

THALONN
TAYN

that is,

the first of the
Thalnom Roywa

as it was written by

Anneo Allomonnan

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Hark ye and hear of heart and hate,
of friends and foes, of feuds and fate,
of he who strode with fitful mind
to fame, to love, to glory find.

Contents

Guide to Pronunciation	vii
------------------------	-----

Map of Syglonn, Eylavol, and Surrounding Areas	xi
---	----

Preface	xiii
---------	------

Thalonn Tayn

1. The Beginning of Things	3
2. Mothers and Fathers	5
3. About Gaylodho and His Kin	9
4. The Finch and the Fox	12
5. Queerer Folk	18
6. Words of Wisdom	29
7. A Farewell	33
8. Thalo Departs	37
9. Death in the Dark	41
10. Another Household Sundered	48
11. Lying and Laying	55
12. The Ruin of Moyr	61
13. The Missing Twin	68
14. Concerning Pearmol and Alvennawl	71
15. The Terror of Alvennawl	76
16. Thalo's Plea	90
17. Yorlayvo	95
18. Winter Passes to Spring	101
19. Homecoming	109
20. Concerning Samnew and Fnarslad	120
21. Gaymono's Quest	127
22. The Ruling of Fate	136
23. A Funeral	145
24. Karvalo's Inquisition	148
25. The Torment of the Elves	155
26. The Oath of the Sworn Brothers	165
27. Awldano's Gift	173

28.	The Lawmoot	175
29.	On Domestic Matters	189
30.	A Deepening Rift	193
31.	Awldano Goads Fate	197
32.	The Seeds of Strife	206
33.	Trewgeo's Folly	215
34.	The Earls and the King	221
35.	The First King's Plea	227
36.	The King Goes North	231
37.	The Battle of Samnew	235
38.	Grief Returns	244
39.	The Lordship of Samnew	249
40.	A New Home	254
41.	Concerning the Kingship	262
42.	Fessos	267
43.	The Earls and the King Again	275
44.	The Seed Is Sown	287
45.	The Second King's Plea	293
46.	Ormana Goes Home	295
47.	Fathers and Sons	301
48.	The King's Troubles	308
49.	The Serpent Wakes	320
50.	Awldano Goes Home	328
51.	Thalo Goes Home	335
52.	Blood at Bealnew	341
53.	Men of Glory	353
54.	The Battle of Oydawl	362
55.	The Price of Peace	368
56.	Fate Takes Root	376

Guide to Pronunciation

The text of *Thalonn Tavn* was written by the priest Anneo Allomonnan ca. 590–600 YA in his native Mawkan dialect, an earlier form of which would have been spoken by the majority of the story’s cast. All names are rendered as they were known to Anneo. The romanisation used should be broadly transparent to the English speaker, but points of particular note are detailed below.

Consonants

- i. Double consonants are typically pronounced only once. Some notable exceptions are ⟨mm, nn⟩, which represent lengthened [mː, nː] when they occur at the end of a word, and ⟨pp, tt, kk⟩, which represent the clusters [ʔp, ʔt, ʔk].
- ii. Before ⟨k, g⟩, ⟨n⟩ is realised as [ŋ], as in English *sink*, *single*.
- iii. ⟨y⟩ represents the approximant [j], as in English *yes*.
- iv. The sequences ⟨ty, dy⟩ are conservatively pronounced [tj, dj], but they may be coalesced to [t̪, d̪], as is the case in *tune* and *dune* in non-yod-dropping varieties of English.
- v. ⟨th⟩ always represents [θ], as in English *thigh*, *breath*.
- vi. ⟨dh⟩ is always its voiced counterpart [ð], as in English *thy*, *breathe*.
- vii. ⟨h⟩ is only used in the digraphs ⟨th, dh⟩, and **never** represents the [h] of English *help*.

Vowels

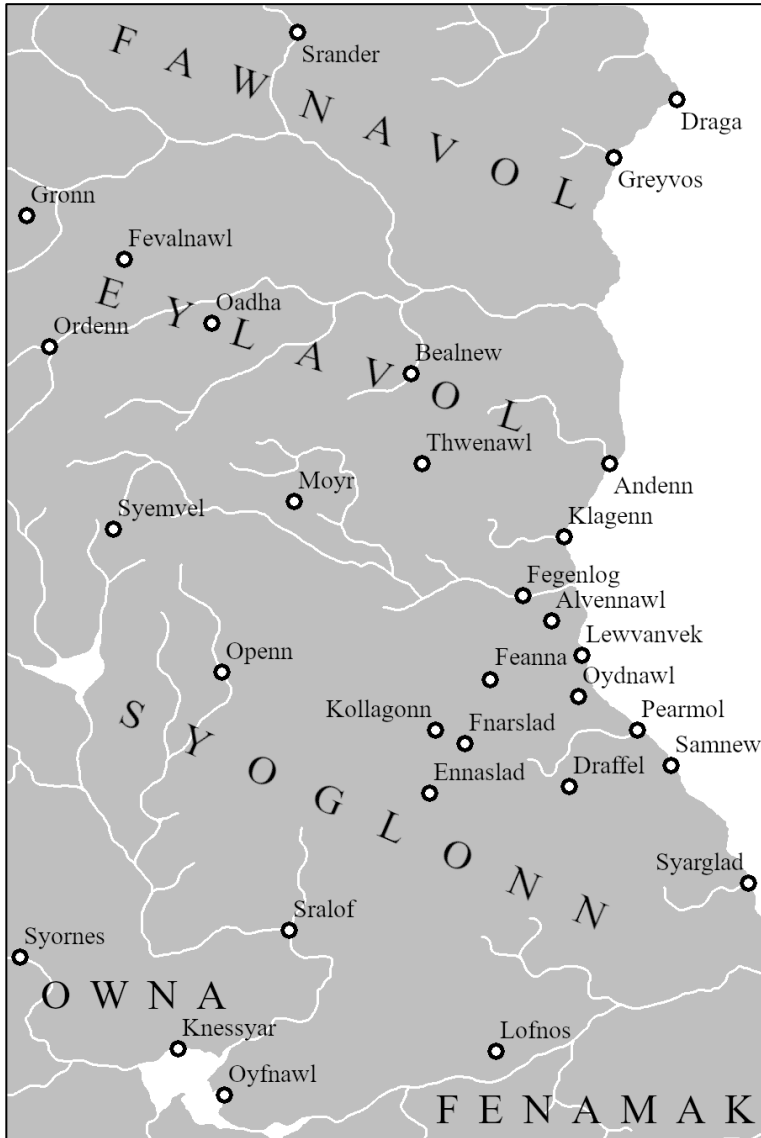
- i. All vowels should be pronounced.
- ii. The monophthongs ⟨e, a, o⟩ exhibit regular allophony, altering their quality and length depending on the phonetic environment (see the table overleaf). However, they may be approximated with the vowels of English *pit/pet*, *pat*, and *put/pot*.
- iii. Where ⟨a⟩ appears before ⟨m, n, r, l⟩, it is closer to the vowel of *part*.
- iv. The diphthongs ⟨ey, ay, oy⟩ are akin to those of *hey*, *hi*, and *ahoy*.
- v. The diphthongs ⟨aw, ow⟩ are akin to those of *now* and *know*.
- vi. ⟨ew⟩ is the ⟨e⟩ of English *pet*, followed by ⟨w⟩.
- vii. The sequences ⟨ea, eo, oe, oa⟩ are equivalent to ⟨eya, eyo, owe, owa⟩ and never represent diphthongs.

Vowel	IPA	Conditions
⟨e⟩	[e:]	1. In open stressed syllables, <i>except</i> before ⟨y, w, a, o⟩, or a double consonant.
	[ɪ ~ e]	1. Before ⟨y, a, o⟩. 2. In open stressed syllables before a double consonant. 3. In closed stressed syllables, <i>except</i> before ⟨w⟩.
	[ɛ]	1. Before ⟨w⟩. 2. In unstressed syllables, <i>except</i> before ⟨y, a, o⟩.
⟨a⟩	[ɑ:]	1. In open stressed syllables before ⟨m, n, r, l⟩.
	[ɑ:]	1. In other open stressed syllables, <i>except</i> before ⟨y, w⟩, or before a double consonant.
	[ɑ]	1. In closed stressed syllables before ⟨m, n, r, l⟩.
	[a]	1. Before ⟨w⟩. 2. In open stressed syllables before a double consonant. 3. In other closed stressed syllables, <i>except</i> before ⟨y⟩.
	[ɐ]	1. Before ⟨y⟩. 2. In unstressed syllables, <i>except</i> before ⟨w⟩.
⟨o⟩	[o:]	1. In open stressed syllables, <i>except</i> before ⟨y, w, e, a⟩, or a double consonant.
	[ʊ ~ o]	1. Before ⟨w, e, a⟩. 2. In open stressed syllables before a double consonant. 3. In closed stressed syllables, <i>except</i> before ⟨y⟩.
	[ɔ]	1. Before ⟨y⟩. 2. In unstressed syllables, <i>except</i> before ⟨w, e, a⟩.

Stress

- i. Stress is predominantly lexical, however sequences of more than two unstressed syllables are not permitted within a word. As such, there is a strong preference for predictable, alternating stress patterns.
- ii. In given names of two syllables, the first syllable is always stressed, and the second is unstressed, as in *Thálo*, *Knále*, with an acute accent here marking the stressed vowel.
- iii. In given names of three syllables, the second syllable is usually stressed, as in *Gaylódhó*, *Meóla*.
- iv. An exception is found in names which begin with a closed syllable and end with the sequences ⟨ea, eo, oe, oa⟩. In these cases, the first syllable is stressed. Compare *Ásfoa*, *Áfdea*, but *Gaydéa*, *Omméo*.
- v. In matronymics and patronymics, the stress of the underlying name is preserved, as in *Gaylódhonnan*, unless this would yield more than two consecutive unstressed syllables, in which case stress is shifted to the next syllable, as in *Asfóannan*.

Map of Syoglonn, Eylavol and Surrounding Areas



Preface

My beloved friend, I gift to you this book over which I and my fellows have worked tirelessly. Hereafter is written the tale of Thalo Thennelo—for whom I happen to know a great fondness has ever dwelt within your heart—as it was told to me by my father’s father. He was in his boyhood beholden to the kin of Fraya the Foreknowledgeful, the soothsayer from Feolmak in the land of the Frowans. Fraya was a deep-minded woman, farsighted both forwards and back, and she was learned in every kind of wisdom, lore, and craft that could be learnt. She told my old kinsman much of what she knew, and he likewise told it all to me. Among her teachings were the deeds of Thalo and his lotsmen, and those of many others from that time, and also those of all their offsprings. That is why I hold so thorough an understanding of all the small things which may have otherwise been forgotten. That is also why the truth of this tale, the telling of both broad and narrow dealings alike, can be trusted; these are the words of Fraya, who knew many things, and of all that she has been said to have known, all is known to be true, and that is true of this tale as much as it is of all else. So it is that I hope you will find reading this work to be very gladdening, as much as I have been gladdened to set it down, knowing that I have done so for you.

*These are the words of your Anneo, and between them lies his love.
Here ends my foreword.*

Thalonn
Tayn

I

The Beginning of Things

Here things begin with a woman called Asfoa, who had no kin or clan. She was born at Bealnew, which was in those days the seat of the Earl of Eylavol. She was orphaned as a child, and a nameless vagabond found her crying outside the earl's house.

'Who are you, little girl?' asked the vagabond.

'Asfoa,' said Asfoa.

'Where is your family, Asfoa?'

'Wolves got them.'

'Wolves,' said the vagabond. He knew wolves well. 'I know wolves well.' He reached out his hand. 'Come with me, little Asfoa.'

Asfoa asked the vagabond his name.

'I have no name. Know me only as a wanderer, a luckless man cursed to walk the wilds, deprived of my people and all worldly pleasures.'

Asfoa took the vagabond's hand and went with him. He raised her on the road, and he taught her all she ought to know—hunting and foraging, healing and fighting, and many other things besides. And as long as she knew him, the vagabond kept a nifty sword at his side, old and well made. Though he bore no name himself, he could not let so fine a blade be just as nameless. He called it Sleme, and it was the only sword Asfoa ever held. Then, after twelve years had passed, Asfoa asked the vagabond for his name once more.

'I have no name,' he said. 'I am but a lowly vagrant. It is my lot to spend this wretched life alone, but for this briefest of interludes with you.'

That night, while Asfoa slept, the vagabond went away. She awoke in the morning to find Sleme lying on the ground where once had been her warden. She never saw him again.

Now Asfoa put all she had learnt to use. She wandered the wilderness alone, her course set only by the stars and her liking, her bed but the ground at her feet, until she came one day to a place called Klagenn. That was a valley on the coast, with a small town by the mouth of the river. At the top of the valley stood

a most marvellous waterfall. The very moment Asfoa set her eyes upon it, the moment she saw the sunlight sparkling on the water, the moment she felt its flow on her hand, she knew she had found her home. With the help of only one kindly fellow from the town, she cleared a spot in the woods and built herself a small house. There she remained, to wander no more.

Asfoa became well known among the people of Klagenn, but they did not terribly like her. They shunned her, living alone in the woods, and they called her a witch, even though she neither dabbled in magic nor bore much ill will for anyone. But that did nothing to move her, for no harsh words could part the river from its course.

Then came war. The elder Arkelo, the Mawkan king, came forth from his homeland with conquest in his head and glory in his heart, intent upon asserting his kingship over all the folk of Norlonn. News of his coming was quick to reach Klagenn, and a troop of fighters gathered in the town, ready to hasten away and support their earl—it would have been Threlbega the Thrifty-throated in those days—against the conqueror king.

In the middle of this was a man named Gaylodho Ayrkenennan. He was known as Gaylodho the Wealthy because he had inherited a fantastic sum of wealth from his forebears, who had made their fortune trapping the lynx that roamed the uplands for their pelts. Gaylodho was something of a haughty chap. He thought very highly of himself, deeming his wealth a measure of his good nature, and he bore a fearsome temper. At even the slightest provocation, he would let loose his whole boundless fury. Indeed, it was sometimes said there was no less stealthy fellow, for his bellowing ever preceded him.

Gaylodho bade Asfoa, skilled with sword and spear alike, join his party in fighting the warmonger king. She wanted nothing to do with it.

‘Get out of here,’ she said. ‘I will fight none but those who bring their blades to my very own door.’

Gaylodho gave her every foul word he knew, but Asfoa would not be swayed. She watched his warband race away to Bealnew, where the earl was gathering her army, and that was the end of it.

But though the earls fought with fervour, each one eager to protect their lands, to make themselves the king’s killer, their fervour was outmatched. The king and his folk wrought such grief upon their foes, dealing wounds far deeper than flesh or bone, and bearing them in kind, that the earls’ willingness to fight withered as swiftly as it had bloomed. The king won his war and forced the earls to submit, the first of his kin to do so.

Asfoa soon saw Gaylodho’s warband trudging back home, half as many as had left. The king had conquered their homeland, killed their kin, and levied his first tax, but it made no difference to her—the river yet flowed.

II

Mothers and Fathers

One day in the following year, while Asfoa was washing her clothes in the river, she heard panicked voices in the woods above. She clambered up the waterfall to see what was afoot, and there she espied four people gathered in a small clearing. Gaylodho was easy to recognise, but not so the others. One was a young man, and the second a woman of similar age. The third was a baby, swaddled in the woman's arms—it could not have been more than a year old. Asfoa supposed the man and woman were the baby's parents. She sat in the bushes and listened into their conversation, and the man said they needed help.

'And why should I help you?' said Gaylodho.

'There was an attack,' said the man. 'Up at Andenn.'

Andenn was a town in the east of Eylavol, the seat of the king's reeve in the earldom. In the year after the earls submitted to the king, a company led by Throggalo, the last of the sons of Threlbega, brought forth their rage and set upon the town, hoping to oust the king's followers who had made their homes there, or else slaughter them all. What followed was the last revolt of the north, at least for the time being, and it was nothing short of a massacre. Syave the Reeve was killed in the fighting, as were many of their friends, and so too was Throggalo, as were many of his. And so zealous were Throggalo's lotsmen, and so indiscriminate their violence, that when the sun rose the next morning, or so it is said, the whole town glowed red for the blood yet caking the ground.

'Dreadful business,' continued the man. 'We managed to flee, but to where, we cannot say.'

The woman said, 'We need to find safety firstmost. If you can spare us nothing else, we would gladly take directions to the nearest place to rest.'

Asfoa could tell they were Mawks, though they tried to hide their accents.

'What were you doing up at Andenn?' said Gaylodho.

'What does it matter? We have found ourselves in need, and with a child in our care. Where, man, is the harm in helping?'

'The harm in helping,' said Gaylodho, 'is in who you help, so it matters

very much what you were doing up at Andenn. I am inclined to think you may have been there with that loathsome king of yours. Yes, I am not so dull as to let your foul extraction escape me.'

It is fair to say the poor pair grew more afraid with every word Gaylodho spoke, swaggering about and eyeing them with contempt. The woman meant to reply, but Gaylodho did not care to hear her. He took up his spade and struck the man on the head with the edge of the blade. The blow killed him on the spot, and the woman's words died with him. She stood still and silent, staring at the man on the floor beside her.

'I know where you are from!' said Gaylodho. 'Do not think I will let you return!'

As soon as Asfoa realised what was happening, she leapt shouting from the bushes. The woman regained her senses, clutched the baby in her arms, and ran towards her. But, careless in her panic, she crashed into Asfoa, and they both fell to the floor, the baby mewling all the while. That was all the misfortune it took, for but a moment later, Gaylodho loomed above, teeth gritted, hands clenched. He struck the woman's head with the spade, and she cried out.

'Aiee!'

He struck her again. Asfoa leapt up to grapple with him, to wrest the spade from his grip and force him away from his quarry, but it was not until his temper lessened that she could finally overpower him. She shoved him backwards onto his bottom, and only then turned to the woman behind her. She was already dead. Asfoa tore the spade from Gaylodho's hands—he was still rather dazed from his tumble—and put herself between him and the woman's body.

'Get out of here,' she said.

Rising, Gaylodho said, 'Asfoa, you witch! Hand me my spade!'

'I will do no such thing. Go home.'

'Idiot woman! These are the folk who pillage and plunder as they please. Raiders and reavers, the lot of them! They would kill us all!' Gaylodho pointed at the baby, and stepping towards it, still wrapped in its mother's lifeless arms, he said, 'I cannot let it live!'

Asfoa presented the spade. 'Take another step and I will do you in.'

'They killed my friends! My kin! I will avenge that to the fullest extent!'

'How hopeless they must have been to be killed by a baby.'

His face scrunched up with scorn, Gaylodho managed no further sounds beyond grunts and growls, until his anger overtook him. He lunged forwards, grasping for Asfoa's neck, but caught only a sharp knock on the forehead. He staggered backwards again.

Asfoa took the baby from the woman's arms. 'Go home, Gaylodho. If you threaten this child again, you will not live to boast of it.'

Gaylodho huffed, searching for scathing words, but he found none. He went home.

Asfoa soon went home herself, the baby in one arm and the spade in the other, but not before burying the bodies. Gaylodho would have left them to be eaten by whatever hungry thing found them, but that would not do. She dug a grave as big as she could manage, and in it she laid the man and the woman together, sprinkled some river water over them, and filled the grave. Above it she placed a stone, and thus were they truly dead, to remain there until the earth itself reclaimed them.

Asfoa raised the orphaned boy as her own. She named him Thalo. He soon grew into a healthy young lad, and she taught him everything she could, just as that nameless vagabond had once taught her. Indeed, she proved to be such an excellent instructor, and so well versed in all matters of life, that by the time Thalo was pubescent, his skills surpassed those of many hapless folk twice his age, or older. The people of Klagenn deemed this right queer, the work of the witch and her wicked ways. Some shunned him for that. Some shunned him for other reasons. That was Gaylodho's toil, for instance—to greet Thalo, on those rare occasions when he greeted him at all, only with disdain, and to sneer should he receive it in return (he sneered very often). Others pitied the poor boy, trapped in the woods with the malevolent hag. In any case, there were few friends to be found at Klagenn.

One of those few was an old woman named Regnaga, one of Gaylodho's relatives. Thalo liked her company. She would sit by the beach with him and tell him all sorts of stories. Many were true, though many more were fanciful. Most of all, she told him stories about her father, Olvadho. He had been one of the companions of Gayvadho Enmonnonnan—Gaylodho's grandfather—who won great renown as a dauntless man of unrivalled pluck. Regnaga told Thalo how Gayvadho and Olvadho fought the army of the southern king Folgono, just as Gaylodho had fought against the King of Mawon more recently.

'We have a history, see,' said Regnaga. 'If a king wants to conquer, they conquer Norlonn first.'

She told Thalo of Gayvadho's glorious triumphs and sorrowful defeats, of his stoic resolve and his cunning ploys, and how folk still honour him because he gave everything, even his life, to defend the homes of his friends and his family. Such stories had particular currency in those days. And as Regnaga told these tales, recounting generations of family history and recalling the great deeds of each, Thalo delighted in every word. The many names of people and places meant little to him, but their lives and their deaths moved him all the same. He listened to few things with more awe and attention than the feats of folk long dead.

So Thalo came to Asfoa one day with a question.

‘Who was my father?’ he asked.

‘Why are you asking about this?’

‘Old Regnaga has told me much about her parents, and theirs, and those of many others, and there is much to be said about them all. What about my own parents? You are my mother, but who was my father?’

Asfoa did not like this question, for an honest answer was an unhappy one. So, she lied.

‘Come and sit down,’ she said. ‘Let me tell you about that.’

Then she told this tale: ‘One day, I went up to the waterfall to wash my clothes, but when I came to the pool, something quite extraordinary happened. The water bubbled and swelled, and forth sprang a man, tall and mighty, and much more so than any other fellow I have seen.

‘That man pointed at me, and they said, “Asfoa!” Their voice was as deep as the ocean, and it bounced here and there, between the trees and off the water.

“Asfoa!” they said. “Thou art good and true!” I remember it well, for I was terribly flattered to hear such a nice thing said of me.

“Thou art good and true, while I be old and failing!” They looked neither old nor failing, but I suppose they knew themselves better than I could.

“I be old and failing! Thus, I have chosen thee for a worthiest task!” I was more than a touch surprised they chose little me for anything important, but I felt I could not even address them, let alone refuse them.

“I have chosen thee for a worthiest task! Take my son as thine and raise him well!”

‘That son was you, Thalo. They put you in my arms, and you were soaking wet—you had just come out of the water, after all—and you got me all wet too. Needless to say, I was quite unimpressed with that.

“Raise him well! Let all folk know the glory of Thalo Klagennan!”

‘You see, Thalo, it turned out they were Klage, the spirit of the river, after whom we call it Klagennas. Before I could get a word in edgeways, Klage washed himself back into the water, and I never saw them again, and the rest has since unfolded. So yes, you might say you are the son Klage, born of the river itself. How is that for a father?’

Thalo was glad to hear this. He did not forget it.

III

About Gaylodho and His Kin

There was a boy called Gaydeno. He was Gaylodho's nephew, being the son of his sister, Gaydea. Gaydea had joined Gaylodho in opposing the king, but she was forced to lay the fight aside to see her pregnancy through at a town called Errendenn in Syamlavol. In the weeks after Gaydeno was born, the king besieged the town, for Kolveno Seymaronnan, the Earl of Syamlavol, had holed himself up there. This was in the final days of the war, when all seemed most hopeless (because, by and large, it was). Gaydea's friends urged her to flee with her son before the king trapped them in the town, but she refused to go.

'I will not abandon my cause,' she said. 'I would rather this boy's mother be among the glorious dead than live long in cowardice.'

This was misguided, but Gaydea was of headstrong stock. She would not be easily parted from her intentions. She thusly said, if her alleged friends were so concerned for Gaydeno, that they should take him themselves, and thereby forsake their own honour, rather than seeking to damage hers. This they did. A handful of her companions fled Errendenn, Gaydeno among them, and survived the attack. That was how many babies were raised in Norlonn at that time. They brought Gaydeno to Bealnew, where he was raised in the household of his grandmother, Gaydola. Gaydea, meanwhile, stood fast at Errendenn and died in the fighting, as did Kolveno the Earl.

Gaydeno spent much of his childhood at Bealnew, and while he was there, Gaylodho came up to make himself the earl. This was after the folk of Norlonn were firmly—if unwillingly—beholden to the king. Gaylodho bought himself a strapping pack of followers and toured the earldom gathering support among the magnates by slandering the kingship and making lofty promises and the like. Then he had an assembly summoned at Bealnew, where he called upon his newfound followers to support him in challenging Yolfredha Rollayvonnan, the incumbent earl. Yolfredha met the challenge, and the pair stood together before their peers to contest the earldom. They each stated their case, and after some discussion and many threats, the magnates chose Gaylodho, and he took

the earldom.

During his time in the earldom, Gaylodho married his second wife, Meola Ravonnan, who also happened to be his second cousin. Gaylodho's first wife was a woman called Balkena Olvelonnan, who was once known in Klagenn as Balkena the Eloquent, for she was an eager and impassioned poet. This is one of her most famous verses:

This blackest cave is dank and dark,
yet even so does this man hark.
He'll row his boat along the stream,
e'er guided blind by but his dream
into the gloom, to find that chest
where, deep within, his wants all rest.
And then at last, with sated sighs,
he'll find his prize when waters rise,
and out he rows into the light,
to leave behind the cave's long night.
Yet never will he turn his face
to see again that plundered place.

Gaylodho had only one child by Balkena, and she died shortly after the birth. He was a son called Gaymono. Gaylodho had his second son, named Kolbeo, some twenty years later with Meola at Bealnew. He would become just as capable as his brother, albeit much more deceitful and violent.

Otherwise, Gaylodho's time in the earldom was not of particular note. While he was by no means a poor earl, his brash and unmoving manner did little to inspire long-standing confidence. Several potential rivals presented themselves. Foremost among them was a fellow called Enmodo Enswelannan. He was in favour of appeasing the king. With the war now lost, he thought the folk of Eylavol would get more out of his friendship than his wrath, and he quickly accrued rather stauncher backing than Gaylodho would have liked. Then, after having held it for some eight years, Gaylodho feared a challenge for the earldom was imminent. He had seen off three before, but Enmodo posed a far greater threat, and one that required intervention.

So did Gaylodho arrange to settle his rivalry with Enmodo by offering a mutually beneficial resolution. They agreed to meet one evening on a nearby hill called Fnoytovl, where the woodland spirits would bear witness to any agreement they might reach. However, when Gaylodho came to the meeting spot, he did not put up his hand in friendship. Instead, he offered his welcome in the shape of a rock, thrown with deadly intent. The rock struck Enmodo's

head with such force that it knocked him out cold, but it did not kill him, so Gaylodho took it up and finalised their deal by bludgeoning Enmodo's head until he was well and truly snuffed.

To disguise the killing, Gaylodho flipped Enmodo's body so that he was lying prone, placed the rock beneath his head and a stick at his feet, and then laughed, so chuffed by his cunning. Yet he soon found he had not considered every eventuality. Gaydeno, his young nephew, happened to have followed him to Fnoytovl and witnessed every detail of the murder. While there were to be no witnesses, Gaylodho was unwilling to murder his little kinsman as well. He marched him straight back to Bealnew and sent him off to Klagenn the same day, before he could say anything to anyone who mattered.

Despite these efforts, Gaylodho was accused of the murder as soon as the body was discovered. Enmodo's relatives tried to bring a lawsuit against him, but this came to nothing. They could not find sufficient evidence to indict the sitting earl, and when they consulted the trees of Fnoytovl for their testimony, the tricky things had nothing much to say. Thus, Gaylodho faced no formal penalty for the killing, even though everyone agreed he had done it.

Things nonetheless went poorly for him after that. The murder of Enmodo garnered far more distrust than he had anticipated, and another of his prominent rivals, a woman named Beyla Bodwalonnan, came forth seeking the earldom in the following year. Beyla loathed the king just as much as Gaylodho, but she was ever more pragmatic about things. When the matter was brought before the magnates, they backed Beyla, and she took the earldom. Many said she would be in every way the better earl, and Gaylodho did not forget it. He stayed at Bealnew for a while longer, trying to reclaim both his honour and the favour of his former friends, but neither was forthcoming.

IV

The Finch and the Fox

Thalo went down to the beach one day to lounge in the sun. While he was sitting on the grassy bank, he saw a boy walking along the pebbles, his eyes cast upon the ground. He did not recognise him. Thalo watched him for a while, wondering who he was and what he was doing, before his curiosity took hold and he made his approach. He asked the boy what he was up to.

‘I am looking for luck,’ said the boy, ‘but I have yet to find any. Trinkets, that is. A ship stuck itself against a skerry recently. I think, if fortune favours me, some nice things might have washed ashore.’

‘What have you found?’ asked Thalo.

‘Timber, mostly. And a foot, but that was no nice thing to find.’ The boy continued, ‘Who are you? I have not seen you before.’

‘I am Thalo. Who are you?’

‘I am Gaydeno. My mother was Gaydea. Her was father Ayrkene, and his was Gayvadhó, whom you ought to know about. His wife was Eldea, who was once the earl. That is who I am. But they are all dead now, so my foremost kinsman is my uncle Gaylodho the Earl. What is your stock, Thalo?’

‘I am the son of Klage,’ said Thalo, ‘son of the river itself, and brother of the valley. My mother is Asfoa.’

‘The son of a god and a witch? How queer!’

‘She is no witch.’

‘I am told otherwise. Old Regnaga is clever, and she says so too.’

‘My mother says not to trust a word of hers.’

Gaydeno giggled to himself and said, ‘It would be best not to trust a witch’s word, either.’

‘My mother is not a witch, nor a liar.’

They stood silently for a moment, until, squinting in the sun, Gaydeno asked Thalo whether he would like to join his treasure hunt. Thalo agreed. The boys continued to speak with one another as they searched the beach, and many small things were said. Gaydeno showed Thalo the lost foot, blue and half-

rotted, and they found nothing else besides scraps of timber and a friend each.

The pair would often meet in Klagenn and spend their days ambling about and being silly, jeering at the elderly and stoning the pigs and so on. When Thalo first told Asfoa about this, she shook her head.

She said, 'He is one of Gaylodho's lot.'

Thalo said, 'Gaylodho is not around.'

'No matter. He will come back eventually, and he will not be happy to hear what you have been up to when he does. He has it in for us, you see.'

When Thalo protested, Asfoa told him not to pout.

'You need not forsake your friendship,' she said, 'but be careful how you treat him. I am not eager to suffer his uncle's temper.'

Thalo heeded his mother's words. When he went to meet Gaydeno the next day, he told him what Asfoa had said.

'I will not defy a witch,' said Gaydeno. 'We need to be careful.'

Then they went about the day's business, and were utterly careless.

Two years now passed, and it was as if Thalo and Gaydeno were bound together by rope and tar, so often was each at the other's side. Just so, they went up the river one day until they passed Asfoa's house. She was chopping some firewood when she saw them strolling up the valley, hand-in-hand.

'Oy-oy!' she called out to them, and then she approached, her axe upon her shoulder. 'Where are you boys headed?'

'Up to your waterfall,' said Gaydeno. 'I am most privileged to have been granted such a pleasure.'

Of course, Asfoa was not a tall woman, nor was she in any way big, but she bore herself proudly. Hers was quite the imposing figure, standing before the boys and posturing with her axe.

'That is no good idea,' she said.

'Yes!' said Gaydeno. 'I am full of bad ideas, and I act on each and every one. No harm has yet befallen me.'

But though Gaydeno's cheer was clear to see, Thalo, as was his manner, stood rather gloomier beside him. Asfoa said no more about it. She patted Thalo on the head and said, 'Be careful.'

Thalo and Gaydeno went straight up to the waterfall and wasted the day, a right slothful pair, and there Thalo told Gaydeno how Asfoa had found him—at least as he knew it.

'That is quite the tale,' said Gaydeno. 'A witch has a witch's tongue.'

When they were done in the water, they lounged on the bank for a short while, until Gaydeno heard a small rustling in the bushes. He told Thalo to be quiet while he went to see what he might find there. Drawing close, he found a little chaffinch sat sadly in a holly bush.

‘A little chaffinch,’ he said, ‘but a sad one.’ The bird appeared to be injured. ‘Perhaps we can help it.’

Gaydeno grabbed the bird and stroked it with his finger, and it shivered with fright. And rightly so—there was much to fear among the trees, for a beast was prowling. The boys heard its first fearsome growl rolling out from the gloom. Gaydeno tightened his grip about the bird, while Thalo seized a nearby stick for a sword. Another low growl came from the bushes, this time closer, and fiercer, and then another closer still.

Thereupon a fox leapt before them, fangs bared and snarling. But this was no ordinary fox. It was longer and taller than others, with gleaming golden eyes, and its coat was a blackish-silver colour that shimmered in the light. This was a fox above all foxes, a most majestic creature, and a beautiful sight to behold, or it would have been, were its beauty not matched only by its sheer ferocity. It lunged at Gaydeno, still squatting on the floor, still clasping the chaffinch, and he tumbled backwards beneath it. Yet before it could grip his hands in its jaws, before it could tear them apart and devour the finch within, Thalo took up his stick and had at it, beating at the fox with all the might he could muster. With enough trying, it backed off, but it kept its gaze fastened unmoving upon Gaydeno’s hands.

‘Off with you, pratty fox!’ shouted Thalo, and he struck at it again.

The fox snarled once more before dashing away into the trees.

Thalo helped Gaydeno up. He had a nasty scratch down one leg and had taken a firm thump on the back of his head, but that was the full reckoning of his hurts. No, he was much more concerned for the poor little chaffinch. He uncupped his hands to examine the bird, and found its feathers all in disarray, ruffled up with fright. Only then did Gaydeno truly appreciate its beauty, its striking blue hood, its eyes as bright and brilliant as the sun—a finch above all finches. After a moment, he thrust it forth into Thalo’s face.

‘Behold him!’ he said. ‘A handsome fellow, is he not?’

But as Thalo admired the little chaffinch, it leapt flapping from Gaydeno’s hands and flew off into the woods. Its injuries were lesser than they seemed.

The boys then went home to think no more of this. Gaydeno trotted down the valley back to Klagenn, while Thalo came home to Asfoa. She stopped him at the door and asked him what they had been up to. Thalo said nothing very interesting had happened, but Asfoa did not believe him. She knew what was afoot, and she knew it would not end well. All the same, that ending came rather sooner than expected.

That very afternoon, in fact, Gaylodho came marching up the valley. Asfoa was surprised to see him coming. As far as she knew, he was still grovelling his way around Bealnew, but it turned out he had returned to Klagenn only

earlier that day. He came to the door and nearly knocked it off its hinges, such was the fury in his fists.

‘Asfoa, you crone!’ he said, bursting into the room before anyone let him in. Gaylodho was ordinarily a large man, but he filled the room all the more completely when he was so minded.

Asfoa came to meet him. ‘Why is it, Gaylodho, that you have come into my house? And with such a mouth?’

‘Whyever! My nephew came home today, and he came bearing a grievous wound upon his shin. He said he got it in the woods by the waterfall. Now tell me this, sodswoman: what was he doing up here, where witches prowl and sweet things sour?’

‘How should I know? It would be better to ask Gaydeno himself, I think.’

‘Do not presume to belittle me. He has said everything I need him to say.’

Gaylodho strode towards Thalo, a little boy sat on his little bench, but Asfoa put herself between them. He stopped for a moment, glowering.

‘You,’ he said. ‘Thalo boy. If you have any sense at all, you will listen to me now and listen to me well. The utter disrespect with which you have treated me is nothing short of intolerable, yet I will nonetheless tolerate it, such is my graciousness. Understand, I am no violent man; I will not let come to blows that which need not. But I will not forget this grievance, this vile, wretched attempt to undermine me and my good standing, and that of my kin. How shameful it is that tender Gaydeno would let himself be beguiled by you and your sort. How it wounds my pride! You will not seduce him again. I will not let you.’

That was more than enough to rile Thalo, and violence blinded him. He leapt up from his bench and sprang full pelt towards Gaylodho, his eyes fixed fast upon his beltknife, hoping to snatch it from his waist and turn it against its master, that hateful man, his mortal foe. He was a boy who meant to kill, and he made it known.

‘Die!’ he cried.

But Asfoa was too well mannered to let Gaylodho be murdered in her house. She grabbed Thalo by the arm and thrust him back upon his bench.

Gaylodho laughed. ‘Oh? The baby means to kill me? Let him try! It will trouble me none to put this runt on his face.’

‘You cannot harm me,’ said Thalo. ‘I would lay you out like a blanket.’

‘Filth! The chance of it is fatter than your dunce-child head! What hope would such a cute little thing have against the likes of towering me?’

Thalo grinned. ‘I would need no hope at all. You are no threat to me. I am fluid like the water, born of the river, my glory guaranteed. How could a fat old pig kill the river itself?’

‘Let me show you!’

Now it was Gaylodho’s turn. He stepped towards Thalo, but before he could draw his beltknife, Asfoa had her hand on his wrist.

‘Get out of my house,’ she said, ‘before bad things happen.’

‘Yes,’ said Thalo. ‘Leave, if you are too frightened to face me.’

‘Fie! There is not a craven bone in my body. I have fought face-to-face, man-on-man, against the most warlike folk there are. I have borne spears and axes and kept my footing firm. I have suffered blood and strife and anguish, and not once has my heart wavered. My courage is beyond doubt! But what of yours? What trials have you endured that could demand anything approaching the boldness I bear? I will say the full measure of it: none.’

That was not far wrong. Thalo was yet but a boy, whereas Gaylodho was a war-weathered man. Thalo thusly found himself lost for words, shielded by his mother. But though his youth served him little in the art of boasting, Thalo was nothing if not a little git.

‘Oink-oink!’ he oinked.

That was enough to whip Gaylodho into a new fury. ‘You brat! You rogue, you sod, you cur! Born of the river? What is a river but the piss of the earth? A thousand deaths to you, piss-boy, and I shall deal the first!’

Thalo rose from his bench and stepped forth, eager to meet him, but once more, Asfoa sat him down.

She said, ‘You keep your bottom on that seat, or I will stake you to it.’

And once more, Asfoa’s intervention delighted Gaylodho. ‘Hah! See the spunky little lad jostled about by dear old mummy!’

But Asfoa had harsher words for him. ‘Gaylodho, if you put even a finger on my son, you will have none left for yours.’

‘You would put your words up against me?’

‘My words and my fists, if you ask for them. Get out of my house.’

Gaylodho grumbled, but he was yet calm enough to relent.

‘I will leave,’ he said, ‘but by my determination alone. Had I my sword, this would not have ended as it has.’

Asfoa said only, ‘Out.’

‘I have told you before, Asfoa, to keep your pet where you can see him. Collar him if you must. Do it, or I will have him. One more slight like this, and I will ensure this sorry hovel is burnt to the ground and the very floor stained with your blood. That is my promise to you; my promise to you both!’

Then Gaylodho left the room.

Asfoa was not remotely pleased with all this. She scolded Thalo for his carelessness, but he did not listen. No, he strolled straight down to Klagenn the following day, expecting to meet Gaydeno. He awaited him for a good long

while, but he did not appear, so he went home. The next day, he went to meet with Gaydeno once more, and once more he found himself loitering alone in the town. He went home again. Then, on the third day since their parting, Thalo went down the valley with not a jot of sense in his head. He gave Gaydeno some time to appear, and for a third time, he did not. So it was that Thalo took himself to Gaylodho's very own door. It was his elder son, Gaymono who came to meet him, and he said Gaydeno had been sent far away to a farm in the western reaches of the earldom.

'And we expect,' said Gaymono, 'that he will not return here. Or not until my father will have him, at least.'

This was true. Gaydeno had been sent to live with his father's kin on a farm called Gronn in the west. They would not meet again.

Thalo was not pleased to hear this.

'Faithless liar!' he said, and he slammed the door and ran away. At home, he told Asfoa what Gaymono had said, and he demanded she say otherwise.

'I will not,' said Asfoa. 'Gaylodho has sent him off westwards, or so I hear. To where? I could not say, but any which way, he is certainly not here. I have no reasons to doubt it, and many to believe it, if you can imagine.'

Thalo's anger now turned to despair, and he went wordlessly out of the house and made straight for the river.

'I want no more of this,' he said. 'Let my father reclaim me! Let his spirit possess me and soothe my broken heart forevermore!'

Then he fell forwards into the water. Asfoa pulled him out, but Thalo would not be dissuaded. He wriggled out of his mother's grasp and into his father's, and he forced his head back beneath the surface. Asfoa pulled him out again and up onto the bank.

'Foolish boy,' she said. 'Drowning will do no one any good, and least of all yourself.'

She dragged him home, sat him down with a hearty meal and hard words, and tried to put some sense into his head. This had little success, however, for Thalo clung to Gaydeno's absence as once he had his presence. This grievance would not be forgotten.

V

Queerer Folk

Now the story will turn to an elf called Knale. He was a fellow of particular notoriety. As the tale goes, there was an occasion on which Knale decided to bring misfortune upon the troll Glamo. He brought his wicked tongue to Glamo's ear, and into it he whispered many foul words, magic and curses, and drove the troll to madness. Thus did Glamo go stomping abroad, causing havoc and strife for whomever he chanced upon, until he came at last to the abode of a young woman named Leyva. By the time of their meeting, Glamo's rage was wearing thin, the ire-light waning in his eyes, and when the warm-hearted girl took pity on the troll and took him into her home, her comfort was sufficient to expel the last of his madness.

However, Glamo soon discovered Leyva was betrothed to a fellow named Loffalo. He was descended from the elf Kawo, one of Knale's brothers, and thereby the gods. Upon this revelation, Glamo was beset by shame, and he sought to make away and punish himself.

Leyva stayed him.

'Do not fret,' she said, 'for I have beheld the warp of your body, as you have mine, and I see no chance that a child could come of it. This need not become a matter of concern.'

But Glamo was himself of elfin descent, and no torture short of gelding could assuage the great virility of their kind.

'No!' said Glamo. He pointed to her womb. 'My seed will sprout, and the fruit that comes of it will be bitter indeed. Let never the light of day shine upon its skin! Unmake it! Unmake it, or all will be unmade!'

Then Glamo howled his shame once more and fled into the night.

Just so, Leyva came to be with child, but she did not unmake it. Instead, she went to Loffalo and said the child was his. Now, Loffalo was a man of single mind—he wanted to fashion for himself a fantastic troop of children, and to delight in calling them his friends. But despite his elfin stock, not one had yet been sired. He had taken many lovers in his time, each younger than the last,

but none had yielded a pregnancy, let alone a child. It was, therefore, with astonishment that Loffalo heard he had wrought an heir at last. For the first time since his infancy, he wept.

The time soon came, and Leyva went with her friends to finalise the birth. But once they looked upon the child—a boy—there was no joy abounding in that room, for he was the very image of his father. The attending women said the boy was cursed, a herald of misfortune, a warning from mighty fate, and they bade Leyva kill her son. But she could not. She looked upon the warp of his flesh, and in it she saw that of his father, whom once she had loved.

‘No,’ she said. ‘There is no cause for killing unless fate would kill us both.’

Leyva named the boy Nawko, gave him to her auntie, and asked her to take him away. She proclaimed the boy stillborn, unnamed, and she said the truth of these matters was never to leave the birthroom. Each of the attending women swore themselves to secrecy, and they all upheld their covenant. Not one would speak the truth unless Leyva spoke it first.

For the first years of his life, Nawko was raised in secret on a faraway farm, and Leyva would occasionally sneak away to visit him. She soon grew weary of this arrangement, however, as did Nawko himself, isolated as he was, and so Leyva went one day to Loffalo. He was by then her husband, and she told him of the birth of Nawko. She said he was not stillborn, but that he was born in the image of a troll and yet lived in seclusion, where no harm might befall him, and where he might deal out none.

Loffalo was unimpressed by this news, though he agreed to at least meet his son, who was at that time nearly a young man. Yet when Loffalo first looked upon Nawko, he was moved to such unfettered hatred that he took up his sword and sought to deal the troll his death blow. With a cry, he swung forth, but the blow did not fall as intended. No, Leyva came forth and put herself between them, and as the sword fell, she fell with it, dealt a mortal blow. Loffalo cried out for his faltered wife, as did Nawko his mother, and kneeling above her, they received her dying wish.

‘My Loffalo,’ she said, ‘take pity on your son. Take him into your home, that he may know the love I have hitherto denied him.’

Then she died.

Loffalo heeded her words. He put his arms about Nawko, and they wept.



In the time between his meeting with Leyva and her death, Glamo went into exile, hiding himself away from all happy things. He was not seen for many years thereafter, and his grandmother, the elf Nela, became terribly concerned

for his wellbeing. One night she looked up to the moon, and in it she saw the same terrible light that shone from her grandson's eyes. She was taken by such sorrow that she cried out into the night.

'O Glamo,' she said, 'my Glamo. If only you could hear me now, then you would know kindly arms yet long to hold you. O fate, I beseech you, bring my grandson home. Guide his heart and feet alike and lead him here to love. O fate, this oath I hereby swear! I would withhold no price at all, if only I could have my Glamo again.'

And though Glamo's ears did not hear these words, two other pairs did. The first was that of Nela's keenest brother, Swalo, the hunter, he who spent his days hearing past the silence and seeing through the darkness. He heard his sister's plea, and crying, he swore to bring Glamo home.

'That is my quest,' he said, 'to make this lost thing found, or else to lose myself.'

The second pair of ears, however, was Knale's. He too heard his sister's plea, but—his mind full of naughty thoughts—he heard more eagerly her oath. Nela was at that time in possession of a most marvellous thing, the heart of Ommaro, who was in the very old days a king of the seas and servant of the god Syokkoa. This Nela ever wore about her neck, and it was a much-coveted prize. Knale coveted it no less than anyone, so he went to another of the elf brothers, Syovo, the most violent and treacherous among them, and together they devised a plan to make themselves the finders of Glamo, that they could take up Nela's oath.

So Swalo and Knale set out, and the hunt for Glamo commenced. Swalo went alone, though he later came into the company of an orphan girl named Lewva, whom he took as his daughter and apprentice. Knale and Syovo, on the other hand, were no fine finders. They therefore elected not to look for Glamo themselves, but to stalk Swalo from the shadows as he hunted his mark. So it was for eight years, until Swalo and Lewva—she was by then a formidable woman in her own right—found the troll in his cave. That cave would come to be called Syemvel, in the heart of Yaransyog. Lewva went in first, and Swalo followed her.

Now a great tragedy unfolded. As Swalo went into the cave, Syovo crept behind him and did his treacherous work. Murder-minded, he stabbed Swalo in the back, and the blow killed him. Lewva heard her father's death cry, and upon seeing Syovo laughing above him, she forsook her quest and set her mind on vengeance. She ran Syovo out of the cave and down the cliff, where he turned to meet her, but that was his undoing. Lewva bested him with her sword, and she killed him.

Meanwhile, Knale stole alone into Glamo's cave and found the poor chap

huddled on the floor and muttering, a right pitiful sight. Knale went to him and put a comforting hand beneath his chin, but when Glamo thought he saw a friend, Knale brought forth his wicked tongue and filled his head with madness once more. With every word he spoke, Glamo's eyes shone ever brighter, until the whole cave was alight, the rage betook him, and he burst forth into the sunlight.

How he howled! When he spotted Lewva below, he leapt over the cliff and fell thrashing upon her, and they fought. But although Glamo was invigorated by Knale's foul magics, his strength even still fell short of mighty Lewva's, preeminent as she was. She killed Glamo, hewed his head from his shoulders, and only once his writhing ceased did she weep for her father, stalwart Swalo, now slain.

Knale took up Glamo's head while Lewva was distracted and brought it to Nela. He said the killing was Lewva's work, as indeed it was.

'O Sister,' he said, 'look upon your grandson, and see that I have brought him home. The moonlit night has sworn to me its silver, so let me name my finder's fee. You wear about your neck a finest thing, the heart of old Ommaro. I want it. That is my price: a head for a heart, and a heart for a head.'

But, weeping, Nela spared not a moment in refusing him. 'There is no price so meagre I would pay it for this deed.'

'Fie!' said Knale. 'You swore to pay the price, whatever it may be. I have named it. You must pay it. Give me what I want, or you will regret it.'

Nela put up her hand, and with the other clutching Ommaro's heart, she said, 'Out! Out with you! Out of my hall and out of my home, or else out of this mortal life! Out with you!'

Knale knew then he would not so easily have the heart. He threw Glamo's head to the floor and spat upon it.

'This,' he said, 'is the undoing of all your kin.'

Then he left.

Nela kept Glamo's head, and she set it on a stool beside her bed so she could hold him in her arms each night and put a kiss upon his forehead each morning. But one day, Knale snuck into her bedroom and stuck his fingers into Glamo's great, moon-forged eyes until blood ran from his nose, which he collected in a bottle before stealing away unseen.

That evening, Knale went to Nela as she feasted in her hall, halted the meal, and climbed upon a table. He said he wished to make amends, that she should keep the heart of Ommaro, for it was rightfully hers to possess. He took up a cup, poured into it Glamo's blood as if it were wine, and made a toast in honour of his poor nephew, before taking a great gulp of the blood.

Yet Knale spoke with such artfulness and cunning that even wise Nela was

moved by his words. She too took up her cup to drink in kind, but she drank no welcome wine. Knale had not swallowed Glamo's blood, but instead, he held it in his cheek, and when he saw Nela take a drink herself, he skipped towards her and spat the blood forth into her mouth. Nela swallowed it, and before she knew what was happening, a great violence overcame her. She fell shrieking from her chair, and there on the ground twisted in agony as heat and hurt alike arose within her limbs. For a good long while did she convulse so, and a great throng gathered about her, but no helping hands could allay that torment, save those of time alone.

When at last Nela awoke, stretched out upon the floor, she found she was blind. For this, she cried out, but soon a young kinswoman of hers, Eyra, came to her side. Eyra put her hands on Nela's face to soothe her in that moment of terror, and Nela likewise reached out for hers. Then, when each had a hand on the other's cheek, Nela fell silent—she could see. But she did not see the hall in which she lay, or the kindly faces about her. Instead, she saw young Eyra, old and resplendent in a kingly mantle, her hands red with her sister's blood. She saw not what was, but what was yet to be. To witness so terrible a vision, Nela recoiled her hand from Eyra's face, and the sight was gone, and once again, she was blind.

Nela retired to her bedroom to rest. Yearning for comfort, she took into her loving arms the head of Glamo, beside her bed as ever it had been, and caressed it. But as she did so, a new vision seized upon her. She saw Nawko, Glamo's son, his head parted from his body and put upon a stake above the sea. Beneath it sat Lewva, Glamo's killer, to be the bane of trolls twice over. With a shriek, she dropped Glamo's head, and she could see. In the darkness of the night, she saw the pale death-glimmer of Glamo's eyes. She saw the killing of her kin, once done, to be done once again. This she could not abide.

At once, Nela found herself a sword, put on her wings, and flew away to a sea cave where Lewva had fashioned herself a home. That would come to be called Lewvanvek. When she came there, Nela went into the cavern and found Lewva standing beneath her waterfall, her sword drawn.

'Death to you!' said Nela. 'You are the killer of my kin!'

'The fault for that,' said Lewva, 'was Glamo's alone. I sought to bring no violence against him until he brought it against me. I will not apologise for defending myself.'

'I speak not only of the murder of my Glamo, but that of my Nawko. I have seen your deeds of past and future alike, and I therefore know there is no further joy allotted to me—all my life is to be spent grieving for what you have taken from me, and what you will. Thus I come against you now, to avenge what is done, and to prevent what will be!'

Nela then set upon Lewva with her sword, and they fought one another with vigour. The battle was brief, and it ended when Lewva, much the better fighter, cut a terrible wound into Nela's stomach and knocked her backwards into the river. She moved to deal the final blow, but before she could, Nela clutched Ommaro's heart about her neck and bellowed this invocation:

'O king of seas, I bid you wake!
Your heart and mine but one shall make!'

A fantastic light shone out from Ommaro's heart. Lewva stepped back and looked away, so painful was that dread light to behold, but it was short-lived. When it faded, Nela appeared to be dead, her body floating out of the cave and into the sea, the heart of Ommaro to be lost alongside her. Lewva deemed the day won and put the matter behind her.

But Nela did not truly die that day. When Lewva was readying for bed in the evening, she saw beneath the waterfall the figure of a woman. She called out to this uninvited guest, but she received no reply. When she came to look more closely, Lewva realised she was Nela, her spirit irrevocably bound to the river itself, to ever after haunt the cave. Lewva soon left Lewvanvek, and she hoped never to return.

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The next turn in this tale concerns poor Nawko. While he was a member of Loffalo's household, Nawko married a young woman called Orvoa, who was also beholden to Loffalo. It is said that, at their wedding meal, Nawko drank as much as everyone else in attendance combined, and still thought more clearly than any of them. In time, Orvoa came to be pregnant, and Nawko was the jubilant father.

The first person to whom he sang of his fatherly joy was the elf Feydo, who was his uncle and the brother of Nela, and Knale, and all the elf brothers. In the decades between Nela's half-death at Lewvanvek and Nawko's marriage to Orvoa, Feydo came to Water-Nela for counsel, and she told him nothing of interest. Instead, she demanded he protect Nawko as she could not. Feydo was generally a timid sort of fellow, and so he found himself unable to decline; he swore by oath to try his best. He came into Loffalo's service, where he lived alongside Nawko, and he became his closest friend and confidant.

Knale was also quick to learn about Orvoa's pregnancy, for his crafty ears heard only what they should not. He was outraged by the news.

'I am outraged,' he said, 'that nasty Nawko would dare to deem himself

worthy of love. This cannot go unpunished!’

‘My brother,’ said Feydo, ‘do not involve yourself in this, I beg of you. You need not heed your every impulse.’

‘So what is their purpose, if not to be heeded?’

Then Knale pushed Feydo over and went away to make right this wrong. He changed his body to resemble that of Lewva Thunder-hand and came to Orvoa while she was washing alone in the river. Elf-Lewva took off her clothes and used her wiles to woo the poor girl and lure her out of the water. When she had her in her grasp, she put a hand on her thigh and whispered a great many flirtations into her ear. Orvoa was quickly overcome with lust. Together they rejoiced by the river, whereafter Lewva scampered away. As soon as she left, Orvoa regained her senses, and a great shame beset her. She went at once to Nawko and professed her faithlessness.

‘These are unhappy tidings indeed,’ said Nawko, ‘but please, my dear, let me allay your shame. I cannot hold you responsible for this, for there can be none more faultful than licentious Lewva, she who has both killed my father and preyed upon my wife. I cannot tolerate the hostility with which she has ever regarded my kin and will thusly avenge this dishonour.’

‘I do not ask for vengeance,’ said Orvoa. ‘I ask only for forgiveness. If that is freely given, we need not pursue this matter further.’

But to this, Nawko roared. ‘There is nothing to forgive,’ he said, ‘and much to avenge. I do not have so little pride as to leave this be.’

Nawko donned his armour, picked up his mighty axe, and set out to visit Lewva. Feydo went at his side. After each step they took, he said they should take two back home, so Nawko, hard and pride-frenzied, told him to utter no more words than would a talkative fist, or else he would be introduced to one. Feydo had no more complaints after that. Behind them went Knale in his fox fur, for he was keen indeed to see what would come of all this.

When they came to Lewva’s house—it would in those days have been somewhere in southern Syoglonn, near where Yaransyog meets Remennas—Nawko knocked down the door and demanded Lewva come outside to meet him. This she did, and Nawko accused her of murder and also criminal adultery before she could greet him.

‘Kindly,’ said Lewva, ‘begone. If by murder you refer to the death of your father, he attacked me first. I will not apologise for defending myself. As for this adultery, I know nothing about it, nor do I wish to. I have neither the time nor the inclination to continue dealing with you and your lot.’

‘And I,’ said Nawko, ‘have neither the time nor the inclination to listen to your venomous lies.’

After this, Nawko loosed a battle cry and attacked Lewva with his axe.

Though she was now an old woman, she remained a formidable fighter and quickly bested the troll, knocked him to the floor, and there killed him with a well placed blow to his throat. She pointed her sword at Feydo, and she asked him whether he wished to continue the fight. Feydo said he did not and went home empty-handed.

The killing of Nawko was Lewva's last great feat. To commemorate it, she chopped off his head and took it to Lewvanvek, where she staked it on the cliff above the sea, washed the blood from her hands in the river, and shouted out to Water-Nela in the cavern.

'I am the scourge of gods!' she said. 'Three times have you folk come against me, and three times have you faltered. Let this head stand testament to my immortal glory.'

After this, Lewva became a hermit priest in Yaransyog. She established in the woods a shrine dedicated to the old god Loffeyda, of whom her father Swalo had long ago been a disciple. There she kept his ashes, and there she also set aside the hermit's life after accruing a handful of lovers with whom she lived well and contented until a peaceful death. She had no further dealings with elves or trolls, or even men.

It was Feydo who brought the news of Nawko's death back to Orvoa, for Knale stayed behind to defile his headless corpse and fill it with spite. Upon hearing this news, Orvoa wept, and the grief swelling inside her was such that she immediately went into labour. Feydo assisted her with the birth, and she produced a pair of twin boys, each the very image of their father, whom she named Fowdho and Klovo. Then she died, her heart utterly broken. Feydo tried to revive her, but the effort was paltry and futile, so his thoughts turned instead to the baby trolls.

'O Nela,' he said, 'I could not save your Nawko. Perhaps sparing these boys of hardship will redeem me.'

He took them up, one in each arm, and fled Loffalo's house to stash them somewhere deep and dark, where no trouble might befall them.

Knale returned to Loffalo's house shortly thereafter, for he meant to delight in Orvoa's grief. He was, therefore, quite disappointed to find she was already dead. Wondering what had become of Nawko's baby, Knale took a knife and opened Orvoa's womb to see what he might find. It was empty, of course, so he went to Loffalo, now old and withered, and asked what had become of the child.

'Tell me, what do you mean by this?' said Loffalo. 'As far as I am aware, Orvoa's child has yet to be born.'

Knale said the child must have been born, for he could not find it in her womb. Upon hearing this, Loffalo went to Orvoa's bedroom and found her

dead, her body sliced open, and Knale wearing blood. A great commotion then ensued, and Knale slipped away before anyone could ask him any questions. He set out searching, hoping to find the baby troll, to kill it, and in doing so, to quell Glamo's contemptible bloodline once and for all.

First of all, he went to Water-Nela at Lewvanvek and bade her see its future and tell him where it might be found. But there was no love left in Nela's heart, and least of all for Knale. The moment she saw him come into the cavern, she whipped up a great tumult in the water and tried to drown him. This came to nothing, so she simply disappeared into the water and paid him no heed. But Knale was not one to be brushed off. He picked up his skirt and went about yellowing the water.

'How does that taste?' he said.

For this foul provocation, Nela finally re-emerged from the river and asked Knale why he had come.

'I have already said this,' said Knale. 'Nawko has brought about the heir to his hatefulness. Tell me where it is.'

Nela refused, and when Knale asked why she was being so obstinate, she spoke this prophecy:

'I see deaths dealt, I see them plain,
my delve-doomed twain each wrongly slain;
my grandsons two, twice-over great,
twice-over spurned by unearned hate!
My last-loved two, twice-over scorned
by spite-swung sword, twice-over warned
that he who brings these wounds to bear
will, bound in blood, his own wounds wear!
Let he who deals be dealt the worst;
twice-over doomed, twice-over cursed!'

Nela fell back into the river and said nothing more. These words did not please Knale, but they were useful to know.

After visiting Water-Nela, Knale wandered about aimlessly, expecting that, with enough patience, he should eventually chance upon some luck. This came along in the form of his brother Flawko, he who was called the shadow, the lord of roads, the eternal wanderer. Flawko told Knale he had crossed paths with Feydo in the last few decades or so.

'Feydo reported to me,' said Flawko, 'that he had become a father, and a glad one.'

Knale disputed this. 'There is no being in this world, or any other, who is

both well made enough to bear a child, and ill-decisive enough to bear one for him. It cannot be so.'

Flawko agreed with this and clarified that Feydo was not the father by birth. He said Feydo had made himself the warden of two twin trolls at their sister's bidding, although he did not know their provenance.

Giddy with bitterness, Knale said, 'But I do! Tell me, Brother, where are these trolls?'

'They dwell in the deep and the dark,' said Flawko, 'as do we all. I know only that.'

'Then where is Feydo?'

'Talmakeyd, or so it was.'

'Better. Whereabouts?'

Flawko said Feydo had put himself up as a shepherd in the south-eastern reaches of Talmakeyd, on the slopes approaching Fegennas, and he gave Knale directions to the precise location of his house.

'And know,' said Flawko, 'light and dark are blinding both.'

Then he donned his hooves and vanished before Knale's eyes, and that was their final farewell.

Knale went straight to Talmakeyd and found Feydo there, much as Flawko had described. He snuck into the house, and before Feydo realised what was afoot, he grabbed him by the neck and demanded he reveal the trolls' hiding place. Feydo refused, and wracked with panic, he took the shape of a chaffinch, slipped from Knale's grasp, and flew out of the house. Knale likewise put on his fox fur and gave chase.

The pursuit took them all the way down Fegennas, and then up the coast until they came to Klagenn. It just so happened that, as Feydo flew up the valley and over the waterfall, he spotted two young boys playing in the water—they were Thalo and Gaydeno. After days of flight, he was in terrible need of a rest, and he thought Knale might not attack him if he took it in the company of others. He flew to the floor and hid himself in a holly bush, and there Gaydeno found him, as has already been told. Of course, Knale attacked him nonetheless, but Thalo beat him back, giving Feydo time enough to gather his strength and set out again. Knale was quick to catch sight of him flying out of the woods, and so he resumed the pursuit, cursing Thalo the interferer all the while.

This went on for another few years, until Feydo was so worn out one day that he could no longer fly. He found himself a secluded spot where he believed Knale would not find him, and there settled down in an empty oak tree to rest. What he did not realise, however, was that this oak was already home to an old rook called Kroggazo. When Kroggazo came home to find Finch-Feydo asleep in his boughs (and on his favourite branch, no less), he made his temper known.

‘Squatter!’ he cawed. ‘Shoo!’

He attacked Feydo, and fate condemned him—Knale was passing nearby, utterly lost, when he heard Kroggazo’s fury. He trotted over to the oak, and it was not long before Feydo, startled by Kroggazo’s assault, fell out of the tree and into Knale’s foxen jaws below.

‘Call me chough-chuffed!’ said Knale, and he stole away.

Knale took Feydo off into the woods, bound him to a tree and planned to subject him to many tortures. And what tortures they were! He concocted every pain and cruelty he could, intending to test every one of them against Feydo’s resolve. Yet after only some preliminary choking, Feydo cried out and said he would reveal the trolls’ whereabouts, if only Knale swore by oath that he would not kill them. Recalling Nela’s prophecy, Knale agreed to this.

‘You fool!’ said Knale. ‘You wretched dunderhead! Do you not see what trouble you would have spared me, if only you had offered me this sooner? Do not worry your empty little head, for this I hereby swear: I will bring no harm at all upon these trolls. Now speak.’

Satisfied with Knale’s oath, Feydo said exactly where each of the trolls could be found, and Knale chortled with delight.

‘You are an excellent brother,’ he said, and then he scurried away to turn his vengeance against another. Feydo remained attached to the tree until a local woodcutter freed him a few weeks later.

VI

Words of Wisdom

Thalo was in the woods one day—he would have been a proper young man by then—when he spotted someone sitting a short way off in a holly bush, a short, slender man clad only in a small skirt around his waist. When Thalo went to him, he saw the man was an elf. That was Knale. He was wounded all up his arms and across his torso, and Thalo wondered how many of the wounds were from the holly bush.

‘Who are you?’ asked Thalo.

‘I am me,’ said Knale, ‘as you are you.’

‘You are an elf.’

‘You can call me that, if that is what you wish to call me.’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘I mean what I say, and I say what I mean.’

‘Are you hurt?’

‘Yes.’

‘What happened?’

‘A wounding.’

‘Who wounded you? Why?’

‘Who? Someone. Why?’ Knale glared at Thalo. ‘A grudge.’

‘Who is this grudge with?’

‘Me. Hence my hurts. Are you stupid?’

‘Not to my knowledge, no.’

‘And yet you ask such stupid questions.’

‘I want to know where things stand. I have heard enough stories about elves to know something is amiss here. They say your sort are cunning and sly, often crafty folk, who are prone to tempting people with hollow words. Is it true?’

Knale put a sultry look in his eye. ‘It is not for me to prove what elves are and what they are not.’

‘Is it true of you?’

‘It is not for me to prove what I am and what I am not.’

For a moment, Thalo looked upon Knale in silence. He was terribly pretty, and he wore a face among the most beautiful he had seen, beautiful enough to overlook Knale's poor manners, and all good sense.

'Would you,' said Thalo, heat-stricken, 'let me at your wounds?'

'Perhaps I might. What would you expect to get out of that?'

'Many things, or few. Your wellness, if nothing else.'

'Does my wellness mean much to you, a stranger?'

'Apparently so. How about it?'

'Very well,' said Knale, rising from the holly bush. 'Do what you will.'

Thalo took Knale home and sat him on his bench. He cleaned his wounds and dressed them where they needed dressing, and he brewed him a herbal drink, one Asfoa used to make when he had hurt himself at play. Throughout this, Knale sat silently, watching with an unwavering smile.

When all was done, Thalo sat beside him and said Knale's wounds were more plentiful than they were severe. 'The only treatment left is some sound advice: do not sit naked in a holly bush.'

'That is sound advice indeed,' said Knale, 'not that I will keep it. I will repay you for what you have done to me.'

'What repayment would you give?'

Knale's eyes widened, almost glowing with a golden light. 'You deserve a great many things, and I wish to give you every one. But let us start with this: wisdom! I will give you some advice of my own, if you will hear it. I can tell you things that are important to know. That, after all, is the best reward a fellow can give.'

Thalo could think of many better rewards, but he was not eager to appear ungrateful.

'So be it,' he said. 'What would you tell me?'

'I will tell you what omens to recognise in battle. Something tells me that will be useful to you. In the days to come, if not now.'

'Maybe so. What is your first omen?'

Knale grinned and spoke this verse:

'If river runs betwixt two foes,
the worthy waryer holds his blows
and does not look to cross the stream.
He knows restraint. Do not be keen.'

'Sensible enough. Tell me more.'

Knale nodded and spoke these verses:

‘If mighty sun is high and bright,
the worthy waryer willn’t keep sight
of sky-bound light before him hot.
Be sure to have a shaded spot.

‘And if the fight should grace a hill,
the worthy waryer surely will
be stood above his foe so bold.
The longer sword he ought to hold.’

‘Your advice seems lacking. My mother has taught me twice as much in half as many words. Tell me something I do not already know.’

‘Very well,’ said Knale, scowling. ‘I did not expect there to be any good wisdom at all in that wood-cut skull of yours.’

‘But your omens seem to bear little wisdom, either.’

‘Oh? You want some proper portents, wise man?’

‘That would be good, yes.’

Knale grimaced as he spoke this verse:

‘If cunning crow should coldly caw,
or howl is loosed from wolfish jaw,
the worthy waryer hears it first.
Fight full and hale, and without thirst.’

‘Useless. Tell me something important.’

‘Fine. I will tell you something more important than you realise, though you will not heed it.’

Knale spoke a final verse, his eyes full of malice:

‘If wounded one does long to know
who dealt to them their killing blow,
the worthy waryer willn’t be heard.
Be well aware of wicked words.’

Thalo deemed Knale’s wisdom to all be very obvious, or otherwise very unhelpful. Yet as he sat before him, lost in his gorgeous, gleaming eyes, he could not shift his gaze from him. He was so enchantingly beautiful, so exquisitely proportioned, that Thalo was held captive by his every feature—golden eyes, flaxen hair, the burnished lustre of his skin. There could surely be no fairer face.

So they sat, staring wordlessly at one another, until Thalo became aware of

himself. He thanked Knale for sharing his wisdom. ‘What will you do with yourself now?’

‘What do you think I should do with myself?’

‘I think you are well and fit and should best be on your way home.’

‘But do you want that?’ said Knale, leaning forwards. ‘To cruelly cast me out into the cold?’ He took Thalo’s hands in his own, and what handsome hands! ‘To deny me your warmth and comfort both?’

After swallowing his first failed answer, Thalo said, ‘It is quite warm out. And we have nowhere to put you up, anyhow. If you need a bed for the night, you should be able to find one in town.’

Knale shook his head, eyes narrow, and said ‘Bah!’ before standing up and leaving the room.

Thalo followed him outside, but when he stepped into the light of the day, Knale was nowhere to be seen.

‘The wind blows,’ he said, and he went back inside.

Thalo told Asfoa about this meeting later that day, but she did not believe him. She said elves would not stalk among such laypeople, and even if they did, he certainly would not have lived to speak of it.

‘Deadly things,’ she said. ‘No, you must have been duped. He was certainly some under-grown softling trying to rub you and rob you.’

Thalo accepted his mother’s reasoning and gave the matter no further thought, peculiar though it was.

Asfoa was quite right, however, for Knale was a deadly thing indeed. He had not disappeared, but had instead retreated into the woods, and from the shadows he watched over the house, that he might gather a better understanding of who Thalo was and how he might be ruled. After observing Thalo and Asfoa for a short while, and the love that existed between them, Knale skulked one night into their little house, and into Asfoa’s sleep-deaf ear, he whispered a mortal curse.

‘Die. Die. Die,’ he said, but magically.

Then he giggled, and then stifled his giggles so as not to rouse her before making away once more.

VII

A Farewell

It soon occurred that Asfoa grew rather unwell. She initially found her spirit would lessen more quickly than it used to, and she was becoming tired earlier and earlier with each passing day, until she felt weak of limb and bone from dawn till dusk, and all through the night. Then she became weak of stomach, often unable to hold a meal no matter how little she ate, and then prone to vomiting even when she had not eaten at all. In this way did she grow ever thinner and weaker, and thinner and weaker, until she had withered beyond recognition. Her temperament withered alongside her. She was often of a sour mood, sluggish or cheerless or generally out of sorts, and often needed a great deal of encouragement to do anything, not that she could do much. Likewise, Thalo could only sit by as his mother wasted away before him.

At first, Asfoa did little to remedy this. She thought her affliction would pass in time. It did not. Thalo tried to treat her with what skills he had in the matter of medicine, but this came to nothing.

So, desperate to spare his mother from her sickness, he went to humble himself before Meola, Gaylodho's wife. She was familiar with all sorts of herbs and potions, and more so than anyone in the valley. Thalo asked her to visit Asfoa, and to do whatever she might to expel the illness from her body.

'I ask only that you try,' said Thalo. 'If you would grant us your effort alone, I would give you anything you ask of me. I understand, however, the enmity that exists between our families. If you cannot surmount that, as I have done by coming here today, I will not hold it against you.'

'You need not,' said Meola. 'Boys' grudges are no concern of mine. I will grant you this kindness, as I hope you would grant such a kindness to me. There is no need for repayment.'

'How I thank you, Meola. I cannot tell you how grateful I am.'

Then they went up the valley together. When they came to Asfoa's house, Meola saw her lying gaunt on her bench, her breathing harsh and laboured, and it was as if she saw a living corpse, risen from its grave to clamber back into a

more comfortable bedstead. It was a sad sight indeed, a most ghastly thing, a once lively woman rendered bedridden and gasping. Nonetheless, Asfoa's pride held firm.

'Why have you come here, Meola?' asked Asfoa.

'I have come to help you,' said Meola. 'Inasmuch as I can, at least.'

'Unnecessary. I am managing quite well as it is.'

'I have eyes, Asfoa, and ears and a nose, as well. Not one of them would agree with you.'

'Nor would I,' said Thalo. 'Do not decline this help so readily offered.'

From Thalo, this was sufficiently convincing. No pride was enough to deny her son his mother.

'Very well,' said Asfoa. 'Let us see what you can do about this.'

Meola took a seat beside Asfoa and asked her many questions, and also felt her skin and her breathing, and checked all her orifices. This went on for a little while, until she rose from her seat, grim and foreboding, and stepped away from the bench.

'You are dying,' she said, 'but by what cause, I cannot say. In any case, I suspect the matter is now so far gone that nothing can be done. Foul things are festering. Doom awaits.'

With that, Meola left the room, unwilling to stay there a moment longer.

Thalo knelt beside his mother. 'It cannot be so. This will pass. It must.'

'As all things do,' said Asfoa. 'All things must pass.'

They said nothing more. Thalo bowed his head, placed it in Asfoa's lap, and there he wept for her. He wept alone.

A few days later, Asfoa felt the time was upon them. After their evening meal, she summoned Thalo to her side and took his hand in hers.

'Thalo,' she said. 'My son.' She struggled to speak, even though she knew precisely what she meant to say. 'I want to see my waterfall, our river. I would like to feel it again. Can you do that for me?'

Thalo did as she asked. He lifted her from her bench, yet wrapped in her blanket, and carried her out of the house and up to the waterfall. He placed her on the floor, near the edge of the pool, and sat beside her. With an eager hand, Asfoa reached out and felt the chill of the water on her skin once more. That was good.

'There are things I must tell you,' she said. 'I will not get another chance. You ought to know the truth.'

'What truth is this?' said Thalo.

'The truth of your birth, or the little I know of it.'

'I already know this. I am the son of Klage, born of the river itself, and the brother of the valley.'

‘I have told you as much, but that is not the truth. You were born of flesh-and-blood folk like everyone else. Your parents were from Mawon, I believe. I found them dead in the woods, while you yet lived in your mother’s arms. If you go to the clearing above the waterfall, you will find an old stone marking their grave. I buried them there myself and took you into my home, their son and mine. That is all I know of the matter. If Klage is still alive, I have never met them.’

These were surprising words indeed, and not wholly welcome.

‘It was an idle tale,’ said Asfoa, ‘for an idle boy. I know how you like such stories. I gave you one of your own, as true as any other. You are not the son of a god, but none are. I cannot say how proud I am to see the man you have become.’

Thalo said, ‘Is there no godly blood within me? No greatness behind me? No glory before me? Is all I have your pride? Is there nothing else for me? What more is left for me if I lose you?’

‘As much as you wish. You are not Klagennan, nor are you Asfoannan. You are Thalo. Your life is your own. Your inheritance is no immortal ancestry, nor the life I have lived, but the life you fashion for yourself.’ Asfoa turned to look upon Thalo, though he could not meet her gaze. ‘I am dying, Thalo. That cannot be avoided. Do not let yourself die with me. Do not sit idly in my house any longer, but take what you want from it and burn the rest. Burn my house, and everything left within. Then you must go. Go wherever you wish, but you must go, and you must not return. That would be no good for you. Klagenn is my home, and Klagennas my love. You must find your own. There is so very much more for you in this world, Thalo. You need only seek it.’

Asfoa put a hand on Thalo’s face, wiped the tears from his cheeks, and she beheld him, soft in the twilight.

‘Promise me that,’ she said. ‘Promise me you will seek it.’

Thalo reached behind his mother and took her in his arms, her head against his neck.

‘I will,’ he said.

Sat with the waterfall before her and Thalo beside her, Asfoa knew all had been worthwhile—the times of hardship and the times of harmony both. And as her strength waned, and her breathing quieted, she closed her eyes, and said, ‘Thalo, I love you.’

Thalo said, ‘Stay with me.’

‘I love you, my son.’

Then Thalo held her tight, trying in vain to trap the life within her, to cling to that moment as long as he could. Yet all things must pass. So Asfoa died, her head resting gently against his own as her body slackened. Thalo laid her

back on the ground and saw that she was dead. But that was not the mother he knew. No, his mother was a doughty woman, proud and hearty. The woman who lay before him was all thin and bony, her lips withered, her skin loose, her eyes sunken into their hollows. Even so, she died smiling.

Thalo kissed her forehead and went to find a spade. He took it up atop the waterfall, found the spot of his birth parents' grave, and spent the rest of the evening digging another nearby. He dug in silence and paid no heed to the passing of time. Once the grave was ready, he took Asfoa in his arms, still wrapped up in her blanket, and laid her in the earth. There he looked upon her once more, fixed her image in his mind, sprinkled some water from the river over her body, and only then did he fill the grave. Above her he mounted a large stone, the largest he could find, to mark her burial bed until the wind and the rain had worn it down to nothing.

He spent the rest of the night at home. Long had he dwelt in that house, but it was wholly unfamiliar without his mother to make it homely. That would prove to be the first of many sleepless nights.

VIII

Thalo Departs

The next morning, Thalo sorted through the contents of Asfoa's house and gathered all he wished to take from it—food and clothes and other useful things to keep him well, but also a helmet and a spear, each of which he had only recently come to possess. Last of all, Thalo took up his mother's sword, Sleme, old and faithful, and fixed it on his belt, where it would long remain. So armed did he stride down the valley to Gaylodho's stable.

Gaylodho came to meet him. 'What are you doing here, walking about my town, and so decked in warlike fashions? Have you come to disturb the peace? To start something?'

Thalo walked past Gaylodho and found the best-looking horse in the stable, a young colt with a fine brown coat and good manners, solid but not too big for it, rather like Thalo himself. He found also a saddle and bridle hanging from a post and prepared the horse for riding.

'What are you playing at?' said Gaylodho, miffed. 'Let me tell you this, ninny: if you do not remove your miserable self from my stable and get back up to that damnable little house of yours, I will have to trade my harsh words for even harsher blows.'

But Thalo did not intend to abide Gaylodho any longer. He pushed him backwards into the hay and pointed his spear at him, spread upon the floor.

'I am taking this horse,' he said. 'As payment, you can have your life.'

Then he climbed upon the horse and rode back up the valley.

Gaylodho arose and brushed the straw from his shirt. He summoned to his side a gang of his friends, all hastily armed, and took them off to reclaim his property and his pride. Among them went Gaymono, his elder son, diligently following his father as he ever did. When Gaylodho's troop arrived at Asfoa's house, they found the horse by the door, but Thalo came to them before they could seize it.

'What are you doing here?' said Thalo.

'I have come,' said Gaylodho, 'for justice's sake. I will not allow you to go

about unpunished after abusing me as you have today, after stealing from me my valuable things and threatening my life. That you would disrespect me so is intolerable.'

'I have treated you with more respect than you deserve.'

'Pigswill! There is no man more respectable than glorious me! And there is no boy more contemptible than paltry you, horse-thief!'

'You have plenty of horses. You can spare me one.'

'I will spare you nothing! This matter goes beyond property alone, and I have had quite enough of it—quite enough of you!'

Gaylodho drew his sword from its glamorous sheath, decked in flourishes of gold and gems of all colours. The sword itself boasted a finely gilded hilt and a blade long and slender, forged with an exquisite pattern running up the fuller. That was Ograme, once wielded by his grandfather, a marvellous sword. To see it unsheathed, flashing in the sun, Gaylodho's posse all bowed their heads in reverence. Blood would surely be spilt that day.

'Asfoa!' Gaylodho cried. 'Asfoa, you witch! Come out! Come watch your wild wolf die!'

But Asfoa did not appear.

'She is dead,' said Thalo.

'Oh? Dead at last, eh? Young for a witch, I think. In any case, today truly is an excellent day indeed, that mother and son will both go at once. As it should have been.' Gaylodho paused briefly, and then he continued, 'Tell me this: you are Klage's son, are you not?'

Thalo said nothing.

'Sulk if you wish. Whether you care to believe it or not, we both know the truth. Did she ever tell you what became of your birth parents?'

Thalo knew well enough what Gaylodho meant to say next, but all the same, he wanted to hear the words said aloud.

'I suppose not. No wonder.' Gaylodho put his hand on his chest and said, 'I killed them. I put my spade in their heads, and their heads in the dirt, and I would have done the same for you, but Asfoa would not have it. Of course, she spared you only because I left the mewling babe for last.' He took a purposeful step forward. 'No, I should have put you down when I had the chance. I should have smashed your infant head in and been done with it. What a lot of bother it would have saved me! Just look at us now, bickering like a pair of children. No more. I will suffer you no longer.'

Though Thalo cared little for the derision with which Gaylodho spoke, these were welcome words. In that moment, the violence swelling in his heart, he would let Gaylodho spout every discourtesy he wished, for each word he spoke gave him further cause for vengeance.

‘Nor will I you,’ he said. ‘Fight back, if you wish; it will come to nothing. You cannot harm me.’

At this, Gaylodho’s mind filled with rage. There was such fury burning in his heart, and the surety of Thalo’s boast, so calmly delivered, only stoked that fire. He could contain it no longer. With his sword held high, he charged ahead, eager to lay into his foe with all his burly might, to unleash his whole mania upon him, and to exult in a killing long awaited. That wrathful man!

The fight was short. Thalo stepped forth from the doorway as Gaylodho came barrelling up towards him, his spear firm, and before Gaylodho could make even a first lunge, Thalo struck him in the leg with the point of his spear, squarely on the knee. Gaylodho toppled over with a cry, though his momentum kept him moving forwards until he fell face-first upon the floor.

At once, Thalo was above him. With his sword now drawn, his foot firmly atop Gaylodho’s back, he said, ‘You cannot harm me,’ then brought the blade down hard, stabbing into Gaylodho’s neck.

To hear him sputtering an awful death cry, to see him clawing at the ground below him, Thalo could not conceal his pleasure. It was a glorious thing, he thought, to conquer one’s foe, and so soundly, to enact the will of death itself. It was a joy like no other. So he stabbed into Gaylodho again, and a third time for good measure. That was his honour. That was his glory. That was his first murder, and he reckoned it very well deserved.

Gaymono did not. He had watched it all unfold with horror, stricken by the dreadful swiftness with which his mighty father, a man of foremost standing, was brought to ruin, a corpse on the floor.

‘Death dealt!’ he said, his voice quivering. ‘What a wretched injury this is, to my father and family both. As his kinsman, I hereby proclaim my intent to pursue justice for this crime. Do you, murder-man, wish to submit yourself to my penalty? Or do you intend to make this a judicial matter?’

Thalo did not care for such things. Yet thrilled by the bloodshed, he stepped towards Gaymono, his sword before him, and said, ‘Neither. I am leaving. If you mean to stop me, come and try it.’

Gaymono considered his options. Thalo was not ordinarily all too daunting a figure, perhaps the shortest man in the valley, but that cruel killing had put such fervour, such bestial delight in his eyes that with his sword in one hand, his spear in the other, and Gaylodho dead beneath him, he was the very image of ferocity. And though Gaymono was just as well built as his father, he was not nearly so brash. He would not risk his own death avenging another.

‘Thalo,’ he said, ‘let us have him, at least. Yield to me my father for burial and make away. Keep the horse if it will rid us of you sooner, but if ever you return here, expect to be met with blood.’

His comrades all raised their voices in protest, and one among them, an otherwise insignificant man named Fannago, said, 'Gaymono, my goodly friend, do not let him flee. He has killed your father, our choicest neighbour. This is a bitter blow to every one of us, and to let it go unpunished would be all the bitterer—it would surely dishonour us all. We must have vengeance for this wrongdoing, or failing that, adequate compensation for our loss.'

'Tell me, Fannago, what compensation do you expect to extract from the woodlander? It would be an insult to suppose one so impoverished could make up for my father's great worthiness. And as for vengeance, there is no penalty more damning than exile. Death, after all, is swift, while the trials of the outlaw are many and harrowing. I will take this matter to the earl and have the ruling affirmed. If this should confer any dishonour upon us, let it be mine alone to bear.'

Fannago did not press the matter any further, nor did anyone else.

'Very well then,' said Gaymono. 'What do you say, Thalo?'

Thalo lowered his sword and stepped aside. Gaylodho's fellows reclaimed his body and heaved him home, while Gaymono picked up his splendid sword.

'If by dusk you remain here, Thalo,' he said, 'dawn will never come.'

Then he fled back down the valley.

Thalo did not intend to remain there. He finished gathering his things from the house and set it alight, just as Asfoa had bidden, and watched on as his whole youth burnt before him, all the joy and the sorrow, the comfort and the anger, the excitement and the peace. But though the wood and cloth succumbed to the flames, his memory would not. He could cling to that.

Then he rode away.

IX

Death in the Dark

Thalo now took to wandering, just as Asfoa had before him. With little to guide him but his whims, he spent the next year or so travelling here and there, doing whatever work presented itself. This was usually farmwork, but he also found himself carrying messages or hunting criminals and the like, all in exchange for bed and board in a farmer's house, or whatever else he needed to get from place to place.

The long road proved to be a great boon to his horsemanship. Despite her many other talents, horses demanded a set of skills which Asfoa ever lacked, for she had neither the cause nor the means to make use of one. Thalo instead learnt to ride only sporadically on the farms around Klagenn, where he lent his labour now and then in his youth. His saddle-skill at the time of Asfoa's death was unremarkable at best, but, in time, his horse became his firmest friend and trustiest ally. He named him Ondayo, after Ondayo the Bear-breasted, an old hero said to be of paramount strength and virility, and who was well revered among men of Thalo's ilk. It was a fitting name for a powerful, reliable horse.

Early in his first winter on the road, Thalo came to a farm called Dyar in Fawnovol. There he met a man named Sroaro, who had previously lived on another farm called Lammam, where his forebears had made their home for many generations. Sroaro likewise held the house at Lammam for many years. However, he and his family had recently been forced to leave their ancestral home amid a bitter feud with a neighbour called Wavo.

Wavo was by birth a man of Syenavol, but he was outlawed for unseemly deeds. He left the earldom and brought his family eastwards to Fawnovol, and they found hospitality with Sroaro at Lammam, although they said nothing of Wavo's past wrongs. After living with Sroaro for five winters, Wavo decided to establish a farm of his own across the river. This displeased Sroaro—he wanted to be the only householder in the local area—but it was not his place to object. Instead, he determined that, if he were to have Wavo for a neighbour, it would serve everyone to be on good terms. He therefore offered to help build

the farmstead, and he and Wavo toiled together until it was a house worthy of renown. Wavo named this farm Wavonnawl and soon moved his family from Lammam into their new home. They would have exclusive use of the land on the north side of the river, and Sroaro's family would have the land on the south, although they agreed to share access to the woods on Sroaro's side, and also his dairy.

Things were then pleasant for a time, but, with a landholding of his own, Wavo's true manners came to the fore once again. The good relations that had once existed between Lammam and Wavonnawl only deteriorated. It happened slowly at first, through petty jibes flung between neighbours, or minor disputes needing little resolution, yet the matter progressed until the only words taken across the river were curses.

This culminated when Wavo's son, named Wavono after his father, took a herd of pigs to forage in the woods, as was his right. However, as he walked between the trees, he stumbled over a log and fell face-first into a beehive. The bees swiftly stirred, and a great swarm amassed. Wavono fled to a nearby woodshack, fearing for his life all the while, and he suffered many stings before he got there. A short while later, when the bees had finally forsaken their fury, Wavono ventured back out of the woodshack to collect the pigs, but he found a handful had gone missing. Wavo later came along to help him search for them, but they had no luck.

'Hopefully,' said Wavo, 'they will turn up somewhere soon.'

That they did. The missing pigs found their way into one of Sroaro's fenced fields and pillaged his crops. In a fit of anger, Sroaro took up an axe and set upon the interlopers, killing every one of them, and screeching all the while.

He and some of his kinsmen paid a visit to Wavonnawl shortly thereafter. They dumped the pigs' carcasses in Wavo's pigpen, then went into the house to demand compensation for the damage, and also punishment for Wavono, who had let it all happen. Wavo was outraged by the very notion.

'My pigs may have wrought ruin upon your crops,' said Wavo, 'but I will pay you nothing for it. They were my finest, fattest stock, and you have gone and butchered them with such haphazard frenzy that I can scarcely salvage a tail or toe. I would be well within my right to extract compensation of my own. Yet, in recognition of the damage they caused, I will not. Thus, I offer to you this settlement: I will pay you nothing, nor will I seek payment from you.'

Wavo further refused to punish Wavono for his blunder (he had suffered enough for that) and bade Sroaro leave his house forthwith.

He did not. Unable to tolerate this dire affront to his honour, this awful lack of discipline and respect, Sroaro's temper escaped him, and he took it upon himself to strike Wavono on the head, to ridicule him, and to admonish him as

only a father should. Upon seeing his dear son treated so, Wavo immediately succumbed to his own rage. With a wrath-wrought fist, he struck Sroaro's chin, knocking him down, whereupon Sroaro's kinsmen set upon Wavo, and Wavo's kinsmen set upon them, and a terrible brawl unfolded. This did not end until, outnumbered and outmatched, Sroaro and his fellows fled the house, bruised of both body and pride.

Yet that was not sufficient for Wavo. It was not at all fitting that Sroaro should dare to father another man's son. That night, Wavo gathered a gang of his choicest friends and went over the river to Lammam. They forced their way into Sroaro's cowshed and drove six head of cattle home to Wavonnawl.

When Sroaro found half his herd missing the next morning, he howled an infernal cry. He knew without doubt what had become of his cattle—it was surely Wavo's work.

'It would seem,' he said, 'there can be no cordial resolution to this feud.'

Thus did Sroaro ambush Wavono as he was walking up to the dairy later that morning, bound him in rope, and took him before the local chieftain. She was called Koyala. Sroaro shoved Wavono at her feet and had him testify against his father and confirm the theft of Sroaro's cattle. Wavono did as he was told, fearing for his life once more. Yet when Koyala heard his testimony, and then Sroaro's demand for justice, she stood unmoved.

'You are making small things big,' she said. 'It is no crime to move one's own cattle. There is no cause for justice.'

'I hear your words,' said Sroaro, 'but they baffle me. He moved my cattle, not his own. He stole them from me. Do you understand?'

'How can a man steal what is his? I will tell you: he cannot.'

Koyala then vowed to subject Sroaro to the harshest penalty she could if he attempted to steal Wavo's cattle and move them back to Lammam. With that, she freed Wavono from his bonds and sent Sroaro home unsatisfied. It later turned out that Wavo had come to Koyala earlier in the morning and given her two of the stolen cows for protection against the law.

While the loss of his cattle was a sore blow, it was not sufficient to render Sroaro destitute. From then on, he always had someone awake to keep watch, for he would not let fate turn against him once more. But mighty fate cannot be ruled, and so it was that Wavo, empowered by his deal with the chieftain, came back one night with nearly his whole household, armed with spears and axes, to lay claim to as much of Sroaro's livestock as they could. When the night wardens let up the cry of theft, Sroaro and his fellows seized whatever weapons they could and rushed to meet the thieves. But though they fought hard and well, Wavo's kin were the victors.

Wavo returned to Wavonnawl with two head of cattle and twenty head of

sheep, and one clever chap also came back with a pregnant sow in his arms, from which a foremost farrow would soon be born. The deaths were none on Wavo's side and two on Sroaro's—they were Lopare and Kalropo, the two younger sons of Sroaro's sister, Arlopa—though the lesser woundings were many more for both.

Sroaro was now truly impoverished. He returned to Koyala to accuse Wavo of further thefts and also murder, hoping she would finally heed his plea, but she was much too chuffed with her new flock of sheep to hear him. She refused to deliver justice. This left Sroaro with no choice but to reclaim his livelihood by force, or else to abandon Lammam, his ancestral home, once and for all. He sought support from his household for a counter-raid, but he found none. His relatives were all much too weary to fight again. Instead, they resolved to give up, to go their separate ways, and to make new lives for themselves wherever they might find them—preferably well away from Wavonnawl.

In this way did Sroaro's household dissolve. He and his closest kinsfolk came to Dyar, where they lived with his sister-in-law, Moa, though she and her lot needed much persuading to take them in. Wavo, meanwhile, took control of Lammam, where once he had been a guest in Sroaro's house.

Sroaro spent the rest of his days ever cursing Wavo. He would often incite his younger friends and relatives to avenge the destruction of their household, but this never came to anything. Some said they did not want to bring harm to Wavo, fearing his grudge would only worsen and they would be forced from their home once again. Others said they did not care for vengeance at all, for Dyar was a much nicer home than Sroaro had ever kept at Lammam. In any case, Wavo went unpunished for his crimes. He always went to bed full and content, while Sroaro spent his nights weeping for all he had lost.



'So,' said Sroaro, 'I am eager to find some other agent of justice. Would you, Thalo man, be willing to deliver it?'

'What would I gain from this?' said Thalo.

'I will reward you handsomely enough.' Sroaro showed Thalo a fantastic jewel, bright red and blazing. 'This is the prize for the murder of Wavo. It is an old family heirloom. I received it from my father on the day of his death, and likewise has it been handed down through many generations prior. I had once intended to pass it on to my sons just the same, yet they have squandered their honour and mine. If they wish to so manfully disregard their father, they will disregard their inheritance as well.'

That jewel, that most awe-worthy gem, was of such resplendent quality, such

beautiful make, that Thalo thought not twice about it.

‘I will deliver your justice,’ he said. ‘By my hand will Wavo be slain.’

To hear these words, Sroaro was moved to rapture. He clasped Thalo’s head in his hands, pulled him close to his breast, and kissed him three times, each kiss the firmer. Then they sat together to plan the murder. Sroaro told Thalo how to get from Dyar to Wavonnawl.

‘It will be no trouble to get inside,’ said Sroaro. ‘Wavo is cruel, but he is not remotely clever. Nor will he be difficult to find. He sleeps with his husband at the back of the house, behind an embroidered curtain. That was a gift from my wife when they first moved there. You will know him by his looks—a tall bloke, and thin, with close-cropped hair and a long black beard. He is missing his right eye. Do him in there and then, and my wealth will be yours.’

Thalo said he would do as Sroaro proposed, and he spent the rest of the day preparing himself.

The time came that evening, shortly before sunset. Sroaro walked Thalo down to the river and saw him off. The journey was long, but Thalo came to Wavonnawl without going astray—Sroaro knew the land well indeed, and his directions were faultless. He first tried to get into the house through the door, but this was bolted from the inside and could not be opened without making a racket. The same was true of the door to the smithy.

‘Perhaps,’ said Thalo, ‘this Wavo is cleverer than is reckoned. But I am all the cleverer.’

Then he got onto the roof, crept along to the smithy, took off the roofcap, and dropped into the house. After opening the door from the inside, only one task remained.

‘Now to do and be done,’ he said.

All the candles in the house had already been snuffed, the room lit only by the pale moonlight filtering through the crack of the door. At the other end, Wavo would surely await him. Before venturing further, Thalo took a moment to look for any restless movements, to listen for any sign of wakefulness, but no such sounds could be heard above those of sleeping men, all snoring and grunting. He went in. Each step was carefully placed, each breath considered, his hand ever outstretched in the darkness. It was only a few paces from the smithy door to Wavo’s bed, but Thalo went with such caution, such absolute awareness of every step and every sound, that it might as well have been a nightlong endeavour.

Then, at last, his hand clutched a curtain. Peering behind it, he could not discern one man from the other, but the darkness would not dissuade him. He reached within, groping blindly in the dark, to find their faces. His touch fell first upon a shaven cheek, but Wavo wore a beard. That, then, was Wavo’s

husband, Goldhego. Wavo himself would be sleeping on the farther side of the bed. That was his chance. Though Thalo held no grudge against Wavo, the thought of Sroaro's jewel glinting in the firelight, the desire to feel its heft in his hand, was stuck fast in his mind. With but a stab and a dash, it would be his. He could not let such an opportunity pass. He must not. There could be no turning back.

Thalo drew his knife from his belt, reached once more behind the curtain, and with one quick strike he plunged the blade hard into Wavo's neck, then ran. And how he ran! As Wavo lay sputtering behind him, as Goldhego leapt up and cried murder, as the household jostled awake, Thalo sprang through the smithy door and out into the night. Wavo's relatives all armed themselves for vengeance, but they dealt none. They had been taken by surprise, and Thalo left so quickly, and amid such confusion, that he got away unstopped.

When he came back to Dyar, it was nearly sunrise. Sroaro, having slept poorly that night, was awake to meet him. Thalo showed him the bloody knife and declared Wavo to be dead, and that was all the proof the old man needed.

'Joy!' he said. 'I cannot tell you, Thalo man, what elation swells within me! Come inside, and I will share it with you.'

Sroaro brought Thalo inside and gave him his jewel. Thalo received it with pleasure and went to bed.

Then a very peculiar thing happened. While Sroaro was preparing his breakfast above the fire, he heard raised voices outside. Before he could so much as lift his bottom from his seat, in came Wavo, armed and armoured, his face clean-shaven.

'Oh!' said Sroaro, leaping to his feet. 'A haunting!'

But this was no ghostly apparition. There stood Wavo, glowering, firm of flesh and fierce of face.

'Why are you here?' said Sroaro.

'My Goldhego,' said Wavo, 'has been murdered in the night.'

Sroaro could not comprehend this news. He understood well enough that Goldhego was dead and Wavo yet lived, but it made no sense at all. Wavo was dead, but there he stood. It could not be.

'Are you sure about that?'

'Am I sure I was awoken in the night by my husband's death cry? That his dying words struggled out through a cloven throat? That I held him in my arms as he bled in our bed? Do I seem unsure?'

Eyes wide, Sroaro whimpered, 'I see. Who could have done this?'

Wavo scoffed. 'Who indeed?' He took his axe from his belt, and with an eye of fire, aflame with grief and a grudge, he strode towards Sroaro. 'Let me tell you exactly why I am here, Sroaro. I am here to accuse you of this crime.'

To avenge Goldhego's death, and all else you have made me suffer. To be rid of you once and for all!

Then Wavo took up his axe and killed Sroaro with a single blow to the neck.

'What is dealt is dealt in kind,' he said, and he left the room. No one dared stop him.

Thalo was still asleep when Wavo left Dyar. The walk to Wavonnawl and back, and the thrill of the murder, had worn him out so thoroughly that he slept soundly from Wavo's coming to his going. He was not awoken until Moa, Sroaro's sister-in-law and the head of the household, pried him from his bench a little while later. She told him Sroaro had been killed and bade him make himself useful.

'Who killed him?' said Thalo.

'Wavo,' said Moa. 'Sroaro's resentment must have finally deluded him. He murdered Goldhego, and Wavo paid him back. A terrible mess. This is why we tried to turn him away.'

Thalo did not correct her, nor did he make himself useful. He packed his things, the jewel of Lammam among them, and left Dyar before he could be held to account. He did not look back.

X

Another Household Sundered

Thalo soon came to a small hamlet called Broensrok, not far over the boundary between Fawnovol and Syenavol. As he rode along, he passed a group of five or six burly men cooling off their chests.

‘Oy-oy, men,’ said Thalo. ‘Tell me, where might I find a bed for the night?’

Not one of the men answered him. Instead, they mumbled little jokes and jibes between themselves and chortled at him.

‘Did you hear me?’

‘That we did,’ said the backmost man. ‘That we did.’

‘And what do you say?’

‘What do I say? I say we did! Did you hear me?’

‘Useless.’

Thalo meant to ride along and bother someone else, but the five or six men would not allow it.

‘Hang on,’ said the frontmost man. ‘We can find a spot for you.’

‘Do not trouble yourselves,’ said Thalo. ‘I will go elsewhere.’

‘Will you?’

‘I will.’

The backmost man came to his fellow’s side, and he said, ‘This man here—if he can be so called—he seems hen-hearted, no? Ho! Run along then, little clucker boy.’

Thalo alighted from Ondayo and strode towards them. ‘Say that again.’

‘Or what?’

‘Or I will give you a sound fisting and be on my way.’

The other three or four men all stirred from their slump-spots and gathered behind the fronter two.

‘You what?’ said the frontmost man.

‘I what, or will, if only you say it again.’

‘Say what again?’

‘Call me a clucker boy.’

‘You are a clucker boy.’

Thalo threw the first punch. He struck the frontmost man squarely on his nose. The man staggered back into the arms of his four or five comrades, and they each let up their voices in sequence: ‘As one!’

Although Thalo was an eager foe, he stood alone against many. A barrage of fists and feet beset him, and once the five or six men had satisfied their urges, he lay spread upon the floor, bruised, bloodied, and soundly beaten. Ondayo came to nose at his face, but Thalo had not the strength to rise and quickly fell unconscious.

A certain fellow called Kwele happened to witness Thalo’s beating. He was a man of priestly occupation. Though he had considered intervening in the fight, he did not hold in his heart sufficient courage to put himself before the five or six men. Instead, he waited until they had all gone home before coming to Thalo’s side.

‘O horse!’ he said, kneeling before Ondayo. ‘Majestic and magnificent, I behold you! Tell me, is this mad man your master?’ He put his ear to Ondayo’s cheek. ‘I see. And would you let me heal his hurts?’ He waited a moment. ‘Very good. Truly, I envy your wisdom, noble one.’

Then Kwele took Thalo up in his arms, laid him in his cart, and ferried him away to his woodside shrine house. Ondayo went behind them. When they came to the shrine, Kwele brought Thalo to a bed, and there he healed him.

Thalo awoke from his pain-made slumber late the next morning, sore and heavy, and also terribly confused. He was not where he was, nor where he ever had been. He went outside to seek out any landmark by which he might locate himself, but he recognised neither the trees nor the sky, nor the ground beneath his feet, and there was nothing much else to see. He could, however, hear in the woods the gentle shuffling of leaves, quiet at first, but it soon grew louder, and louder still, and ever more vigorous, until it became apparent something was fast approaching.

Then, amid the trees, a flash of silver, striking in the gloom. Thalo moved to get a better look, to see what manner of beast was prowling, and after a moment of eager silence, he saw it. A dashing silver fox trotted out into the light and took a seat, brilliant at the edge of the woods. He had seen this fox before, and to see it again, to see its eyes of gold burning bright in the sun, he knew it to be the very same fiend. Thalo went towards it unthinking, driven not by head or heart, but as if by the will of deadly fate itself. Yet before he had taken even two steps, the fox was gone again, lost among the trees.

Kwele beset him from behind.

‘The man has risen!’ said Kwele.

‘Who are you?’ said Thalo, his hand upon his beltknife. ‘Where am I?’

‘Have no fear! There is no need for knifing here. I am Kwele, and this is Leygnos, my house and home. The brutes you met left you for dead, but I have very kindly remedied that. Now say, who is it I have brought into my shrine?’

‘Thalo.’

‘Good. I bid you come inside, Thalo man, and rest. Take what food and fire you need from me, and let your body be soothed.’

‘I should be on my way.’

This displeased Kwele, but he said nothing of it. ‘Of course. The sun will set before it rises. Ready yourself, and I will see you off.’

Once Kwele had gone inside, Thalo turned back to the woods, but the fox did not reappear. He went inside.

Thalo found his things near his bed—Kwele had piled it all in the corner of the room—then dressed himself and prepared to resume riding. As he did this, however, Kwele crept to Ondayo’s side and colluded with him.

‘Magnificent one,’ he whispered, his hand against Ondayo’s chest, ‘your friend is not fit for faring. If you wish to keep him well, keep him here.’

Ondayo lowered his head.

‘O standout steed, how I thank you. Know that your dignity is immense, and your wisdom unparalleled.’

Thalo came outside as they were parting. He hung his bag from Ondayo’s saddle and clambered up.

‘Kwele,’ he said, ‘I thank you for your healing. Ondayo, away!’

Ondayo did not away. Thalo tried to spur him on once more, but the horse would not so much as lift a hoof. He dismounted and came to meet Ondayo eye-to-eye.

‘Why so stubborn?’

He received no reply.

‘Would you rather I walked? Let us be off, then.’

Thalo took the reins and tried to lead Ondayo away on foot, but still, he would not budge. After another little tug, Ondayo lay down on his side.

‘Ondayo boy? Are you hurt?’

‘Not him,’ said Kwele. ‘The horse I see before me is sage and generous. Do not doubt his instincts. He will not lead you to harm, and nor will he be so led. Let him rest a while, and perhaps you will take some yourself.’

Thalo looked between Ondayo on the floor and Kwele grinning beside him. His sighting of the silver fox had lit within him a tremendous need to leave that place—whether to find the fox or flee it, he could not be sure—but though he was eager enough to move along, he was unwilling to force Ondayo onwards.

‘Perhaps I will,’ he said, ‘if you will have me.’

‘Gladly.’

Thalo spent five days at Leygnos with Kwele and his household. He tried to leave each morning, and each time, Ondayo refused to move. This left Thalo increasingly worried for his friend, fearing some illness was festering within him and depriving him of all his spunk. He spent as much time as he could at Ondayo's side, checking him daily for any sign of ill health, but he showed no symptoms besides stubbornness. Kwele tended to Thalo just as closely, his every need met with such wholehearted dedication that it was as if none of the three ever left the others' sides.

After Thalo had been at Leygnos for three days since his awakening, a man called Dalbono came to the shrine for priestly counsel. He was the son of one of Kwele's cousins, but their bond was faster than that of many brothers. Kwele invited Dalbono to stay the night and share a meal with the household, an offer he graciously accepted. As they sat for dinner, Dalbono found himself next to Thalo.

'Who are you?' said Dalbono. 'I do not know you.'

'Nor need you,' said Thalo. 'I should not be here much longer.'

'Crooked! What are you hiding? Are you a criminal?'

'Yes.'

'What was your crime?'

'Murder.'

'Whom did you murder?'

'I have performed two killings. Which name would you like to hear first?'

'Which name will most astound me?'

'Gaylodho, I suppose. He was once an earl.'

'An earl? Why did you murder him?'

'He deserved it.'

'How so?'

Thalo listed all the reasons for which he had condemned Gaylodho. Among them, he cited the murder of his birth parents, the attempted murder of himself, and most importantly, the disrespect with which he ever regarded Asfoa.

'You seem much aggrieved by this man,' said Dalbono. 'Are you pleased to have murdered him?'

'I do not regret it,' said Thalo, 'but that I did it so swiftly. I wish to try again, to make him suffer as fully as he should have.'

'Those are harsh words. Tell me, what brings you here? You speak like no priest I have ever met.'

Thalo told Dalbono how he had come to Leygnos.

'I see,' said Dalbono. 'Having said all this, murder man, will you tell me who you are?'

'I am Thalo.'

‘And I am Dalbono.’

Dalbono had no more questions.

In the evening, once the sun had set and the stars were all alight, Dalbono went outside to speak with Kwele.

‘O Dalbono,’ said Kwele, ‘my magnanimous mate! Why do you meet me so, and before the mighty moon?’

‘I have spoken,’ said Dalbono, ‘to the Thalo man.’

‘Ah, my Thalo. I have tended him well, have I not? Say, why do you bring his name to my ear?’

‘I spoke with him over dinner, and I was hard stricken. He reminds me very much of the man I once was, young and wrathful. He speaks of such terrible violence. I have known my share of that.’

‘I am well aware.’

‘And alas that it should be so! I know what becomes of the blood-sower. It is a thrilling thing to kill, but it is harrowing all the same. Yet such fates can be averted. With some hard work, I think, and good company, he can make a finer man of himself than the swinging of swords ever could. I mean to invite him into my household, for I could do with an extra pair of hands, and he could do with a kindly ear to hear him. It is my duty as a man of means to share them.’

‘That sounds just swell, but he will not accept such a gift. He would not still be here at all, were it not for his horse’s stubbornness. What if he declines?’

‘That would be his right, but I cannot withhold an offer simply because he might refuse it. If he does accept, would you let me take him from your home?’

‘It is not my place to let you.’

‘Is he not your boy?’

‘No. He is a guest in my house. A welcome one, yes, but an unwilling one. I could not deprive you, my friend, of this chance for good-doing.’

‘O Kwele! Hearty is the heart within your breast, so full of love and grace. You truly are the envy of all well minded men.’

‘No, Dalbono, do not spend such words on me when there is no man your equal in virtue.’

Then the pair hugged one another before retiring to bed.

During breakfast the following morning, Dalbono sat beside Thalo to make his offer. ‘You told me last night, Thalo, that you have been wandering awhile. I happen to find myself in need of extra farmhands. How would you like to be put up in my household?’

‘I need to be on my way,’ said Thalo.

‘To where, may I ask?’

But Thalo had no destination at all, besides that which all men share. ‘I do not yet know. Wherever my way leads me.’

‘I see. Perhaps, then, your way will lead you into my home?’

Thalo had no good reason to decline. ‘Very well, but I will need to see what my horse has to say about it first. He is unwilling to walk, and I will not be parted from him.’

‘Of course.’

They spent the rest of the day at Leygnos while Thalo prepared to move along. Early the next morning, they were ready to set off. Thalo took hold of Ondayo’s reins and gave them a little tug, but the horse remained in place. Thalo tried a few more times, with no success. When he was just about ready to give up, to accept that he would be living at Leygnos forevermore, Kwele came forth and gave Ondayo one slow, solemn nod.

‘Farewell, my venerable friends,’ he said. ‘May we meet once more with much mirth and merriment!’

Ondayo walked on, and Thalo beside him, and Dalbono just the same.

Thalo spent the rest of the winter at Dalbono’s farm, Gawslad. He earned his keep doing whatever sad, cold work that needed doing over winter, but he was well kept for it. Dalbono worked him hard and fed him well, and he always had warm words to spare and a willing ear, though it heard little.

At Gawslad, Thalo met Dalbono’s son, Ommeo, with whom he became very well acquainted. This would have been all well and good, if only Ommeo were not already married. Ommeo’s wife was a young woman called Rewna—she was at that time only a bit older than Thalo—and she neither knew nor approved of Ommeo’s new plaything. He did not intend to change that.

‘Do you not think,’ said Thalo, ‘she ought to have some say in the matter? You are her husband, after all.’

‘Silly Thalo!’ said Ommeo. ‘Words unspoken never wrought a wound.’

That was convincing enough for Thalo, and they had at it. Yet Ommeo was the sillier, for words unspoken can be heard all the same, and oft cut deeper than those softly said.

Rewna went out one evening into the countryside to watch the spring sun’s final setting from a local hillock, as was her forebears’ tradition. As she went, she heard a muffled voice coming from a nearby gully. Fearing someone may have fallen in and hurt themselves, she went to see who might await her. The only thing hurt, however, was her soon-to-be-sundered heart, for there in the dirt lay Ommeo, Thalo astride him, each awash with ecstasy.

‘Treachery!’ she howled, and she scrambled into the gully, tore the pair apart, and gave them each a sharp knock on the head.

‘Rewna! Rewna!’ cried Ommeo, his words otherwise failing him.

‘You layabout! You prickard! You he-whoring ass!’

‘O Rewna! Rewna, Rewna!’

This went on for a little while, Rewna loosing a whole flood of curses, and Ommeo doing precisely nothing to allay her. While they bickered, Thalo got himself dressed and tried to sneak away, but Rewna would not let him escape. She seized Ommeo by his arm and dragged him back to Gawslad in pursuit, her tirade not letting up once all the while. Upon their return, everyone came outside to see what all the uproar was about, and Rewna professed the whole truth, or all she had seen of it. It was all too much for poor Dalbono.

‘Ommeo, my son,’ he said, ‘I did not raise you to be a man of deceit. How my fatherly honour is shaken! Hang your head in shame, boy, for I will so hang mine. This will cast a grim shadow upon our house. And you, Thalo, who will weep for you? Who will weep for you when your life yields up your death, and your friends are all besmirched? I have shown you all manner of kindnesses, and this is the gratitude you show for it? You would repay my hospitality by adulterating my son and defiling his marriage? How appalling! There can be no reconciliation here. No, I bid you leave this place at once, lest the spring’s last moon should awaken in me a deadliest foe.’

Then Dalbono went inside to weep.

Thalo heeded him. He left Gawslad that evening, taking to the road once more, but not before Ommeo, that shameless man, stole one last secret kiss.

Rewna divorced Ommeo the next day and left Gawslad to live with her eldest brother, Greyo, at a farm called Breyrmol. The moment Greyo learnt about Ommeo’s faithlessness, he summoned his brothers to his side, and they all marched over to Gawslad, forced their way into the house, dragged Ommeo from his bench, and drowned him in a nearby lake. This moved Dalbono to such wrath that he took up an axe and went alone to Breyrmol, where he hacked each of Rewna’s brothers to death. Rewna was stricken with grief, a grief she could not bear, and blaming herself for her brothers’ deaths, she hanged herself from the rafters.

As for Dalbono, he could not bring himself to return to Gawslad. He left the farm in a niece’s hands and spent the rest of his days living with Kwele at Leygnos. There he died a bitter, broken man.

XI

Lying and Laying

Thalo spent the rest of the summer drifting his way westwards, first through Syenavol, then through Noynavol, until he came into Latavol. It happened one day, while he was in the southernmost reaches of the earldom, that he stopped to bathe in a river. He took off his clothes and waded in, but when he came up out of the water and opened his eyes, they nearly shut again for good. Sat on the riverbank he saw fox-fanged Knale once more, clad in his courtliest silver coat, his golden eyes glowing in the morning twilight.

‘You again!’ said Thalo. He flapped his arm and splashed about in the river, trying to scare the fox off, but he remained still. ‘Why do you haunt me?’

Knale said nothing.

Thalo continued, ‘You are no humble fox, are you? What else, then? Some spirit sent to torment me? What is your wicked work?’

Again, Knale said nothing, but now he stirred from his seat, trotted over to Thalo’s bag on the bank, and upon seizing it in his jaws, he skipped away. That was Thalo’s treasure bag, in which he kept the jewel of Lammam, and also what little cash he held.

‘Thief!’ said Thalo, and he sprang out of the river, threw on his clothes, and spurred Ondayo into pursuit.

Thalo followed Knale for the better part of the morning until he came to a village called Belrenn. It was four big houses around a well, all surrounded by farmland, except for a forest on one side. The whole place was quiet. Though it could have housed a hundred people or more, it was completely abandoned.

Knale dashed into one of the houses. Close behind, Thalo pulled Ondayo up and followed him inside. Within he found a man, big in every direction—tall, broad, and round. He lay asleep in the middle of the floor, beside the firepit, having lain down to ease his aching back. At the man’s feet lay Thalo’s treasure bag, but no fox was to be seen.

Thalo kicked the man awake. ‘Who are you? Where did the fox go?’

The man scowled up at him. ‘First tell me who you are, the stranger in my

home.’ He did not stand up to speak.

‘Thalo,’ said Thalo.

‘Why are you in my house, Thalo?’

‘I followed a fox. It came in here with my bag.’ Thalo showed the man his bag. ‘I have it back now, but where is the fox?’

The man’s eyes widened. ‘That is a concerning omen.’

‘How so?’

‘A stranger guides a stranger. Foul intentions guide foul faces. I want no part of this, Thalo man, lest you bring calamity to my house.’

‘I am not here to bring you calamity.’

The man scoffed. ‘I cannot trust the words of one so tall, for their tales are surely taller.’

‘I think you would be the taller of us, if only you stood up.’

‘But that is not where we find ourselves. Get out of my house, tall fellow.’

Thalo went back outside. As he stepped into the sunlight, something caught his eye in the woods. There he saw Knale again, now in his elfin skin, his little skirt and glinting rings, just as he was when they met at Klagenn. Possessed by an insatiable need to approach, Thalo went to him, and as he drew near, Knale walked off into the forest. He was easy enough to follow, however, for it was as if a pale light shone from his hair, leading Thalo through the shadows. They soon came to a clearing, where Knale sat upon a rock beside a small pond. That was a most marvellous place, quiet and ethereal, the sunlight shimmering on the surface of the water.

Thalo said, ‘What are you doing here?’

‘That is a significant question,’ said Knale. ‘Let me try it on myself.’ He deepened his voice in false solemnity. ‘What are you doing here?’

Thalo sat in front of him. ‘Tell me your name.’

‘My name! What good is a name to me? I am me and myself, nothing more and nothing less.’

‘I am Thalo.’

‘You are queer. When I was a young something, we would not give our names to just any fellow who asked for them. Not without good reason.’

‘What makes a good reason?’

‘I cannot know until I know.’

‘What about fame? What good is fame with no name to bear it?’

‘Fame? Bah! What good is fame with? No more or less either way. And what fame do you have anyhow, little witch’s boy?’

‘I have the fame of all my deeds to come.’

‘How cute! I have known many famous folk and you are not among them.’

‘Never mind that. Tell me who you knew.’

‘Whose name do you want to hear?’

Thalo thought for a moment. He had liked old Regnaga’s tales, and those about raging Agleo most of all, but she had often made him a villain.

Thalo said, ‘Tell me about Agleo.’

Knale squinted. ‘Never heard of him. Next.’

‘How about Aldoro?’

‘Yes.’

‘How did you know him? Say more.’

‘No.’

Thalo thought better than to press the matter, and they sat staring silently at one another. Once this had lasted a moment longer than comfort would allow, Thalo patted his knees.

‘Tell me,’ he said, ‘why should fate bring us together once again? What are you doing here?’

‘What am I doing here?’ said Knale. ‘This is my home, the sky my ceiling, the water my bed. Why should I not be here?’

‘You live here?’

‘I live, and I am here. I live here.’ Knale’s voice turned grim. ‘Let me ask you this, Thalo, the stranger in my home: what are you doing here?’

‘I followed a fox. It led me to a man who said much the same thing, and I am unhappy to have met him. Do you know him?’

‘Better than I should like.’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘That fellow has caused me great grief. Such sorrow.’

‘What did he do to you?’

Knale turned to the water beside him. ‘He came and lay in my pond.’

‘He came and lay in your pond?’

‘He came and lay in my pond! And it caused me great grief. Such sorrow. I bore such sorrow to see a stranger come into my home uninvited.’

Thalo shook his head, failing to fully understand the situation.

‘Are you dim?’ said Knale. ‘I live, and I am here. I live here. He came here uninvited. He came into my home uninvited. But it would seem he has now suffered as I have suffered, so I ought to thank you, I suppose.’

Thalo gave a shallow, uncertain nod.

But now Knale’s face grew stern. ‘And yet I find myself unsatisfied. He will come and defile my home once more. If you are no longer here when it happens—and it will happen!—I will have no way to do unto him as he does unto me, to do for him as he has done for me. No, there is nothing else for it.’ He placed his hand on Thalo’s shoulder. ‘You must kill him. Kill that man and bring me his body.’

Thalo took Knale's hand from his shoulder and stood up. 'It does not seem terribly just to kill a man for lying in a pond.'

'Foul intentions guide foul faces. I know who you are, Thalo. I know what you want. I can put you on the proper path, if only you would do this for me.'

'Say more.'

'I have known many famous folk, and though you are not among them, I can make it so. I can grant you your immortal glory. I can do for you if you will do for me.'

'How so?'

'You ask too many questions. Answer one for once. Do you want your name to live on imperishable? To ever grace the tongues of poets and bards?'

'I do.'

'Then kill this man, bring me his body, and we will sort things out from there. Do not waste this opportunity.'

'What if I decline?'

'Oh, please! What if the sun stops rising?'

Thalo did not very much want to go through with this arrangement. As far as he could see, the lying man had committed no more heinous crime than being strange. But Knale was exceptionally beautiful. His hair long and fair, his eyes bright and yellow, his skin full of radiance, it was as if he were sculpted entirely of gold. Thalo could not deny him.

'Swear it,' said Thalo. 'Make me an oath. Swear to uphold this deal as you have laid it out to me.'

'Very well. I swear it. You have my word, for all it might be worth.'

Thalo took a deep breath in. 'Good. We have an agreement.'

Knale smiled. 'Good. Off you trot.'

So Thalo ventured back through the trees to revisit the lying man. When he went inside the house, he was still on the floor.

'Why have you returned here, tall fellow?' asked the man.

'I have heard about your misdeeds,' said Thalo, 'and I have come to repay you for them.'

'What misdeeds are those?'

'Foul intentions guide foul faces, and your face seems foulest.'

'That does not answer my question.'

Then Thalo drew his sword and stabbed the man in the chest. He did not want it to last any longer than necessary. The man grunted and groaned, but he died quickly, lying on the floor of his house. That was Thalo's third murder.

Thalo dragged the man outside by his legs, and it was a terrible effort to shift the corpse. Knale awaited him at the edge of the woods, and once he had brought him the body, he clapped his hands together.

‘This is a fine thing you have done!’ said Knale. ‘I am very grateful—very grateful! Now cut the belly open.’

‘Cut it open?’

Knale flashed him a charming smile and wagged his finger at the body. ‘Cut the belly open.’

Thalo cut the belly open. Knale reached inside and rummaged about, feeling his way around the man’s innards, until he asked for Thalo’s knife, with which he cut out the gallbladder. Then Thalo watched with horror as he ate it whole. The very sight of it was vile, his hands caked in blood, bile spilling from his mouth and dribbling down his chin. But revolting though it was, Thalo could not tear his eyes from Knale’s face, adorned with an otherworldly pleasure, sighing, moaning, revelling in every grisly morsel. How he savoured it!

When Knale finally swallowed, he gave one last, drawn-out sigh, utterly overcome. He wiped the bile from his mouth (that only replaced it with blood), leant himself against a tree, and waved his hand limply.

‘Please return him to his house,’ he said, his voice much weaker than it had been. ‘Best not to keep him long.’

Thalo was still in shock, his breathing heavy, his stomach unsteady, but he nodded dutifully and dragged the man back to his house. He left him just inside the door, unwilling to shove him any further in. When he went outside, Knale was gone again, so he walked back through the village, then back through the woods, until he found him sat upon his rock once more.

‘I have done for you,’ said Thalo. ‘What will you now do for me?’

Knale said nothing. Silently, he stood up, took off his skirt, and walked into the pond. His unearthly beauty pervaded his whole body. Every part of him, every dip and curve, was just as enamouring as his faultless face. He sat in the water and bade Thalo join him.

Thalo needed no persuading. Heeding his headier head, he took off his clothes and strode into the pond, no need to be asked twice. He knew at once why the lying man had sought it out. The water was cool and clear, putting him at ease and soothing him entirely. He sat opposite Knale.

‘I recall giving you some advice,’ said Knale, ‘but I have more to give, if you will hear it, and this advice will be free.’

Thalo was in no state of mind to question anything he said. ‘Give it.’

Knale smiled. He knelt beside Thalo, one hand on his shoulder, the other on the small of his back, and moved his fingers across his skin, gently drawing the water up his spine. As he did so, he whispered this verse into Thalo’s ear:

‘To man of worth will all earth yield,
to fork and hoe, that well ploughed field,

for in the earth his seed he'll sow,
and from that seed will glories grow.'

Thalo was glad to hear this. Never before had words so delighted him. Knale softly kissed his cheek, and the rest unfolded thereafter.

When Thalo awoke on the grass by the pond, Knale was gone. He feared he had played some trick on him, goading him into murder only to shirk his end of their deal. Anger brewed in his breast. How had he let things go so far? How had he let himself be ensnared by the elf's wiles? He clothed himself and rushed back through the forest, each step drumming up yet deeper regret. But when he came out of the woods and into the village, when he saw Knale sat on the floor beside Ondayo, the anger and the doubt all diminished, until only that hopeless, helpless infatuation remained.

Thalo went to him and said, 'What now? You swore to do for me as I have done for you.'

'So I did. You want folk to know your name, yes? Silly, but if that is what you want, that is what you get. And I know how you might do that, and where you might go to do it.'

'How? Where?'

Knale arose and said, 'Follow me,' and then he put on his fox fur.

Briefly, Thalo stood dumbstruck, momentarily released from Knale's sultry charms. But before he could say anything, Knale scurried off out of the village.

'A fox,' said Thalo. 'A tod and a vixen both.'

Then he climbed upon Ondayo and rode after him.

XII

The Ruin of Moyr

Thalo followed Knale for several days, travelling eastwards through Latavol, Syagavol, and then back into Eylavol, where he was now an outlaw. Knale said nothing as they went. They spent each day travelling in silence, walking only the wildest ways, and hearing no chatter besides that of the birds. Each night, when they stopped to rest, Thalo tried to question Knale. The information he had yielded at Belrenn—though enough to drag him all the way back to Eylavol—was sufficiently little to leave him wanting. Of course, he wanted to know where they were going and why, but there was much else to be asked. What wonders had the elf beheld? To what ancient knowledges was he privy? If any at all, he gave Thalo none of it. Yet he followed him all the same, for he could not help himself.

After twelve days of this, and as Thalo's rations were dwindling, they came at last to a wooded hill overlooking a small village called Moyr, in the southern stretches of Eylavol. There Knale pointed Thalo to the village and told him to take a night's rest.

'That seems unwise,' said Thalo. 'I am a wanted man in these parts.'

'Do as I bid,' said Knale, shaking his hips, 'and you will be wanted the world over.'

Then he pranced away.

Thalo did as he was told. He went down the hill to a little house standing higher than the others, and there he called out for a welcome. A short, round woman came to meet him.

'Who are you?' said the woman.

'Thalo,' said Thalo. He made a poor outlaw. 'Who are you?'

'Rara. Why are you shouting at my door, Thalo man?'

'I am seeking a night's lodging. What do you say?'

'Will you rob us? Will you kill us?'

'No.'

'Then come inside.'

Thalo went in, and there he met Rara's husband, a foolish fellow named Oggelo. He told them he was on the road after being forced out of his home, although he did not reveal any identifying details. They gave him a hearty meal and some warm blankets and invited him to sleep.

'You could use it,' said Oggelo, 'thin-limbed and haggard-like.'

Thalo said nothing to this and went to bed.

Knale, meanwhile, stole into the moonlit hills for a long-awaited meeting. In the shadows of a small hollow, he found the cave he sought and ventured forth into the darkness.

'Klovo,' said Knale. 'Are you here?' He received no reply, but he heard in the depths a disgruntled grumbling. 'Klovo, awake! You have a guest. Be a good boy and meet him.'

Klovo, Nawko's delve-doomed troll of a son, arose from his sleeping spot and loomed up, enormous in the confines of the cave.

'Feydo?' he said. 'When did you become so rude?'

'Oh, no, Klovo, no. I am no fear-flighted finch. I am your Auntie Knale!'

'A fell name. Why do you harry me in my home?'

'As it happens, I come concerning Feydo.'

'What of him?'

'He is dead.'

Klovo's breathing became taut. 'What did you say?'

'Again, he is dead.'

'But when? How?' Klovo fell silent, then stepped towards Knale, leaning in the entrance of the cave. His eyes bright with wrath, glowing, gleaming in the gloom, he said, 'Was this your wicked work?'

'What? No! I am appalled you would even think me so capable.'

'Do not flap your tongue at me, fox!'

Klovo lunged at Knale, reaching for his neck, intent upon seizing it in his mighty grasp and snapping it with a single, brutal twist. Yet Knale, the fleet-footed fiend, stepped out of the cave, and Klovo relented. He could not cross the threshold.

'I did not kill Feydo,' said Knale. 'He was my brother. I too have bounds I cannot cross.'

'Can it truly be so?' said Klovo. 'Swear it to me, then. Swear you did not kill him.'

'If you wish. I will swear it here and now, beneath the very moon for you: I did not kill Feydo.'

'Then who did?'

'It was the villagers just down the slopes. Feydo and I were passing by on our way here when they attacked us. He tried to fight them off, but it came to

nothing. He died so I could live.'

Klovo turned away from Knale, the ire-light fading from his eyes. He said, sniffing, 'There never was a kindlier fellow. Why would they do this?'

'Cruelty, I suppose. Or malice? Spite?' He knew such motives all too well. 'Who can say? Any which way, I have a proposition.'

Klovo's sniffing stopped, but he did not speak, nor turn around.

'What do you say to vengeance? That, Klovo, would be your right.'

Klovo turned back to Knale, eyes red, cheeks wet, his whole demeanour diminished. 'I cannot leave this place. For years beyond count have I dwelt here, yet even now, when my only friend lies dead, I sit by powerless, my mind enslaved by inaction. I do not recall the touch of grass, Knale. The warmth of the sun, the soft caress of the wind. Only the darkness. Hard stone and darkness. It is endless. I am no avenger.'

Softly, Knale came back into the cave, and he put a reassuring hand upon Klovo's shoulder. 'I can release you.'

'You can?'

'My brother put you here, no? What could he do that I cannot? I long for retribution just as much as you do, but I am equally powerless to deliver it—see what weak little arms I have! I can, however, deliver you. What do you say, Klovo? Will you do this for me? Will you do this for Feydo?'

Klovo stood, his eyes alight once more, his stature renewed. 'I will see the stars again. Release me, Knale, and I will wreak such wrath upon these folk. Release me, Knale, and release my forefathers' vengeance!'

'So be it. I will release you.' Knale went back outside and did his work, dispelling the enchantment by which Klovo had been confined to his cave for centuries. 'It is done. Be free.'

Klovo came forth, and with much trepidation, he stepped out over the threshold. Emerging from the shadows of the hills, he looked up, and he saw with wonder the moon and the stars, and all the beauty of the night.

'I am free,' he said, but then his fingers forged a fist. 'I am purposeful.'

So did Klovo go striding on his way to Moyr and set upon the village. He put his whole self into ravaging that place, toppling buildings, laying waste to livestock, and assaulting anyone who dared stumble groggily against him. That mighty man! How he roared!

In Rara's hillside house, Thalo was above the destruction, but all the noise awoke him nonetheless, Klovo's vengeful howls amid the cries of the villagers. He dashed outside to see what was afoot, Oggelo and Rara either side of him, and they saw Klovo frenzied in the village below.

'Someone should do something about this,' said Rara.

'That they should,' said Oggelo, rubbing his bald head, 'and I should like

to see the knackers on them. A right frightening fellow, he is.’

Thalo was already back inside, readying himself for a fight. He pulled on his thick shirt, donned his helmet, and raced down into the village, spear and shield in hand, his sword and knife at his hips.

Yet when he came there, he found Klovo looking rather larger than he had back on the hill, his great, throaty roars all the more penetrating. He nearly turned back the way he came, but no. He firmed his grip, his feet, his mind, and he thought of the splendid heroes of old, they who fought to the death, be it theirs or their foe’s.

‘Beast!’ he said, sparing not a moment for reason. ‘Face me! You will not leave this place alive.’

Klovo was too swept up in the carnage to say anything back. He turned to Thalo, the little man with big words, and had at him, and they fought.

Thalo rushed forth at once and drove his spear into Klovo’s belly, but before he could withdraw it, before he could release his grip and step away, hammer-handed Klovo gripped it, sundered the shaft, and struck out at Thalo’s head. The blow dented Thalo’s helmet, knocking him dazed to the floor, his shield falling beside him.

Klovo took up the shield, and with no effort at all, he snapped it in twain, loosing another roar all the while, and fell thrashing upon his foe. Though he was still stunned, Thalo had enough of his wits to draw his beltknife and stab aimlessly into Klovo’s ribs. The troll did not let up. He stabbed again and again, but it was not until the fifth or sixth strike that Klovo recoiled, heaving as blood streamed from his side.

Thalo clambered wonkily to his feet and drew his sword. As best he could, he fixed his eyes on Klovo, crumpled and wounded on the floor, wet with blood and sweat and tears alike, his vigour utterly spent, and ran him through. So Klovo died as he had lived—alone in the dark. That was Thalo’s fourth murder.

With the troll vanquished, Thalo pried off his helmet and lay down on the floor. His vision remained misaligned, his head hot and thumping, his whole body weak and wobbly, but he was alive, and he was triumphant! He lay there laughing, exultant and exhausted in equal measure, until Rara and Oggelo came down the hill and helped him limp his way back up to their house. They patched him up and put him to bed.

And as he slept, the villagers all came together in a great throng to marvel at the monster’s corpse, to lament the wreckage of their homes, and to grieve for the dead. Four big men hauled the body over the river and buried it where it would not taint the soil, and the matter of the troll was put to rest. On the next day, they held a funeral for those who had died—there were four of them—and committed their ashes to the earth. Then the toil began as they worked to clear

away Klovo's wreckage and start rebuilding. Thalo stayed in bed, though no one held this against him.

In the evening, the local priest, a woman called Tresbera, held a meal for the village at her temple, and Thalo was invited to sit beside her at the front of the hall. Partway through the meal, Tresbera called for silence and stood to speak. After naming the dead and calling upon the villagers to hold them dear in their hearts, she gestured towards Thalo.

'I bid you likewise hear the name of another,' she said. 'As we mourn our fallen friends, let us also hear the name of Thalo, he who slew the troll and brought its rampage to an end. I name you Thennelo, Troll-foe, defender of our lives and livelihoods.'

Tresbera's young son then came into the house with a box, and he presented this to Thalo.

'As thanks for this feat,' said Tresbera, 'I offer you this gift, a small deal of my temple's wealth. Let it ever bring to mind all you have warded here.'

Thalo accepted this gift with pleasure.

Shortly thereafter, Thalo saw himself out of the temple, his treasure box firmly in hand. Rara walked him back to her house, leaving Oggelo to drink himself witless until the birds harangued him with their dawn-song. When they came there, Thalo offered her a portion of Tresbera's gift for her hospitality.

'No,' said Rara. 'You have more than earned your keep.'

'Then I will say no more about it.'

'Well, if you insist, I suppose I can take something or other.'

'I do not mean to insist.'

'Never mind, then. What is said is said. No more.'

They each went to bed.

In the darkest hours of the morning, Thalo awoke, his sleep unsettled, as it often was. Unable to coax himself back to sleep, he went out into the wintry night, and there on the roof sat Knale.

'Oy-oy,' said Knale. 'How did you find my friend Klovo?'

'That beast was your doing, was it?'

'Such ugly words. Show some respect! He was my however-many-greats-nephew, you know.'

'Do you ever answer a question?'

'Do you ever stop asking?'

'I merely want to know where things stand. Forgive me, but you have hardly been forthcoming.'

Knale dropped down from the roof and swaggered up to Thalo, his hands on his hips. 'I will forthcome as and when I so choose, and certainly not at your insistence alone. Many important things need doing, and I cannot make them

all you.'

'As far as I can see, you have done nothing but scurry about while I fight for my life.'

'You cannot see far, then. I have been upholding our deal, as I said I would. I gave you my word, after all.' Knale smirked, and what a smirk! That gorgeous grin! He brought it right up into Thalo's face, breathing down his neck. 'We have spoken, Thalo, of folk of elder days. Tell me, do you know about Lewva Thunder-hand?'

'I do. She slew the raging trolls.'

'That she did. And all these years later, you yet know her name, her deeds.' Knale placed a hand on Thalo's shoulder, his soft, elfin touch caressing his skin. 'How would you like to be her? To be the bane of trolls twice over?'

'That is the glory you would give me?'

'It is.' He gently forced Thalo backwards until he was up against the wall. 'One down. Shall we go all the way?'

'Another troll is abroad?'

'Think nothing of that, swordsman. Tell me this, and this alone: will you accept my offer of immortal glory?'

Thalo thought briefly of his mother's dying words. An orphan son of an orphan mother, his glory could only be that he fashioned for himself. And so ensnared by Knale's wiles, their bodies pressed together, warm in the cold of the night, Thalo saw his chance. He saw Knale's glimmering golden eyes, and in them he saw everlasting life.

'I will,' he whispered. 'I am Thalo Thennelo. Bring me your troll, and I will slay it.'

'Very good.' With that, Knale leapt backwards, releasing Thalo from his grip. 'Now, whatever became of the wretched corpse?'

Thalo's wits returned all at once. After stumbling over his words, he said, 'It was buried over the river.'

'No good. Come.'

Knale had Thalo lead him over the river to the site of Klovo's burial and made him dig the body up. Once Klovo's body was revealed, he clambered down into the grave, used the spade to hack off his head, and tossed it up at Thalo's feet.

'Keep that,' he said.

Thalo turned the head face up with his foot, and grim though it was, he could not move his gaze from it—the blood-stained nose, the slack jaw, the enormous, lifeless eyes. 'No.'

'Yes. How will anyone know you killed a troll if you have no proof? Must I do all the thinking?'

‘What proof is a rotten head?’

‘Trust me, Thalo, as you have. That is the head of a troll. It will not go bad. Or it will get no worse than it already was, at least.’

Thalo did not want to keep the severed head, but Knale flashed him a lustful little grin.

‘I will keep the head,’ he said.

‘Good. Go back to bed. I will sort the grave. Meet me back atop the hill in the morning, and we will move along.’

So Thalo did. He took the head back to Rara’s house, covered it with a bag, and went to bed.

The next morning, Thalo said he would be leaving Moyr. Rara thanked him again for his help and saw him off alone, for Oggelo had not yet returned from Tresbera’s feast. Thalo walked Ondayo—now more packhorse than steed—up the hill and met Knale in the woods.

‘All set?’ said Knale.

‘Let us be off,’ said Thalo. ‘My destiny awaits.’

XIII

The Missing Twin

Thalo and Knale took to the road once more. They travelled southwards over Fegennas and into Syoglonn, in the northern reaches of Mawon. From there, they followed the river eastwards to the coast. As ever, Knale went in silence, Thalo's every word falling unacknowledged.

After four days of walking, they stopped to rest one evening at the edge of a small wood. While Thalo was off gathering some kindling, Knale put on his fox fur and scurried away unseen. Thalo returned to their camping spot to find it deserted. He started the fire himself, had a small meal, and went to bed.

While Thalo slept, Knale went off to the coast. He clambered down the cliffs to the beach, and there he spotted his destination—an old sea cave. In he went, hoping to find Fowdho, the second of the twin trolls, and the second of his scornful nephews, whimpering within. Yet canny fate determined it would not be so, for in that cave he found no sun-starved troll. He found instead his brother Feydo, alive and alone.

'Oh!' said Knale. 'Alas that I must suffer this dunce yet again!'

Feydo had no mind for pleasantries, either. 'Why are you here, Knale?'

'Why am I here? Why are you here? And why is Fowdho not?'

Feydo said, 'I let him go.'

'Do not lie to me, Brother. It is ill-fitting.'

'You are one to speak of lies, Knale.' Feydo stepped towards him, his eyes alight. 'You swore you would not kill them. You swore it to me by oath—an oath now broken.'

'And to what exactly might you be referring?'

'You killed Klovo! You swore not to, and then you did it anyway. I had to free Fowdho before you got him, too. They are both now lost to me, but at least I know one yet lives.'

'Cease your tweeting, twitter-twink! I knew you were dull, but this is some new nitwittery. I have not killed Klovo. Whyever would you think I had?'

'I came to his cave, and there I found his headless corpse.'

‘Be that as it may, it was not by my hand that Klovo died.’

‘Do you—you, Knale—truly expect me to believe that?’

‘Like I care what you believe. Fate knows the truth. I am blameless, so all are satisfied! Except for old Klovo, of course. And also me, actually. I was very eager to find Fowdho here. Where is he?’

‘Gone. I have not seen him since I let him loose, and I doubt I ever will. But neither will you. Perhaps that is the only joy left for him, to live free of his cave, yet likewise free of friendship. Free of death, yet free of life. It is a pity it has come to this. How I wish you had not forced my hand.’ With a sigh, Feydo stepped out of the cave. ‘I am going now. Nela awaits me.’

Upon the invocation of his sister’s name, Knale’s blood began boiling. He rushed at Feydo, grabbed his shoulder, and pulled him back into the cave, nearly dragging him off his feet. ‘No. Nela need not know about this.’

‘You may think nothing of an oath,’ said Feydo, ‘but I do not. I swore I would keep her boys safe and look what has come of it! One dead, one lost. My oath is broken, my long life fruitless.’

‘That is your own fault, spineless waste of a man!’ Knale seized Feydo’s neck, just as his temper seized him. ‘Now tell me where Fowdho is. Tell me, Brother, or I will end your long, miserable life here and now.’

‘Wherever he is, he is beyond us both. It is just as well.’ What little anger had dwelt in Feydo had all now given way to despair. ‘I am tired, Knale. I tried to keep them safe—I tried so hard, but I was a coward. I failed them. I failed them all. Kill me if you wish, but if there is any love left in you, I beg of you, Brother: take pity. This wretched guilt I bear is justice enough.’

But there was no love in Knale, nor any room at all for pity. ‘I will pity you when you lie dead at my feet!’

Then he clenched his hand around Feydo’s throat and attacked him. To be beset by his own kinsman, a new verve arose in Feydo. He gripped Knale’s hand in his own, pried his fingers apart, and freed himself from his brother’s grasp. He took to his finch feathers and fluttered out of the cave without turning back.

How Knale seethed behind him! Utterly dissatisfied, his temper flared as never it had before. His fists full of fury, his heart full of hate, he thrashed bitterly at the floor as if deprived of all sanity, screaming and howling until his knuckles were raw and bleeding, and centuries of spite, a malice to mar many lifetimes, reddened the stone beneath him.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Things can be done. Things can be done.’

Then Knale left the cave.

When he returned to their campsite, it was not yet daybreak, but Thalo was already awake, sat by the fire and chatting idly to Ondayo about petty matters.

‘Thalo,’ said Knale. ‘We are halting our journey.’

‘Why?’ said Thalo.

‘That is no concern of yours. I have seen a farm a little to the west of here. Stay there. I will fetch you when we are to resume.’

‘When will that be?’

‘Before you die, with any luck.’

Knale donned his foxen coat and took off without another word.

Lost, lustful, and with no better options, Thalo did as Knale bade yet again. He readied Ondayo and set off westwards. His destination was a farm called Alvennawl.

XIV

Concerning Pearmol and Alvennawl

The story will now dwell on a place called Pearmol, which was a fortified town in the north-east of Yaranweg, not far south of Fegennas. The hall there stood atop a cliff overlooking the sea, and it was walled off from the rest of the town. Pearmol had long stood as a stronghold of particular importance, though it no longer stands so proudly.

The first to hold the Lordship of Pearmol was a man named Thyomalo, who was also the last King of Yaranweg. He was known as Thyomalo the Bent, for he was forced to submit to Endelo Annaronnan, the first King of Mawon. After surrendering his kingdom, Thyomalo held the lordship for over thirty years, ruling well and proudly until his dying day.

Thyomalo was succeeded in the lordship by his only son, Rogwalo. He was known as Rogwalo Firebrand, so named after his sword, Gantewre, which he had also inherited from his father. Each time the sword was drawn—and Rogwalo drew it often—it flashed with a radiant light, like fire spewing from the blade itself. No one knew who could have made such a faultless thing, but many said it must have been the work of a wizard, or else have been wrought by something wholly inhuman, so transcendent was its sheen. That was a sword among swords! That was Gantewre!

Rogwalo married a woman called Gonwela, by whom he had three sons. They were called Yalmalo, Karvalo, and Enyalo. He also had two daughters by the names of Erlawga and Alfrela. Rogwalo's sister was called Syolleda. Her husband was Nyolovo, and they had one son together, Kyale. Where Gantewre was Rogwalo's inheritance, the shield Yamveke was Syolleda's, broad and sturdy, and just as finely fashioned as her brother's sword.

Rogwalo was the Lord of Pearmol at the time of the king's expedition to Norlonn, and being a warlike man himself, he was keen to get involved in the matter. He mustered a company to lead northwards with the king, drawn from his thanes and his bondsfolk alike, and in this company went all three of his sons, his brother-in-law, Nyolovo, and his nephew, Kyale. Gantewre too went

at Rogwalo's hip, as ever it was, and Yamveke in the hands of young Kyale. Syolleda had forced the shield upon him and shooed him off to war, as proud as a mother could be.

In the early days of the fighting, Rogwalo led his troop away from the king's army towards Fevalnawl in Eylavol. He intended to defeat two of the earls at once there, Threlbega of Eylavol and Rengleyva of Syagavol, while they were travelling together to Bealnew. He hid his troop in a thicket, and as the earls were passing by, he drew flame-throwing Gantewre and bade his company spring forth and press the attack.

But alas, Rogwalo was in those days past his peak, and his eagerness to fight far outstripped his fitness of both body and mind. Mere moments after battle was met, he cast his shield aside and leapt howling before the line.

'Never to yield!' he roared, and was immediately skewered.

With his fellows' morale already low, the death of their yet undying lord proved to be a fatal stroke twice over. They routed, and a terrible slaughter unfolded as their foes gave chase.

Young Kyale had stood in the front line alongside his father, the shield Yamveke sparkling before him, and being a man of firmer judgement than pride, he was among the first to flee. But as he went, he spotted a miserable-looking chap crawling on the ground, his death but a few paces away, and found in himself some courage at last. His shield firmly braced, Kyale put himself before the faltered fellow, fended off his foe, and then helped him up and away. Both men survived the battle.

Of Rogwalo's three sons, Enyalo alone fought at Fevalnawl, and he was among the first to bring news of the defeat to his father's campsite. He rushed into his brother Yalmalo's booth, fell woe-weary upon his knees, and there he wept. Yalmalo helped him back up to his feet and bade him tell his tale.

So Enyalo spoke: 'My father slain, my family slain, my friends slain. Death itself strode among us.'

'Oh dear,' said Yalmalo, and not a word more as he strode out of the booth, stemming his tears.

Yalmalo swiftly took control of his father's retinue and proclaimed himself Lord of Pearmol. He sent a messenger to Threlbega to request the return of Rogwalo's body and glittering Gantewre, but they were her personal booty, so she refused. Yalmalo thereupon swore to keep up his father's fight, intent upon reclaiming the honour and inheritance of his kin.

After affording him three days to grieve for his father and his friends, Yalmalo sent Enyalo home to Pearmol with news of Rogwalo's death and their continued involvement in the king's war. When she heard this news, Gonwela, once Rogwalo's wife, now his widow, shed a single tear.

‘These are woeful tidings,’ she said, ‘not least because I must now pick up the pieces as Lord of Pearmol.’

To this, Enyalo said, ‘Yalmalo has named himself lord.’

‘And I am king of all the world. He can say whatever he likes, but it does not make it so. No worthy lawyer would find his claim firmer than mine.’

Gonwela summoned an assembly of the household’s foremost servants, and they accepted her as their lord. She proved to be a shrewd and canny politician, and she held the lordship until her death nearly twenty years later.

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Kyale came back to Rogwalo’s camp late in the evening with many others who had fled the slaughter at Fevalnawl. He sought his father there, but many folk said they had seen Nyolovo killed at Rogwalo’s side. So did Kyale go weeping to Yalmalo, his closest cousin, seeking a generous ear. He found only dismissal.

‘There is much to be done,’ said Yalmalo. ‘I have no time for tears, yours and mine alike.’

Kyale went next to Karvalo, the second of Rogwalo’s sons.

‘Sobbing serves none of us,’ said Karvalo. ‘If you wish to weep, weep away from here, where I need not hear you.’

Dejected, Kyale went outside to cry, whereupon inscrutable fate saw fit to reunite him with the man he had earlier defended. Only then did they introduce themselves. The man named himself Yonnago, an orphan farmhand drafted into Rogwalo’s company by his local sheriff. He thanked Kyale once more for his help, and he said he owed him a great debt.

‘Sit with me now,’ said Kyale, ‘and we will call it settled.’

Yonnago took up this offer, and they sat together long into the night. Kyale spoke of the death of his father, and how his cousins had turned him away.

‘Yalmalo has ever been a favoured friend of mine,’ said Kyale, ‘but now he speaks in a lofty voice, as if he is another man entirely. I have not seen him mourn his father at all, as fast as their friendship was. Such change in a man bodes ill, I fear.’

‘No two eggs crack the same,’ said Yonnago. ‘It is best not to scry when the skies are overcast, let alone at night.’

So the night wore on, and they each came to count the other a worthy friend. For the rest of the campaign, Kyale and Yonnago stuck together until they had fashioned a friendship so firm that each was ever at the other’s side, both in battle and in bed.

Then, when the fighting was done and it was time to return home, Kyale and Yonnago went back to Pearmol together. But though Kyale welcomed

Yonnago into his home, no one else did. His relatives looked upon Yonnago with scorn, accusing him of being lowborn and disreputable, and in every way unbecoming the preeminence of their hall.

So it was to their great dismay that Kyale stood during dinner one day and proclaimed his intention to marry Yonnago, and only half spitefully. His lordly aunt, Gonwela, was the first to decry this.

‘I will not allow it,’ she said. ‘If you are to marry, Kyale, you are to marry well, or you are to marry in the house of some other sap. There is no room for wretches on my benches.’

Karvalo, the lone survivor of Gonwela’s sons, was second to speak. His gaze fixed unmoving on Yonnago, he said, ‘With each passing day, it seems my cousin’s sound judgement grows ever cloudier. It pains me to see him so debase himself, to so spoil his honour, as the honour of this house is already spoiling. Enough of it.’

Karvalo sat down, and the protestations went on for some time as each of Kyale’s relatives stood in turn to abuse his cherished Yonnago. Last to stand was Syolleda, Kyale’s own mother.

Upon seeing her rise, Kyale’s eyes fell to the floor. He stood up himself, and before she could speak, he said, ‘I would deem this meal a revelatory one, if only your words were not so painfully predictable.’ He took up a lump of bread, tore it in twain, and cast the pieces on the floor. ‘I have no kinsfolk here.’

Then Kyale left the hall, and Yonnago hastened wordlessly behind him.

That evening, Gonwela summoned a council of her closest thanes, and they resolved to end the matter once and for all. At the first light of dawn, they would seize Kyale and Yonnago from their bed, force Yonnago out of the hall, and bid Kyale either forsake his love, or else be tossed out behind him.

Syolleda, however, overheard this discussion, having come to reason with her sister-in-law. She made to Kyale forthwith, knelt before him, and took her son’s soft hands in her own.

‘My son,’ she said, ‘this dispute has worn on too long, and it will now come to a tumultuous end. I wish you every happiness, but I beg you to consider your decision with utmost care. I have overheard Gonwela speaking with her friends. They mean to eject Yonnago from the hall, and if you do not forsake him, they will force you out likewise. My dear Kyale, you have my blessing either way, but you must be certain of your decision.’

‘I am,’ said Kyale, unthinking. ‘There is no joy for me here either way. I will not fetter my love. If this is the price I must pay, I will gladly pay it.’

To hear these words, Syolleda was moved to grief, and she wept for her son. ‘Very well.’ She kissed his hand and arose, wrapping him in her arms. ‘My Kyale. I envy your spirit. Do not let it wane.’

Kyale thanked her and went to bed.

Once dawn had broken, Gonwela's bodyguards came along to bustle Kyale and Yonnago from their bed, just as Syolleda had warned. After dragging him outside, they pushed Yonnago down the steps, and Gonwela demanded that Kyale forsake him.

'I will forsake my every bond of kinship,' said Kyale, 'before I forsake him. Never to yield!'

Gonwela did not ask him to reconsider, and so he went tumbling down the steps himself, but Yonnago was there to catch him.

Once Gonwela had gone inside and shut the door on them, Syolleda came out with all she could find of their belongings. She also brought the shield Yamveke, which Kyale had returned to her upon his homecoming. She gave it back to him, saying, 'You will not be deprived of your every birthright.'

Kyale received this gift with gratitude, but Karvalo happened to be nearby, watching to ensure they left promptly. He witnessed the passing of Yamveke, the reckless relinquishment of the treasure of his kin, and at once, he came blustering down the steps.

'I will not see such storied finery in the hands of nannies and sows!' he said.

Karvalo grabbed Yamveke, and with all his might, he pushed Kyale down and tore the shield away from him.

'Nicker!' said Yonnago, and he walloped Karvalo in the face, knocking him to the floor, then reclaimed the shield and ran.

Kyale bid his mother a swift farewell and ran off behind him.

After spending some time drifting about, Kyale and Yonnago came into the company of a gang of pirates looking to set that sort of life aside. They all clubbed together and established for themselves a farmstead at Alvennawl, where Kyale made himself the householder. It was there that he and Yonnago held their wedding meal, joined only by their farmboys. There they remained until Kyale died a decade or so later. Yonnago mourned his husband ever after, but in the company of his friends, and in the home they had made together, every day proved easier than the last.

XV

The Terror of Alvennawl

Thalo came to Alvennawl around mid-morning. As he approached the house, a stout, scruffy man emerged from a bush. This was Yonnago. He asked Thalo who he was and why he had come there. Thalo gave him his name and said he was looking for a place to stay.

‘For how long?’ said Yonnago.

‘For however long you will have me, be it a night or a lifetime.’

‘Can you work?’

‘I can.’

After a moment of thought, Yonnago said, ‘Very well then, Thalo man. A night or a lifetime.’

Yonnago named himself and welcomed Thalo into his house. After putting Ondayo up in the barn, he invited Thalo inside and gave him a small meal—Thalo had said he had not eaten that day, even though he had. Besides the two of them, the house was empty.

As Thalo ate, Yonnago said, ‘Tell me who it is I have let into my house.’

‘Thalo,’ said Thalo. ‘I have already said this.’

‘Here, I am no moistly-minded man. Who is Thalo? I would rather know my housemates better than not at all.’

‘Thalo is me. What more need you know?’

‘Why have you come here? And from where? Every man on my bench has a tale to tell—tell me yours.’

Thalo did not mean to say anything of his past, but Yonnago wore much too kindly a smile to deny. He told him of his youth at Klagenn, and then of Asfoa’s death and his departure, but he said nothing of murder.

‘I have since been wayward,’ he said, ‘and the way brought me here.’

‘That must have been a rough road to walk,’ said Yonnago.

‘The days go by well enough, but the nights linger. Sleep is a dear friend, but a distant one. Even so, my joys have thus far outnumbered my sorrows.’

Yonnago said, ‘If it is any comfort, I never knew my father either, and while

I do recall my mother, it is only fleetingly. It was the day she dumped me on a farmer's doorstep and never came back. Maybe it was a desperate kindness, or maybe her intentions were rather crueller—I never knew why. In any case, the householder took me in, but that place was never my home. I was not welcome there, nothing more than another pair of hands, until times grew hard, and I was but another mouth to feed. They chucked me out soon enough, and with barely the clothes on my back.'

'Where did you go?'

'Here and there. Much as you have. I ended up living on another farm called Begoroslad. It must be a way south-west of here. Things were better there, until I got dragged into the fighting up north.'

'You fought?' Yonnago did not look like a fighter.

'Poorly. I was there to make up the numbers, more than anything.' Though Yonnago had kept Kyale at his side for much of his time in the north, that was small comfort next to the toils of war, the fear and the pain and the grief. 'But enough of that. What I mean to say, Thalo, is that you sit in good company. I too have wept tears of joy and sorrow alike, as have all the men of Alvennawl. Do not overlook it.'

Thalo thanked Yonnago for the meal, and he was put to work the same day.

That evening, Thalo sat down for dinner with Yonnago's household. Much interest swelled about him, a stranger at their table, the farmboys all gathering round to know better their new companion. At their request, he told them about his travels, but again, he mentioned none of his murders.

All this attention quite disgruntled a man at the end of the room named Omvedho. A former pirate, he was counted among Yonnago's oldest friends, having dwelt at Alvennawl since the farm was founded.

'A stranger and a vagrant,' said Omvedho, rising from his seat. 'How can we trust your words, Thalo man? How can we be sure you bear no ill intent? What brings you to our house?'

'Let me tell you,' said Thalo, rising in turn. 'An elf.'

A sceptical quiet fell upon the room.

'An elf?' said Yonnago.

'An elf. I met him once while I was still at Klagenn, but fate decreed our paths would cross once more. I met him again in the west and followed him here. He makes for an odd fellow, but let me tell you, gentlemen, he is certainly well bred.'

Omvedho silenced the farmboys' murmuring with a scoff and took a seat.

'Nonsense,' he said. 'That was no elf. No, what you have, I would wager, is some swishy stake-stalker leading you on under the guise of fatefulness—assuming you followed anyone here at all, besides your own conniving.'

‘If it were so, he would have been long gone before I came here—he has had his fill and then some.’

The farmboys all raised their voices once more, praising Thalo’s manhood, or else jeering at Omvedho.

‘No,’ said Thalo, ‘this was indeed an elf. He turned into a fox. Find me some swishy stake-stalker who can do that, and I will swallow him whole. And he keeps queer company, too, as an elf would. I slew a troll for him.’

Omvedho said, ‘A troll, do you say?’

‘Do you not believe me, Omvedho man?’

‘Not at all.’

‘So be it.’ Thalo reached below his bench for his bag, and standing proud, he unveiled Klovo’s head and said, ‘Do you now?’

To see so gruesome a sight, the severed head of trollsme Klovo above their dinner table, his death-set countenance staring out at them, devoid of life and love alike, the farmboys’ tongues each failed them.

But not so Omvedho’s. He shook his head, his eyes heavy with foreboding, and in a grim voice he said, ‘Queer folk, queer deeds, queer words. They are never ruled by chance. This is an ill omen. Misfortune awaits us. Yonnago, my friend, oust this man at once, for the good of us all.’

This put Yonnago in quite the quandary. Though he understood Omvedho’s concern, he had also taken a quick liking to Thalo, for he too had once been a man of meagre means, in want of a hearth and a home.

‘No,’ said Yonnago. ‘I am not in the habit of turning a man out before he deserves it. I trust your counsel, Omvedho, but I think you are being overly cautious. Thalo, put that thing away and sit down.’

Thalo sat down and bagged the head, and Omvedho set his objections aside, though he did not forget them.

Thalo spent the next two days at Alvennawl, and no misfortune visited. He and Yonnago spoke a great deal during this time. Yonnago told him about his life with Kyale, how they had met in Norlonn, and how they grew closer amid the violence.

‘We found ourselves in a bad spot, you see,’ said Yonnago, sat in the sunset. ‘We were with his uncle. He wanted to end things quick and properlike, but that was not to be. I remember it ever so clearly, seeing Rogwalo charging headlong to certain death, sword drawn and bellowing. They got the better of us after that. I tripped as I ran, and I would have been done for, but then I saw Kyale’s shield. His shield! There I was, groping in the mud, and it was as if the sun itself had come down to defend me. He saved my life. It was a wonderful thing, Thalo, to owe so much to someone who expected nothing in return.’

Yonnago’s memories moved Thalo to consider his own, and most of all his

days with Gaydeno, now long lost to him. Had he known him a while longer, he thought, had they each been older, he might have found such a friend in him. He would never know.

Yonnago had worked himself into a very reminiscent mood. ‘But he was important, you know? He was a son of Pearmol, a son of important people, and descended from importanter people. He could stand up and count his ancestors back to gods—they trained it into him. I could lose both hands and count mine. That was no good. I might as well have been a half a rotten log in that house. His love was wasted on me, they said, the dirty ragged wretch, yet he gave it anyway, and I returned it. We soon got ourselves out of important matters. We had little to show for his stock, but we had each other. That was enough.’

Then Yonnago started crying, but he stifled himself.

‘Your husband was a man of status,’ said Thalo, ‘but he laid that aside for you. That is the sort of man I try to be. To know what I want, and to seek it.’

‘And what do you want? Not to spend the rest of your life sat on my farm?’

‘No. There is little fame in farmwork.’

Yonnago nodded. He knew all too well the sort to seek fame. They were the folk who found spears in their chests, the folk buried with gold and glory, but nary a grey hair on their heads. They were the folk he and his war-friends dumped into hastily dug graves, unable to bring them all home. Rarely did they listen to reason.

‘Dead men all sing the same song,’ he said.

Then he went inside, and Thalo went in a little while later.

That night, the month’s full moon took flight, and as the men of Alvennawl put their heads to their pillows, none of them knew what horror stalked beneath its gaze. Its first herald sounded below Thalo’s bench. As he slept, an undeathly energy gripped Klovo’s bag-bundled head, shaking in the shadows. So violent were its convulsions, so frenetic its trembling, that it woke Thalo at once. He stumbled bleary from his bench to see what was afoot, and, befuddled, found beneath it the trembling bag.

Upon unveiling the head, Thalo’s confoundment gave way to concern, and a great panic arose in his heart. He had stood firm against Klovo in life, but to see his dead head so full of lively vigour, to see it writhing pale in the darkness, he was moved to a terror unlike any he had known before. He fell backwards onto his bottom, and there he beheld his foe transfixed.

Between the energised head and Thalo’s hapless stumbling, the whole household was soon awake, all eager to know what the ruckus was about. Forth came Yonnago, and he saw in the candlelight Thalo sat upon the floor, Klovo’s head contorting before him.

Omvedho came to his side, and he said, ‘What wicked witchcraft is this?’

Fie! What doom have you spelt for us, Thalo man?’

But before Thalo could answer, before anyone thought to lay a hand on the head, the door of the house began rattling, creaking in its frame, wood wailing, hinges hurting, bolts breaking. All eyes turned upon the door until, with one thunderous crash, the whole thing was torn away. Every candle went out, and Klovo’s head fell still. The household stood stiff in the silence, awaiting their fell visitor with an unyielding apprehension, and then, lit only by the mighty moon above, into the room stepped a man, a gangly creature, tall and thin, with long, spindly fingers, knuckles jutting from fleshless hands, pallid and spectral in the moonlight. That was Fowdho, the last of his kind.

Fowdho saw Klovo’s head lying in the middle of the room, and in a low, croaky voice, he said, ‘My brother.’

The head was thereupon possessed by a new vigour, a terrible light shining forth from its eyes, illuminating the room in a pale death-glow. With a piercing, guttural howl, Fowdho took one step forwards and struck the man closest to the door, Salveno, knocking him to the ground. At once, all the men of Alvennawl were released from their awe, save one. As they found their mettle anew, took up whatever weapons they could, and charged the troll, as Fowdho pried his eyes from his brother’s and turned to flee shrieking into the night, as a handful of men ran boldly behind him, Thalo remained still, his heart yet anchored by dread. Yonnago offered him a helping hand, but his legs would not be stirred. It was not until the light of Klovo’s eyes had faded, until Fowdho was run far off into the darkness, melted once more into the shadows he long had known, that Thalo could rise again.

But that would not be the last of the night’s trials. As Thalo knelt to bag Klovo’s head once more, Omvedho strode up to him and pushed him over.

‘Now do you see?’ he said. ‘He consorts with unnatural folk, and see what terror it has brought us! We must be rid of him at once, lest that beastly man return and lay into us with hexes and curses.’

Then he bade the farmboys seize Thalo and drag him outside. Dispirited as he was, Thalo was of no mind to resist them—his every thought was of keeping his hard-won head in hand—but Yonnago stayed his friends.

‘Omvedho,’ he said, ‘I do the bidding here. I suspect we are all rather tired and witless. Let us see the night through, and if no further fearfulness should beset us, we will settle this matter in the morning as men of even minds.’

So Yonnago put everyone back to bed. Thalo put his head-bag beneath his bench and tried to sleep, but nothing came of his efforts. Indeed, no one slept much more that night.

In the morning, the household came together to reflect on the previous night’s events, and to determine Thalo’s fate. Omvedho was the first to speak.

‘My friends,’ he said, ‘I need not say much, for we have each borne witness to all the proof we need.’ He pointed at Thalo. ‘This man is a danger to every one of us. I warned you all, but was I heeded? Not so! I bid you heed me now. We must cleanse our house of this man and the wretched company he keeps, before calamity calls once more.’

Second to speak was Salveno, a terrible troll-dealt bruise across his face. He said, ‘I got a good look at the ghoul, close as I was. He seemed to have eyes only for that head of yours, Thalo man. As long as it remains here, I fear, we will never know peace again. If the man himself will not go, that at least must.’

Third to speak was Thalo, in defence of his place at Alvennawl. Though he had slept little in the night, he had taken enough rest for all the troll-terror to wane, and he spoke as spunkily as ever. ‘I hear your concerns, gentlemen, so let me allay them. I am going nowhere. This is where I must be, so here I will remain. Nor will I relinquish my prize unless it is pried from my death-frigid fingers. If that displeases you, I see no reason why you cannot leave this place instead.’

‘I do,’ said Yonnago. ‘I cannot work a farm with no farmhands.’

‘And my concerns stand utterly unallayed,’ said Omvedho. ‘We have told you our demands, and you have flatly refused them. If you do not comply, we will turn to whatever force is necessary.’

‘No force will be necessary, for I will not be leaving. As for your concerns, this I swear: if the troll returns, I will kill it. What tumult can a dead man make? Not one of you need fear him, for I am Thalo Thennelo.’

Omvedho spat at Thalo’s feet. ‘We have seen for ourselves what tumult a dead man makes. We have seen for ourselves your staunch resolve. You alone sat idly by as this troll attacked. Thalo Thennelo? You flaunt a foul past with foul folk. It should be clear to all that you are their agent, driven by fell forces to bring us ruin and despair.’

Yonnago said, ‘Is that true, Thalo?’

‘A fruitless question. He will deny it either way.’

‘Either way, I want an answer.’

Thalo said, ‘It is true enough that I am working with my elf, but my task is neither ruin nor despair. My single task is to slay this troll.’

‘So,’ said Omvedho, ‘you knew he would come?’

‘I was not expecting him.’

The room fell silent. No one was sure what to make of all this, so Yonnago strode up to Thalo, put his hands upon his shoulders, and peered into his eyes, searching for whatever hint of intention he might find. After a moment, he stepped away and said, ‘I believe him. There is no malevolence in this man, or none that I can find. Only folly.’

‘Malevolence or folly,’ said Salveno, his bruise turned towards Yonnago, ‘what difference does it make? His presence here is a danger either way.’

‘I will tell you what difference it makes: a fool may right his wrongs.’

‘Yonnago,’ said Omvedho. ‘Perhaps you are older than you claim. Take a moment to fully consider this.’

‘I have. This is my house. I choose who stays, and Thalo stays. That said, I will not be meeting this troll again. So long as you keep that gruesome head of yours, Thalo, you will not be sleeping here. You will be rid of it, or you will sleep alone in the smithy. If the troll returns, it is yours alone to defend, as is your life, as is your oath. If the troll returns, you will kill it.’

Then Yonnago sat down, and thus the council of Alvennawl was concluded. Thalo moved his things into the smithy shortly after breakfast, too stubborn to be parted from Klovo’s head. In the evening, after a rather fraught dinner in the house, he retired to the smithy and went to bed. But though he lay there with much anticipation, no howl sundered the quiet of the night, no grim light shone from Klovo’s eyes, and no troll came to tear down the door. The night passed without incident. The next night unfolded likewise.

Then, on the third evening since Fowdho’s visit, Yonnago came to the smithy as Thalo was preparing to sleep.

‘Say,’ he said, ‘just how long do you intend to sleep out here? You need only be rid of the head, and a sound night’s sleep awaits. If I may be crude, I think it would do you good.’

‘Perhaps it would,’ said Thalo, ‘but I must decline. That head is my trophy, and I will keep it.’

‘But why? A right nasty thing it is, and if it was indeed the troll’s cause for coming, there is every chance he intends to come back for it. Are you willing to take such a risk? Is that what you want?’

‘What I want is of no matter. I need him to come back.’ Thalo paused for a moment, pondering his words, his thoughts resting on the sheer terror Fowdho had struck in his heart the night prior. ‘I could only sit by while everyone else rushed to fight. I will kill him for that. I will cut his head from his shoulders and prove my valour once more. I must. If I can lure him here, away from you in the house, that would be the safest way to go about it.’

‘If even half your tales are true, you have proven quite enough already. You need not prove anything more.’

‘I have more self-respect than to let this shame stand.’

A smile slowly rose on Yonnago’s face, but it was a sad smile. ‘You remind me of the lads from Pearmol. When we were all up north, they seemed to only speak of honour, or dignity, or pride, or whichever such virtue you like. They yammered on about it all until their dying days—and I should know because I

buried the poor sods. I have met a lot of boys who lived only for glory, Thalo, and every one of them died for it.'

'Then they died for a worthy cause. I hope to do the same.'

'You might yet.'

'Do you mean to dissuade me?'

'No. I know better than to force a matter. But you are still a young man. If nothing else, you can at least be careful.'

Then Yonnago left the smithy, and Thalo went to bed, though he could not lull himself to sleep.

That night, duplicitous fate yielded up a battle keenly awaited. Thalo still lay awake when Klovo's head was invigorated once more. He leapt up from his sleeping spot, unbagged the head, and found it trembling just as it had three nights prior. And again, he knelt before it, unable to shift his gaze, so enchanted by that troll-doled trance. Fowdho had returned.

The smithy door soon began rattling in its frame, and Thalo was afflicted by a fresh fear, his knees stuck fast upon the floor, his eyes held captive by the foreglimmer gloom rising in Klovo's own. Fowdho beat and battered the door, thundering in the night until he sent a time-tempered fist splintering through the wood with a roar and tore the whole thing down. A moment of silence passed, whereafter Klovo's eyes lit up, bathing the room in their dreadful glow, and Fowdho stepped inside.

There he stood, the moon waning behind him, but twice over full before him. To see his brother's eyes shining in the shadows, his head convulsing with grisly glee, life returned to Fowdho's lifeless face.

'My brother,' he said. 'I have found you.'

Fowdho crept past Thalo, each step soft, almost silent. Thalo meant to set upon him, to take up his sword and rule over his life, but there was yet such a terrible weight hung upon his heart that he could lift nary a foot or finger. So Fowdho came in unopposed, and at the end of the room, he reached out for his brother, the dear twin from whom he had long been parted.

Yet the moment his fingertips brushed Klovo's forehead, the moment the brothers were reunited at last, the moment Klovo's head fell still, Fowdho's fate was fixed. That was the moment Thalo saw a beast pawing at his prize, and all the terror in his heart dispelled at once. In its place arose a deadly hatred. His beltknife in hand, Thalo sprang forth and seized the troll's wrist. Fowdho recoiled with a shriek, but that served only to drag his enemy closer.

'Wretched troll!' said Thalo, his mind glory-garbled, his hand clutching Fowdho's gnarly neck. 'Die!'

Fowdho tried desperately to free himself from Thalo's murderous grip, to shake the little man off or peel him from his body, but Thalo would not allow

it. He firmed his knife in his hand and stabbed him in the back.

‘Ay!’ cried Fowdho, and he collapsed to the pillow-strewn ground.

Thalo fell beside him, and there they grappled. Thalo got himself on top, straddling Fowdho as he wriggled and writhed, flailing his arms and striking at everything nearby, but he would not be deterred. He bore each blow as best he could and put all his strength into restraining his foe. It was tiresome, sweat dripping, arms aching, but he could not yield. Possessed by some unshakeable bloodlust, the same deadly thrill that had impassioned him once before, he stabbed at Fowdho’s chest, neck, stomach, any patch of flesh he could find. And how he revelled in the violence! How he howled!

Fowdho too was weakening. His thrashing diminished, and his formerly frenzied yelps became only whimpers. He tried one last jolt, one final start for freedom, and pushed himself upwards with all the force he could.

But Thalo held him down. He kept up the assault, his thoughts set singly upon Fowdho’s death, stabbing and stabbing until each contender’s strength was utterly spent, until the troll’s life was spread across the floor, staining both cushions and clothes, skin and soul alike, and until he sat gasping amid it all. Still, Fowdho managed some final, laboured contortions beneath him.

‘Away with you!’ said Thalo, and he reached for his sword, slender Sleme, sleeping nearby. He summoned the last of his strength and stabbed the blade down into Fowdho’s neck once, then twice. Though Fowdho lay still, he would take no chances. He got up, his sword held as high as the roof would allow, and brought it down once more, parting head from body.

Only then did he stop to breathe. He slumped backwards into his blood-sodden bedding and admired the corpse before him—a gory triumph! But that reprieve would be short-lived. Klovo’s head took to its trembling once more, and Fowdho’s joined it, each with eyes alight.

‘Stop!’ cried Thalo. ‘I have slain you!’

‘Tell me,’ said Fowdho.

These two words filled the room with a new dread. Thalo crumpled over Fowdho’s head, peered into his anguished eyes, and he saw such life yet within them. ‘What horror is this?’

‘Tell me, mortal man, who are you to come against me?’

Thalo stumbled backwards, open-mouthed and wheezing. Fowdho repeated his question, and a moment later, Thalo said, ‘I am a man with no name.’

‘Do not lie to me. All mortal folk are named. Tell me who you are.’

‘I have no name.’

‘Liar! Tell me of your kin and kind! Tell me who you are!’

‘No. I have no name, no mother nor father, no kin nor kind.’

‘Heed me, murdermonger. Long have I dwelt in this world, though my life

has been fleeting. Long have I been deprived of wealth and warmth, and all worldly pleasures. I will know the one who slays me, who denies me joy and justice both. Such is the right of all dead folk. Tell me who you are!’

But as the rage in Fowdho grew, so too did Thalo’s pluck. He said, ‘Troll, I am none but your death.’

So Fowdho growled and spoke this verse:

‘In secrecy the slayer strides,
while, silently, the slain abides—
the wounded one awaits, unwept,
the warlike one with worth ill-kept.
But daring deeds will yet be done,
and doleful dirges dourly sung,
for bold will be that hero’s blood
when body breaks, befouled by mud!’

Thalo had heard enough. His spirit flagging, he stood as tall as he could and said, ‘I am Thalo Thennelo, the bane of trolls twice over!’

‘Thalo!’ said Fowdho, but before he said a word more, Thalo howled and booted his head across the room. As it struck the wall, Klovo’s head fell still, the troll-light illuminating the room faded, and Fowdho died with it.

Triumphant at last, Thalo collapsed and fell fast asleep in the blood.

The morning was well underway when Thalo awoke. He was alone in the house, rather than the smithy, and thus he rose disoriented from his bench, still sullied by blood and sweat. He went outside, and Yonnago came to meet him.

‘Thalo!’ he said. ‘You jammy thwarter, you! You got him!’

‘I did.’

‘Are you hurt?’

‘Only bruises, I think.’

‘Wearing the other fellow’s blood, then? As it should be.’

Then Yonnago told Thalo what had happened after he fell asleep. He said they had heard the commotion in the house, though no one dared to intervene until the night had long fallen silent. When they came to the smithy at last, he and the farmboys found Thalo asleep beside Fowdho’s headless corpse, and together they awed at it in the candlelight. They had tried to wake Thalo there and then, but no one could stir him, no matter how they manhandled him or what insults they shouted, so they carried him back into the house to spend the rest of the night in a proper bedstead while they cleaned up in the smithy.

‘And you should clean yourself up,’ said Yonnago. ‘Then we can be done with all this. Back to work, and all that.’

‘What did you do with the head?’ said Thalo.

‘We buried them, good riddance. They ought not trouble us again.’

‘Both are buried?’

‘Both are buried.’

‘Where?’

‘Over the river.’

‘Where over the river?’

‘What does it matter? We are rid of them. No need to worry any longer.’

Yonnago tried to conclude the conversation there, but Thalo would not have it. He gripped Yonnago’s shoulder and turned him on the spot. ‘You must tell me where.’

Yonnago said, chortling, ‘Why? Do you mean to dig them up again?’

But Thalo’s face remained flat and earnest. ‘I do.’

‘They are dead and buried, boy, and so they will remain. Let the dead rot. I will hear no more about this.’

Then Yonnago walked away, and Thalo let him go.

Thalo went down the hill to the river shortly thereafter, both to bathe and to look for the trolls’ grave himself, despite Yonnago’s objections. There he found Omvedho bent over on the bank, beating the bloodstained bedding upon which Fowdho had died. Thalo stripped off, black and blue all over, braced for the cold, and ventured into the water without a word.

They each did their business in silence for a moment, but Omvedho could not abide it. Before long, he said, ‘You killed the troll.’

‘As I said I would.’

‘Folk say a great many things. What comes and goes is whether they follow through.’

‘I always follow through.’

‘I do not doubt your conviction.’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘I mean exactly what I said.’ Omvedho leant back and looked Thalo up and down. ‘Are you trying to impress me? You killed the troll, but I would rather you had not led it here at all.’

Thalo scoffed. ‘I have come to bathe. Or does that bode ill as well?’

‘The river is long, and yet here you are.’

‘Here I am.’ Thalo paused briefly, then continued, ‘Did you see it?’

‘See what? Not much to see here.’

‘The corpse.’

‘Did I see it? I think I did. In fact, I think I buried it. Yes, I cleaned up your mess, a mess I warned against, a mess that never should have been made. Did I see it? Pah! Who did not?’

‘Where did you bury it?’

‘Where? On the south bank, a little way west of the ford.’

Thalo nodded, lowering himself until the water came up to his chin. After another brief silence, he said, ‘And are you impressed?’

‘More than I should like.’

That was enough. Thalo promptly got out of the water, dried himself off, and left Omvedho in peace.

Before he went back up the hill, he followed the river up past the ford, until he spotted what looked very much like a fresh grave dug on the opposite bank. He firmed its location in his mind and returned to the house.

Thalo spent the rest of the day helping on the farm. Once the household had gathered for dinner in the evening, Yonnago arose and made a toast in Thalo’s honour, commending him for the killing of Fowdho. When he was done, the farmboys all put up their cups and cheered a hearty, ‘Oy-oy!’

The meal then unfolded uneventfully.

That night, Thalo crept out of the house armed with only a sack and a spade. He stole back down to the river, his path lit only by the failing moonlight, until he came to the spot where the trolls were buried. Down he dug, and there lay his treasure: one body, two heads, and his every glory. Though the trolls’ builds had been similar only in their immense height, their faces were one and the same, with the same sunken black eyes, the same slack jaw, the same pallid skin. They looked rather more alike in death than they had in life.

Thalo bagged the heads, filled in the grave, and hastened back up to the house. But as he came to the door, he heard on the roof above a quiet tutting. Taking a step back, he saw Knale sat above him, biting his nails.

‘Where have you been?’ said Knale. ‘I told you to stay here.’

‘By the river,’ said Thalo.

‘Hush! If you think I care for your silly excuses, you are thicker than ever I thought. I told you to stay here, so you stay here.’

‘Why? The troll is dead. What further business do we have here?’

‘The troll is dead?’ Knale fell clumsily from the roof and rushed up into Thalo’s face. ‘Truly dead?’

‘I just said that.’

‘Klovo, you mean?’

‘And the second one, or so I think. You tell me.’ Thalo took Fowdho’s head from the sack and presented it to Knale. ‘Is this the right one? Or might there be a third troll abroad?’

When Knale saw Fowdho’s severed head, when he set his golden gaze upon those death-dim eyes, he was overcome by such relief, such boundless elation, that he shoved the head aside, seized Thalo’s face in his hands, and pressed a

kiss upon his lips.

‘He is dead!’ he said, pulling away. ‘They are dead! One dead, two dead! Dead at last!’ Knale skipped a little, but quickly stopped and turned back to Thalo, his face dour. ‘You killed him?’

Thalo said nothing, still reeling from his kiss. He was bound up in whatever preternatural power lay within it, scarcely able to think of anything but the soft touch of his delicate lips, until Knale snorted at him, and he was released.

‘You killed him?’ said Knale.

‘Yes,’ said Thalo. He put Fowdho’s head back in the sack. ‘I killed him. I am the bane of trolls twice over. What now?’

Knale’s face hardened again. ‘What now?’

‘I have slain your trolls. What now?’

‘What now?’ Knale strutted off into the gloom. ‘What now is up to you. I have delivered you twofold triumphs. It is for you to tell everyone about them.’

‘But we had a deal. You gave me your word.’

‘So I did, and so I have kept it. Our deal is done.’

‘No. You promised me glory. My immortal glory.’

‘And I have given you all you will need to find it. But you must find it for yourself. Or have you already forgotten what your poor mother told you?’

Thalo was at once pulled back to the day of Asfoa’s death, her dying words sounding in his mind. That was a moment he shared with his mother alone as she lay in his arms, but perhaps not as alone as he thought.

‘Were you there?’ he said.

Without turning to face him, Knale said, ‘Our deal is done.’

Then he put on his fox fur and vanished into the night.

Standing alone in the dark once more, Thalo considered his options, and decided to go to bed.

Thalo declared his intention to leave Alvennawl the following morning. As he was readying Ondayo for the road, Yonnago came to him, and he came with Yamveke, that shield so finely wrought, decked in flourishes of silver and gold. Though it was well worn, bearing many scars and scratches, it remained strong and firm.

When he saw Yamveke in Yonnago’s hands, Thalo said, ‘Tell me, how did Yonnago, the crude bumpkin that he is, come to own such a thing?’

‘It was Kyale’s,’ said Yonnago. ‘With this shield, he ever defended me. He was a man of Pearmol, but this was all he ever had to show for it. It was his inheritance, his by right, but his kin were rather more wealth than worth. They did not yield it readily.’ Yonnago ran his hand over the face of the shield, each blemish a story in its own right, some far older than anyone could know, though few would ever be retold. He presented the shield to Thalo. ‘Take it. I imagine

it will serve you better than me. Let Yamveke ward the weary once more.'

Thalo took the shield and examined it, watching its adornments glinting in the sunlight. 'Are you certain?'

'It is unbecoming to refuse a gift, lad. Yamveke is far from all I have of Kyale. I have my house and my head, and all the memories within. When I look at that shield, it brings to mind many matters I would rather leave buried. It is time to pass it on, I think.'

'Then I will use it well.'

Yonnago stepped back, smiling at Thalo before him. He had spent only seven nights at Alvennawl, but they had forged between themselves a firm friendship, one each would carry for the rest of his life. 'Where are you off to now, then?'

Thalo looked into the distance, then at the shield in his hands, and then back to Yonnago. 'Time will tell.'

'Well, I expect you will end up somewhere.'

'As do we all. The ground, mostly.'

'So it is. Good luck, lad.'

Thalo nodded slowly and climbed atop Ondayo. The pair offered a farewell each, and then Thalo rode away. He had already determined his course.

XVI

Thalo's Plea

From Alvennawl, Thalo followed the river to the coast, and then followed the coast southwards until he came to a large town perched atop a cliff around noon the next day. That was Pearmol, a house of fame. The Lord of Pearmol at that time was Karvalo, the lone survivor of Gonwela's son, though he had only held the lordship for a short while.

Thalo walked Ondaño up to the gate, atop which stood an imposing woman, tall and well built. Amfredha was her name, one of Karvalo's chiefest thanes. Her comrades called her Sunder-spear, so named because, attempting to woo some pretty lass from the south, she once hurled a spear at a tree, and with such tremendous force that it shattered on impact.

'See that, sweetie!' she had shouted out, but the girl was looking the other way and wandered off with nary a glance for her burly suitor.

Clad in a gleaming coat of mail, her belt fitted with a sword, a knife, and an axe, and brandishing in one hand a spear, and in the other a shield, Amfredha cut a fearsome figure. But her true pride sat atop her head, her handsome helmet patterned all over and embellished on top with a clump of hair taken from the mane of one of those hoary stags that roamed the highlands. That was a helmet befitting only the most glamorous of retainers.

'Let me in,' said Thalo.

Amfredha said with a scowl, 'Who are you?'

'Thalo.'

'And what is your business here, Thalo man?'

'I want to meet your lord. I can make it worth his while.' Thalo took from one of his bags the jewel of Lamman, old Sroaro's cherished heirloom, and held it up. 'See this? This is just the start.'

Amfredha leant over the parapet and said, 'Toss it up.'

Thalo did as she requested, and she examined the jewel before passing it to her colleagues. Together they determined it to be a costly piece indeed.

'You look sad and small and poor,' said Amfredha, turning back to Thalo.

'Are you a robber and a crook, come to shift ill-gotten goods?'

'All my wealth was hard won.'

Amfredha turned back to confer with her fellows, all whispering between themselves, nodding and shaking their heads in turn, until she threw the jewel at Thalo's feet. 'Come in. But behave, scrag boy, or you will bend before me.'

She had the gate opened, and Thalo went in. He walked up the path to the yard, stabled Ondayo with a parting kiss, and then climbed the steps to the hall, laden with all his treasures. Two more guards stood by there, dressed much like those on the wall. One, a strapping chap, stepped forth, his hand outstretched. He was Solmodo, and he was called Solmodo the Champion because he was accomplished in every sport and game.

'Hold it,' said Solmodo. 'Who are you?'

'Thalo,' said Thalo.

'And what is your business here, Thalo man?'

'I have already been through this.'

'Perhaps I have gone dim, but I do not recall meeting you. Are you calling me dim?'

'I have been through this at the gate. They let me in.'

'But I am not at the gate, am I? I am at the door. And if you want to come through the door, you have to wait for me to let you through the door. So tell me, Thalo man: what is your business here?'

With a sigh, Thalo said, 'I wish to speak with your lord.'

'As do many. He is a busy man. Why should we grant his time to you, a stranger to all?'

Thalo bent down, placing some of his booty on the floor so he could get Yamveke off his back. As he held it up, he said, 'He might like to meet me.'

When Solmodo saw Yamveke glittering in the winter sun, his eyes lit up, gazing adoringly at the shield. 'I was little more than a little lad when last I saw this. Just how did it come to you, a road-weary tramp?'

'I was given it.'

'Quite the gift. Yes, I think my lord would like to meet you.' Solmodo had his companion open the door. 'Karvalo awaits you.'

Thalo went inside, where the hall stretched long before him. Everything within was marvellous to behold, the decorative embroideries lining the walls, the beams etched with manifold designs, the benches wrought from fine, dark oak. No expense at all had been spared in the adornment of that house.

And there at the end of the hall sat Karvalo upon his platform, a group of attendants flocked about him. His forebears had accrued such wealth and status through trade, politics, and artful war that his influence rivalled even that of the kingship. And he delighted in it, the might-minded man! Thalo knew what sort

of chap he was the moment he saw him, posturing in his chair, for he had dealt with him before.

As Thalo came down the aisle, Karvalo rose from his seat, welcomed him, and said, 'Who are you?'

'Thalo,' said Thalo.

'And what is your provenance, Thalo man? Where can I place you among the ranks of the well bred? You are a stranger in my house. How will I know you to be worthy of my time?'

'My mother was Asfoa.'

'I know some. Which Asfoa?'

'From Klagenn. In Eylavol.'

'Eylavol? No, I am not familiar with her. How about your father?'

'I have no father but the river, though he has forsaken me.'

'Say more about that.'

'No.'

As he spoke, Thalo remained ever conscious of Karvalo's attendants, his eyes flitting between them, each face more sceptical than the last.

'Tell me, then,' said Karvalo. 'Why are you here?'

'I want to be your thane.'

'Is that so? Why should I take you in? What good will you do me? And why have my trustiest friends thought fit to let this wind-worn waif prostrate himself before me?'

Thalo's patience was already wearing thin. He placed his belongings at his feet, took Yamveke from his back, and dropped it before the firepit.

'See this,' he said, 'and see that I am a friend of your kin. I do not mean to cause you any trouble. Whatever you ask of me, I will do it, and better than anyone else. That is my promise to you.'

Karvalo arose, stepped down from the platform, and strode over to Thalo, towering above him. He took up Yamveke and cast a grim eye upon it, his hand brushing over its face. 'How did you come by this?'

'I was given it.'

'By whom?'

'Yonnago of Alvennawl. I am told you knew his husband, Kyale. He said he was your cousin.'

'That he was.'

Karvalo summoned to his side a woman named Thorreda, his second pair of hands and chiefest advisor. Together they whispered between themselves, each nodding along to the other, until Karvalo handed her the shield, and she whisked it away.

'What once was lost is found,' he said, returning to his chair. 'I thank you

for that, Thalo man. You may leave now.'

Thalo stepped forth. 'I will not be leaving with neither my shield nor your favour. Give me one or the other, and maybe then I will leave.'

'Your shield? You would claim Yamveke to be your shield?'

'Yonnago gave it to me himself.'

'But it was never his to give. The miserable thieving wretch yonked it from my very own hands. I bid you leave while you yet have yours.'

'Hold on.' Thalo picked up the box of treasure from Moyr and emptied it onto the floor, dropping the jewel of Lammam atop the pile. 'See this wealth! Take me into your retinue, and you will have it again and tenfold.'

Karvalo scoffed, saying, 'And what am I to make of you casting your dreck upon the floor? Any sodding thief can amble along and clatter about. I will not entertain this.'

'But I am no thief. I earned this wealth, every piece of it. I am worthy of your house. I am Thalo Thennelo. I killed a troll.'

'And I am my dog's daughter. Get out of my house, landleaper. Do not to test my patience any further.'

Thalo held up the head-sack, but Karvalo spoke over him.

'Oy! I suppose those are his bollocks, yes?'

'No.' Thalo held the bag open and let the trolls' heads drop out, their tongues lolling from their mouths as they thumped to the ground. 'See here two heads from two trolls, both slain by my hand. I killed a troll, and then another. See these heads and see my skill.'

Karvalo came back down from his chair to inspect the heads. He turned them each face up with his foot, stared into their eyes, open wide and empty, and was entranced. In those eyes he saw the trolls' terrible power, a power that held him fast. He could not turn away until Thorreda returned to his side to gawk at them herself.

'What grisly things,' she said.

'Grisly indeed,' said Karvalo. 'Why do you so sully my floor, Thalo man? Do you mean to insult me?'

Thalo said, 'I mean for you to see things exactly as they are. I have returned your shield, promised you wealth, proven my worth. You need only point my sword, and I will swing it.'

Karvalo thought quietly to himself, and then he whispered once more with Thorreda. After a moment, she stepped away, and Karvalo stood tall, looking down at Thalo before him.

'So be it,' he said. 'Have a seat in my hall, a place in my retinue. But know this, Thalo Thennelo: I will be expecting much of you. This opportunity has not been readily granted. Do not squander it.'

Then Karvalo left the room.

Thalo tried to gather his things on the floor, but he was allowed to reclaim only the trolls' heads. His wealth was now Karvalo's, just as Karvalo's house was now his. There he would be a vagrant no more, though his life remained a lonely one.

XVII

Yorlayvo

Our man in the middle of things will now be a chap called Yorlayvo, who was Karvalo's choicest friend and closest companion. His parents were southerners from Sleydesya. His father, Alsyeo, was a warrior beholden to a powerful earl, and his mother, Yoldea, was one of the earl's household attendants. It happened that Yoldea became pregnant during a time of terrible strife in that land, and Alsyeo was slain before Yorlayvo was born. Yoldea survived that and fled from her homeland, fearing for her life, and that of her unborn son.

Yorlayvo was born at a town called Wango while his mother was travelling northwards through Gonnalonn, and she named him Ayolo. She then continued travelling destitute, and she eventually came to Syorbak in Arlonn, when Ayolo was nearly two years old. There she met a woman called Aydha, who was the daughter of Thambrano Hammer and a thane beholden to Thyomalo, Lord of Pearmol. Aydha had come to Syorbak in Thyomalo's company for the lawmoot that year, and on the evening of their arrival, she chanced upon Yoldea trudging through the lesser roads, Ayolo coughing in her arms. At once, pity beset her. She offered Yoldea every kindness, but she accepted only her coat and hat. Aydha said this was the very least she could give.

'If your heart should change,' she said, 'seek me out in the king's yard.'

'They would not let such a grotty woman as me past even the outer gate,' said Yoldea.

'No matter! Say you seek Thambrano's daughter, Thyomalo's friend, and the way will surely open.'

Then they parted.

On the following morning, Aydha awoke to find Yoldea standing quietly in her booth. She said she could not put Aydha's generosity out of her mind, and that she wished to thank her properly. Aydha rose from her bench, placed a hand on Yoldea's shoulder, and refused this.

'There is no need to thank me,' she said, 'and least of all while I remain

undressed. It would have been shameful indeed to be unmoved by your plight, for you have clearly suffered at the hands of blind-eyed fate.'

'That is to say the least of it,' said Yoldea.

Then Yoldea told Aydha her tale of woe. She spoke of the strifes that drove her from her homeland, and the weary way to Syorbak.

'Such tales are too often told,' said Aydha. 'Come, let us ensure you need tell no more.'

Then the pair got to talking, and this went on for the better part of the day, and also the following three, until the lawmoot was done and Thyomalo was ready to leave for Pearmol. Aydha went to him and asked whether Yoldea could go with them.

'I have not so much room on my boat,' said Thyomalo.

'Tell me this, then,' said Aydha. 'If I surrender my spot, and I walk with her to Pearmol, will you let her into your hall?'

It should be mentioned that Thyomalo was notorious for keeping a rather homelier hall than most, and his penchant for the unrefined was a matter much discussed among his peers.

'I reckon so,' he said, 'but if she dishonours me, so do you, and it would pain me to be so wounded. Let it not come to pass, and we can be merry.'

'Merrily!'

Then Thyomalo set sail, and Aydha walked home with Yoldea, Ayolo yet clutched in his mother's arms. Upon their arrival, Yoldea petitioned Thyomalo herself. She told him she had been a woman of high status in her homeland, brought low only by misfortune beyond her control. Thyomalo asked her to walk to him with poise, and this she did.

'You blink in the fashion of a foreigner,' said Thyomalo, 'but I am satisfied. Hear me, Yoldea my friend. My house is yours, and yours mine. Your work is mine, and mine yours.'

Yoldea bowed, thanked Thyomalo for his hospitality, and then she left the hall with Aydha at her side.

Yoldea and Aydha married one another a year or so later.

Ayolo was about the same age as Karvalo, and they were made into men at one another's side. In their youth, Karvalo said Ayolo's name was unbecoming and much too foreign, so he named him Yorlayvo instead.

'Yes,' said Karvalo, 'that is rather more tasteful.'

Yorlayvo liked his new name, and he kept it. Only his mother called him Ayolo after that, and only in private. He and Karvalo ventured into adulthood with a lifelong love strung between them.

On the day Thalo came to Pearmol, Karvalo bade Yorlayvo speak with him, that they may know their new man better. Thalo had been put up in one of the large houses furthest from the hall, where he troubled himself with neither the names nor the friendship of his housemates. Yorlayvo came into the house in the afternoon while Thalo was stashing his things about his bench, seized him by his arms, and pulled him to his feet.

‘You,’ said Yorlayvo. ‘I suppose you are Thalo, the clamourer?’

‘I suppose I am,’ said Thalo.

‘Very good.’ Then Yorlayvo named himself. He said, ‘Would you care to go riding with me?’

Thalo said he was busy.

‘Then let me make myself clearer, Thalo man. I am going riding, and you are coming with me. If you refuse, you will be riding out of here all the same.’

Then Yorlayvo went outside, and Thalo went behind him.

Their route took them out of Pearmol, past the farms, and up into the moors. They ranged here and there around the heath for a while, Yorlayvo pointing out all the landmarks and recounting what tales he knew of each, until they came back down to the cliffs. Yorlayvo got off his horse at a spot a little way north of Pearmol, not far from Lewvanvek, and there he stood stark on the cliff-top, looking out to the sea.

‘They say you killed two trolls,’ he said, ‘and had their heads rolling about in the hall. Tell me about that.’

Thalo climbed down from his saddle and stood behind him. ‘Why?’

‘I would like to understand how you came to be here, and so loudly. It is my task, after all, to ensure my lord’s business proceeds unimpeded. If I am not convinced of your faithfulness, neither will be Karvalo, and your place in his hall will be forfeit.’

‘Do you not trust me?’

‘You have given me no reason to trust you.’ Yorlayvo turned to face Thalo, his gaze hard and penetrating. ‘I have never known someone who has met a troll, and yet you claim to have killed two. I can only suppose it was all some trick, some cunning ploy to worm your way into our house for foul purposes I would rather not let come to light.’

‘If all you seek is proof, I could have shown you their heads before we came all the way here.’

Yorlayvo scrunched up his nose and said, ‘That will not do. I have heard about magic men who use dubious arts to contort the dead. The proof I want is the tale you tell of it. I understand you have been very frugal with your words. No more. It is time to speak.’

Thalo was happy enough to boast of his feats. He told Yorlayvo he had been

an aimless wanderer drifting about until he came to a village called Moyr, where a troll attacked.

‘I fought him,’ he said, ‘but to call it a fight would be poetic. One swing of my sword, and I had his head off. The locals all cheered my name and gave me treasure, for I was their saviour. The road then led me to Alvennawl, where the second troll attacked. He said they were brothers. I slew him there and then, my heart unwavering, and thereby claimed the second head. Yonnago gave me Yamveke for that. He told me about Pearmol, so I came here to make myself useful to your lord, and with two trolls’ heads to prove it so.’

As Thalo spoke, Yorlayvo nodded along in silence, until he said, ‘You were a vagrant? How did that come to be?’

Thalo did not want to say anything about that. He hesitated for a while, but Yorlayvo was nothing if not patient. Though his face remained hard, he wore a warm smile, and one that demanded honesty.

‘I was raised by my mother,’ said Thalo, ‘at Klagenn, in Eylavol, but I left after she died. I made the road my home after that.’

Yorlayvo said, ‘Why was that?’

Thalo hesitated again. He nearly spoke of the murder of Gaylodho, and of his exile, but even he knew better than to say such things under such scrutiny. ‘I made my mother a promise—one I could not keep at home.’

‘And one you might keep here?’

‘Maybe so.’

Yorlayvo said nothing more. He climbed upon his horse and rode back home, and Thalo rode on after him.

Upon his return to Pearmol, Yorlayvo made straight to the small fire room, where he found Karvalo sitting alone. He sat opposite him, and he told him Thalo’s account of the killing of the trolls, and that he believed it.

‘Or for the most part, at least.’

‘And what do you make of the man himself?’ said Karvalo.

‘He is odd, as northerners are, but I do not doubt his intentions. He means only to suckle at your glory, and to make it his own. He may be a handy fellow to have around, if only to have a friend called Thennelo. I expect it would make quite an impression among your peers, after all. And if it comes back to bite you, then let it bite me too.’

Karvalo hunched forward, looking into the fire for whatever guidance its spirits might offer, and then he said, ‘No. There is an unhappy feeling arising in my gut, as if my soundest foresight warns me of matters in which I want no stake. If I am to house this man about whom I know so little, I must be sure he speaks truly.’

To that end, Karvalo sent Yorlayvo to Alvennawl the next morning to ask

about the killing of the troll. Yonnago came to meet him, but the moment he recognised him, Karvalo's most beloved thug, his face hardened into a scowl. He asked Yorlayvo why he had come.

'We have received a visitor at Pearmol,' said Yorlayvo, 'and he came with a fantastic tale. He named himself Thalo, Thalo Thennelo, and he says he came from here.'

To learn that Thalo had gone straight from Alvennawl to Pearmol was quite the disappointment, but Yonnago did not let it show. 'What of him?'

'Tell me what happened.'

'I suppose you are asking about the troll? He killed it.'

'Say more.'

'What more is there to say? The beast came, and he killed it.'

'What became of the body?'

'We buried it over the river.'

'Take me there. I want to see it.'

'We buried it.'

'You dug the grave, did you not? Dig it back up.'

Yonnago sighed, then took Yorlayvo down the hill and over the river. They had a pair of hefty lads dig down into the grave, and once they had dug far enough, they gently parted the earth until daylight touched Fowdho's skin once more, skin which had dwelt for centuries in darkness. Yorlayvo peered into the grave and beheld the corpse, half submerged in the soil, and promptly turned away. But though they found the body, they found no heads where they had buried two.

'Lads,' said Yonnago, 'can you see the heads?'

The diggers rifled through the dirt again, but they found no trace of them.

'Thalo brought them with him,' said Yorlayvo. 'I did not see it myself, but I hear he threw them at Karvalo's feet.'

Yonnago's heart quivered once again, and again, his face held firm. He gave the slightest of nods, said, 'There you have it, then,' and walked back up to the house.

Yorlayvo came back shortly thereafter. He said he was satisfied, and that it was time for him to leave.

'But first,' he said, 'you should know that Thalo also came to us bearing a certain shield, one with which you will be quite familiar.'

Yonnago's stomach turned to stone.

'Understand, Yonnago, Karvalo does not take kindly to thieves. What is dealt is dealt in kind. Scorn begets only scorn.'

Yonnago stepped up to Yorlayvo, his voice full of anger, but his eyes dim and drawn. 'Are you threatening me?'

‘You are not Karvalo’s man to threaten, and I doubt he will take it up with the reeve.’

‘Then you can sod off already. I have shown you what you want to see. If you are not going to murder me, it is time to leave.’

So Yorlayvo took his leave with a bow. Once he was gone, Yonnago took himself to a quiet place, and there he cried alone, his husband’s only treasure twice yielded to undeserving hands.

Yorlayvo went to Karvalo as soon as he came back to Pearmol, and he told him what he had seen and heard at Alvennawl.

‘There is no doubt about it,’ he said. ‘Thalo killed a troll at Alvennawl.’

‘Very well,’ said Karvalo. ‘I will have him.’

So Thalo came to the hall to become a man Pearmol, Karvalo sitting in his chair upon the platform, with some other attendants standing by to listen in. Yorlayvo stood Thalo before the firepit, and he put himself beside it.

‘Make me an oath,’ said Karvalo. ‘Swear that you will be loyal to me, and that you will be a reliable member of my household. Swear that you will be bound to me as I will be to you, until either of us should die, or else I should relieve you of this obligation. Swear this before me, and you will thenceforth be a member of my retinue, entitled to all the worth and honour that entails.’

Thalo bowed his head. ‘I swear it.’

Yorlayvo went to Thalo and took out a wooden stick inscribed with a brief summation of the terms and conditions of the oath, not that Thalo could read it. He cut a notch into one end, then presented the stick to Thalo. Thalo notched the other end, kissed the middle, and put the stick into the fire.

‘So it is,’ said Karvalo. ‘You, Thalo, are my man now, mine full and proper. Do not disappoint me.’

‘I will not,’ said Thalo, but only farsighted fate could determine whether it would be so.

XVIII

Winter Passes to Spring

Some weeks now passed, and as the new year approached, all of Pearmol was soon abustle—Karvalo was not known to dine in halves, and the spring festival was never any different. On the very last night of the year, when Thalo lay aloof on his bench, into the house came a young woman of sprightly demeanour. She was Ormana, Yorlayvo's daughter.

Yorlayvo's extraction has already been told. His wife, Ormana's mother, was a woman called Esleyna. She was fair of hair and face alike, but though she was not terribly old, she wore her age poorly, having weathered in her life many hardships, and just as many bereavements. For one, her mother, Ewssea, died during the birth of her younger brother, who himself did not survive long enough to be named. Then Esleyna's father, Ossyelo, drowned a few years later while he was swimming, dragged out to sea by a strong current he had not the strength to overcome. Her elder brother, the eternally charming Fenlovo, was killed fighting in the north and flung into a hasty grave with thirty others. And lastly, her younger sister, Allea, left Pearmol as a young woman, seeking a wealthy spouse from some other lordly hall, only to be waylaid by reavers on the day she left. Although Allea escaped her attackers, she fled in such a panic that she got trapped in a bog, and there she died.

Despite her many sorrows, it should be mentioned that Esleyna had also known her fair share of joys. Yorlayvo had previously been among the many young men of Pearmol who went to fight in the north, and he was one of those fortunate enough to come home mostly intact. Shortly after his return, he and Esleyna married, and they had two children together. Ormana was the elder of the pair, and the younger was an unimportant lad called Kolmago.

Though Ormana had ever been of buoyant disposition, her words were often so poorly chosen, and often so clumsily spoken, that many perceived her to be dreadfully awkward, or bothersome, or otherwise ungracious and queer, and sometimes even outright discourteous. Thus, when she and Thalo first met, she flung back her shoulders, broadened her smile, and greeted him slowly, and

clearly, and ever so politely.

‘How do you do?’ she said with a bow. ‘I do not believe we have met.’

‘We have not,’ said Thalo, and nothing more.

Ormana then continued the conversation alone, speaking of many dull and trivial things, until Thalo offered a polite farewell and walked away. Much the same happened the next day, and the next, and so on. Soon enough, Thalo had grown very fond of Ormana’s idle chatter, and she of his steady quiet, and they thusly found in each other an easy friend.

So it was that Ormana came to Thalo on the night of the winter lights, set upon dragging him from his bench and out into the yard to join the celebration. But Thalo had no intention of rising until dawn demanded it.

‘Slothful git!’ said Ormana. ‘Get up and get out.’

Thalo greeted her with half a smile and no words.

‘Did you hear me, man?’ She seized Thalo’s arm and tried to haul him to his feet, but he would not be moved.

‘I am trying to rest,’ he said.

‘You will have plenty of time to rest soon enough.’ Ormana took her knife from her belt and pointed it at his face. ‘I am threatening you.’

‘Not nearly enough.’

‘Phooey! You must come out. It is important to fulfil your obligations as a man of Pearmol, after all.’

‘Perhaps, but what obligation do I have to waddle out in the middle of the night and shiver? None.’

‘You have an obligation to uphold the harmony of the house, and I yet hold a knife. I am threatening you.’

Thalo meant to protest further, but Ormana’s smile lessened as she spoke, and he agreed to accompany her.

They went out into the yard together, where a great throng had gathered beneath the waning moon, all chatting to one another while the low hum of song drifted up from the town. Ormana brought Thalo among her kinsfolk—close to the doors of the hall, for they were people of dignity—and took from her belt-bag two small candlesticks. She lit them both, then handed one to Thalo and kept the other for herself.

Once everyone was assembled, Karvalo emerged from the hall, and atop the steps, he rang his bell with verve. A quiet fell upon the yard, and as Karvalo stepped aside, a woman came out behind him. She was Seyglena, his wife, and a daughter of a prominent family from Lagovol. She was born blind, and her family had therefore bestowed upon her a priestly education.

After Karvalo helped her down the steps, she walked to the middle of the crowd while he remained by the doors, above everyone else, just as he liked it.

‘Hear me!’ said Seyglena. ‘Hear me and heed me!’

Then she knelt and sang. As she did so, two large men came whooping out of the hall and put themselves either side of Karvalo. One was draped in furs and animal skins, and he wore a marvellous mane on his head, and antlers on his back, and also had his face covered with a fearsome fanged mask. The other was decked in feathers, with a long-beaked mask, great wings extending from his shoulders, and an exquisite crest atop his head. Each carried a staff which they thumped upon the ground in time with Seyglena’s song, and the beastly fellow barked and woofed along while the feathered fellow hooted joyously, crowing as if he were under the spell of some crazed wizard-chicken.

When she had finished singing, Karvalo helped Seyglena back up the steps, where the beastly fellow dropped to his knees and presented her with a bowl of soil. She took a fistful and cast it through the door, onto the floor within. Then the feathered fellow dropped to his knees and presented her with a bowl of water. She cupped some in her hand and splashed it onto the floor likewise.

‘So have I been heard!’ she said. ‘So have I been heeded!’

Then she went inside. Karvalo rang his bell once more and followed her in, having not said a word, and then the two whoopers went in behind them.

That was the first time Thalo had borne witness to such a ritual. At Klagenn, he and Asfoa had marked the coming of each new year with only a song softly sung between themselves, and while the winter he spent at Gawslad had offered a more substantial celebration, it happened that he was celebrating elsewhere on the night of the winter lights. The whole affair was rather too loud and busy for his taste, but he was glad at least that Ormana was enjoying herself.

Karvalo hosted the spring feast on the following day, the first day of spring, and there was much to be enjoyed in that lordly house, songs and dances, music and merriment, good food and goodwill. Thalo went along at Ormana’s urging, but he was sulky about it and left early.

On the next day, Yorlayvo learnt that an infamous robber called Magnaga Much-maligned was abroad. She had been accused of doing many wicked things by many different farms, and even more would come forward to make posthumous allegations. Karvalo had already outlawed her in his domain, so heinous was her catalogue of crimes, as had all his neighbours, but now Yorlayvo determined so slippery a fiend should not be left to wander. Thalo volunteered himself to sort the matter.

‘I have yet to perform a killing in my lord’s name,’ he said, ‘and there can be no manfuller art.’

Yorlayvo granted him that, but he stipulated that a pair of big men were to go along for the ride and ensure nothing went awry—his faith in Thalo, though firmer than it had been, remained far less than absolute. Everyone agreed to

this.

Just so the three departed, and they followed the sightings to a farm called Feanna, not very far from Pearmol itself. There they went inside and found the crook prying a baby from its mother's nipple, surely intent upon doing some horrible thing. Thalo drew his sword, star-sheened Sleme, and sliced her open before she knew what was happening.

The baby's mother said some of the goods in Magnaga's possession were hers by right, and that the hoodlum had swiped them shortly before justice had arrived. Justice called her a liar and a chancer, returned her baby, and took the body away, all its ill-gotten goods claimed for Pearmol. Thalo and his fellows then rode out into the moors, stripped Magnaga's body, and dumped the corpse to be defiled by whatever nasty thing sought to defile it, as was the custom for outlaws in those more barbarous days.

After a hard day's graft, they were glad to be home before dinnertime. Thalo went straight to the hall to deliver the loot, eager to be dealt back his part. He put it before Karvalo, sitting at one of his benches.

Karvalo said, 'I am told you have been hunting? I suppose this is my profit?'

Thalo said it was.

'Then let us see what the scoundrel had to offer.'

Karvalo seized the bag from the table and opened it up, but his enthusiasm lessened as quickly as it had stirred.

'Fair enough,' he said, 'for a vagrant.'

He then began rummaging through the bag to determine what he should deal back to his man, but he stopped when Solmodo the doorman came to his side and said a pair of women had come to visit on behalf of the Earl of Eylavol. Karvalo bade him bring them in and took to his chair, his goody bag yet in his lap and none the lighter. Thalo did not want to stay in the hall—he knew exactly what matter had brought friends of the Earl of Eylavol to Pearmol—but neither could he bring himself to leave, and thereby risk losing his share of Magnaga's booty. He plopped himself in the back corner, hoping to melt into the shadows and be missed by Karvalo's visitors. That hope was in vain.

Soon enough, Solmodo escorted the women inside. One was Godleda, the daughter of Beyla the Earl. Karvalo had met her once before, in her mother's company, but he did not know her companion. It was Meola, and the moment she set foot in the hall, her eyes swept the room and settled upon Thalo in the corner, drawn to him as if by the will of treacherous fate itself. She served him the fiercest scowl she could manage but saved her words.

Karvalo stood to greet his guests.

'Welcome,' he said. 'Who are you?'

'I am Godleda,' said Godleda, 'daughter of Beyla, the Earl of Eylavol. My

friend is Meola Ravonnan, though you may know better the name of her late husband, Gaylodho Ayrkenennan, the earl's predecessor.'

Karvalo welcomed them by name and sat back down. 'Speak, what brings you to my most esteemed hall?'

'You have surely heard,' said Meola, 'that my husband was murdered.'

Karvalo had not heard this, though he should have.

'It was a cowardly act performed by a cowardly man. The culprit fled before we could seek justice. To see so cruel a killing go unpunished has wrought in me no end of grief, but things seem to be turning in my favour at last. You see, Lord of Pearmol, you are harbouring the murderer.'

Karvalo nodded knowingly, looking not at either of his guests, but at Thalo in the corner. 'And just who do you mean to accuse?'

But before either of them could answer, Thalo stood and said, 'Thalo is his name.' He would not be ruled by fate if he could help it. 'That man died by my sword alone.'

'So it is,' said Meola. 'The man himself admits it.'

Karvalo leant forward to peer at Meola before him. 'And what do you want me to do about it?'

'The man is a murderer. He slaughtered my husband and fled before justice could be sought. It was a vile crime, one for which he has been outlawed from his homeland, but that is not sufficient. He must be yielded to face the proper penalty.'

'Perhaps. But let us hear both sides first.' Karvalo summoned Thalo to his side with a wave. 'Thalo, what do you have to say for yourself?'

'The man was a pig,' said Thalo. 'I wish I could bring him back to life, that I could kill him again, and slower. He did not deserve to live.'

As Meola heard these words, such fury welled within her, a fury she could scarcely contain. 'Lord of Pearmol, it is shameful that you would even hear his words, let alone heed them.' She shifted her glare towards Thalo. 'I want the murderer. Blood for blood, and nothing less. Fate wills it.'

Karvalo now took a moment to consider his options, but the matter seemed clear. Even if Thalo was nothing much more than a violent, temperamental little man, he was nonetheless Thennelo. That name, he thought, might yet prove to be valuable. If he dared yield not only one of his thanes for execution, but Thennelo, and so soon after acquiring him, and to the Earl of Eylavol of all people, the cost to his good name would be far greater than that of any feud with a rabble of mouthy northerners. He would not be so besmirched.

'I see my man has done you harm,' said Karvalo, 'but I will not give you his life. Perhaps I can offer you some other compensation. What price would befit your husband's standing?'

Meola said, 'I have named the price.'

'Perhaps,' said Godleda, in her most judicial voice, 'we can instead offer to reimburse you for your loss. What would you take in exchange for your man?'

'Nothing. If you cannot agree to that, then we have no further business. I will not sell his life for any sum at all, as I would not sell that of any one of my thanes. Such is my duty as their gracious lord and protector.'

'Gracious?' said Meola. 'Where is the grace in this dishonour? This man murdered my husband, unfathered my son, widowed me. Neither does he deny it, nor even pretend to have a just cause.' She bent to her knees and spread her hands on the floor. 'Where is your dignity? I beseech you, my hands upon your floor: do what is right and just!'

'I will not discuss dignity with the groveller.'

Now Godleda came to help Meola to her feet, but her hand was refused. She stepped towards Karvalo instead. 'See the weeping widow. See the hurting heart. And so, see sense. Justice must be done.'

But Karvalo had no interest in justice. 'Get out of my hall, or your son will mourn his mother as well. I will say nothing more about this.'

Then he left the hall, his bag firmly in hand.

Yet upon her knees, Meola put her glare back on Thalo as he stood on the platform beside Karvalo's chair.

'Do not waste your days,' she said, 'for they will be few!'

Then she arose, spat at his feet, and left the hall. Godleda went with her.

Two more things must be said about this conversation. Firstly, although Thalo was pleased to see people arguing over him, that his life rested upon its outcome left him not the least bit rattled. This was, after all, the only one of his sixfold killings to have borne any apparent consequences. Secondly, he never got his share of Magnaga's death-loot, for this matter put it far out of Karvalo's mind.

That evening, Yorlayvo sat down to speak with Thalo. He had previously thought time and instruction alone would be enough to make him an upstanding young man. After all, it was one thing to be good with a spear—any half-fit fellow could kill a man—but it was mind and manners, dignity and discipline, which were most useful in their work. That was not Thalo having a tantrum in the hall, but he had hoped they could mould him into a worthier fellow. Yet as time passed and little changed, as Thalo remained aloof and disinterested, he wondered whether it would at all, or if it even could.

'No,' he had said to himself one day. 'Nothing lasts forever. Things always change eventually. It is but the when and the how that come and go.'

But it was the when and the how that worried him. He knew Thalo no better after two months than he had after two days, and what little he had gathered

did just as little to ease his doubts. Now Karvalo had told him of his meeting with Meola, of dark deeds brought to light, and the situation became untenable.

‘Thalo,’ he said, ‘tell me about this earl you murdered.’

‘I did not murder him,’ said Thalo. ‘He deserved to die.’

‘No one deserves to die.’

‘No one? Then what of this outlaw, Magnaga? You had me kill her just today. Did she not deserve it?’

‘No, but the folk she wronged thought otherwise, and they are the folk who keep us fed. We put the matter to rest, and Magnaga with it, but that does not mean she deserved it. It was a practical consideration.’

Thalo only scoffed.

‘Pay attention,’ said Yorlayvo. ‘You murdered an earl.’

‘I did not murder him.’

‘You murdered him, and you were outlawed for it. Do you deserve to die for that? No. Whatever you have done, you do not deserve to die. But we all still do. And again, you murdered an earl. Should the worst come about, I will do what I can to spare you, but I can only try. In the end, your life is your own to defend.’

‘Have you come to threaten me?’

‘I have come to ensure you know where we stand. If you are to stay with us, we need to trust you, and you need to trust us. We must be as one. Once more, you murdered an earl. We must be prepared for whatever may come of it, for such matters do not resolve themselves. Do you understand?’

Reluctantly, Thalo said, ‘I do.’

Yorlayvo said, ‘We each hope fate favours us,’ and then he went away.

Though Thalo heeded much of his wisdom, he remained unconvinced of Gaylodho’s undeserving. Yorlayvo did not know him as he knew him, nor could he, for he was justly dead and buried. Nothing would come of it, for what more justice needed doing?

‘None,’ said Thalo. ‘I need no absolution, for I have done no damnable deed. All is well. All will be well.’

And so Yorlayvo’s words all fell out of him as he readied for bed.

The spring games were held on the following day. Thalo did not take part. Solmodo won the barrel, and the chap who got the rag proved too forgettable to be remembered.

While everyone was out having their fun, Karvalo made some arrangements for himself. He picked from his retinue a reliable and trustworthy thane named Bane-of-the-Tongues—so called because they knew every sort of speech worth knowing, and all so fluently that they could claim any extraction they liked and be believed—and sent them off to Eylavol. They were to keep a close eye on

things, notice whatever needed to be noticed, and send tight-lipped friends back with any important news. In this way did Karvalo begin putting his fingers where they did not belong.

XIX

Homecoming

Now the story will turn to Karvalo's sons, three of whom survived long enough to be at all notable, though he only cared to cherish two. The elder of them was Essero, known as Horn-helm after a fetching helmet he liked to wear, topped with a pair of decorative horns. He was a big fellow, just like his father, though he was not yet so heavy with age.

Essero was not at Pearmol when Thalo arrived, having set out on a marital tour a year prior. With Karvalo at his side, eager to make a good match for his son, Essero visited a selection of the lordships to find himself a wife of noble stock. When they were staying for a while with Afdea, Lord of Awlteyr, Essero spotted a certain red-headed young woman during the winter lights. He thought she looked quite something indeed, so he strode over to introduce himself.

'What ho, maiden,' he said, 'and good evening! Behold me and behold an impregnable wall of a man!'

The woman was quite alarmed by the sudden appearance of this forceful young man, and she walked away without a word. But Essero, his father's son, was not one to be shrugged off. He followed her, cornered her in a quiet part of the hall, and forced a conversation as polite as a forced conversation could be. The woman introduced herself as Ernala Seygayonnan, a granddaughter of Seymodo, Lord of Owffek, and the pair got to talking. She said she was only visiting Awlteyr, having come in her uncle Seytrewo's company.

'And my earliest memory,' said Ernala, 'was watching my parents choke and burn to death in an arson attack, and my sister with them. I alone survived the flames.'

Now Essero had a marvellous stroke of luck. Tactless though his approach had been, it worked well enough, and he and Ernala got on rather well. Over the next month or so, they met one another time and again, until Essero decided to bring the matter to Karvalo. He said he did not want to move on just yet, for he was keen to see where things would go with Ernala, and that he was quite chuffed with the relationship they had fostered.

Karvalo was not so chuffed. During his stay at Awlteyr, he had heard about Ernala and her emerging fling with his son, and the more he learnt about it, the more unsatisfied he became. While she was certainly of lordly bearing, her prospects as the orphaned daughter of a younger sibling were by no means the brightest.

But Essero said, ‘What do her prospects matter next to the staggering heights of mine? If we were to be wed, what is mine would thence be hers, prospects and all.’

Ever the businessman, Karvalo was willing to make certain concessions to keep his sons on side—they were his sons, after all, well trained in all matters of life, and would surely make formidable foes. And as concessions went, a marriage only slightly lacking was by no means the most damaging. He agreed to see how it all panned out and left Awlteyr to get on with other things, leaving Essero behind to woo his girl to his heart’s content.

A little while later, Essero accompanied Ernala on her return to Owffek, where he met her family properly. Upon his arrival, he made a fabulous first impression on Seymodo, her doting grandfather, by strutting into the hall and immediately swishing his hair around with gusto.

‘I like this bloke,’ said Seymodo, swishing his hair in turn, and thus was forged a lifelong friendship.

Essero spent a little over a year with Ernala in Seymodo’s hall, until he received a messenger from his father, who bade him come home.

‘Your noble father bids you come home for the summer feast,’ said the messenger.

‘Whatever is all this about?’ asked Essero. ‘Do they miss me so much so soon? So I would suppose. I imagine that hall is utterly lifeless without old me around making it a pleasant place to be.’

‘If you like. But this is more about your brother. You are to come home in anticipation of his gloried return. He wants you both back together.’

Essero’s brother, the younger of Karvalo’s sons, was called Awldano. He was sometimes known as Awldano Writhe-wrangler, for he had once grappled with a venomous snake and flung it around like a whip, or as Awldano the Bold for much the same reason. He too had recently left home. A few weeks after Karvalo came back from Awlteyr, he went to Awldano and told him he should set out on a marital tour, just as his brother had.

‘And he has found more success than none,’ said Karvalo. ‘I have no doubt we could find you a wife of equal or, preferably, greater nobility.’

Awldano had other ideas.

‘I have no such desire,’ he said, and then he walked away.

Karvalo huffed but said nothing more, not wanting to press the matter.

However, he had a dream that night in which the other lords were all jeering at him, mocking his son's bachelorhood, and saying an unmarried man was as much use as a feather for a knife. He woke up in a fury.

'What is it, Karvalo?' asked Seyglena, awoken by his angry jostling.

'I will not let my good name be dragged through the mud!'

Karvalo leapt out of bed and dressed himself with no further discussion. He went straight to Awldano and shook him awake.

'Awldano, my beloved son,' he said. 'It would be better for everyone if you stopped lollygagging, bucked up a bit, and found yourself a wife.'

'I understand your concern,' said Awldano, 'but the sun has yet to rise.'

'Then I will give you a second option. A handful of my sheriffs have been short-changing me recently, and our stores have been less happy than I should like. If you will give me no grandchildren, you will get yourself on a ship and give me gold and glory instead.'

Awldano found this option rather more agreeable. To appease his father, he spent some time preparing a pair of ships and planning a voyage, rallied his closest friends, and soon enough, they were all off sailing down past Arlonn and on to Ayslonn. There they terrorised the locals with raiding and looting and the like. The whole campaign went swimmingly, and after a few months spent prowling the coast, they had earned themselves all the booty they could ask for, not that they did.

The journey home, however, was less successful, and Awldano's ship was blown off course amid a terrific storm. Once they had completely lost their bearings, Awldano put the ship to shore on the first land they spotted, which turned out to be the western reaches of Frowlonn, across the sea. They quickly saw this as a most fortuitous failure, surely the work of two-handed fate, and began robbing and reaving once again, pillaging for themselves many fine things they might not have found elsewhere.

They also captured an old seaman—a chap called Sorgeo, who had much experience sailing back and forth between Mawon and Frowlonn—and forced him to navigate the way home, threatening to drown him if he refused.

'I am not fit for sailing right about now,' said Sorgeo. 'My gut has been rather disagreeable lately.'

'I can make it worth your while,' said Awldano. 'A favour for a favour.'

'What sort of favour is it when I have no choice in the matter?'

Awldano was now becoming increasingly worried that he would have to follow through on his threat and drown the man, but it took only a little more knife-waving and sword-fondling for Sorgeo to relent. He agreed to do as they asked and sail them home, and so he did. By the time they were back in Mawon, nearly a year had passed since their departure, and the summer feast was fast

approaching.

They first landed at Syarglad, where Awldano picked a pair of men and sent them to Pearmol to inform Karvalo of his impending return. Before he returned himself, however, he had to sort the matter of the old seaman. Sorgeo was not at all happy with how things had gone, and he started making a fuss in the town, demanding to be taken home. Awldano deemed the request fair enough—he had been a valuable navigator, after all—so he spent a while in Syarglad finding a ship to ferry him home.

This all came to nought, however, when Sorgeo, feeling quite crotchety, got himself into a fight with a pair of drunkards. They left him bruised and bleeding on the floor, which made him an easy target for a cloaked mugger who came strolling along shortly thereafter, and he was beaten and left for dead a second time. Yet it was not until a mob of local children came along to kick and stone him that his life finally failed.

When Awldano learnt about this, he set about hunting the criminals, eager to repay Sorgeo however he could. He met mixed success. Although they found the drunkards, clubbed their heads in, and tossed them in the ocean, the cloaked mugger duped them three times before vanishing without a trace, and the gang of children eluded them entirely. Awldano cut his losses there and ruled that Sorgeo had been satisfactorily avenged. After this delay, he gathered his troop and set sail again, homeward bound at last.

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Essero came home to Pearmol the day before the summer feast. On the day of his return, he strutted into the hall, Ernala on his arm, and he said, ‘Rejoice! Rejoice, my venerable kin! Essero is home!’

Karvalo and Seyglena came to the hall to receive him. They took their seats, and then Karvalo arose and welcomed his first of twofold sons. Seyglena did much the same.

‘You noblest man-makers,’ said Essero, ‘how you honour me!’

‘As you honour us,’ said Karvalo. ‘Come forth.’

Essero brought Ernala up onto the platform to sit beside his parents, and there they exchanged their gifts. First, Ernala gave Karvalo a wreath wrought from a gull’s feathers and ornamented in gold.

‘This is a significant gift,’ she said. ‘You see, I have an ancestor who lived long ago—let me tell you about him. He was called Ewge, the son of Gewleyna, and she was the daughter of Bewgana, who was herself the granddaughter of mighty Afflano, about whom many tales are told. Ewge’s unwilling father was the elf Syovo.’

‘One day, when Ewge was but a baby, Syovo stole him from his cradle and took him out rowing.

“‘A father and his son,” said Syovo. “The old, cold sea and the dawn’s young sun.”

‘When they were far out to sea, Syovo picked Ewge up and held him out over the water.

“‘Tell me,” he said, “why should I not drown thee here? Give me one good reason, wretched little thing, and perhaps I shall spare thy life.”

‘But Ewge was only a baby, and he could only babble.

“‘Bah bam bum bummer!” said Syovo. “Bah bam bum drown!”

‘And so, he dropped Ewge into the water and rowed away. Ewge rightly should have died that day, but then a strange and spectacular thing occurred. As he cried and splashed in the sea, down from the sky swooped an enormous white gull, cloaked in a veil of mist of all colours, resplendent in the sunlight. The gull took Ewge in its beak and carried him to the shore, where his poor mother knelt in despair. When the gull landed before her and opened its beak, revealing Ewge smiling happily within, she wept tears of joy.

“‘How I thank thee,” she said, “O majestic gull. I am hereby in thy debt. But how is it I can repay thee for this deed? In truth, I know no gift nor honour that would be fair recompense for thy kindness.”

‘At this, the gull spread its wings, threw back its head, and let up a fearsome screech. As it sounded this terrible cry, the veil of mist dispelled, and the gull’s true form was revealed. Before Gewleyna stood the spirit king Ogloa, draped in her cloud-spun silks.

“‘Build here a shrine,” said Ogloa, “and honour my children. This alone I ask of thee. Do this, and they shall ever deliver thy kin of strife.”

‘Then Ogloa kissed baby Ewge on his forehead, and thereby granted him the right to a long life before vanishing into mist once more.

‘Gewleyna did as Ogloa bade and built by the sea a shrine in her honour, and thus was Owffek established, my home and my lineage both.’

Once Ernala had concluded her tale, Karvalo bowed his head, and she put her wreath upon it. He knew then that Essero’s judgement was sounder than it sometimes seemed.

Next, Seyglena presented Ernala with a boar-skin hat embellished with many fine jewels.

‘This is a significant gift,’ said Seyglena. ‘This house was founded by the kin of Kawo, among whom my sons number—let me tell you about him. There was Kawo in the twilit woods, sitting on a grassy knoll and plucking on his harp, his music soft and sweet. And passing by was a company of thanes, riding among them a girl called Gonwela. She heard Kawo’s music drifting through

the trees, and she leapt at once from her horse and made into the gloom, seeking the source of the song. There she found Kawo, broad and beautiful, and she bade him speak his name, that she would know whose perfect plucking had so enchanted her.

“Tell me thine,” said Kawo, “and perhaps I shall tell thee mine.”

“Nay!” said Gonwela, for she was first to ask.

‘So Kawo looked to his harp, and he said, “Take mine harp, and play better than ever I could. Play a song fairer than the fairest flower, and brighter than the brightest star. Do this for me now, and perhaps I shall tell thee my name.”’

‘But Gonwela put forth her hand, and she said, “Take my warmth, and bear me a son. Make him taller than the tallest oak, and firmer than the firmest mountain. Do this for me now, and perhaps I shall tell thee my name.”’

‘Kawo said, “Pluck mine harp, and I shall bear thee a son, and thus will each of us be entitled to the other’s name.”’

‘To this Gonwela agreed. She took Kawo’s harp, rested it in her lap, and plucked away. But that artless girl plucked so poorly that the nearby flowers wilted, and the stars above grew dim, and she shed a single tear. Sighing softly, Kawo sat himself beside her, took her hands in his, and guided her fingers over the strings. Just so they played, and they played so sweet a song that the flowers bloomed anew, and the stars shone bright once more.

“But that is only half of it,” said Gonwela, and she bade Kawo join her in the glory of the night. They became well acquainted.

‘Now Kawo shed a single tear, for he knew at once that he would bear no son. But when Gonwela put her arms around him, when she wiped away his tear and kissed his cheek, he felt in her the wellspring of life. He touched his hand to her stomach, and this he said: “Although there is no son in me, there is the seed of one in thee. Within thy womb is the son of Kawo, for Kawo is my name.”’

‘Gonwela said, “And within my womb is the son of Gonwela, for that is mine.”’

‘Then Kawo asked Gonwela to be his wife, and she asked him to be her husband. With a triumphant snort, he turned himself into a great boar, and she climbed upon his back and rode him out of the woods. From their union was born mighty Syardeo, a man tall and firm, and Gonwela would become a king of many peoples, and Kawo her foremost warrior.’

When Seyglena had finished, she had Ernala bow her head and mounted the boar-skin hat atop her hair. Then they all joined hands.

‘Essero,’ said Karvalo, ‘and Ernala, too. Welcome to Pearmol, my house and yours. Let us each count the others among our closest kin.’

Then they parted.

Now it is important to introduce a certain squat fellow named Sedweo, whom some people liked to call Squit-wit. A noisy man with broad shoulders, he was Essero's closest companion, and he fancied himself a poet. Indeed, he could never let a verse be spoken without trying to better it.

On the evening of Essero's return to Pearmol, he and Sedweo came together to share a meal in private. They took each other in their arms and offered their warmest words of greeting, and then they sat down to eat. Before they began, Sedweo took out a pickled parsnip and halved it lengthways. He gave one half to Essero, and he kept the other.

'My friend,' said Sedweo, 'I have so longed to share a parsnip with you.'

'And so long have I likewise longed,' said Essero, and then they each ate their half and went on with their meal.

They spoke long into the night, and it happened that Sedweo mentioned in passing a man they call Thennelo.

'Who is this man they call Thennelo?' said Essero.

'Thalo Thennelo,' said Sedweo. 'But as for who he is—who knows? He slew some trolls, or so they say, and nothing else is said. He slumps about here and there, and he keeps no company besides mulch-minded Ormana. A queer one in a queer two. I can say no more about who's who.'

'A lowborn lad with low-hung eyes? A man I ought to meet, I think.'

So Essero met Ormana the next morning.

'Ormana,' he said, 'I have heard of a silly sort of man whom the wind has blown into my house. Thennelo, I have heard him called. The Thalo man. Bring me to him, that I may measure him against my mighty self.'

'He will have no interest in that,' said Ormana.

'It is not for me to consider his interests, but for him to consider mine. As it is for you, servant of my household. So put your tongue away and hasten me to him!'

Ormana did as Essero bade and brought him to the big stable, where Thalo was gathering manure. But before she could say any words of introduction, Essero was before her, his hands upon his hips.

'You there!' he said. 'Oy-oy, man! Are you the man they call Thennelo? Is this muck-man a murder-man, and a murderer of monsters?'

'I am Thalo,' said Thalo.

'Ho! How curt. I tell you, Thalo man, it will not do you well to speak to such a man in such a manner.'

'Who are you?'

'Who am I? What a jape! You know, when first I heard of the man they call Thennelo, I imagined the fellow behind the feat, the daring doer, the battle-tested warrior. A man very much like myself, tall and big and bold. Firm and

unbending. Unyielding. Indomitable! Handsome and gracious and rugged all at once. What a man! What a splendid man among men he must be! But now, Thalo man, I see little you, and I hear your little words.’ Essero shook his head. ‘I mean to be as gentle as can be when I say that you seem not even half of that. It is a terrible shame to discover my expectations were so greatly overblown, such is my unending imagination. Indeed, my father has often said my head is right brimming with ideas and ambitions—it is why I have made such a roaring success of myself—but the dreadful disappointment I suffer here today is proof enough that it is not without cost. In any case, Thalo man, you may yet prove your capability, that you are worthy of serving both me and my kin. Perhaps, one day, you will be glad to ride with your horn-helmed lord and make glorious war against his foes! Perhaps. But until that day, I warn you not to think too much of yourself.’

Then Essero picked up his nose and swept himself away, and that was that. It was not until he was gone that Ormana told Thalo who he was.

‘He is Essero,’ she said. ‘Karvalo’s son.’

‘What is the son of a pig,’ said Thalo, ‘but another pig?’

At this, Ormana snorted. She said, ‘So says the man in the muck,’ and then she went on her way.

The summer feast was held that evening. Ormana came to fetch Thalo as it was beginning. He declined her invitation in his usual fashion, and so she threatened violence in hers.

‘We have been through this before,’ she said, ‘and I hope for your sake we need not go through it again. When I say you ought to come, what I mean is that you must and that you will. If not of your own accord, then I will chop you up and take you in pieces, and maybe they will serve you steamed for afters.’

That did not prove to be necessary. Despite his unwillingness, Thalo came in one piece.

The hall was as it ever was on such occasions, warm and busy and loud with chit-chat, but it was summer now, so it was all very much worse. The evening began as it often did. There was barely an empty spot at the benches, and barely a gulp of air to gasp, and the musicians were already out of time, and Thalo was ready to leave the moment he sat down.

But then, a little while later, Solmodo-of-the-door came marching down to the platform. He seized one of the drums, gave it a sound banging, and called for the hall’s attention, gesturing up the aisle. All eyes followed his hand to the doors, and as they swung open, in strutted a cohort of warriors, each decked in gleaming mail, each glittering magnificently in the firelight. At the front strode Awldano, Karvalo’s shining sun of a son, the Writhe-wrangler himself, dressed just as finely as his friends, but topped with an all the more exquisite helmet,

outshining all the others. That radiant man! His splendid troop!

Awldano knelt before the firepit, his hand on his chest, and Karvalo stood from his seat and went to meet him.

‘Late as ever,’ he said. ‘It seems a long time ago I was informed of your prompt arrival. Prompt! I trust nothing untoward has befallen you, my son?’

‘Nothing of the sort,’ said Awldano, removing his helmet.

Karvalo took Awldano’s hand as he rose and embraced him. ‘So all is well?’ But Awldano had no chance to answer before Karvalo said further, ‘No. You are home, you are alive, and you are laden with treasure. All is well.’

Then Karvalo kissed Awldano and bade him take a seat. Awldano nodded, that filial fellow, and he stepped up onto the platform to sit at the high table.

Now Karvalo called for the attention of the hall and proceeded to make a long and haughty speech about the many glories of his kinsfolk, the great repute of his retinue, and the pride with which he regarded his sons’ achievements. Thalo paid no attention to that, for his name did not pass Karvalo’s lips.

When Karvalo had finished his speech, Essero sprang up behind him and had Sedweo say some words of his own. Sedweo did not need to be asked twice. He leapt up likewise, cleared his throat, and spoke this verse:

‘Ye noble sons of noble man,
who bring such cause to kin and clan
for too much food and yet more drink,
that all will gorge till none can think
of aught else but their bloated tums,
their tired tongues and crowning bums,
their bladders bogged with mead-made piss;
‘tis but for you we suffer this!’

For this he was rewarded with a courteous round of applause, whereafter Karvalo seized control of things, lifting his cup and giving a stern, ‘Oy-oy!’

The hall offered an ‘Oy-oy!’ in return, and everyone returned to their own business.

Thalo spent the remainder of the evening with Ormana until he could take no more of the hall, when the whole weight of the world seemed to bear down upon him. He stood up and said he needed to be elsewhere, somewhere calmer, and cooler, and preferably his bench. Ormana thanked him for his company and saw him off. However, as he made for the door, a great pair of hands found themselves upon his shoulders.

‘Thalo man!’ said Essero, grabbing him from behind. ‘You are not to leave this hall before the proper introductions have been made.’

So Thalo turned to find not one lordling looming behind him, but two, for there was Awldano beside his brother.

‘Here he is,’ said Essero, turning to Awldano. ‘This little fellow is the man they call Thennelo, if you can believe it.’

‘So you are the Thalo man?’ said Awldano.

Thalo nodded. ‘I am Thalo.’

‘Yes. I have heard a bit about you already, Thalo.’

‘As have many. As will many more.’

Essero scoffed. ‘A boastful little git, just as I said.’ He looked to Awldano as if to invite him to agree, but he decided to say more before anyone else could get a word in. ‘Let me remind you, Thalo, not to pretend you are taller than you are. I have asked many for their assessments of you, and I think any praise at all would be more than you deserve.’

‘How many is many?’

‘Never you mind. I have heard about the heads in the hall, and impressive though they may have been, no one saw the deed done, did they?’

‘I have witnesses.’

‘Ah! A pack of old coots, by all accounts, with a nothing-much wretch chief among them. Certainly delusional. No, they would surely lay their eyes upon mighty me and believe themselves beset by some beast from ancient days, were I not so delightfully well faced. Nonsense, all of it. Say, Awldano, speak—what do you make of this piffle?’

Awldano said, ‘I know only what I have been told. I have not examined the matter quite as closely as you have, Brother, nor with such interest.’

‘Awldano man, my brother. I have not examined this matter at all closely. I have merely heeded reason and thusly sniffed out the wretched reek of ill intent. Something is certainly amiss here. Surely you smell it too, you keen-nosed brother of mine?’

‘If the scent were so strong, someone should have smelt it by now.’

‘But look at him. Look at him! Or can you not? Why, that is because there is nothing there! Is this a war-man you see before you? This paltry thing? What a laughable thought! I would be surprised if such a thing could best a hoar-head, and I am expected to believe he put down not one troll, but two? And who has ever met a troll, anyway? The very notion is insulting. Do you truly believe this hogwash?’

Awldano took a moment to look Thalo over before answering. It was an incredible claim to be sure, but incredible things had happened before, and smarter folk than him believed it.

‘As I said,’ said Awldano, ‘I know only what I have been told, and I am inclined to believe some more than others.’

‘Bah! What folly is this? No. I will not dignify it. If I am the only person here with any sense at all, so be it.’

Then Essero left them. Awldano took the opportunity to introduce himself properly.

‘I am Awldano,’ he said. ‘Though I suppose you have gathered as much.’ Then he stopped briefly, before saying, ‘Please forgive my brother’s vitality.’

‘No,’ said Thalo.

‘Such would be your right, I suppose.’ Awldano rubbed his beard, thin and patchy with youth, and nodded for a while as Thalo stared at him. Neither quite had the force of character to take charge and end the conversation properly, so they stood in silence until Awldano could suffer it no more. ‘If that is all, I will leave you be. Good evening and good night, Thalo man.’

Thalo bowed his head. ‘Good night.’

Then Awldano turned sharply and went back down the aisle, and Thalo went off to bed.

The summer games were played on the following day, and everyone had a grand time. Essero challenged Thalo to meet him in a contest of strength by individual rope-pulling, but Thalo thrice refused him. Essero made a fuss, called him craven and cowardly, and questioned his masculine pride, but when Thalo would not be tempted, he huffed and moved along.

The games ended such that Solmodo won the barrel, as he always did, and a worthless man named Elvoro, whom everyone hated, took the rag.

XX

Concerning Samnew and Fnarslad

Let us now visit Samnew, a small town which sat half a day's walk down the coast from Pearmol, given a brisk pace and only the odd stop here and there. Samnew was a very young place in those days. It was founded by Thyomalo while he was Lord of Pearmol, but it was originally only a lone shrine dedicated to his late husband, Samo, after whom it was named (and he would be known as Samnew-Samo, for he was otherwise lacking in distinction). In the following years, Samnew became increasingly busy—not least because Thyomalo visited so often—until it could charitably be called a town. And a charitable fellow Thyomalo was! He built a proper hall around the original shrine, tucked snug in its centre, and made Samnew a stewardship.

Samnew's first steward was Ekkeo, an old war-friend of Thyomalo's, and he proved so canny in his management of the town, and so loyal to his lord, that he would likewise be its last. Thyomalo's successor, Rogwalo, oversaw the establishment of Samnew as a lordship in its own right, and thus did he accrue for himself a lordly ally.

Of course, Ekkeo was by that time quite an old man, and he died only three years thereafter. He was succeeded in the lordship by his son, Arleno, to whose lordship Karvalo's of Pearmol was yet contemporary.

Arleno held the lordship when the king took his war up to Norlonn, and though he did not fight himself, he did send a company of his thanes to bolster Rogwalo's warband, a man to whom his kin owed so very much. They were led by Arleno's wife, Lodha, though she died with Rogwalo at Fevalnawl. In her stead, Arleno's brother-in-law, Sweno, (that is, the husband of his sister, Yorrone), took command. He preferred to march beside the king, rather than with Rogwalo's sons. Sweno died in the very final days of the war, when it was already as good as won. The last to be named of Arleno's war-wasted relatives is his eldest son, Godmalo. He went north later on, alongside his uncle Kardano, and he was slain in perhaps the most disastrous encounter of the whole conflict. This was fought near Falswol in Noynavol.

By that point, half the earls had either fallen or submitted to the king, and of those who had not, Kolmodo alone, the Earl of Noynavol, could yet stand against him with any sort of organised resistance. For this reason, the king's cousin, a man called Eydeno, gathered a great swath of the king's army and forced a battle against the Noyns, seeking the swift annihilation of what he deemed to be the last of the northerners' resolve.

However, it was at that time very early in the year, and Eydeno was ill-accustomed to such fresh air. As he let up his battle cry from the middle of the line, he sneezed so violently that he dropped his spear, then stooped to reclaim it. Yet when the lesser leaders heard his terrific sneeze, they thought he had been dearly wounded, and when they saw his glittering helmet fall beneath his friends', they determined he was killed.

'And mighty Eydeno is no slouch,' they must have said to themselves. 'If even he is bested, what hope is there for anyone else?'

Eydeno was quick to stand tall and announce his vitality, but his friends' desertion was all the quicker, and his army routed. So did his line collapse, and his hopes of victory with it. Eydeno himself remained firm, but not firm enough, and he was slain alongside his closest, most loyal thanes. Among them were many men of Samnew, although Sweno himself survived by falling over and pretending to be dead.

Godmalo, however, did not fight with his kinsmen by birth. Rather, he was among Yalmalo and his brothers from Pearmol, his kinsmen by marriage. He had married Alfrela, the youngest of Rogwalo's children, shortly before he left for the north. Indeed, they had barely taken their wedding drink before one of the king's fastest riders rushed into the hall at Samnew and bade Arleno offer some strapping young men to go back with him.

'A noble cause!' said Godmalo, yet holding the wedding horn, and he put himself forward.

'O Godmalo,' said Alfrela in her marital hat. 'You need not put yourself up for this. There are firmer folk to field.'

'Sheathe your sword-tongue, lass,' said Arleno between them. 'I will suffer no such slights against my son's firmness. The boy must make himself a man, and never before was an opportunity so fortuitously delivered.'

That very day, Godmalo left Samnew to make himself a man, though he never did. He found his way into the company of his brothers-in-law, and then found his way into battle at Falswol. Yalmalo heard Eydeno's almighty sneeze, and he heard his rallying cry thereafter, but when he saw the army breaking apart nonetheless, he too chose to forsake the battle.

'Do not flee so soon,' said Godmalo. 'My kinsmen—your kinsmen—yet stand and fight. As long as they do, we must not abandon them.'

‘Godmalo,’ said Yalmalo, ‘this battle is lost before it has truly begun. If they wish to fight it anyway, that is their right, but I will not forfeit my friends’ lives playing at honour.’

Then Yalmalo turned his back, and his company with him, all except one. Godmalo rushed to his relatives at the front, steeled himself, and was slain.

Yet merciless fate determined that the lives of Yalmalo’s friends would be forfeited all the same. As Eydeno’s line routed, as Yalmalo led his troop away, a sudden downpour set upon the battlefield, forcing them to retreat knee-deep through thick mud. Kolmodo the Earl, however, knew well the lay of his land. He sent a troop of his renowned horsemen along a nearby ridge, and there they picked off the fleeing Mawks as they emerged from the muddy ground, cold, tired, and dispirited.

Just so, a gang of Noynish horsemen laid upon Yalmalo’s company as they made for some woods, seeking a hidden place to shelter, and a great slaughter unfolded among the young men of Pearmol. It was said that for each one who got away from Falswol alive, four died behind him. Counted among the dead were Enyalo, the youngest of Rogwalo’s sons, Faffedhe, Yalmalo’s dear friend, and Yalmalo himself—he survived the initial encounter but never made it back to Ewmennes, where the king was awaiting Eydeno’s triumphant return. With Yalmalo dead and his warband in tatters, Karvalo seized control of things.

‘As long as I live,’ he said, ‘no friend of mine shall set foot in this wretched land again, lest they be my friend no longer.’

Then he took his company home. They brought only two bodies back for burial, those of Yalmalo and Enyalo. There were too many to bring all the rest.

When Karvalo returned to Pearmol, a lad called Trewgeo happened to be staying there with Gonwela. He was the second of Arleno’s three children. Godmalo was the eldest, and the youngest was a daughter named Gefyona. She is not relevant now, but will be. Being young men of equal conviction, Trewgeo and Karvalo had a long history of bickering with one another, and about any matter at all, however big or small it seemed. When Karvalo arrived with only two bodies in tow, but with many more left behind, Trewgeo’s temper flared at once.

‘I hate you,’ he said, ‘you calloucest cad! How dare you show your face here, having abandoned my kin and yours? Had you and your lot stood firmer, fought harder, my brother might yet live. No, that you stand here at all is proof you did not do enough. You let him die to save yourselves. You killed him! His blood is on your hands!’

Karvalo was so wounded by this accusation that he said not a word in reply. Instead, he spoke only with an open palm cracking against Trewgeo’s jaw. Now, it should be mentioned that Karvalo was nine years his senior, and he

stood as many thumbs taller. The blow struck with such force that Trewgeo was knocked down to the ground, his head thumping against the floor.

Only then did Karvalo make his retort. ‘Say a word more,’ he said, ‘and so too will be yours.’

Then he went away, leaving Trewgeo to cry alone on the ground.

In that one moment, what had thus far been little more than a propensity for squabbling was fashioned into a lifelong hatred, and one that could only be concluded with blood.

Many years later, in the months before Thalo came to Pearmol, when the enmity between Karvalo and Trewgeo had long been festering, it happened that Arleno fell gravely ill and retired to his bed. In his absence, Trewgeo took up much of the management of Samnew, although he did all he could to keep the true severity of his father’s illness known only to those closest to him. With his father slowly dying and Samnew more or less in his hands, his mind filled first with ambition, and then with thoughts of retribution.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘oy-ay! Pearmol will fall. Karvalo will fall!’

Trewgeo arranged a meeting with six of Karvalo’s sheriffs, whom his sneakiest sniffermen had determined to be vulnerable to persuasion. Their names were as follows: Anlava, Enyana, Osbago, Reyfneo, Rollawga, and Tholreda. They each agreed to meet with him at Samnew, and he said he would pay them well to shirk their duties as Karvalo’s sheriffs.

‘Pay him nothing,’ he said, ‘and I will pay you rather more.’

Much to Trewgeo’s surprise, the sheriffs were all very interested in this proposition. Karvalo had only held the Lordship of Pearmol for a bit over two years at that time, but they were already growing dissatisfied with his manner of governance. Most of their meeting was spent listing their every gripe and grievance.

‘And here,’ said Anlava. ‘He takes a toll from anyone who wants to come into his hall—even us, his most loyal servants.’

‘You know,’ said Enyana, ‘his mother’s fists were tighter than the freshest field, but even she exempted us from that.’

‘But that is not where it ends, now is it?’ said Reyfneo. ‘Not only does he no longer grant us that exemption, but he also insists we present ourselves in person.’

‘I remember old Gonwela, too,’ said Rollawga. ‘She would have her brutes do their collecting at the little far-post and send us on our way without a hassle.’

‘So it was,’ said Tholreda, ‘but now Karvalo has us all trudge up to the hall every time we visit and makes us pay for the privilege!’

With every word they said, Trewgeo nodded all the more eagerly, until five of the six agreed to his offer, and swore themselves to secrecy.

‘And what about you, Osbago man?’ said Trewgeo.

‘I am not quite sure about all this,’ said Osbago. ‘I have as many complaints as anyone, but I will have even more if I get a knife in my throat.’

‘Think nothing of knives. If Karvalo brings violence against you, I swear on my life that I will shield you from it.’

‘Very well, then. I will be the sixth finger on the hand of justice.’

But a hand with six fingers had one too many.

Karvalo’s sheriffs were to deliver their dues a month and a half thereafter, and when the day came, all six of the conspirators went not to Pearmol, but to Samnew, where Trewgeo paid them each with a bag of silver bits. Karvalo, of course, noticed their absence as he was auditing the record of his takings the next day. This was not particularly unusual—a handful of sheriffs would fail to deliver every year, and for any number of reasons, legitimate or otherwise—so he sent his nastiest grimacers off to claim his tribute. After some prodding, all six of the conspirators gave Karvalo what they owed him, and he was satisfied.

The same happened in the following year, and again, Karvalo thought little of it. At least, that was until he realised Osbago in particular had failed him two years in a row.

‘How peculiar,’ he said, ‘that one so spineless, one so averse to trouble, and consequently, one so very loyal, should make this blunder twice.’ He consulted his records from the year prior and identified five other sheriffs who had failed likewise, and his eyebrows twitched. ‘Six and six the same, and not one more or less. I wonder, is this something?’

Karvalo resolved to send his thanes off to investigate once more, and thus did Thalo find himself riding beside Yorlayvo to Osbago’s farm at Fnarslad.

Osbago had been a faithful servant of Karvalo and his kin for many years, and after all that time, he had become a dear old friend to Yorlayvo, who visited Fnarslad often.

‘If I were a braggart,’ said Yorlayvo, ‘I would say I could ride there blind.’

When he and Thalo came to Fnarslad, Yorlayvo let himself in, and Thalo followed. Osbago was then in the small room and came to meet his guests, but when he saw their sworded hips and stern faces, it felt as if he needed to go straight back in.

‘Yorlayvo, my old mate,’ he said. ‘Whatever brings you here? And who is your fine young friend?’

‘This is Thalo,’ said Yorlayvo. ‘If you had been to Pearmol in the last while, you might have heard about him. But I happen to know you have not.’

‘Oh, you know. Busy, busy!’

Yorlayvo took a seat and asked Osbago to sit with him. Thalo remained by the door.

‘So,’ said Osbago, ‘what brings you here, dear chum of mine?’

‘Karvalo tells me you have been rather forgetful of late. What do you want to say about that?’

‘There is little to say. I am getting on a bit, after all. Foggy, if you will.’

‘Perhaps, then, it is time we found ourselves a fitter sheriff and moved you somewhere closer by. Somewhere we could keep an eye on you.’

‘That should not be necessary, I think.’

‘So you say, but if your advancing age is the only reason for the shirking of your responsibilities, the situation can only worsen. Unless, that is, you want to remember some other reason?’

Osbago shook his head.

‘Very well. Let me speak plainly. You have failed to meet your obligations two years in a row. Karvalo, my lord and yours, now offers you these options: either you give him what is owed, and he will, for his benevolence, overlook the prompting it required; or he will take it, whether you like it or not. For all your faults, Osbago, you are a good man. Do not make the wrong decision.’

Osbago was quite reluctant to do anything. He was unwilling to simply roll over and let Karvalo lord over him so unfairly, yet neither was he keen to put himself anywhere near harm’s way, to which was already so dangerously close. And worst of all, he could not avoid both fates.

‘I am in quite the bind,’ he said, after dithering a moment. ‘I have nothing to give. Not now, at least.’

‘Perhaps, then,’ said Yorlayvo, ‘we can take some assurance, and give you time to gather the full tribute. To this end, I ask of you three things. One, you are to pay a fee here and now in recompense for the late delivery of your dues, the sum of which is to be at my discretion alone. Two, you will have until the end of next month to make up the full extent of your shortfall. Any upset this causes among your headmen is your responsibility to bear. And three, you are to swear by oath to abide by this agreement, knowing that to dishonour such an oath is to subject yourself to the appropriate penalty, as dictated by the law. If you cannot agree to these terms, Osbago, we will be forced to settle the matter by other means.’

Then Yorlayvo nodded to Thalo, and without a word, he withdrew from its sheath splendid Sleme and held it tall.

‘I suppose that seems fair enough,’ Osbago whimpered.

‘So it does.’

Yorlayvo took a stick from his belt-bag, inscribed with these very terms ahead of time, and cut a notch in one end. Osbago notched the other, kissed the middle, and handed it back to Yorlayvo, to be burnt before Karvalo upon their return.

‘Now for the matter of your fee. Know, Osbago, that I do not mean to put you out.’

‘Not to worry, old pal. I have just the thing.’ Osbago went into the little storeroom at the back of the house and returned with a small bag. ‘This will be adequate, I hope.’

Yorlayvo took the bag, and within he found an assortment of polished silver bits, all odds and ends. This was Trewgeo’s payment, Osbago’s guilt made manifest.

‘Where did all this come from?’ said Yorlayvo.

After some incoherent mumbling, Osbago said, ‘Pay no mind to that.’

This did little to quell Yorlayvo’s suspicion, but he did not want to press his friend much more than he already had. He let the matter rest.

‘Very well. This will suffice. You will have until the end of next month to deliver all that you owe. We have your oath, Osbago. Do not be a fool.’

‘I am afraid you might be asking a horse to moo, my friend, but this old stud will do his best.’

Yorlayvo gave Osbago a parting pat on the back, took Thalo out of the house, and they went on their way home.

Upon returning to Pearmol, Yorlayvo went to Karvalo and told him what had happened at Fnarslad, and Karvalo said he had heard much the same from those who had spoken with the other slacking sheriffs. Considering the limited extent of the issue, and the willingness with which the shirkers had agreed to their fines and offered oaths of delivery, he attributed the matter to individual incompetence. All the same, he would not let it happen again.

XXI

Gaymono's Quest

Things will now be said about the kin of Gaylodho the Earl. On the day of his death, his widow, Meola, went tearfully before his elder son, Gaymono, and chastised him for letting the murderer flee without a fight.

'What sort of thickhead must he be,' she said, 'who lets his father's killer walk freely from the scene of the crime?'

'Would you prefer that we both had died?' asked Gaymono.

'I would prefer that you had done your filial duty and avenged your father's death. Otherwise, a failed attempt would be better than no attempt at all.'

Then she went away to grieve some more.

Gaylodho was buried in the middle of Klagenn. They put an enormous stone above his grave, big enough that, on a clear day, a keen-eyed chap could make it out from the top of the valley. As Klagenn's residents gathered to mourn their fallen friend, Meola had more cutting words for her stepson.

'It really is pathetic,' she said. 'My husband is slain. Your father is buried. They call you good, but see what little good you have done.'

Then she muttered some more foul words before departing.

Indeed, Meola was so aggrieved by Gaymono's inaction that she chose not to involve him in bringing the matter to Beyla the Earl, or the following trip to Pearmol. He was not made aware of these events until she returned to Klagenn with Godleda at her side. She told her relatives what had happened in Karvalo's hall, whereafter Gaymono came along to ask where she had been.

'What do you care?' said Meola. 'I was not aware you had any longing for justice.'

'I should not have let the killer flee,' said Gaymono, 'but understand that I made my decision in a moment of anguish, my father dead before me, slain so swiftly by a sword I found not the mettle to meet. But much time has passed since then, and I see now that there would be no better use for my time and talents than to avenge my father.'

Meola turned away from him. 'Words are easily spoken.'

Then she walked away.

Gaymono was at that time married to a woman called Broyndea, with whom he had two little daughters called Brala and Klata. Broyndea was born with the will of the warrior, and all the notions of honour and pride it entailed. She heard what Meola had to say, and she had some thoughts of her own.

‘Pay no heed to the bitterest among us,’ she said. ‘If you intend to avenge your father, as should a man of your fine stock, you can only stand up and do it. Do not waste your time seeking the approval of another, and least of all one who will not give it.’

‘The right to retribution is as much hers as mine. I would not exclude her from the matter.’

‘And yet she would exclude you. What is given is received, and that is true of good and bad things both. Come, Gaymono, let us go together and right some wrongs.’

Then Gaymono, moved by his beloved wife’s words, agreed to make his own arrangements. He and Broyndea asked Godleda if she would go back to Pearmol with them to try again, and to this time do things properly. Godleda was unwilling.

‘Pestering will get you nothing,’ she said.

‘We will do no pestering,’ said Broyndea, ‘but will instead appeal to their honour.’

‘Appeals to honour move only the honourable.’

‘We could offer them wealth?’ said Gaymono.

‘What wealth would entice one with too much of it?’

Gaymono and Broyndea offered a handful of other approaches, but Godleda disregarded each one without a moment’s thought. She very much did not want to go back to Pearmol.

Thus did Broyndea say, ‘You, Godleda, are honourable, and you are by no means over-wealthy. Perhaps we can buy your time and support?’

Godleda sighed. ‘So be it, but they will give you no more attention than the least they can give.’

‘And that will be enough!’

Then Godleda and Broyndea confirmed their agreement, and Gaymono was pleased things were happening. They set out for Pearmol a short while later, leaving their daughters in the care of old Regnaga. However, when they came to the gate, Amfredha recognised Godleda from her previous visit.

‘Move along,’ she said. ‘You will get nothing from us but jeers and spears.’

‘Hold it!’ said Broyndea. ‘We have come concerning matters far above you. Let us in, that we may speak with your betters.’

‘You think you can belittle me? Think again!’ Amfredha threw back her

shoulders and raised her spear high above her head. 'Behold! I am Amfredha Sunder-spear, Lord of the Gate, and foreworthiest warden of Pearmol. All who face me quake, so indomitable is my will! So impregnable my shield! I am the fiercest. I am the fastest. I am the firmest. I am the best!'

Broyndea could not let such a boast go unanswered. 'You think so? I bid you hear me and fear me, for I have beaten better.'

'Do not delude yourself. You cannot see the full measure of me down there.'

'Come down, then, and let us settle this properly!'

As Broyndea and Amfredha postured at one another, Gaymono feared the conversation was moving rather off-topic, and it remained clear that Godleda, yet completely silent, wanted nothing more than to be anywhere else. He would have to take control of things.

'Say, mighty Amfredha,' he said. 'How about a deal? You two meet one another and settle things accordingly, and if you win, we will call it quits and be on our way. But if my fairest Broyndea wins, you will let us meet your lord, as you should anyway. What do you say to that?'

Amfredha spoke with her companions briefly before turning back to the threesome below.

'What do I say? I have already said what I say, and I said move along! I need not prove myself, and least of all to your sorts.' She pointed her spear at Broyndea. 'Now begone! It would be a shame to bloody so pretty a face.'

Godleda left first, not needing to be asked again. Gaymono was the next to turn, for he knew that once one comrade had broken rank, there was no hope of success for the rest, and it would be best to cut their losses there. Broyndea followed thereafter, glowering at Amfredha atop the gate.

Gaymono was in no rush to return to Klagenn and admit his failure, but it needed to happen. He and Broyndea parted ways with Godleda and went home, their heads hung in shame. Meola spared no time in scorning the fruitlessness of their efforts.

'Never has a son so disgraced his father,' she said, spitting at Gaymono's feet. 'I am disgusted to be near you, to look upon your awful face and know what a travesty of a man lies behind it. Get out of my sight, wretch, lest I loose my lunch upon the floor.'

Then she walked away, and Gaymono sat down to cry.

Some time now passed, and through it all, Meola's spiteful words became no less forgiving. Gaymono ever turned to Broyndea for comfort, to hold her hand as he wept upon her shoulder. She let it happen for many months, but after a while, she found it too pitiful to bear.

'How undignified it is,' she said, 'for a man of your calibre to spend each

day mewling like some womb-warm newborn groping for its mother's teat. But you are not yet too far gone, I think, and we could remedy the shame of it with some much-deserved avenging.'

Just so, Gaymono found himself rather stuck, two separate voices ever in his head. One was cold and scathing, the other loving yet provocative, but both demanded action, and both demanded vengeance. In time, he became restless, unable to tolerate his idleness. It was his duty, the son of the slain, to avenge his father, and he could not let that task fall upon anyone else. That was his obligation. That was his privilege!

Renewed with a fervent passion for retribution, Gaymono took up the cause once more and invited his cherished Broyndea to Bealnew to meet the earl and see what else might be done. Broyndea accepted this invitation with glee.

'Yes, my darling,' she said, 'arise! This is our life and lot! It is our fate to do this valorous deed! To do or die doing! Arise, my love! Arise!'

To do things properly, Gaymono stole into his father's bedroom—that is, Meola's—and took from its box handsome Ograme, that most brilliant blade, and its shining sheath. Meola had refused to relinquish it, but the sword was rightfully his—his inheritance and his vengeance. With Ograme at one side and Broyndea at the other, Gaymono left for Bealnew.

When they arrived, a fellow called Enlovo happened to be there to meet with Beyla. He was the Reeve of Eylavol, the king's foremost representative in the earldom, and his word was as good as the king's own, not that many in those parts cared anything for it. Gaymono asked Godleda to involve Enlovo in the matter, and she did so. Thus did he sit down with Beyla the Earl and Enlovo the Reeve to determine how they might catch and kill a murderer.

Beyla initially suggested they go to Pearmol and ask Karvalo to hand him over in exchange for some compensation, but Godleda said they had tried that twice now, to no avail.

'Did you ask nicely,' said Beyla, 'or did you go in whinging and whining?'
'It would be hopeless either way.'

Gaymono asked Enlovo whether he could take the matter to the king.

'I could,' said Enlovo, 'but it would yield nothing but wasted words. The king has no jurisdiction in the Lord of Pearmol's domain.'

'Then is there nothing we can do?'

'Not as long as he is a man of Pearmol. You might wait for him to come back to Eylavol and grab him when he does, if he does, or else convince the Lord of Pearmol to turn him over, but I suspect neither course of events is likely to unfold any time soon.'

Gaymono now started despairing. When he set out on his second quest for vengeance, he was so impassioned by zeal, so caught up in his fresh fervour,

that he thought it would be no more difficult than batting away the compliments with which Meola would surely shower him upon his successful return.

'Alas,' he said. 'It is hopeless! I will never have my satisfaction, and it will be my own doing.'

'Do not lose heart, my sweet,' said Broyndea. She stood up and pointed at Enlovo. 'Reeve! You say we might convince the Lord of Pearmol to turn the criminal over, but he has thus far been unwilling. What might we offer him that he could not refuse?'

Enlovo shook his head. 'I have no idea.'

Broyndea sat back down without a word.

Then they dwelt in the silence for a moment, each pondering how they could progress the matter, or if they should, until Beyla said, 'Enlovo, you are useless, and we all know it. You know not what the Lord of Pearmol would accept in exchange for the murderer, but I know who will.' Beyla turned to Gaymono, and she bowed her head. 'The Lord of Samnew will do you well. He and the Lord of Pearmol are as kinsmen. I would know, for I was there once. If Samnew asks, Pearmol answers. You should bid the Lord of Samnew do some asking.'

Gaymono and Broyndea deemed this the best plan presented and decided to give it a go. They had nothing to lose but time, after all, for their venture was so virtuous that it could not possibly fail. Likewise, Enlovo was glad they had decided something and allowed him to leave. With that, everyone was satisfied with the outcome of the meeting, and they all went their separate ways.

Gaymono and Broyndea came to Samnew as soon as they could and asked to speak with the lord there. They gave their names and said they had come on behalf of the Earl of Eylavol, and also the associated reeve. The doorman was quick to usher them into the hall, but once they were inside, they did not meet with Arleno, owing to his ill health. Rather, Trewgeo came trotting into the hall to meet his father's guests.

'What is afoot?' he said. 'Tell me, why do I have a pair of grotty northerners loitering in my hall with very official-sounding business?'

'We have come seeking your help,' said Gaymono.

'And what help might you want from me?'

'We will take whatever help you would offer, be it small advice or very much more.'

'Yes, but just what is this about?'

'You see, my father'—Gaymono's voice grew grim—'was murdered.'

'As are many fathers. What makes your murdered father worthy of my very valuable attention?'

'I was just about to say.'

'Then say it quicker, man. Understand, I am a busy sort of fellow with very

much to do. I cannot waste my day on you.'

'Then I will say it plainly. The murderer was a man called Thalo. He has fled into the protection of the Lord of Pearmol, thereby evading the appropriate retributive justice. We have twice bidden the Lord of Pearmol cooperate with us and relinquish the murderer, and he has twice declined. In considering our options, we have resolved to make him an offer he cannot refuse, yet we know not what would constitute such an offer. Thus have we come to you, with the understanding that you are a close friend and ally of the lord in question.'

Trewgeo was well pleased to be hearing this. 'A friend? An ally? Yes! You could definitely say that. This is about the Thalo man, no? Karvalo's newest little lapdog? Thennelo, I believe.'

'We hear he has been called that, yes.'

'Has he just!' Trewgeo stopped to consider things for a moment. 'One thing is for certain: you will not get your man without Karvalo's consent—what he wants to keep, he holds with fingers unclasping. You will not pry them apart, however much you try.'

'So it would seem. What would you suggest?'

'How do you pay a man who has everything?' Trewgeo sat down to think silently, then stood up once more. 'No. You two, please stay the night. I will ponder this predicament and return to you presently. How does that sound?'

Gaymono was chuffed to bits. 'Fantastic! My friend, I really do appreciate your willingness to help.'

'Oh, you! Think nothing of it, say nothing of it. Any fellow worth anything would lend a hand in this situation.'

Then Trewgeo went away.

Gaymono turned to Broyndea beside him, and he said, 'This is all going swimmingly, is it not?'

'No,' said Broyndea. 'This Trewgeo man irks me more than a little. He pays you no respect, yet he offers you every hospitality. If I were to cut him open, I would not be surprised to find a rat in place of his heart.'

'There should be no need for that, my darling. Let us see where this goes before we do any cutting open.'

Gaymono and Broyndea were put up in a room to themselves, for they were honoured guests indeed. They ended up staying at Samnew for a few weeks, enjoying the scenery, the sea and the stars, and generally being very well looked after.

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To return to Yorlayvo now, it was on the last day of the year that he came to

Fnarlslad to collect Osbago's dues. Osbago offered the goods with no fuss at all, and his debt was thusly settled. While he was there, Yorlayvo arranged to get together with Osbago again and go out ranging the moors once the spring festival was over, as they often had in their younger days. The date was set one week after the spring games, whereafter Yorlayvo left for home.

But the very same day, Osbago set out for Samnew. He arrived the next evening, and there he met with Trewgeo to make his report. He said he had given Karvalo everything he asked for, and also the silver payment.

'You sodden, spineless stump!' said Trewgeo, and he continued on in this manner for a good long while. Once he had calmed himself down, he said he intended to gather Karvalo's sixfold slackers for a meeting. Its purpose was to assess the success of their conspiracy, and its date was set one week after the spring games.

'Unfortunately,' said Osbago, 'I will be busy then. I am set to spend that day with a friend.'

'And just whose friendship is so unshakeably important,' said Trewgeo, 'that it supersedes mine?'

'Yorlayvo's, for one.'

'What is this about you spending the day with Karvalo's bigger bollock?'

'We are going riding, just like old times.'

'I see.' Trewgeo paused for a little while, and then he said, 'We can settle on another date. Send Yorlayvo my warmest regards.'

'So I will,' said Osbago, and he left the hall.

Trewgeo made at once for Gaymono and Broyndea. He rushed into their bedroom and roused them from their sleep.

'Marvellous things are afoot!' he said. 'I think I have sorted something out for you, and it really is something. Come to Samo's shrine at once, and I will tell you all about it.'

Gaymono and Broyndea rose groggy from their bed and did just that. They met Trewgeo in the shrine and sat on the floor before him.

Trewgeo said, 'You want the Thalo man, yes?'

'Yes,' said Gaymono. 'That exactly.'

'Yes. But Karvalo will not yield him, and neither you nor I have anything he does not. That said, and love him though I do, he is a terribly self-interested sort of fellow. You have no choice, I fear, but to take what is his and ransom it back. He wants for nothing, so you must make him want. How it would wound his pride, knowing he was bested by the likes of you!'

'No,' said Broyndea. 'No more of this slander!'

'Do you want my help or not?'

'Not if it costs me my every scrap of honour.'

But Gaymono put his hand on Broyndea's and bade her stand down. 'We want your help, my friend. What exactly would you suggest?'

'If I know Karvalo, there is just one thing he values above all else. And I happen to know where it will be, and when, if you see what I mean.'

'I do not.'

'There is a farm to the west of here called Fnarslad. You must go there and make yourself at home. I can find a girl to take you if you are not familiar with the way. The householder there is a man called Osbago. He is a good friend of mine, and he will take you in. If he refuses, show him your sword and he will change his mind. Then you need only wait. One week after the spring games, a man will come to visit. Capture him and see just how firm Karvalo's resolve truly is.'

'I see,' said Gaymono. 'That should do the trick, I think! How can we repay you for all your help?'

'I ask for nothing more than your success, and your silence. It pains me to see my dear Karvalo disgrace himself by keeping such ignoble company. Free him of the murderer, and that will be repayment enough. But keep my name out of it, and this arrangement will satisfy everyone involved. I would not want to sour our cherished friendship.'

Gaymono shed a single tear. 'You truly are a generous man!'

'No, no! We simply do our best.'

So Trewgeo grinned with delight as he sent Gaymono and Broyndea off to Fnarslad the next morning. They arrived the next day, and they told Osbago they had come to make arrangements with him.

'What sort of arrangements are these?' said Osbago.

Gaymono told Osbago about his pursuit of vengeance against Thalo, his father's bane, and the plan to take Yorlayvo hostage and negotiate a trade. And as he had agreed, he said nothing of Trewgeo's involvement.

'I understand this Yorlayvo man is a friend of yours,' said Gaymono. 'If you would help me fulfil my filial duty and avenge my father's death, I would be very grateful.'

'And apprehend my dearest friend?' said Osbago. 'No. I want nothing to do with this.'

'Know that we mean the Yorlayvo man no harm. His role in this is but a means to an end. We will make the Lord of Pearmol see reason, whereafter your friend will be released unscathed.'

'Even so, I will be unable to sleep at night, knowing I had betrayed him.'

'If my assurances do not sway you, let me make you an oath. I swear here and now that no harm will befall him. I swear it on my good name, and that of my kin. Let your conscience be clean.'

'And if I held you to this oath, what would I stand to gain from it?'

Gaymono had not expected this question, and so he looked to Broyndea, desperate for any idea at all. She shrugged.

Osbago said, 'So I thought. You two had best begone, and quickly.'

Now another man entered the conversation. He was Yaro, Osbago's eldest son, and he said, 'Hold on a moment. Father, your friends speak loudly indeed, and I could not help but overhear their words, nor despair at yours.'

'What do you mean?' said Osbago.

'You should do as these people ask.'

'Why? As far as I can see, I have much to lose and nothing to gain here.'

'Then I bid you open your eyes. These people offer us a chance to hold Karvalo to account. We are eager to be free of his yoke, but if nothing changes, nothing changes. Our treatment by the lordship will not be improved unless we force it, and if we work with these people, if we capture Karvalo's right-hand man and have him grovel at our feet, we might prove to him that our demands for dignity cannot be ignored. Show him what we can do, and we will see how stubborn he is at the next assembly.'

'Do you think that would work? Karvalo's not the sort to let the waves wash over him.'

'Nothing is certain, but there is nothing to gain if nothing is at stake.'

These words did little to inspire Osbago's confidence. 'I ought not do this. Not to Yorlayvo.'

'If he truly is your friend, Father, he will understand what must be done.'

Osbago took a moment to consider the way forward, and then he turned to Gaymono and said, 'Very well. I will help you, but you must swear by oath that no harm will befall him.'

'I have sworn it once,' said Gaymono, 'and I will swear it again. I give you my oath: no harm will come to him.'

'Then we have an agreement.'

Gaymono was glad for it. Having heard Yaro's counsel, he feared he and Broyndea had walked into the middle of something, but he was unwilling to ask about it, lest he be turned out for prying. They ended up spending about a week at Fnarslad before their quest came to an end.

XXII

The Ruling of Fate

One week after the spring games, Yorlayvo hopped upon his horse bright and early, before even the ever-dying sun had awoken, and made forthwith to Fnarslad. His young son, Kolmago, went beside him.

‘What a bother!’ said Kolmago. ‘It is much too early in the morning for travelling, and especially for riding.’

‘I will hear no more of that,’ said Yorlayvo. ‘When I was yet a lad, nothing short of sickness would keep us off our horses, and certainly not the foredawn darkness. Today, Kolmago, you will see what a worthy young man does for leisure.’

They came to Fnarslad at the break of dawn, but no one was up and about, even though it was early in the spring. As it happened, Osbago’s relatives had all abandoned the farm the evening prior, keen to avoid any consequences that might come of their guests’ plot. Osbago tried to keep them there, begging them to stay at his side, but they refused. Failing that, he tried to go with them, to get himself out of the matter likewise, but Broyndea would not let him go. Thus, his kinsfolk left him behind and spent the night at a neighbouring farm called Kollagonn, where Osbago’s cousin, Ammono Oylennan, was the householder.

Yorlayvo came to the door and bellowed, ‘Oy-oy, Osbago! You have some visitors.’

Then he went inside and found Osbago standing alone in the middle of the room, eyes wide and legs wobbling.

Yorlayvo said, ‘What is the matter, man? Is something awry?’

Thereupon the treachery unfolded. Gaymono crept along the wall outside and pounced upon Yorlayvo from behind, putting a bag over his head, knocking him down, and binding his hands behind his back. At the same time, Broyndea came in behind him, seized Kolmago, and pinned him to the floor, his breathing fraught as he tried to escape her hold.

‘Whatever is all this?’ said Yorlayvo. ‘Osbago?’

‘I really am very sorry,’ said Osbago. ‘But worry not! I will keep you safe

and sound. I swear it!

‘If you were sorry, you would be getting us out of this bind, not into it.’

‘I would if I could, but I cannot. But I am sorry, I truly am!’

So things went on, Yorlayvo demanding an explanation, Osbago pleading for forgiveness, and Kolmago sniffing beneath it all, until Broyndea had borne enough of it. She drew her beltknife and held it at Kolmago’s neck.

‘Enough!’ she said. ‘Be quiet! All of you!’

Of course, this did nothing to assuage Kolmago’s fear. Rather, with a blade pressed against his skin, the poor lad whimpered with all the more terror.

‘What is she doing?’ asked Yorlayvo. ‘Kolmago, stay calm. Do as they bid, and all will be well.’

‘Quite right,’ said Gaymono. He knelt beside Broyndea and encouraged her to put her knife away. ‘We mean you no harm. That said, wicked things have come to pass, and our pleas for justice have not been heeded. We must make ourselves heard, but please be assured that our quarrel is not with you.’

‘So why is it, then, that we are where we are?’

Gaymono was not sure if he should say anything just yet, so he looked to Broyndea, who shook her head. ‘All in due time. For now, you need only do as we ask, and no harm will befall you.’

‘And what is it you would ask of us, that we need be so bound?’

‘Stay there and stay quiet,’ said Broyndea. ‘Boy, I am going to stand up, and you are going to stand with me. Try anything, and you will soon fall back down again. Got it?’

Kolmago nodded his head, his cheek pressed against the ground, and so Broyndea arose, and he arose with her.

‘Where are you taking him?’ asked Yorlayvo.

‘He need not be here,’ said Gaymono. ‘We are sending him home.’

Broyndea led Kolmago outside and asked him where he lived.

‘Pearmol,’ he said.

‘Good. Now listen carefully, for I have some instructions for you, and your father’s life depends upon your following them. Do you understand?’

Kolmago nodded.

‘Say it, boy. Do you understand?’

‘I understand.’

‘This is your task, then. Go home and tell your lord that we have made the Yorlayvo man our hostage, and that he is being held at Fnarslad. To have his man back unharmed, he must give us one in return, and only one. The only man we want is Thalo Asfoannan. Say his name back to me.’

Kolmago hesitated, but when Broyndea tightened her grip about his wrists, he said, ‘Thalo Asfoannan.’

‘Yes. Thalo Asfoannan. If you are to blame anyone for all this, blame him. So long as he yet shies away from justice, your father will remain our hostage, but I trust your lord will turn him over promptly. If we are not satisfied by the setting of the sun, your father will never see it rise again. Let your lord know this. Let him know that his pride will be his folly. Let him know that fate cannot be denied. Am I clear, boy?’

Kolmago said she was, and she let him go.

‘Off with you, then!’

With that, Kolmago leapt upon his horse and rode away to Pearmol with all the haste he could muster. As he went, Gaymono came outside.

‘My darling,’ he said, his voice heavy with a growing uncertainty. ‘What was that I heard about the setting of the sun?’

‘The cost of dithering,’ said Broyndea. ‘Do not falter now, my sweet. This is a matter of honour, yours and mine, and just so your father’s. We must see this through, whatever should come of it. Such is our obligation, and such is our privilege.’

Then she went inside to bind Osbago’s hands, that he could not turn against them. Gaymono’s doubts remained unallayed, but he felt Ograme’s hilt on his hip and swallowed his fear.

‘Fate favours the faithfuller son,’ he said, and he went inside behind her.

Kolmago returned to Pearmol around mid-morning. Amfredha brought him crying into the hall and called out for his mother, and Esleyyna came to him at once. Ormana came behind her, and then Karvalo arrived to see what the fuss was about. Kolmago told his tale, and upon hearing such woeful news, Esleyyna put her arm about her son and held him close.

‘I fear I have made matters worse,’ said Kolmago. ‘I left my father in their vengeful clutches, that they may wreak upon him any harm they like.’

‘No,’ said Esleyyna. ‘My dear boy, no. It is for your haste that we can make this right. We will make this right.’ She looked to Karvalo in his chair, her eyes dark with dread. ‘We will make this right.’

‘Lad,’ said Karvalo, ‘why have they done this?’

Kolmago said only, ‘Thalo Asfoannan.’

Thalo was not in the hall at that time. Karvalo sent a man to fetch him, and when he arrived, all eyes fell upon him, sauntering down the aisle as if nothing were amiss. He asked why he had been summoned.

‘Yorlayvo has been put in bonds,’ said Karvalo. ‘A pair from Eylavol have made him their hostage, and they will free him only in exchange for you, and you alone. They demand blood for blood.’

Thalo said nothing. He supposed this was to do with the death of Gaylodho, so he took a moment to mull it all over, to discern Karvalo’s intentions, but his

face remained inscrutable. If there was any fear at all within Karvalo's heart, it was locked so tightly away, banished to its very farthest reaches, that not a glimmer of it shone through his eyes. That was a man of unmoving mind.

'Prepare yourself,' said Karvalo. 'I am going to Fnarslad, and you will be coming with me.'

Then Karvalo went out of the hall. He mustered a troop to accompany him, all armed and armoured with their very best, and it soon seemed as if the yard was strewn with silver and gold, so fabulous were Karvalo's thanes. He himself donned his armour for the first time in a good long while, clad in his finest mail coat and topped with his handsomest helmet, gold-wrought, red-crested, and shining in the midday sun. On his back, he slung the shield Yamveke, and from his hip hung gleam-glinting Gantewre. Thalo was armoured likewise, but less glamorously, with a spear in hand and old Sleme at his side.

Then, when everyone was atop their horses and ready to ride, Karvalo gave the word and led them out of the gate. But as they were leaving, Thalo caught sight of Ormana watching from the steps, grim of face and bearing alike. He gave her a shallow nod, and she held his gaze for a moment, her eyes hollow, before finally returning it. Thalo turned away and urged Ondayo onward.

The troop came to Fnarslad around mid-afternoon. Gaymono and Broyndea came outside to meet them, but upon being confronted with such a resplendent retinue, they realised they could have been rather better prepared.

'Broyndea, my sweetheart,' said Gaymono, 'are you quite certain we two are up to this?'

'Yes,' said Broyndea. 'We have the sounder cause. Fate is on our side.'

Gaymono was not so sure, but he kept his composure.

As he drew close, Karvalo leapt from his horse and strode up to the house, his troop thronging behind him.

'Welcome,' said Broyndea, 'to Fnarslad.'

'No,' said Karvalo. 'I will not be welcomed by you. This is my domain, in which I do the welcoming, though there is no cause for that today. Tell me who you are and what this is about, and I will tell you what will be done about it.'

'I am Gaymono,' said Gaymono, 'and this is my dear wife, Broyndea. My father was Gaylodho Ayrkenennan, who was once the Earl of Eylavol, and who was murdered.'

'I am aware of this.'

'Of course.' The quaver in Gaymono's voice belied the surety of his words. 'Then I trust you know the sorry circumstances of our meeting here. How about it? Are you willing to trade?'

'Tell me this: where is Yorlayvo?'

'Inside,' said Broyndea.

‘Let me see him.’

‘No. He is inside, and he will remain there until we are done. If you are to see him again, it will not be until our demands are met.’

These bold words put a terrible scowl upon Karvalo’s face.

‘That is to say,’ Gaymono hastened to add, ‘you can see as much of him as you like if we hurry things along.’ He moved his gaze to Thalo, easily lost amid the mighty men of Pearmol, and his tone turned sombre. ‘Lord of Pearmol, I bid you do the honourable thing and yield the murderer to us, that we can put this matter to rest. We will have the appropriate justice, you will have your man back, and all will be well.’

Gaymono hoped this trade, a blow struck at Karvalo’s tenderest spot, a sore wound in his lordly pride, would make him more amenable, but alas, it did little to dishearten him. No, that stubborn man stood tall, his face yet as firm as the helmet encasing it.

He said, ‘I am not here to negotiate, but let me be generous. If you are so set upon seeking compensation from me, I will see what I can do about that. But I must make myself clear: not one man of mine will die for this. Should that not be agreeable, your options are twofold: leave this place unsatisfied, or never leave at all. If you will accept nothing less than blood, I will give you blood. I will give you spears and axes, wrack and ruin, death and dishonour both. I will be forced to unleash upon you such fury as you have never before witnessed. Now tell me, son of the slain, how red will be the sunset?’

Gaymono said nothing and retreated into the house, Broyndea beside him. Inside, he sat down shaking, right rattled by Karvalo’s boast.

‘Was that Karvalo I heard?’ said Yorlayvo. ‘You are done for!’ Before he could say any more, Broyndea kicked him quiet and took Gaymono into the storeroom to speak in secret.

‘Gaymono,’ she said. ‘Do not waver. We swore to have our vengeance. Do not dishonour that now. Do not fall to shame and disgrace.’

‘But how are we to do it?’ said Gaymono. ‘I fear the stags’ antlers are rut-locked and cannot be pried apart.’

‘It can be done, and you will do it. You must fight him. Neither we nor the Lord of Pearmol will compromise, but he may agree to an even duel. If he has placed such faith in Thalo that he refuses to yield him, he may be willing to let fate decide the way of things. And you, Gaymono, are the fairest fellow there is, so full of care and kindness, devoid of all mortal ills. Fate is on your side. This is your chance. You will have your vengeance.’

Gaymono shook his head. ‘This was not our course. I did not come to fight.’

Broyndea put her hand against Gaymono’s cheek, and with the other, she drew Ograme from its sheath and held it between them. ‘This is our life and lot.

Gaymono, now is the hour to arise, to hold your oath, to honour your father, to arise and avenge. Fate wills it.'

Gaymono put his hand on Broyndea's cheek likewise, and with the other, he gripped Ograme's hilt. 'So be it. To arise and avenge.'

Together they went back outside, and Gaymono called out for Karvalo. He was huddled with some of his thanes discussing the way forward, though they peeled apart upon Gaymono's shout.

'Lord of Pearmol,' he said. 'I have a proposition, if you will hear me.'

'Say it,' said Karvalo.

'Let me offer Thalo a duel. Let us fight one-on-one, and let fate decide whether my cause is worthy.'

Before Karvalo could answer, Thalo came striding forth, and said, 'I will do it. I will fight you, and I will kill you.'

'No,' said Karvalo, pushing Thalo back. 'I am not here to make deals, to gamble with the lives of my lotsmen.'

'Do you doubt me?'

Karvalo pointed at Gaymono. 'Do you see that man? He is the bigger, the broader, the taller, and, I would suppose, the mightier in all ways.'

'And I have killed folk bigger than him, broader and taller and mightier. Or do you forget those trolls I put bleeding on your floor? I know this man. I killed his father, and I will kill him too, for a pig's son is just another pig. He cannot harm me.'

'Nor will he have the chance.'

Of Karvalo's twofold sons, only one had come to Fnarslad with him. Essero had already assigned that day to be spent with Ernala, an engagement he was wholly unwilling to put aside, and so Awldano alone stood behind his father.

'You should let it happen,' he said. 'As far as I can see, neither side is going to relent. If you were to rush in on the attack, you would certainly prevail, but who can say whether Yorlayvo would see the end of it? The safest way forward, I think, is to take up this offer and trust that Thalo is the luckier fighter. If even half of what I have heard is true, you need not fear for the outcome.'

'And if he wins,' said Karvalo, 'you suppose they would respect that?'

'They speak of honour. I should hope they have some of their own.'

'I do not deal in hope. I deal in reason, in fact and the light of day.'

'And the light of day is fading. If the sun sets with this matter unresolved, all is lost.'

'That is an empty threat. Yorlayvo is all they have. They would not simply cast that aside.'

'Maybe so, but given where they are, and all they have said and done, would you rather doubt their conviction, or trust in their honour?'

Karvalo took a moment to consider these words, looking between Thalo, Gaymono, and Awldano, until he said, 'Very well. I will stake my pride upon the outcome of this fight.'

Thus did Karvalo and Thalo meet with Gaymono and Broyndea to decide the terms of their duel. They agreed that each fighter would wield a sword alone and wear no armour, so Thalo took off his helmet and his mail coat. Broyndea and Awldano were the appointed shield-bearers, but Broyndea had not brought a shield, so she borrowed one from one of Karvalo's thanes. With the terms agreed, Karvalo asked that Yorlayvo be released, for his life was no longer hanging in the balance. Broyndea refused.

'He will not be released,' she said, 'until the will of fate is decreed.'

Karvalo scoffed, but he did not challenge this.

Thalo and Gaymono then took up their positions, Awldano and Broyndea each three paces therebehind, and proceeded with the customary boasts.

'Now,' said Gaymono, 'let us settle this feud once and for all. One of us shall live, one of us shall die, and fate alone shall be the arbiter.'

Thalo drew from its sheath strife-swung Sleme, Gaylodho's bane. 'As is fitting.'



Inside, Yorlayvo remained bound and bagged, with Osbago beside him in much the same predicament. He asked Osbago whether anyone else was still in the house, and Osbago said both Gaymono and Broyndea were outside.

'Good,' whispered Yorlayvo. 'I need you to help me out of this bind. Take this bag off my head and loosen my bonds, and I can get out of here while their attention lies elsewhere.'

'No!' said Osbago. 'They will kill us both!'

'Not if you hurry. This is our chance, Osbago.'

Osbago took the bag off Yorlayvo's head. 'You do not understand. Your life is not at risk, they have sworn as much. You need only wait.'

'No. These folk want one thing alone, but they will never get it. You heard what they said. If their demands are unmet by sunset, I am dead. And if I am dead, so are you. Whatever happens, Karvalo will throw at you his entire wrath. Your only hope is to ensure I am there to temper it. Your only hope, Osbago, is to get me out of this, and the sooner the sounder.'

'Are you sure? Are you certain?'

'There is no other way.'

Osbago went to untie the rope about Yorlayvo's wrists, but he told him to start with his ankles, for he did not need his hands to run, and so he turned his

attention to Yorlayvo's feet. Thus the course of fate was set. Osbago's hands were yet bound, and he was so stricken with fright, so laden with worry, that he terribly boded the unbinding, and began panicking.

'The knot is too tight,' he said. 'The knot is too tight!'

'Osbago,' said Yorlayvo, 'slow down. Stay calm.'

But Osbago was no calm-minded fellow. Desperate to undo the knot, he began tearing and clawing at the rope, yanking Yorlayvo's feet every which way, until, overcome by fear, he wept. This all made rather more of a racket than intended, and enough to catch Broyndea's attention, yet stood before the door, shield in hand and pitying her husband's gormless boasts. She slipped quietly inside to see what was afoot, and there she found Yorlayvo against the wall, his head unbagged, and Osbago crying at his feet.

'Traitor!' she cried, and she charged, her shield ploughing into Osbago and bowling him over.

For all his trying with the rope, Osbago had at least loosened it enough for Yorlayvo to stand up, to thrust his shoulder at Broyndea, to try to knock her down and hop to freedom, but she was of surer footing. She put up her shield to catch the blow, and before she had taken even a moment to think, she brought forth her beltknife and plunged it squarely into Yorlayvo's side.

'Aiee!' he said, buckling to the ground with a terrible cry.

Then the fact of the matter dawned upon Broyndea. Unsure what else to do, she pointed her knife at Osbago, crumpled upon the floor, and said, 'Stay down. This is your fault. You did this!'

She stepped towards him, loomed over him, intent upon further violence, but her knife was stayed when a second terrible cry arose outside. She rushed out to see how the will of fate had fallen, only to stop by the door, pinned in place by the sudden weight of despair. There was Gaymono, lying dead upon the floor. There was Thalo, prying her husband's sword from his lifeless hand. There was Karvalo, stoic before his glittering troop. There was her failure, and there was her doom. Yet even so, the warrior within would not be quelled.

'To do or die doing!' she said, and she clenched her knife in her hand and sprang forth, her mind set singly upon laying waste to Thalo, the killer of her kin, her eternal foe.

Thalo's back was turned as he claimed Ograme for himself, but Karvalo's troop all moved to meet her. Awldano was nearest. He braced his shield, and in one motion he shoved Thalo aside and drove his spear into Broyndea's chest. Her knife fell to the ground, and once the rest of the troop had set upon her, she fell with it. Thus did Gaymono and Broyndea die without their justice.

Karvalo sped past this and into the house. There he found Osbago mewling in the corner, his head buried deep in rope-bound hands, and Yorlayvo slumped

against the wall and bleeding from his side. He knelt beside his beloved friend, freed him from his bonds, and took him in his arms.

‘Yorlayvo,’ he said, ‘dear Yorlayvo.’

‘Karvalo,’ said Yorlayvo, sighing. ‘I am hurt. I see with waking eyes my death drawing near, Domnadhe’s children creeping forth from the darkness. Yet even so, the pain of this mortal wound is little next to that of my looming fear that I will be forever parted from you.’

‘Hush. We need not be parted yet.’

Yorlayvo smiled weakly. ‘One’s fate cannot be refused, and mine has now been allotted. It has been an honour, my friend, to know you, and to love you.’

‘So it has, my friend.’

Then Karvalo shed a single tear, kissed Yorlayvo’s forehead, and held him to his breast. Yorlayvo’s eyes grew dim, his body slackened, and cradled in the comfort of Karvalo’s arms, he died.

XXIII

A Funeral

Beneath the starlit sky, Karvalo brought Yorlayvo's body home. He laid him on a board and arranged a room where his friend could rest for the night ahead of his funeral the next day. Esleyna came at once to Yorlayvo's side, and her children with her. Beside their fallen kinsman, they clasped each other's hands, three joined as one, but Esleyna wept alone. They prepared his body that night, stripping him of his blood-marred clothes, washing his skin, and decking him in his finest jewels. Over his waist, they laid a heavy red cloth, tasselled at each end, and embroidered with floral patterns. Then they looked upon him once more before retiring to bed, though none slept much at all that night.

Esleyna returned to Yorlayvo's side the following morning to oversee a handful of personal visits. Karvalo was the first to come, alongside Seyglena. He knelt beside Yorlayvo and bowed his head, though he found not the courage to cry. Seyglena stood silently behind him, her hand resting upon his shoulder. Next came Thorreda, Amfredha, and Solmodo, Karvalo's most senior thanes. They bowed before their peer, placed at his side some small trinket each, and offered Esleyna their words of condolence. After them came Essero and Ernala, and they did much the same, and then Awldano came likewise.

Thalo was not entitled to such a visit, for he was not of sufficient standing, nor was he close to either Esleyna or Yorlayvo himself. He did briefly consider visiting Ormana, for they each counted the other among their friends, but his valour did not extend beyond the reach of his spear. He stayed away and alone, fearing she might hold him accountable for her father's death.

After the noblest folk of the household had paid their respects, Yorlayvo was brought out of the hall, and a great procession gathered to walk him across the river to the cemetery. Karvalo and Seyglena went at the front, as was fitting, and they led the singing of dirges as they went. Behind them were Yorlayvo's closest kin, Ormana, a daughter deprived of her father, and Kolmago, a son just the same, but no mournful wife walked weeping for her husband. Esleyna had

stayed at home, sitting alone by a window overlooking the sea. Preparing her husband's body had been trying enough—she could not see him committed to the fire.

In the cemetery, the procession gathered about a pyre before the shrine. They laid Yorlayvo atop it, resplendent in his funerary finery, and Karvalo helped Seyglena up onto the dais, from where she administered the rites. She sprinkled some soil upon Yorlayvo's body, and some water, and then she raised her arms aloft.

'Hear me!' she said. 'Hear me and heed me! All things in this world are fleeting! As day will ever pass to night, so too will night ever pass to day.'

Then she knelt and sang a sorrowful song as the pyre was lit. Yorlayvo did not stir amid the flames. Some came along in turn to cast little trinkets into the fire, mementoes of their fallen friend, while others joined Seyglena in her dirge, but all watched on as the fire swelled, as cloth crumbled to ash, as gold and jewels all glowed with a gruesome light, as billows of smoke curled forth to blacken the clouds, as Yorlayvo succumbed to the flames.

Once the fire had diminished, Karvalo led the procession home for a funeral feast. It was as grand an affair as ever, though it was equally full of both sorrow and cheer. Karvalo sat at his high table, Seyglena at his right, and their sons to the right of her. At his left, three seats were prepared for Esleyna, Ormana, and Kolmago, though only one was claimed. Esleyna remained so stricken by grief that she could not bring herself into the hall, and Kolmago forsook the feast likewise, choosing instead to go out into the sunset, to climb up onto the wall, and to look out to the distant moors. So Ormana sat bereft thrice over, and so Ernala came up from the lower benches and sat beside her, that she need not be so alone.

Early in the evening, Karvalo called upon Sedweo to speak in Yorlayvo's honour. Sedweo rose from his seat, and lifting his cup, he said, 'Hear of the violence! Hear of the valour! Hear of the vengeance!'

These verses followed:

'Alas for soot and sombre smoke!
Alas for wracks each wrongly wroke!
Alas for fate of fallen friend!
Alas for ill and arrant end!

'So spring the streams of sorrows forth,
for wrath and ruin each are wrought,
but rivers revelrous shall run,
for daring deeds are duly done!'

Then Sedweo cheered an ‘Oy-oy!’ and received one in reply, and the hall went on with things.

Now the evening progressed, and though the food and the drink did much to alleviate the solemnity in the room, it did not soothe all moods equally, and least of all those of the forlorn folk at the front of the hall. Ormana came to where Thalo was sitting near the door, and she asked him to come outside.

‘I wish to speak with you,’ she said, ‘where things are quieter.’

Though he feared she might wish to speak of weighty matters, Thalo agreed to go with her. Outside, he asked what she meant to say.

‘I wanted to ask how you fare,’ said Ormana, ‘given your involvement in recent matters.’

‘No need,’ said Thalo. ‘Think nothing of me. Not now, at least. Not while your own burdens are the heavier.’

‘I heard you fought them, that you tried to make things right. I wanted to thank you for that.’

Thalo bowed his head, and they parted.

On the following morning, all but one of Yorlayvo’s closest kin returned to the cemetery for the burial. Once again, Esleya stayed at home. Thalo had not meant to attend either, but Ormana took him by the arm and brought him with her, eager not to stand alone.

The remnants of the pyre had been gathered in an urn overnight, the ashes and the bones, and all the fine crafts that had survived the blaze, and the grave had been dug beside that of Yorlayvo’s mothers. Standing above it, Seyglena took a fistful of the ashes from the urn and cast them within.

‘O bounty!’ she said. ‘Let us beseech you! Let not this loss be lasting!’

They placed the urn in the grave and furnished it with more of Yorlayvo’s possessions: his helmet and armour, rarely used; his spear and sword, yet less so; and all those things he treasured most, save his family. Then the grave was filled, and they placed a stone atop it. Thus was Yorlayvo truly dead.

Karvalo led the way home, but Ormana was not yet ready to depart. She kept hold of Thalo and asked him to stay with her. He did that. Together, they sat in silence, neither sure what might be said, if anything could be, until she put her arm about him, lay her head upon his shoulder, and wept at last for her father.

XXIV

Karvalo's Inquisition

Karvalo now pointed his nose towards sniffing out the true cause of Yorlayvo's death. Since returning from Fnarslad, he had held Osbago in a small storeroom at the back of the hall, the sort of spot that would be suitably cold and dark and otherwise uncomfortable, and kept his hands and legs bound all the while. Just so was he laid upon the floor when Karvalo and Thorreda came to ask many questions, and with any luck, receive many answers. Karvalo jostled Osbago onto his bottom and said that Yorlayvo had been cremated and buried, and that he wished to know why such strife had come to pass.

'My beloved lord,' said Osbago, 'I will tell you everything and anything I can, and you will find my testimony to be an honest one. I can promise you that much.'

'Of course,' said Karvalo. 'I am willing to accept, Osbago, that much of the fault in this matter was borne by those who now lie dead. I do not expect you to know the full measure of their plot, nor do I care to know it myself. They have been suitably addressed.'

The corpses of Gaymono and Broyndea were both beheaded at Fnarslad. Karvalo had their heads thrown into a bog, and their bodies were stripped and dragged into the moors, to be left for the pleasure of the eagle, the wolf, and the crow.

'However,' Karvalo continued, 'I care very much about understanding your involvement in this matter. Why is it, Osbago, that one of my sheriffs, one of those trusted folk upon whom I impose only the highest standards of loyalty, was conspiring with a pair of wrack-raving northerners, and against his very own lord, no less? Say it now and say it quickly.'

As Karvalo loomed above him, Osbago was seized by a terrible chill, and he cried, 'They coerced me! My hand was forced!'

'How so?'

'They came to my house seeking help, and I let them in, the generous and hospitable man I am—that is not to say I am more so than yourself, of course—

and then they put me in ropes—these ropes, as it happens—and they said they would kill me if I refused to do as they asked. They put a knife at my neck and gave me no choice, I swear it!’

‘And what about your household? There were only two of them, and they were hardly kitted for a fight. I understand that you, Osbago, would put up no resistance at all, but I struggle to believe that not one of your kinsfolk thought to challenge them.’

‘They did, not that they had much hope. See, there were rather more of them when they arrived. Twenty-odd, a whole gang of them, all armed alike. They shooed everyone off. Picked up their swords and said, “Get gone or get dead!” So you can understand why my family decided not to tarry.’

‘Twenty-odd? Then where were they?’

‘Ah. Well, the day before you came, they all got to bickering. “This is a bad idea,” they said. “The fruit will not be worth the toil,” and the like. So some of them deserted, and then some more, until only the two remained, and two of them is still more than one of me.’

‘I see. And who do you suppose these people were? How did they come to Fnarslad of all places?’

‘I have no idea, but come they did, and we are all unhappier for it.’

‘Did you not know any of them?’

‘Not a one.’

‘And neither do you know where they went?’

‘I would know as well as a dog knows how to stop eating. Home, if I had to guess, but they never said so.’

Thorreda now leant over to whisper into Karvalo’s ear, and he whispered back to her, then said, ‘Very well, Osbago. We will see what comes of this.’

Then he and Thorreda left the room, and he stepped on Osbago’s ankles as he went.

Having heard Osbago’s account, Karvalo’s next sought that of his family. For this purpose, he gathered a small party and headed to Fnarslad once more, where he sat with Yaro, Osbago’s eldest son, and Seyredha, Yaro’s daughter. Karvalo asked them what had happened when Gaymono first came to Fnarslad.

‘They came along,’ said Yaro, ‘and forced us out of the house. They drew their swords, flung some threats, and saw us off. We all headed off to uncle Ammono’s—just a little skip past the hill—and let me tell you, Karvalo, that man knows how to welcome a guest, if you know what I mean.’

‘Too right,’ said Seyredha. ‘We put our feet up and ate the days away.’

‘Did you not try to resist?’ said Karvalo. ‘There were only two of them.’

‘Only two?’ said Yaro. ‘Ten and two more like, with swords and shields and axes’

‘And why do you suppose they came to Fnarslad so armed?’

‘For vengeance, of course.’

‘As I am aware, but why Fnarslad in particular?’

‘They said nothing about that,’ said Seyredha, ‘nor did we dare ask. You would have to do so yourself.’

‘They are dead.’

‘And we are quite aware of that! What a miserable business it has been to clean it all up!’

At this, Karvalo snorted. ‘Bah! Do you mean to complain to me about the mess made by the murder of my man?’

‘No,’ said Yaro, ‘not at all. What my girl means to say is that we cannot speak of their mind or motive, only the actions borne therefrom.’

‘Of course. Now tell me, did you know any of them?’

‘Not one among the many. I would have better luck telling stones and rocks apart.’

‘And you expect me to believe this?’ said Karvalo. ‘That a whole warband, all decked in their battledress, appeared at your door and wrought terror in your house, and that every single one was a stranger to everyone?’

Yaro and Seyredha exchanged some panicked glances, each considering their position on the truth, until Yaro threw up his hands.

‘Karvalo, no,’ he said. ‘It appears we have misled you. Let me clarify. They were not strangers to all of us. No, it seemed they may or may not have had some kind of acquaintanceship, if you will, with my dear old father, the exact nature of which I could not know.’

‘Osbage knew them?’

‘That is not what I said, but that was the impression I got, yes.’

‘And how do you suppose they were acquainted?’

‘Again, I could not know.’

‘How fascinating. You see, I doubt it will surprise either of you to learn that I have already spoken with Osbage, and he has assured me that he knew none of them. He has claimed just as much unfamiliarity as do each of you. It would seem someone is lying to me.’

‘I must be mistaken, then. Pay it no mind.’

‘Or,’ said Seyredha, her eyes alight with conniving, ‘perhaps not. Perhaps my old git of a grandfather is lying! He did seem awfully chummy with the lot of them, and he tried to drag us into the matter.’

‘I do not quite remember that bit, my girl.’

‘You should! When the northerners all came in, he told us we should help them, and when we refused, he told us to leave or face the consequences. And we like consequences no more than anyone else, so we left. We went round to

old Ammono's, see, and what a treat it was! He knows how to bake bread, but he knows better how to break it! In fact, I have half a mind to move over there for good.'

'No, no, my girl. Ammono will give you none of that, so long as you hold his horse. The good is for guests, and what have you.'

'Enough of this,' said Karvalo, and he left the house.

It was not long before Karvalo stood glowering above Osbago yet again, and he said, 'I have spoken to the foremost members of your household, and they have told me some very interesting things.'

'They are very interesting people,' said Osbago, cowering.

'Save your glibness for some lesser man than me, Osbago, for I will not bear it willingly. You are to listen. Your granddaughter has said that you were not only familiar with the folk from Eylavol, but entirely complicit in their plot, and intent upon rendering your family just the same. What do you say to that?'

'That is a lie! Balderdash and then some! They were egging me on, the little squealers, and telling me to cooperate with the thugs. But I adore you, Karvalo, my most irreplaceable lord, and I adored Yorlayvo, and I would not budge! I remained unflinching! At least until I had a stopper in my mouth and a knife at my neck. I assure you! My involvement was unwilling! Please be assured!'

'Really, Osbago? You remained unflinching? Did the sun set at dawn?'

'Please believe me! They are lying! They have it in for me! They want to get me gone so they can steal the farm! I had an inkling at first, but I really am very sure of it now. Hang them all! Every one of them! As soon as I thought I could help Yorlayvo out, I did so. I failed, but I tried! I really tried to save him! I really did!'

Karvalo pressed Osbago with more questions, but he was getting nothing more from him than whimpers of fear, and grief, and regret. He ended the day there and took his thoughts to bed.

On the following day, Karvalo returned to Fnarslad and sat with Yaro and Seyredha just as he had before. He asked them about Osbago's accusation that they had goaded him into working with Gaymono's troop.

'So we did,' said Seyredha. 'I am surprised you would question it.'

'Let me clarify,' said Yaro. 'You must understand that they threatened to kill him if he refused to help. Now, I might not be on the best terms with my father, but I like him well enough not to wish him dead, and I hope he would return the sentiment. So, when we were looking at a gang of brutes bursting into our house and waving their weapons, it was rather difficult to refuse them. We said he should do as they told him, for his own safety, and he said the same to us. We left as soon as we had the opportunity, for that seemed preferable to furthering our involvement.'

‘You said,’ said Karvalo, ‘that he seemed well disposed to these people. And yet they threatened to kill him?’

‘Yes, so he seemed. There was a warmth in his greeting that I have never received, and they knew him by name. But then they threatened to kill him. Perhaps he thought it was a more pleasant call than it turned out to be?’

‘And in any case,’ said Seyredha, ‘a friendship need not go up as far as it goes down. One can loathe while the other loves, as it were. Let me tell you all about that.’

Karvalo left the house before Seyredha could tell him all about that. He had Thorreda finish things at Fnarslad while he went home to take his questions to Kolmago. This proved utterly useless, however, for that sorrowful lad could speak of nothing but the horror of the hood, the knife against his neck, and the wretched ride home. Karvalo left him.

After a few days had passed, he resolved to make his sheriffs keenly aware of his displeasure, to make an example of Osbago, and to make sure such events could never again take place under his lordship. He sent out his thanes to meet with his sheriffs and summon each of them to a shrieval assembly. This was to take place beneath the next full moon, leaving time enough for rumours of its purpose to emerge, for gossip and intrigue to swell as all turned their ears to Pearmol, eager to know what words might await them. Then, when the time finally came, Karvalo’s sheriffs—some delighted by curiosity, some laden with fear—all descended upon his hall, all sat at his benches, and all fell silent.

In came the man himself. Draped in his finest dress and topped with his lordliest hat, Karvalo cut a fabulous figure indeed, for he stood at the very height of noble fashions, and he knew it. How he swaggered down the aisle! With all eyes fastened upon him, with radiant Gantewre at his side, he taunted each of the sheriffs with grins and glares, revelling in the awe and the terror with which they beheld him. That prideful man!

At the front of the hall, Karvalo rose up to the platform, sat upon his chair, and waited a moment, revelling in the hall’s attention, before standing once more to welcome his guests.

‘Welcome to Pearmol,’ he said. ‘I would thank you all for coming, but it would be foolish to thank the sword for swinging. One swings the sword, and the sword swings. I bid you come, and you come. That is the nature of our relationship. I command, and you obey. And yet, there are some who seem to think otherwise. There are some who would attempt to cheat me, to lie to my face, to make false promises and bad oaths and think they can get away with it. Alas, some such folk sit in this very room. Even now they sit among you, my most dependable servants, believing they can shirk their obligations, that they can wield no respect for anyone, that they can bear themselves with as little

dignity as they like. But I am a benevolent man, generous, and magnanimous, and forgiving, and I have offered them chances manifold to improve, to show me that they yet have some honour—some loyalty! So it is with tremendous regret that I see my generosity being so flippantly flung back in my face that the treachery of my bondsfolk has dealt the sorest of wounds to even my most cherished friends. That is unforgivable.'

Karvalo paused and had Osbago brought into the room—his ankles freed, but his hands yet bound—and dragged up onto the platform. Osbago was ever a slight man, but the weeks spent lying in the cold dark of the storeroom, the weeks of fear and terror, had done much to shrink him further. Slumped beside Karvalo, so enormously built, the mere sight of him was pitiful to see.

'Now,' said Karvalo, 'my patience is spent. I will tolerate this disgrace no longer. If you think you can undermine me, if you think you can usurp my authority, I say this: try it! Sit upon my chair, Osbago, Lord of Pearmol, and see what comes of it.'

Karvalo waved Osbago towards his chair, but he had neither the courage nor the strength to speak, and gently shook his head.

'But this is what you wanted. This was your intention, was it not? To make a mockery of me? I offer you this, Osbago, so do as I bid and have it!'

Karvalo now seized Osbago's arm and thrust him into the chair, sparing no thoughts for propriety.

'Behold, my friends, your lord and mine! Behold his treachery! Behold his folly! Behold his death!'

Then he drew flaring Gantewre, spewing forth its radiant light, that deadly flame, and swung out, his mind set only upon his right to retribution. Osbago fell out of the chair with a yelp and tried to escape that blazing blade, but such was not his lot. With but one frenzied blow, gleaming Gantewre cleft through his neck, parting head from body as he tumbled off the platform to bleed into the firepit.

The hall watched on in silence. It was a horrible thing, they must have thought, to see mighty Karvalo, decked in his lordly trappings, strike at his own bondsman, to spill blood on his very own floor. That was a most unseemly end to a life.

Karvalo put himself back above his sheriffs and said, 'I am a benevolent man, but my judgement is incontrovertible. See this wretch upon my floor, his blood, his head, and see the cost of defiance. See the work of my wrath. Let it not fall upon you.'

Then Karvalo left the room, and the assembly was dismissed.

Osbago's relatives were present at the assembly, having received a special invitation, and they all sat aghast as they watched his execution. They took his

body back to Fnarslad for burial, and Karvalo found another of his bondsfolk to take up the shrievalty, unwilling to grant it to one of Osbago's heirs. He had fewer issues with his sheriffs for a while after that.

Although three lives had been spent in Karvalo's pursuit of vengeance, he was not yet satisfied. He thought to bring his ire against Thalo likewise, for it was his deeds that spurred Yorlayvo's killers, but Thorreda dissuaded him.

'The lawmoot is coming up,' she said. 'You have already lost one of your thanes over this, and murdered one of your sheriffs. Consider the impression this will have upon your peers.'

Karvalo said, 'Was he not the one who brought this quarrel to my house?'

'Tell me, did Thalo kill Yorlayvo? No. Those who did have all been held to account. You offered them compensation, a more generous offer than was necessary, and they refused. There is no need to lose another thane, to further sully your dignity, because of their stubbornness.'

Karvalo thanked Thorreda for her counsel and resolved to let Thalo off with only a flogging, but he also seized the sword Ograme, which Thalo had brought back from Fnarslad. He had a pair of large men grab him from his bench one morning, strip him, and drag him out into the countryside. There he was to spend the day digging a ditch as deep as he could. When the sun set, the men climbed into the ditch and beat him with sticks, whereafter he was charged with filling the ditch again and making his own way home in the darkness of the night. When he finally came back to Pearmol, he was so pained by the ordeal that he collapsed onto his bench, and he struggled to move much at all the next day. Indeed, simply raising his arms proved so difficult that he could not dress himself until Ormana came along to help him.

Thus did Karvalo consider Yorlayvo avenged at last. He went back to the cemetery to visit his grave every day thereafter, but though the number of his visits dwindled over the following months, he always found himself back there in time, kneeling before his dear friend's grave and softly singing his grief.

XXV

The Torment of the Elves

Look! Here comes Knale! Following the killing of Fowdho, he left Alvennawl with a merriest spring in his step, right delighted to have finally brought an end to Glamo's hateful line, to have wrought his vengeance, albeit for reasons long forgotten, and to have so cunningly evaded Water-Nela's prophesied doom. Yet nary a day had passed before his joy began waning. Both of the twin trolls were dead, yes, but he could not be truly satisfied until he had borne witness to Nela's grief renewed, until he had seen for himself the sorrow on her face, the pain in her cries. So Knale set out for Lewvanvek.

It happened that Feydo had already come to tell Nela of Klovo's death, and also the loss of Fowdho, unaware that he too had been slain. When Nela heard these tidings, she was moved to such fury that she swelled the river about her and caught Feydo in its icy grip.

'Oath-breaker!' she cried, and she dragged him beneath the surface of the water. There she held him, and only when he was on the verge of drowning, on the very brink of death, did she release him. Feydo got his head out of the water, gasping for air, whereupon she ensnared him again, dragged him back beneath the surface, and brought him next to death once more. Then the same happened again, and this went on for about a week, until Knale arrived.

'Oy-oy!' he said, strolling into the cavern. 'Drown him, please, and I will have yet another cause for joy! You see, my dear sister, both your loathsome little trolls are dead and done, just like their dad and his. Both of them! Both and both alike!'

The water grew tumultuous about joyless Nela, and she said:

'Let he who deals be dealt the worst;
twice-over doomed, twice-over cursed!'

Thereupon she flooded forth her fury. She released Feydo from her grip, that she could claim Knale instead, intent upon locking him within the water to

subject him to eternal torment, to make him suffer as she had suffered. But Knale was a crafty sort, and nimble too, and he put on his fox fur and fled the cavern before she could catch him. Thus was Knale satisfied at last, and he disappeared into the wilderness to make himself someone else's trouble.

While Nela was distracted, Feydo got himself out of the water, kneeling weak and wet upon the bank. But, for want of retribution, Nela turned back to him at once. She brought up her hands, and the water gathered at her feet, ready to seize upon Feydo once more.

'Have mercy!' cried Feydo. 'Shrewd fate will grant you no pleasure for my punishment. I beg of you, Sister, have mercy!'

Nela said, 'There can be no mercy for the oath-breaker.'

'Know that I did all I could to ward your kin from calamity, but if you still mean to hold me accountable for their deaths, let me redeem myself, or let me try.'

The water veiling Nela retreated. 'Bring me Knale. Do this, Feydo, and I will absolve you.'

'How am I to do that? I am no hunter.'

'Then you must find one.'

Nela put out her hand, and the water washed over Feydo, but instead of dragging him into the river, her moon-sight imparted upon him a vision. He saw the ashes of Swalo, his long-dead brother, and the blood of Kropo, yet another such sibling, and the two were mixed, and thus was Swalo revived.

'Take up Swalo's ashes,' said Nela, 'for he alone can find the unfindable. Then bring them to Bradhambelow and seek there Gesdelo the Sage. He alone would dare defy the edict of fate.'

'Is it truly so?' said Feydo.

'So it is. This is your task, Feydo. Do it or die.'

Feydo was not in the business of dying, so he said he would see it done and set out at once.

He journeyed first to Lofnos, nestled deep within Yaransyog. That was the shrine founded long ago by Lewva Thunder-hand, where Swalo's ashes yet remained. The shrine stood in the middle of a beautiful grove, and it was so beloved by the forest spirits that it remained ever full of light and bounty, even in winter, when the sky was overcast and the greens elsewhere turned brown.

Feydo fluttered along in his finch feathers, and when he came to the shrine, he went inside to find Swalo's urn sitting just as he had seen in Nela's vision. He took on his elfin skin and laid his hands upon the urn, but before he could even lift it from its pedestal, a pair of clerics beset him from behind and pulled him back. They bound him in ropes and took him before the head priest, who was a woman called Kawnela. She oversaw his trial, and she bade Feydo state

his case, that she could determine the appropriate penalty.

‘What you have done here today,’ she said, ‘is a gravest insult to us, our customs, and all that we hold dear. Tell me, what folly possesses you to steal Swalo’s urn, the most ancient of our relics?’

‘Swalo was my brother,’ said Feydo. ‘I have come to revive him.’

Kawnela did not believe his claim. ‘I do not believe your claim. If Swalo were your brother, that would make you an elf of like antiquity, but all such folk are dead.’

‘Not all.’ Feydo put on his finch feathers, thereby slipping from his bonds, and then made himself human again. ‘Some of us yet live.’

Kawnela witnessed this with awe. ‘You are an elf? Tell me your name.’

‘I am Feydo, and Swalo was my brother.’

‘O Feydo, when my clerics brought you here, I expected to have you killed, but that would be no fair justice for one of your godly stock. Nonetheless, I cannot grant you what you seek. To revive the dead, were it possible, would be to transcend the will of fate, to make a mockery of life itself. If it were achieved, it could not be lasting, or else it would surely incur such scorn from vengeful fate that all the world would be imperilled. I cannot allow it, and so my ruling is thus: you are now my prisoner, to be kept here until either of us should die. When such a time comes, you will be released either by your own death, or at the discretion of my successor alone. But have no fear, aged one, for I am a most hospitable host.’

Kawnela then had Feydo taken away. The clerics dressed him in their clothes and welcomed him into their home, offering him all the happinesses they enjoyed themselves. Feydo was pleased to be treated with such respect, but he knew it could not last. That evening, he made for Swalo’s urn again, this time under the cover of night, and laid his hands upon it. And again, the same pair of clerics, now bearing spears, caught him in the act, bound him in ropes, and brought him before Kawnela.

‘Why would you do this?’ said Kawnela. ‘You perpetrated a most severe transgression, but I spared you from death, opened my home to you, and offered you every comfort I could. Yet now I see my hospitality repaid with another such transgression, a blatant act of disrespect. I fear, aged one, that I must now punish you for this.’

Kawnela bade her clerics seize him, but he made himself a chaffinch before they could catch him. He could not flee the room, however, for there were no windows in that part of the shrine, and the door was closed. The clerics simply waited until Feydo grew so tired from flapping his wings that he had to come down to rest, whereupon they put a box over him. They kept him trapped in the box for three days, and they shook it every now and then so he could get no

more sleep than only a little. After the three days had passed, Kawnela had the box opened. Feydo sprang out at once and fell panting to the floor.

‘Now,’ said Kawnela, ‘will you abide by my ruling? If you defy me again, aged one, I will be forced to lay aside my reverence for your kind and bring your long life to a most undignified end.’

‘I will,’ said Feydo.

And he did. Feydo ended up spending several months at Lofnos, during which he lived with the clerics as if he were one of them, singing their songs, sharing their meals, and hearing the many tales they told of their community and its history. In time, he garnered a great deal of trust from Kawnela, and she came to count him among her firmest friends.

It was not until early autumn in the next year that Feydo finally left. On the day of the great hunt, a day the women of Lofnos held dear, Kawnela led the clerics out into the woods. As was customary, every member of the household went behind her, leaving Feydo alone. That was his chance, and he took it. He stole into the shrine, laid his hands upon Swalo’s urn, and lifted it from the pedestal, and at last, no one was there to stop him. He fled as quickly as he could, and though it filled him with shame to betray the folk who had treated him so kindly, he did not look back.

When Kawnela came home to find Feydo gone and Swalo’s urn missing, she let up a ferocious cry. She led the household back out into the woods, intent upon hunting Feydo down and butchering him like game, but he was long gone. They came home again with their heads hung low indeed.

For this failure, Kawnela was forced out of Lofnos, and she was attacked and killed by an enraged boar the next day. The clerics could not decide on a successor, and the arguing led to fighting, and the fighting led to killing, which continued until someone set the shrine ablaze, razing it to the ground. Thus was Lofnos destroyed, and those clerics who survived the dispute all abandoned it, that place they had once so cherished.

Feydo now made for Bradhambelow, which was in the very old days the seat of the gods, perched at the very top of Myosslen, though it now stood long deserted. The man he sought there was his nephew, Gesdelo the Sage.

Gesdelo was the son of Feydo’s brother, Grado, and the youngest of three triplets. The elder two were Gowzero and Gyolveo. Grado was an apprentice of the god Oyro, and from him he learnt all manner of arts and magics, and this knowledge he passed in turn to his sons. The triplets lived together on the island Brathmew in Meleya, but Gesdelo fled amid a terrible strife with his brothers.

One day, one of their uncle-elves, called Bleygo, came to visit, and Gesdelo decided to test the extent of his power. He caught Bleygo in a trap, and with the foulest magic he knew, he cursed him, turning him into a fearsome dragon.

Gowzero and Gyolveo were outraged by the mistreatment of their kinsman, and they stood against their brother. Gowzero sought to reverse Gesdelo's hex and make their uncle himself again, while Gyolveo sought to punish Gesdelo for the misuse of his gift. Thus were they locked in a terrible battle, and even though Gesdelo made Dragon-Bleygo his ferocious steed, he was bested. He rode Bleygo across the water and came to Ewllonn in the south.

Returned to his homeland, a new rage arose in Bleygo's draconic heart. He let up a fearsome roar, and he rampaged his way all across Eymalonn, wreaking terror throughout the land for several years. This did not end until Glavo, his brother, came before him. Bleygo and Glavo had ever been a pair tightly bound by friendship, and so, when Glavo put up his hand and bade Bleygo lay aside his rage, he did. And though he tried, Glavo could not cure his brother of his plight, trapped within his serpentine skin. With tears in his eyes, he led him to an ancient barrow up on Draffel, sang him a song of sleeping, and sealed him away to rest forevermore.

Gesdelo pursued Bleygo throughout his rampage, but he had filled his steed with such unearthly vigour that he could scarcely keep pace. When he came at last to the barrow, it was already sealed, and he was moved to an anger of his own. He demanded that Glavo open the barrow, but Glavo refused. Thereupon did Gesdelo pick up his wizardly fingers, and with them he put upon his uncle a mortal curse. At once, Glavo fell to the floor, and slumped before the sealing stone, he died. Gesdelo then tried to open the barrow himself, but despite his god-gifted power, he knew no magic that could sunder such a seal. Deprived of his dragon mount, Gesdelo cried out his despair, then took himself away to Bradhambelow, where he could watch the world below with contempt.

Just so was he sat scornful when Feydo arrived so very many years later. He came before his nephew, placed Swalo's urn upon the floor, and bowing, bade Gesdelo revive him.

'Death cannot be stemmed,' said Gesdelo. 'Not even the oldest of the gods could overcome it.'

'I have witnessed a vision,' said Feydo. 'The corpse of my brother Kropo yet remains here. If his blood and Swalo's ashes were mixed, I am sure Swalo would be born anew.'

Kropo was the youngest of the elfin brothers, but though he was the last to be born, he was the first to die. When he hopped hare-hairy from his mother's loins, he fell head-first onto the floor and died at once. His body was kept at Bradhambelow, and his brother Grado discovered that it bore a healing power. Whenever one put their hands against Kropo's skin, all their ailments would be allayed, whatever their severity. In this way, he was said to be unique among his brothers, for he alone was more skilful dead than alive. Kropo had since

been buried, but his corpse remained unsullied by time.

‘Tell me,’ said Gesdelo, ‘what did you see?’

‘I saw the ashes and blood apart,’ said Feydo, ‘and then together as one, and from that mixture Swalo arose reborn and resplendent.’

‘And why do you seek to revive him, to spit in the face of fate, and invite its everlasting enmity?’

‘I bear a heavy burden, a task I must complete, but he alone can see it done. So, Gesdelo, will you do this for me?’

Gesdelo put his head back in the sunlight, and grinning, he said, ‘I will do it gladly.’

Then he went to Kropo’s tomb and brought his body to the very summit of Myosslen, upon which stood an altar. He laid the corpse upon it, and chanting a fell incantation, he cut open Kropo’s chest and poured Swalo’s ashes inside. Last of all, he added a fistful each of soil and water and spoke a final spell.

‘So he is set,’ said Gesdelo. ‘Once three moons have shone upon him, your brother will be returned to you.’

‘I have no doubt,’ said Feydo, ‘that Artalo will favour him.’

Feydo stayed with Gesdelo for the better part of three months, and upon the flight of the third full moon since his arrival, a most miraculous thing occurred. Feydo looked up to the sky and saw the splendour of the moon, and it seemed as if an arrow of light flew down from it. This arrow struck Kropo’s body, from which a spectacular light emerged, dispelling the darkness of the night. Feydo then watched with awe as a figure arose upon the altar, veiled in that terrible gleam. When at last it faded, there stood Swalo, dark before the moon, once dead and now reborn.

Feydo went to him and said, ‘Swalo, my brother.’

‘Feydo,’ said Swalo, ‘where is this? Where are we?’

‘We are at home. This is Bradhambelow, where we both were born. Come, let me bring you down.’

Feydo then brought Swalo down from the summit. He washed and dressed him, and then he told him everything he could as Swalo ate. He told him of the deaths of fourfold trolls and Knale’s culpability for each, and also of his quest to bring him to their sister. Finally, Feydo told Swalo that he once lay dead and burnt to ash, himself a victim of Knale’s mischief, but no longer.

‘He can wander this world no more,’ said Feydo. ‘He must be brought to justice—my life and honour depend on it—and you alone can find him.’

Swalo heard these tidings amid a grim quiet. When Feydo had finished, he said, ‘You have told me much, but nothing of my daughter. What of Lewva?’

‘She is long dead, Brother, but know that she died old and contented. You need not weep for her. This feud came bitterly against her, but she overcame it,

and she lived a life of triumph and tranquillity. I am sure she held you dear to her dying day.'

Swalo shed a tear, took Feydo in his arms, and said, 'Thank you, Feydo. There never was a kindlier fellow.' Then he stepped away, went outside, and beneath the moon he said, 'I will do as you ask. I failed to bring Glamo home, but I will redeem myself. I will capture Knale, and make this lost thing found.'

Swalo and Feydo set out shortly thereafter, and so preeminent was Swalo's skill in searching that the hunt for Knale only took as long as the walk to the westward coast. Indeed, Swalo simply pricked up his ears, and it was as if the wind itself led him to his mark. They found Knale near a monastery called Seos in the west, where he had sprouted a pair of breasts, withdrawn his genitals, and begun living among the nuns as a woman named Era.

Upon their arrival, Swalo and Feydo saw the nuns processing to the beach, and Swalo knew at once that Knale walked among them, though he could not discern which was in fact an elf. Therefore, he put on his antlers, walked before the nuns, and presented himself wreathed in a silver, moon-wrought light. The nuns were awed by this ethereal beast, and believing him to be a spirit come to grant them fortune, they all bowed before him. Or rather, all bowed but one, for Era alone remained standing. She saw this beast, a stag above all stags, and she knew at once that it was Swalo. Likewise, Swalo saw Era, a nun devoid of reverence, and he knew at once that she was Knale. Swalo put down his antlers and charged forth, and though Era turned to flee, hart-hooved Swalo was the faster. He ploughed into her, caught her dress with his antler, and flung her high into the air. Up went a nun, and down came an elf.

Amid the other nuns' gasps, Knale fell flat upon the shingle. Before he could so much as pry his face from the floor, Swalo stood above him. He bound each of Knale's wrists behind his back and to the opposite ankle, and also stuffed his mouth with cloth, that he need not hear his protestations, and thus was Knale caught.

'Whatever is all this?' said the chiefest of the nuns.

'A family matter,' said Swalo. 'This sister of yours is a brother of mine. You need ask no further questions, for I will yield no further answers.'

Swalo hoisted Knale up by his ankles and slung him over his shoulder, and then he and Feydo trudged all the way back to Lewvanvek. Knale wriggled and writhed all the while, desperate to be free, but he was bound in such a way that he could not make himself a fox without also breaking all his limbs, and that would be all the worse for him. For the first time in his life, he was well and truly helpless.

'And good riddance,' said Feydo. 'You only have yourself to blame.'

Feydo and Swalo returned to Lewvanvek after travelling for two weeks or

so. When they came into the cavern, Nela knew at once that Knale was with them, and before anyone could offer a word of greeting, she whipped up her watery fury and dragged Knale into the river, yet convulsing in his bonds. She locked him in the same torture Feydo had formerly endured, bringing him to the brink of drowning, only to release him for a handful of desperate gasps before submerging him once more.

Triumphant, Nela said again this couplet:

‘Let he who deals be dealt the worst;
twice-over doomed, twice-over cursed!’

‘O Sister,’ said Feydo, ‘I have brought you Knale, and I can see you are quite delighted. Am I now absolved?’

‘Yes,’ said Nela, and she turned her attention back to Knale’s anguish.

‘O Sister,’ said Swalo. ‘It is good to see you again, though I am pained to see what sort of life you now inhabit. Tell me, how did she of the sky find herself in the river?’

Nela turned to Swalo, her face foreboding, but before she uttered a word, Feydo said, ‘Come, Brother, I know some folk you ought to meet.’

‘That can wait, Feydo. I have asked a question, and I will have an answer. I have been granted the gift of a second life, as none ever have. I wish to hear of my beloved sister’s trials, that I may know her better.’

‘And I will tell you, but such a tale would be better told elsewhere.’

‘Why is that? Surely it is her tale to tell?’

‘Not hers alone.’

Then Feydo took Swalo by the hand and led him out of the cavern. Though Nela bore no love for Swalo, she bore even less for Knale, whom Swalo had brought to her. She let them go.

Feydo led Swalo to Lofnos to reunite with the priests there. Given the nature of his departure, he remained burdened with guilt, and he wished to prostrate himself before Kawnela, and with Swalo at his side, beg for her forgiveness. Yet when they came there, they found the whole place abandoned. The shrine lay destroyed, the ground strewn with sundered spears and beak-bleached bones, the evergreen grove turned barren and brown.

‘Oh dear,’ said Feydo.

‘What is this place?’ said Swalo.

‘Your ashes once dwelt here, though this was a lifelier place when I left.’

‘Tell me, Feydo, why have you brought me to this place so grim, to look upon my very own tomb in ruin?’

‘Please be assured, that was not my intention. You see, Swalo, Lewva

founded this place in honour of your old mentor, Loffeyda. She kept your ashes in an urn in that shrine, though it shelters now its own. The clerics said she died kneeling before you. I brought you to meet them, the folk who had warded you so long, and to show you what bounty surrounded your daughter in the last days of her life. Yet that bounty seems to have dwindled, a fitting portent for what I must tell you next.'

'What is it?'

'I have already told you that poor Nawko died by Lewva's hand, but that was not where the feud ended. Nela sought to bring her own vengeance against her, and they fought at Lewvanvek. Nela would have died there, but by some magic I do not understand, she escaped that fate and has been one with the water ever after. She cannot leave that place, nor will she, I fear, until the river itself has run its course, and her spirit is thereby spent.'

Swalo heard this tale with tears welling in his eyes, though he held them back. 'Feydo, you say Nela struck at my daughter?'

'She did, alas.'

'What fair recompense is that for all I did for her? I will not abide it.' Swalo took up a nearby spear, abandoned by its former wielder. 'This feud is not yet settled.'

Feydo took Swalo's hand and said, 'Swalo, my brother, I brought you here that you would see Lewva's long happiness. Nela sought to slay her, but she failed. She has paid the price for that and then some. We must now let the matter rest.'

'I have rested long enough, my life's light snuffed in her service, but I see now that Nela cared nothing for me or my kin. Feydo, I bid you begone. You have done your duty, and I thank you for your kindnesses. You need burden yourself no longer.' When Feydo began dithering, Swalo put up his spear. 'Fly, Feydo, for your own sake. At Lewvanvek awaits only strife, and you deserve none of that.'

'My dear brother,' said Feydo. 'If you cannot be stayed, so be it. I must let you go.' He stopped to wipe the tears from his eyes, then continued, 'Farewell, Swalo. It has been an honour to walk with you again.'

Then Feydo put on his finch feathers and flew away. As he went, Swalo bowed his head, shed a tear, and said, 'Fly far, my choicest of brothers.'

Swalo remained at Lofnos for a short while. He spent much of that time in quiet contemplation, reflecting on the life he lived long ago, and all he had heard of those that came thereafter. Then, when one week had passed, he stood up, held his spear firm in his hand, and made his way to Lewvanvek.

He arrived to find Knale still bound within the water, being brought so close to death that he wished it would finally seize him. Standing in the entrance to

the cavern, the sunlight waning behind him, Swalo called out to Nela.

‘Nela!’ he said. ‘I have returned, and with a spear in hand. I have heard all about your dealings with my daughter, and I have come to repay you for them.’

The water surged around Nela at once. ‘Bane of my blood!’ she said, and without sparing a moment, she sent forth the river.

Swalo braced his spear and charged likewise, but though his mind was full of valour, no sword nor spear could slay the river itself. Nela caught him in her snare and dragged him beneath the surface of the water.

‘Fate is wholly inexorable!’ she said. ‘Your lot was to die, and so you shall!’

Then she drowned him. Thus was Swalo slain again. His body floated out of the cavern to the sea and was forever lost to the tide.

Yet as Nela’s attention turned back to Knale, she found that he was gone. She had been so set upon drowning Swalo that her grip on Knale loosened, and he was able to climb sputtering out of the river and flee. Her fury arose again, and she sent the water crashing against the walls of the cavern and wailed, sad and alone once more.

Knale fled from Lewvanvek to hide in the wilderness, sitting just as sad and alone in his own cave. During that time, his bitterness only grew, cursing just about anyone and everyone, but most of all himself. He had chances manifold to kill Feydo, to prevent Swalo’s revival, and thereby his capture, but he chose instead to flee. So he took up a knife, and with it he cut into his skin, scarring himself all over as punishment for his failure.

And all the while, he was tormented with terrible visions of the happiness of others. He saw in his mind Glamo, calm in the soft, loving arms of his Leyva. He saw in his mind Nawko, held likewise in the arms of his Orvoa. He saw in his mind Fowdho and Klovo, each trapped in their caves, yet nonetheless glad to have fair Feydo for company, holding them dear, as would a father his sons. He saw in his mind Swalo and Lewva, walking abreast in the warmth of the sunlight. And he saw in his mind Thalo, Asfoa beside him, each glad to be together in the comfort of their house.

So Knale said to himself that same old saw:

‘Let he who deals be dealt the worst;
twice-over doomed, twice-over cursed.’

Then he cast aside his knife, donned his foxen coat, and followed his nose to Pearmol.

XXVI

The Oath of the Sworn Brothers

Though only a few of Karvalo's thanes had witnessed the killing of Osbago, a few was more than none, and certainly more than enough for the news to work its way to every hearing ear at Pearmol. A terrible tension fell upon the town in the days after the shrieval assembly, and one that threatened to linger long thereafter. Seyglena was not best pleased.

'Karvalo,' she said, 'I am quite unhappy with this foul mood festering in our hall. Remedy it.'

'If you find it so displeasing,' said Karvalo, 'remedy it yourself. I will not imperil my authority by doling out petty pleasantries. If the cost of that is an unhappy mood in my hall, so be it. That is preferable to disrespect.'

'Useless man,' said Seyglena, and then she went away to do Karvalo's work and restore the harmony of the household.

For this purpose, Seyglena summoned to her side Ernala. Since arriving at Pearmol, she and Seyglena had taken quite a liking to one another, such that it was not uncommon to see them walking about arm in arm or sat side by side as they did their lordly labour. Just so did they sit down together, and Seyglena said she wished to draw these dreadful days to a close.

'Yorlayvo is avenged,' said Seyglena, 'though vengeance soothes only a violent heart, and only briefly. We must make fast our bonds of fellowship before the eyes of judicial fate, that it will never dare sunder them. Only then, I fear, can we move past this.'

Seyglena recited a lengthy list of names, and she asked Ernala to see that they all swore oaths of undying faith to their allotted partners. Ernala said it would be done, and they parted.

Ernala came early one morning to Thalo as he lay bruised on his bench.

'You,' said Ernala, 'Thalo man. Seyglena bids you meet her in the house shrine. She awaits you now and eagerly.'

That was unusual. Thalo's place at Pearmol was by then well established, and it happened—be it by chance, or by the will of the woman herself—that he

and Seyglena spoke only very rarely, and never alone. With his thoughts resting upon the stick-scars yet sore upon his skin, he became quite concerned that further punishment awaited him.

‘What is this about?’ he asked.

Ernala shook her head, and said again, ‘Seyglena bids you meet her in the house shrine. She awaits you now and eagerly.’

Then she took her leave.

Thalo knew then that he could not wriggle his way out of this. He took a moment to breathe his fear away, to gather what composure he could so early in the morning, and went to meet with Seyglena.

When he came there, Seyglena said, ‘Is that Thalo at last?’

‘It is,’ said Thalo.

‘Sit down.’

Thalo did as she asked, but she did not say anything more, only tapping her stick on the floor.

‘Why have you brought me here?’ asked Thalo.

‘I did not bring you here. You came to this town, this hall, this room. You brought yourself here.’

‘But to this room at your request. What do you mean to say to me?’

‘I have a task for you.’

‘What task is it?’

Seyglena paused again, that same uncomfortable pause, and then she said, ‘Much has happened of late, and it has brought a sour atmosphere into my hall. That may pass in time, but I am loath to trust in idle hopes. It must be remedied, and thus my attention falls upon you, Thalo, the man in the middle of things.’

Upon hearing these words, Thalo felt the pain in his welts rising once more, though he did not cry out as he had when first they were struck.

Seyglena went on. ‘The lawmoot is nigh, and I hear my husband means to arrive with Thennelo at his side. You, Thalo, will stand among the foremost of his friends, and must therefore be as firm a link in the chain of the lordship as you can be. Thus, I ask that you bind yourself by oath to my sons, as you are bound to Karvalo, and thereby to myself. You each are fine young men, in your own ways, but though you seem to get on well enough now, it may not last. I have a lord for a husband, after all. I will not permit such haughty men to come crashing together in my household, sowing discord and dispute, with no means by which to resolve it.’

‘You think I mean to sow discord and dispute?’

‘Do you?’

‘No.’

‘Then I do not. But fate is inexplicable. Such strifes may arise nonetheless,

and should they, I would rather you three do not stand on opposing sides, lest your tolerance of one another be forever sundered, and my days of peace thence long lost. Now you should agree, and we will be done with this.'

'Very well,' said Thalo, and he rose from his seat and left the room.

That afternoon, Thalo went with Essero and Awldano to a nearby hill called Portovl. Atop the hill lay a large pond called Ayrpor amid a dense cluster of trees. They each took off their clothes, strode into the pond, and ducked their heads beneath the water. When they came back up, they clasped each other's hands and swore to be the surest of allies and firmest of friends, and that if one were slain, the others would seek to avenge him as if they were three of one womb. They ducked beneath the water again, resurfaced with an almighty roar, and then they left the pond.

'And there we have it,' said Essero. 'We are bound to each other by oath, sworn before the eyes of fate, and witnessed by the trees. Awldano, my brother twice over, will you walk home with me?'

'Not yet,' said Awldano. 'There is yet more to be gained from the water and the woods.'

'Do not sit too long, Awldano, and let your bottom grow sore.'

Then Essero went away, leaving Thalo and Awldano sat together beside the pond. They said nothing for a while, each quietly admiring the dappling of the dying sun through the trees, the twinkling light it cast upon the water.

Soon, however, Awldano said, 'Tell me, how did you come to bear those wheals upon your skin?'

'Sticks,' said Thalo, 'swung on behalf of your father.'

'Whatever for?'

The men who performed his beating had stated its purpose quite plainly, a punishment dealt for bringing tumult to Karvalo's most peaceful abode, yet that could not be the full extent of it. He had not brought Gaymono's vengeance to Pearmol—that was Gaymono's doing alone. No, there could be only one true motive held within Karvalo's hardest of hearts.

'Spite,' said Thalo, and with plenty of his own.

This did nothing to quell Awldano's curiosity. He could not see his father doling out such cruelty for spite's sake alone, but neither could he imagine Thalo being at all comfortable with further questioning, his tone at once both dour and hesitant.

Awldano shook his head, and he said, 'What a sorry thing to hear. With any luck, your pain need not linger. They say this pond is enchanted, that the water is imbued with some ethereal magic. Perhaps, having put yourself within it, it will serve to soothe you.'

Then they each fell silent again, and so they remained until Awldano stood

up, wished Thalo well, and took himself home.

Even so, Thalo was not yet alone, for he heard something skulking in the bushes on the other side of the pond. At first, he thought it was merely some little beast passing by, but then he glimpsed its shape shifting in the shadows, and it seemed rather more fearsome than anything he would willingly ignore.

‘What are you?’ he said.

The creature stopped in its tracks, turned to face him, and a pair of gleaming golden eyes opened in the gloomy twilight, shining forth from a face of black fur, before they vanished once more. He knew then what sort of fiend had come to meet him.

Thalo stood up and said, ‘Why are you here?’

Yet hidden among the trees, Knale said, ‘You do not understand what you have done, what great trouble you have caused me. You killed them, and yet I have suffered for it. It was your deed, your doing, not mine. I have suffered for your wrongs, and that must be righted.’

Then Knale leapt out of the shadows, grappled Thalo from behind, and shoved him into the pond with all the might he could muster. As Thalo looked up at him from the water, snarling on the bank and dressed all over in scars, there was none of his former lustre to be seen. He wore that same faultless face, but all the beauty, all the ancient grace, was now replaced only with such sheer fury, such unfettered rage, that Thalo was unable to move, to speak, even to think—to do anything at all but stare transfixed at the vengeful figure before him. There stood Knale, cloaked in the purest malice. There stood the wrath of a god!

So Knale came forth, wading into the pond with his gaze fastened tight upon Thalo. He splashed him once and uttered these verses:

‘How quick will be deaf ears to hear
of Thalo’s sword, his shield and spear?
How long will sing the witless bard,
of daring deeds and trials hard?
How widely will his name be known?
His battles won? His valour shown?
‘When will the world all realise
the honour glinting in his eyes?
The splendour of his noble strut?
The finest stock from which he’s cut?
That words and deeds are all as one
as courage clouds the witch’s son?
‘I grant thee that, a worthy fate,

but though thy glory will be great,
I likewise grant such awful woe
that all thy kin will come to know—
alas that they should bleed and burn
for wrathful wracks they did not earn!

‘I curse thy loves and all thy friends,
that all will come to wretched ends.
I curse thy kin and clan in kind,
that all will fall to vengeance blind.
I curse the Thalnor, curse thy fame!
I curse thy blood! I curse thy name!’

Then Knale splashed Thalo again, donned his foxen fur, and disappeared once more into the trees.

Thalo sat stunned in the water, all his stoicism having crumbled as never it had before. Though it took some time and some trying, he managed to drag himself up and out of the water, and after drying himself off again, he went home in quite the sorry state.

Yet when he came back to Pearmol as the night was setting in, he found not the solace of his bed. Instead, he came into his house and saw that the twin heads of twin trolls, two trophies that had long sat stashed beneath his bench, were gone. At once, a panic arose. He knelt down to get a better look, desperate not to be parted from his most cherished prizes, but there was no chance of finding what was not there. Instead, where once the heads had lain, he found a golden acorn, a gilded gift left to mark their leaving.

‘What is this?’ said Thalo. ‘Do my eyes deceive me?’

But they did not. He clenched the acorn in his hand, his despair giving way to anger as swiftly as it had emerged. One man alone was with him in the house, a stout fellow called Ambalo the Short, because he was short, though he still stood a thumb or two above Thalo.

‘You,’ said Thalo. ‘There was a bag beneath my bench. What became of it? Where is it?’

‘Did you look,’ said Ambalo, snickering, ‘with your eyes open?’

‘Yes? How else is one to look?’

‘And was it there?’

‘Of course not. Hence my asking.’

‘Then I would suppose it might be somewhere else. Hah!’

‘And I want to know where that somewhere else might be.’

‘And how should I know that? I came in after you.’

Thalo had no patience for Ambalo at the best of times, but after all that had

transpired recently, he would not suffer him a moment longer. He strode up to him, grabbed him by his shirt, and said, 'Man, did you see it stolen or not? Say yes or no, and nothing else.'

Ambalo said, 'Man, get your hands off me before I put mine on you, and I will not swear to keep my fists unclenched.'

Thalo released him with a scoff and went outside to search elsewhere, and though he hunted high and low, he met no success. The trolls' heads were lost, and just so did Thalo lose his. As he walked weary through the yard, sore of mind and body alike, he fell to his knees, and for the first time since Asfoa's dying day, he let his tears escape him.

But merciful fate saw fit to affirm his pond-wrought vow, for it happened that Awldano caught sight of him hunched upon the floor with his head in his hands. He came to his side and knelt beside him.

'Thalo,' he said, 'what sort of misfortune has brought you to your knees?'

'They are gone,' said Thalo. 'I cannot find them.'

'And who might they be?'

Thalo pried his face from his hands, looked Awldano in the eye, and said, 'Tell me, do you know what happened when first I came here?'

'I do. Ask anyone you like, and if they know anything about you, they know about the matter of the trolls. What of it?'

'They are gone.'

'The trolls?'

'Their heads. They are gone. Stolen from my house, my bench, and to where I do not know.'

Awldano thought it terribly odd that Thalo had kept them in the first place—a pair of rotten things, he thought they must have been—though he had more sense than to say as much.

'They were my worth,' said Thalo. 'My pride, my glory. My only glory gone, and with it my cause for being, my right to fame. All gone.'

Awldano shook his head, and said, 'Time alone can lighten such burdens, but I would reckon this burden is easily borne. Those heads have done their work and then some, all things considered.'

'What would you know of it?'

'Let me say it again: if they know anything about you, they know about the matter of the trolls. You have proven much already, Thalo Thennelo.'

That was sufficient to allay Thalo's grief, at least in part, and at least for the time being. His breathing steadied, his hard face softened, and he said, 'You spared me a knife in my back. At Fnarslad, you put yourself between me and Broyndea's fury. I recall falling over, and I saw her knife fall beside me, and then I looked up. Only then, when I saw her on the end of your spear, did I see

what had happened. I never thanked you for that.’

‘Pay it no mind. I am your sworn brother, after all.’

‘Not then.’

‘But I am now.’ Awldano smiled softly, and he said, ‘Now and always.’

Then they parted, and they each went to bed.

But though Thalo went to sleep with a steadier than he might have done otherwise, the night was nonetheless fitful, for Knale’s foreboding words yet weighed on his mind. He turned them over this way and that, eager to put them away and forget them altogether, or else to reason that words alone, so easily spoken, were utterly powerless. Yet all his efforts came to nought, and that anxiety, that looming dread, seep even into his dreams.

He saw himself at a table in the woods, fitted for a most extravagant meal. About the table sat a host of silver-sheened foxes, each feasting upon flesh and blood and bone, each giddy for the grisly meal, or so stuffed with satisfaction that they could only roll about on their backs and spew nonsense or vomit, or both at once. And in the middle of the table was laid poor Yorlayvo, dead on a glittering platter, steamed, buttered, and garnished to perfection as the whole throng slavered over his glistening flesh.

‘How for!’ said the old fox, for an old fox had now appeared, a big old beast clad in black and silver, with red drizzled upon his chin, although sometimes his beard was bigger or smaller, and sometimes it was more or less bloody.

‘How for!’ he said again, and then all the foxes in the hall—the table was now inside—set upon Yorlayvo. Someone danced, Thalo had a sip to drink, and that was that.

Thalo awoke a bit before dawn, a bit confounded, and holding the golden acorn to his breast. Nothing was to be said of another new day.

The trolls’ heads were, of course, taken by Knale. He stole into Thalo’s house and swiped them from beneath his bench while no one was looking, then made his way back to Lewvanvek. There he stood above the cavern—he would take no chances inside—and called out to Nela.

‘This,’ he said, ‘is the undoing of all your kin,’ and he cast the heads down into the water below.

Nela appeared in the river at once, and the moment she saw their heads land splashing before her, she said, ‘My dear boys.’

She reached out for them, but she could not cling to both at once. She first grabbed Klovo, but as she took him in her hands, as she held him for the first time at last, Fowdho floated away. With a heart-hurt wail, she reached out for him likewise, desperate not to be deprived of all her kin, but he had already escaped her. And as she grasped for him, as she grasped for what she could not reach, Klovo floated away just the same.

‘Fate,’ said Knale, ‘is wholly inexorable. This, Sister, is yours, tortures dealt to the undeserving and dealt back twice over.’

Then Knale went away as Nela sobbed below him.

‘What is lost is lost for good,’ she said, ‘but it can be avenged. I have seen that it will be avenged. He will come. Fate is wholly inexorable.’

XXVII

Awldano's Gift

Now a month or so passed, and the lawmoot was fast approaching. This would be Karvalo's first as the Lord of Pearmol, and he would not let himself be lost in the shuffle. There was little risk of this to begin with—the murder of Osbago would prove scandalous enough to garner plenty of attention on its own—but he nonetheless meant to make an entrance, to keep himself perfectly postured and ever dressed in his best, to control every conversation, and to welcome and never be welcomed. He also expected just as much from his retinue, and among his troop was to be the man they call Thennelo, a slayer of twofold trolls, a worthy thane who must surely be bound to an even worthier lord. But of course, Thalo was not of remotely lordly bearing. He would need to be preened, and thoroughly.

Thus did noble Awldano bid Thalo visit him in his bedroom one evening early in the summer. They had, in the weeks after swearing their mutual oath, become better acquainted with one another. Awldano became quite fond of Thalo's company, and particularly his brevity, for he had been reared in the lordliest of lordly halls, where words were cheaper than even the pigfeed.

'But when one speaks only few,' said Awldano, 'each word matters all the more. I am glad, then, that you spend so many on me.'

'They are easy to spend,' said Thalo.

Very easy, he thought. There was ever a certain cheer in Awldano's voice, and a quiet wisdom far beyond his years. Indeed, whenever he was struck by some moon-made mare, some dreadful dream sent to start him from his sleep, he needed only to sit beside his friend and retell it, and all the terror would be dispelled. So it was that they each came to trust the other, to hold him dear, and so it was that Awldano took it upon himself to make Thalo presentable.

'Why?' asked Thalo.

'You, Thalo,' said Awldano, 'have been charged with an important task, one you are greatly privileged to have been given, and one, I hope, you will find agreeable, considering your aspirations. Karvalo, your lord and mine, bids

you accompany him to the lawmoot to meet the king, and that you understand what an honour it is to have been so bidden.'

'I have heard about this.'

'Good. If you are to stand before the king, you must look the part. To that end, I have arranged for some more appropriate attire to be wrought. The fabric is chosen—an exquisite red, which should make you look rather lifelier—but we will still need to ensure a handsome fit. In the meantime, I have something else for you.'

Awldano brought forth a box and handed it to Thalo. Within, he found a splendid hat, poofy and voluminous. Awldano insisted he put it on, and though Thalo was reluctant, he donned the hat, and it flopped around his ears, as if he were wearing an old pillow, but a fancy one. Clad in his typical drear, it did not particularly suit him.

'You seem unimpressed,' said Awldano.

'For I am,' said Thalo.

'You need not be. It is most fetching. Once we have some proper clothes fitted, I think they will pair very nicely.'

'I have no interest in being made up and shown off like some sow for sale.'

'I understand, but we must all do our part, and that includes you. If you are to attend the lawmoot, you are to attend it properly, and it would be quite the disgrace for a man to stand unhatted in such honourable company. But we have no such cause for concern now.'

'And what if I were not to attend? After all, I was never asked.'

'There was never a need to ask, alas, for you have no say in the matter. My father wants Thennelo at his side, and so Thennelo will be at his side. But so will I, and I have done it all before. I will be beside you, Thalo. I will look after you.' He took the hat from Thalo's head and returned it to its box. 'And I will look after this.'

Then Awldano invited Thalo to accompany him to dinner. Thalo agreed to that. They made their way to the hall together, and the evening was a pleasant one.

XXVIII

The Lawmoot

Karvalo set sail for Syorbak a week and a day later. He went with Thorreda, his keenest knower-of-things, and also Awldano, hoping he would chance upon some wealthy girl and promptly make a father of himself. He had hoped to bring Essero as well, for he was expected to one day succeed his father in the lordship, although he had refused to sail.

‘It is a fool indeed,’ he had said, ‘who would sail such a measly distance, challenge turbulent fate, and risk making of himself some sea beast’s lunch. No, a wise man would rather walk a week in safety, than sail a day to his doom.’

Karvalo was disheartened to hear this, though he would not begrudge his son’s prudence. Essero stayed at home.

The remainder of Karvalo’s party was filled with seventeen of his choicest thanes, those whom he trusted to be as fearsome in their battle-dress as they were beautiful in their finery. Last to be counted was Thalo, who brought their number to twenty-one. They all piled into Karvalo’s swiftest ship, and once the spirits of the wind and the sea were appeased, they set off. Conditions proved favourable enough that they came up the river to Syorbak late that evening, and with nary a hand on an oar.

After disembarking, Karvalo came up to the king’s first gate, and there he took off his travelling hat, puffed up his chest, and threw back his head.

‘Oy-oy!’ he bellowed. ‘Let me in, man!’

‘Who are you?’ said the man atop the gate.

‘Before you stands Karvalo, Lord of Pearmol. Let me in, man.’

The gate was opened, and Karvalo strode up the path to the hall. He had his booths set up as close to the hall as possible, claiming a space before the front door, where they put up five to house four each. Of course, that would make room for only twenty—Karvalo was to receive the king’s personal hospitality. Just so, he changed into a finer shirt, donned his meeting hat, and strode off to greet the king while the others built their bedsteads.

The king at that time was a man called Arkelo. He was the eldest son of the

elder Arkelo, who had subjugated the earls of Norlonn, and who had so firmly established his renown (both by the glories of his warmongering, and by his ruthless command of the royal bureaucracy), that very much was said of him, and very little of it dispassionately. The younger Arkelo, however, was unlike his father, being a man of rather inconspicuous character. Even so, Karvalo wished to receive a royal welcome. Thus, when he came into the hall and found no king sat in his chair, he clapped his hands and stamped his feet.

‘Bring me the king!’ he shouted. ‘Bring him to me!’

Some of the king’s attendants asked Karvalo to cease his racket-making, but with each word they said to him, he let his voice grow louder and louder. Soon enough, four different servants had urged the king to attend his visitor. The king asked what sort of fellow would think himself important enough to demand the king’s urgent attention, and the attendants said he was Karvalo, Lord of Pearmol.

‘Alas,’ said the king, ‘that I should suffer this man once more, but such is my duty as his king. I will meet him.’

The king then made his way to the hall at a leisurely pace, sat in his chair, and stood again to welcome his guest.

‘Welcome,’ he said, ‘to Syorbak.’

‘At long last,’ said Karvalo, and then he spoke this verse:

‘Important days must these days be,
so slow’s my host to welcome me.
Or else does not the cock-head king
dare lift his beak from ‘neath his wing?’

The king said:

‘Why would this sack of sword-spat scum
disturb my house with his sword tongue?
Would he dare mock—and with such glee—
my heron’s hall, and mighty me?’

Karvalo said:

‘I need not waste my words to mock
a man whose own betray his stock.
Just how the cock became an erne
not even I can quite discern.’

The king said:

‘Of that, my friend, I have no doubt;
the word-worn lord was e’er without
the wit to recognise sound sense,
from his first breath, through each breath thence.’

Karvalo said:

‘The cock, it seems, has bollocks too,
both much too big and much too blue.
Has he been yearning all his life,
denied the warm touch of his wife?’

The king said:

‘The pig’s, it seems, are bigger still,
so clogged with cold and lovelorn swill.
Alas! It is an awful thing
to see how desp’rately they swing.’

As he and the king spoke their verses, Karvalo kept a close eye upon their audience, composed mostly of the king’s fellows, but also many folk from the other lordships. It was time to bring the matter to an end, and so Karvalo spoke the final verses:

‘What has become of this great hall
to be held by a heart so small?
Where’er has gone its kingly grace?
Where is thy gift of my bed-place?
 ‘The cause is clear: the king’s the wife,
his hall brought low by spouses’ strife,
his children by his woman born,
but nonetheless another’s spawn.’

This verse struck such hurt in the king’s heart that his words failed him. His companions hung their heads in shame.

He said, ‘So be it. You will have your bed in my hall.’

‘As it should be,’ said Karvalo.

Then the king arranged a bed for him, and he took it gladly.

There was no further ceremony that evening. Everyone had small dinners by the booth and then got to bed. Karvalo ate with the king's household, and only he enjoyed that.

There ended the first day of the lawmoot.

The fuss began on the following day. The preliminary meetings were many, be they about a table or wheresoever fate saw fit to cross two paths, though each was as delicate a discussion as any other, the lords all seeking to have their own way, by guile, gifts, or grace alone. Gossip ran rampant through it all, and one particular tidbit found its way to the tip of near enough every tongue: the matter of the murder of Osbago the sheriff.

'It is damning indeed,' some said, 'that Karvalo could so coldly kill his own bondsman. Has he no respect for an oath?'

'But no!' said some others. 'That there is a man who does what must be done. That there is true leadership.'

None could agree, and the matter remains unsettled.

So Karvalo came striding into the hall that evening with all eyes upon him. The doors swung wide, the chatter dampened, and in he came, decked in all the glittering jewels he had, his dress billowing behind him, and his head topped most daringly of all with his handsome home-dining hat. And how he postured! That jubilant man was thrilled indeed to be making such a show of himself, swaggering up the aisle, throwing out all manner of looks and poses, until he came before the firepit. Grimacing below the king, he took off his hat, clapped three times, and—if there was any yet within him—abandoned all subtlety and respect.

'O king!' he said. 'Behold me, for I have arrived!'

The king was sat at his high table beside his wife. She was a woman called Yordhoa, and she was the daughter of a man called Thollayvo, the Reeve of Lagovol. She had two children by the king—a pair of daughters called Kara and Eyva—though she was at that time pregnant with a third, who would come to be a son named Olvero. There was no legitimate doubt about their paternity. The king also had an older son, named Arveno, sat on the other side of his father. He was born from an earlier fancy that was never fastened.

'I behold you,' said the king, and he bade Karvalo sit down.

Karvalo and his thanes elbowed their way into some seats near the front of the hall, very close to the platform, and it was there that they spent the evening hurling jeers and taunts at the king.

Awldano arrived a little while later, having taken some time beforehand to properly prepare Thalo. He had been instructed not to bring him into the hall until he was as pretty as he could be.

'If I see but one hair out of place,' Karvalo had said, 'I will take it off, and

the rest of his head with it, and also yours, Awldano, and then maybe my own for the indignity of it all.'

Filial Awldano had heeded his father's words. He spent a good long while waging his war against Thalo's hair, seeking to make himself the master of every strand, to impose his rule with a bone-toothed sword of tyranny. Then, when at last he was satisfied with his handiwork, he plopped Thalo's hat upon his head and invited him to stand for inspection. He knew at once that it had all been for nought, for who could look upon such a finely fitted fellow and dare to find fault with but a misplaced lock?

So they came to the hall together, and even though Thalo was handsomer than ever he had been, it became quite clear that he remained underdressed. The hall was all hats and trousers, every fabric in every colour, gold and gems and jewels, and splendid swords slung on beautied belts, each with a name and a history stretching back generations, into the hands of the gods themselves. That was Karvalo's world, and Awldano's, and that of all important folk, but it was not Thalo's. All the same, they tried to make it so. They sat Thalo with the rest of Karvalo's troop on the front benches, and there he spent the meal doing all he could to keep himself steady.

As the meal was winding down and people started moving about, Karvalo had Thalo rise from his seat and set him to work.

'Understand,' he said, 'Thalo is at home. The man before me is Thennelo, and Thennelo alone. Do not forget it.'

Thalo was thusly condemned to speaking with each of the lords in turn, and by the end of the evening, he had met nearly the whole lot of them.

'Tell me,' they would say, 'is this the man they call Thennelo?' or some such words.

'Yes,' Thalo would say, and that was about as much as he could offer after a few goes round.

Towards the latter end of the evening, Thalo escaped the hall and fled into the privacy of his booth and the comfort of his bench. Awldano followed him out, and when they were alone, he said, 'You bore yourself well today, Thalo.'

Thalo said, 'What do you mean by that?'

'Only that I did not expect you to fare so well in such lofty company. You are a small man, after all. It fills me with such pride to see how well you handled yourself this evening.'

Thalo scoffed, and he said, 'What need have I for a lordling's pride?'

'None, for your own is quite sufficient.' Awldano took Thalo's hand. 'But need it or not, you have it.'

Now Thalo's stomach grew grim—surely the wine welling within him—and he withdrew his hand. He lay on his bench, closed his eyes, and likewise

closed the conversation. Awldano went to bed shortly thereafter.

Before his own bedtime, Karvalo came to the rede hall to meet with the king, for they had agreed to discuss certain important matters after the feast, but he did not find him waiting alone. At the king's left sat Enlovo, the Reeve of Eylavol, who has already appeared in this tale, and at his right was a woman named Gefyona. She was the daughter of Arleno, Lord of Samnew, and was thereby the sister of his sons, Godmalo and Trewgeo. More importantly, she was married to the king's brother, Arneo (he is not relevant now, but will be), and had thusly made herself one of the king's closest counsellors.

When Karvalo entered the room, he sat down before anyone could greet him, and after all outstanding introductions had been made, he said, 'Say then, O king, what is this about? Why is it that Enlovo, this off-cut slip of bad rock, is sitting here with us, such exceptional folk of exceptional stock?'

'Tell me,' said the king, 'do you know what is afoot in Norlonn?'

'That would depend on what it is to which you refer.'

'The earls, I hear, are speaking harshly of the kingship.'

'And cows, I hear, are mooing.'

'Save your jests for one with the patience for them. The earls are becoming increasingly combative. Some are refusing to work with my reeves, scorning them, and denying them their jurisdiction. They speak of sovereignty, and of justice, and even in matters where there is no need for it. Such ill words breed ill manners, and ill manners breed ill deeds, and I do not wish for my judgement to fall upon those whom I had hoped to count among my allies.'

'It is about time they demanded some respect from you,' said Karvalo.

'Do not speak to me of respect when you know so little of it.'

'I give my respect only to the deserving. That I pay you none is your fault.'

'My friends,' said Enlovo. 'Let us not distract ourselves.'

'Yes. I have barely sat down, and yet I have already suffered enough of this conversation. Let us hasten to its end.'

The king grimaced, and he said, 'Let us. The fact of the matter is that the earls believe themselves fit to govern not only their own domains, but mine and yours alike. They want seats in both my council and the rede. That, of course, is more than I am willing to give. You will understand that I must maintain my stature and my spine. Thus, I have devised a solution which I expect will best satisfy all parties.'

'Let us hear it, then. How would you placate this threat?'

'One of the reeves will become the earls' representative, to be called the high-reeve, and they will speak on the earls' behalf on all important matters. They will be granted a seat in my council and on the rede, though they will hold neither a shire nor a lordship. They will, however, hold the right to vote in each,

thus granting the earls the least of that for which they ask.’

‘That will not do.’

‘I understand your doubts, Karvalo, but do not forget this: with the right to vote comes the right to abstain.’

‘I see. And I suppose Enlovo here is the expectant high-reeve?’

‘Indeed. Enlovo has been granted that honour.’

‘Granted by whom, exactly?’

‘His peers have elected him from among themselves.’

‘Of course they have. I will say, though, that it is difficult not to notice that your chancellor’s son should by chance be elevated to this position.’

The royal chancellor at that time was a man named Rago. He happened to be Enlovo’s father, recently appointed, and also very well disposed towards the king and his allies.

‘It stands to reason,’ said the king, ‘that a son of excellent stock should himself be excellent, and such excellence is not easily passed over.’

‘Yes,’ said Enlovo, grinning. ‘I am truly humbled that my dear colleagues have entrusted me with this foremost responsibility. It is a burden I bear with pride. Be assured that I will not take it for granted.’

Karvalo scoffed. ‘A man is made of his stock, yes, but that does not make a son his father.’ He scowled at Enlovo. ‘He is not his. To my great relief, I am not mine. And you, Arkelo, most certainly are not yours.’

Now the king paused.

‘Pay him no mind,’ said Gefyona. ‘He is only blustering.’

But to her relief, the king held firm, and said, ‘No. Surprising though it may be, he is quite right. My father was certainly a man of particular repute, but a man of particular infamy likewise. We are nothing alike, and it need not be stated that he fell far short of my great virtue.’

‘Very much so,’ said Gefyona, eyeing Karvalo with contempt. ‘Now, for our agreement.’

‘Yes. Karvalo, as the appointment of the high-reeve is a matter pertaining strictly to the common realm and my governance thereof, I reserve the right to implement this appointment solely at my pleasure. Nonetheless, I have chosen to bring the matter before the rede and let it be subject to a vote. As a show of good faith, as it were.’

‘Very well,’ said Karvalo. ‘I will support you.’

‘I had not yet asked.’

‘There is no need. I know what you want, king. I will speak with my lot.’ Karvalo turned to Enlovo, his gaze unyielding. ‘We will back this, but know, Enlovo, that I am expecting abstentions, and abstentions alone. If even once you dare to rise from your seat, I urge you run. Run as fast as you bloody well

can, for no strength of arms will spare you. Have your high-reeveship if you like, but I will not let you be the king's puppet.' His gaze at last loosened, only to fasten again on Gefyona. 'He has enough of them already.'

Then Karvalo left the room and went to bed. He thought this was all very ill-advised, a compromise to best displease everyone, but one he might turn in his favour.

There ended the second day of the lawmoot.

On the following morning, Karvalo returned to the hall to find himself amid the growing throng of well-to-do folk, some making last-minute arrangements with their allies, others making last-minute adjustments to their hats, but all awaiting the lawmoot proper with a decided eagerness.

From the shadows, Thorreda emerged and said, 'Karvalo, what exactly had the king to say?'

'Patience,' said Karvalo. 'Muster for me my friends, and I will tell you all about it.'

'Of course, though I will say that Arleno has not yet arrived, and all the more startlingly, Trewgeo has.'

'So be it. If Arleno should appear, bring him to me. If not, leave Trewgeo out of it.'

Thorreda said it would be done and made away, but Karvalo swiftly called her back.

'Tell me,' he said, 'where is Awldano?'

'Asleep,' said Thorreda, 'or he was when I awoke. But that was a little while ago now, so he may have since stumbled from his bench.'

As Thorreda trotted away again, Karvalo took himself to Awldano's booth. He found him asleep, still snoring with a sprightly vigour, and also Thalo, low-lidded and wan. They were two of the four put up there. Thorreda was the third, though she was more of an early riser. The fourth bench had been allotted to a woman called Soffena on account of her alleged friendship with Thorreda. That morning, however, it stood empty. Soffena had gotten herself so deplorably drunk during the prior evening's meal that she never made it back to the booth. Instead, she stole vomiting into some traders' ship in the morning twilight, and there she fell asleep amid the furs and fabrics, whereafter the ship set off with her yet aboard. Just so was she carried away down past Ayslonn to Syoldenn, and nothing more can be said of her, except that no one noticed any of it, and least of all Karvalo.

'Awldano,' he said, jostling him from his sleep. 'Arise and honour me. Honour me with your promptness! Honour me with your presence!'

'Of course,' said Awldano, 'but I was having a most lovely dream, and I dared not end it.'

‘Dream in your own time. Now it is my time, and I need you at my side. I will not let my esteem be jeopardised by your tardiness.’ He turned to Thalo, awake (he had not slept), though he was still in his bedclothes. ‘And I will say the same again. I expect better of my best. Deliver it.’

Then Karvalo went back inside, and after making themselves presentable, Thalo and Awldano followed him. Their task was onefold and simple, and it was to mingle. This they did, and it was not long before Awldano caught sight of Trewgeo whispering in the corner with his sister. He had only arrived at Syorbak earlier that morning, his departure from Samnew having been delayed by a sudden deterioration in his father’s health. Thalo had not yet met him.

Awldano seized Thalo’s shoulder and said, ‘Here. Come with me, and I will make you a friend of Samnew.’

‘No,’ said Thalo, but before he could further protest, Awldano put his hands on him and dragged him across the room.

‘Oy-oy, Trewgeo,’ he said, ‘and be well met.’

Trewgeo turned to him, and with a dull look in his eye, he slapped the top of his hat and said, ‘You would dare welcome me? I will have you know, I am my father’s lord-in-stead, and I am therefore your better. Take it back.’

‘Take it back?’

‘Take it back. Are you so thick you need everything repeated?’

‘No.’

‘Then take it back already!’

‘Oy-oy-not, then, and consider yourself unwelcomed.’

‘Now let us start again. Awldano, you are in my company. Why?’

‘To make an introduction, of course. Please, look upon this glamorous chap beside me.’ Awldano had Thalo step forwards. ‘This is Thalo, the man they call Thennelo, a man about whom you must surely have heard.’

When he heard this name, Trewgeo’s dark eyes grew bright. ‘Oh? This little fellow is Thennelo? I have heard about him—and very much—but I expected there to be as much to see of him as is said of him. I can only suppose it must have been a very small troll.’

Thalo put his hand on Sleme’s hilt, and he said, ‘There were two of them, and both were bigger than you.’

‘It would seem, Thalo Thennelo, that you are quick to clutch at your sword. I think you should take your hand away now and then, for none but voracious fate knows what might come of it. After all, one man’s murder may yield many victims. We should all be aware of that, and now more than ever.’

At this, Thalo’s hand clenched about the sword’s hilt, but Awldano took it in his own and gently lifted it away.

‘Here,’ he said, ‘we need none of this.’

Thalo stepped back and said nothing more, and neither did Trewgeo. He huffed quietly and moved along.

Before following him, Gefyona said, 'Tell me, Thalo man, is it true? You slew two trolls?'

Awldano said, 'He did.'

Then she went on her way.

Now Awldano said to Thalo, 'Pay him no mind. Trewgeo has long been a scurrilous sort.'

Still, Thalo had nothing to say, well within his mind. Awldano put a hand on his shoulder, but Thalo took another step back, and another, and then he left the hall in quite the hurry. There was no time to follow him. After only a single step, Awldano had Karvalo's hefty fingers bearing down on him, rooting him in place.

'The king is calling,' said Karvalo. 'It is time to begin.'

Awldano looked once more to the doorway, but he turned away and went with his father. Outside the rede hall, two of their biggest thanes stood with their backs pressed up against the door to ensure Karvalo would be the first to enter. He bade them step aside, and at their parting, he brought his knuckles to bear, rapping thrice upon the door before letting loose his mightiest roar. With a chesty 'Oy-oy!' he stepped into the room, shoulders back, head held high, and said, 'Let us begin!'

He took a seat directly opposite the king, with Awldano at his right and Thorreda behind him, and the rest of the lords shuffled in thereafter. Each was accompanied by a handful of their own trustiest companions, until the rede was fully gathered and supported.

Those in attendance are here listed in the conventional order: Arkelo, Lord of Syorbak, with his son, Arveno, his sister-in-law, Gefyona, the chancellor, Rago, and Enlovo, the expectant high-reeve; Sledha, Lord of Wolam, with her daughter, Asdea, and Asdea's husband, Orrero; Seymodo, Lord of Owffek, with his grandson, Enrego, and Ommeo, a close friend of his; Karvalo, Lord of Pearmol, with his son, Awldano, and his chiefest advisor, Thorreda; Yarnaga, Lord of Syornes, with her daughter Yondea, her brother-in-law, Klavo, and the chiefest of her thanes, Fradmalo; Mesdea, Lord of Reykam, with her husband, Gonnalo, and her uncle, Reyfneo; Ewglena, Lord of Knessyar, with her two children, Ferrono and Gyola, and Gyola's wife, Alfrela (who was also the sister of Karvalo); Reggeno, Lord of Awslad, with his wife, Ogdea, and his brother-in-law, Yalkeo (who was also the son of Reyfneo, in the party from Reykam); Arnalo, Lord of Arbak, with his mother and predecessor, Reflea; Afdea, Lord of Awlteyr, with her husband, Arbeyno, her daughter, Bawga, and Bawga's husband, Bewko; Kona, Lord of Flatteyr, with her wife, Fena, and her brother,

Addeo; Kadleya, Lord of Wolsrok, with only her wife, Lota (who was also the king's half-sister); Bremmero, Lord of Reygmol, with his daughter, Paldhera, her husband, Grevo, and Grevo's twin brother, Brevo; Trewgeo, on behalf of his father, Arleno, Lord of Samnew, with his uncle, Kardano, and his chiefest thane, Yorvadh; Eyl, Lord of Gonnawl, who sat alone; Byordeo, Lord of Reygnawl, with a large and menacing fellow named Breygo; Fesdeo, Lord of Brognes, with his elderly father Errere; Rena, Lord of Yolbrog, with her two daughters, Rosswa and Awdbyoga; and Bodleo, Lord of Gwonvek, with his daughter, Syoma, and Syoma's wife, Torvoa (who was also formerly betrothed to Addeo, in the party from Flatteyr).

There was also a twentieth party in attendance from Brogsrok, fronted by a woman called Yala, who had come hoping to be admitted to the rede. The rede voted in favour of her admission, albeit by one vote alone, and she became the Lord of Brogsrok. The rede also voted in favour of the establishment of the high-reeveship and Enlovo's appointment, and this was ratified with a slightly larger majority.

Awldano found the whole affair most enjoyable. This was not the first time he had come to the lawmoot, though it was his first time sitting in the rede hall. Nonetheless, he could not fully enjoy the squabbling, for his mind yet dwelt elsewhere—on the swiftness with which Thalo had earlier fled.

Then, once the first session had ended, Awldano retired to his booth, hoping to find Thalo there, to speak with him and to hear him, and thus to put both their minds at ease. Yet when he came there, the booth stood empty. He ate quietly alone and went to bed. Thorreda soon came along to do the same, and he fell asleep shortly after that.

Thalo had spent the day wandering about, or otherwise making no use of himself at all. He went to sulk by the river for a while, and there he took from his belt-bag the golden acorn he had found in place of the trolls' heads. And as he gazed upon its sheen, glinting in the sunlight, his thoughts moved back to the river before him, fearing a certain elf might spring from it and have at him with vitriol and curses.

'No,' he said, and then he clasped the acorn in his hand, intent upon casting it into the water, to be rid of it once and for all. But when he lifted his hand, he could not bring himself to release it. Within it was some unknowable power, and it clung to him. He could not part with it, much as he could not bear to lose the heads it once had replaced. He put the acorn back in his bag and returned to his wandering until it was long into the night, and well past time for bed.

When Thalo came back to the booth, Awldano and Thorreda were both fast asleep, and neither stirred upon his arrival.

There ended the third day of the lawmoot.

Awldano awoke the next morning to find Thalo's bench empty once more. He set out to find him, but he was nowhere to be seen in the yard, and neither was he in the hall. Just as he was about to leave the hall and take his search further afield, he heard his father bellowing at the back of the room.

'What dishonour!' said Karvalo. 'It is disgraceful beyond words.'

Awldano made his approach, and he found Karvalo holding Trewgeo tight against the wall.

'You, Trewgeo, are my lotsman, mine alone, and yet you sit beside the king and applaud his every word?'

'Unhand me!' said Trewgeo. 'I owe you nothing!'

'How I wish it were so! If it were not for my fatheaded fool of a father, you would be nothing. Your hall would be mine, as it rightfully is, and I would be all the merrier. But that is not where we find ourselves. If things are as bad as you say, if your father is truly dying, and if you are to succeed him, you will honour the bonds between our halls, or I will be forced to act in a manner you may find disagreeable.'

'What bonds are these? Nothing more than old Karvalo sticking his fingers in everyone else's business, as it always has been.'

'And what of the oaths of your fathers? Do they mean nothing to you? Would you squander all your dignity for but a quick whiff of the king's shit?'

'You have no right to speak of dignity! You murdered your own man, in your own hall. If you think there can be any respect for one who would dispense such injustice, then you are very much mistaken.'

Now Karvalo's grip on Trewgeo tightened, and the matter nearly came to blows, but Gefyona prevented that.

'Lord of Pearmol,' she said, 'release him, or I will make this matter judicial. I think we all know how the king would rule.'

'He would certainly rule in my favour,' said Karvalo, 'if he has any concern for maintaining peace within his kingdom.' He stepped away from Trewgeo. 'Do not defy me. If you inherit your father's lordship, I will invite you to make the proper oaths with me, and I urge you accept the invitation.'

Karvalo then left the hall, and as he passed Awldano, he seized his arm and took him outside.

'What was that I heard?' asked Awldano.

'The same as ever. The ewe thinks herself a bull. Promise me you will never be so shameful a son. I could not bear to see my fatherhood so besmirched.'

'But you spoke of the king's concern for peace.'

'And I will not do so again. As things stand, I need not fear him.'

Shortly thereafter, the second session of the lawmoot began. They joined the others in the rede hall, and it unfolded much as it had the day prior, though

the matters discussed were all the pettier. Trewgeo remained stalwartly beside the king, such that he only voted the same way as Karvalo when the king did too, and even then, he was reluctant to do so. Despite his rising fury, Karvalo maintained his composure.

As for Thalo, he had not slept at all, and so he arose before dawn and stole out into the chill of the early morning darkness. Again, he spent his time just as he had the day before—wandering about, and brooding, and being generally useless. Around midday, the many sleepless nights of late set upon him at last. He sat down beneath a tree, and there he fell asleep. So he remained until a few hours later, when the sun had nearly set, and when he started from his sleep to find Awldano stood before him.

Awldano said, 'Here you are, Asfoa's son. What have you been up to?'

'This is a hateful place,' said Thalo, 'a house of spears.'

'Then let me be your shield, that you may stand proud beside me, and not cower away in fear.'

'It will not end well. It never does.'

'You cannot know what lies ahead. Fate is indeterminable, and we can only hope it rules in our favour.' Awldano put out his hand. 'And if not, then at least we shall falter together.'

After a moment's hesitation, his mind caught on Knale, his dreadful words and the fate they had spelt, Thalo found the courage to lay it all aside. He took Awldano's hand and said, 'But it will not come to that.'

Awldano pulled him up onto his feet, put a kiss upon his fingers, and they went back to their booth together.

There ended the fourth day of the lawmoot.

The law games were played on the fifth day, and everyone had a grand enough time. Early in the morning, Karvalo paid a gang of the king's boys to throw whatever they liked at Trewgeo's thanes, and to say nothing of it. They started with only mild insults, though they were throwing stones by the end of the day, and it was not stopped until one of them knocked Trewgeo's uncle, Kardano, unconscious during the wrestling. The king came along at once and made the lads compete against the men of Samnew, and sure enough, they all walked away bruised and bested, but still richer than they were that morning.

None of Karvalo's companions covered themselves in sufficient glory to be recalled.

That evening, the king hosted the closing feast, and it unfolded just as the first had, though Thalo was slightly happier to have Awldano at his side.

Late in the evening, Karvalo and Trewgeo fell victim to their tempers once more. Their argument (about both everything and nothing at all) was fuelled by such enmity that again, it nearly came to blows, but this time, the king himself

came to mediate.

‘Men,’ he said, ‘separate, or you will be separated.’ Turning to Trewgeo, he said, ‘If you are to cast your lot in with me, you must never let your dignity fall so short. Do not surrender control of your heart to another, and least of all one so eager to see it stopped.’ Then, turning to Karvalo, he said, ‘I am a patient man, and very forgiving, but you, Karvalo, are pushing my hospitality to its very limit. This will not happen again, not as long as we each live, lest that not be long at all.’

Karvalo only chortled and swaggered away.

The mood in the hall turned sour after that, and the feast ended with a bitter taste in everyone’s mouths.

There ended the fifth day of the lawmoot, and they were glad to be done with it.

Karvalo sailed home on the following morning. Only then did he realise he was leaving one rower short, but Soffena was long gone, and it was much too late to do anything about it.

XXIX

On Domestic Matters

In the weeks following the lawmoot, the friendship that existed between Thalo and Awldano blossomed into an altogether firmer bond. Whenever they had a moment spare, each would seek out the other and speak at length about weighty matters, and about trivial matters just the same, or else their tongues would be much too busy to say anything at all. They said nothing about this to anyone.

‘I do not expect,’ said Awldano, ‘that my father will be all too chuffed when he learns what you have done to me. You are a capable man, Thalo, but your glory is already his, and your wealth likewise. He will surely bid me consider a more profitable match, and that is no headache I am eager to suffer. No, I shall take some time to determine how I might best lessen his opposition.’

This pleased Thalo greatly—anything to which Karvalo was opposed was surely a worthwhile thing to do—but he agreed to say nothing for now.

Then it happened a little while later that Ormana chanced upon them as their lips were parting. At once, she scurried away unseen and came to Thalo’s side in the evening.

‘Tell me, Thalo,’ she said, ‘is something going on?’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Thalo.

‘I was round the back of the hall this morning, and I happened to oversee you by the wall, and I daresay I need not remind you just how close Awldano was. Were you smelling his breath, or is something going on?’

Thalo said that something was indeed going on, but that Awldano was very concerned about what his father might have to say about it.

‘He means to broach the matter with tact,’ he said, ‘and neither you nor I have much of that. You must not let your tongue wag.’

‘Nor, then,’ said Ormana, ‘should you men, lest it be seen before it is said. But I will say nothing of it. I am dutybound, after all, to uphold the harmony of the house, and that has proven trying enough of late.’

This, it should be said, was still only a few months after Yorlayvo was slain.

Since then, Esleyna had said next to nothing about it. Instead, she spent her days sitting alone in silence and staring out from a window overlooking the sea. Whenever Ormana offered her company, or some food, or any sort of comfort, Esleyna declined it.

‘What joy is left for me, deprived of my life, my love, my Yorlayvo?’ she would say, and though Ormana would say there were yet very many joys for her, she would not be heard.

When Kolmago tried to assure his mother, he had no greater success. He would come to her, a short sword in his hand, and show her his new moves, saying, ‘Look, Mother! I am set to become a warrior of great repute, or so they say, and the envy of all my peers. My father be proud, would he not?’

‘What pride,’ Esleyna might have said, ‘can dwell within a heart that does not beat, nor bleed? There is no fire left within him but that which reduced him to ash, to burn forevermore in the dark recesses of my mind. I am alone. I am forsaken.’

Then Kolmago would lower his sword and leave, all his youthful vigour diminished.

So had Esleyna’s sorrow become a bitter burden, and one that weighed heavily upon not only herself, but upon her children, too.

‘And that is putting it lightly,’ said Ormana. ‘We all must grieve, but she is being quite selfish about it.’

Thalo did not know what to say, so he nodded quietly and let her move the conversation forward.

Thalo soon told Awldano that Ormana had seen them together, and that he had told her of their companionship.

‘Though she can be discourteous,’ said Thalo, ‘I trust her very much. She will not say the first word.’

‘All the same,’ said Awldano, ‘hers are not the only eyes in Pearmol. If we are to sprint ahead of fleet-footed fate, we must make haste.’

Then they resolved to see the deed done.

It fell to Awldano, of course. Thalo did not come with him, for Awldano feared he would only antagonise Karvalo, and thereby ensure the worst result. Awldano came to his father in the small fire room late that night, when it was well past time for bed, and sat so the fire lay between them.

Awldano said, ‘You want me to marry well, yes?’

‘I do,’ said Karvalo. ‘Why do you say this? Is something going on?’

‘Tell me, what do you make of Thalo?’

‘Thalo Thennelo?’

‘He is the only Thalo we have.’

Karvalo scratched his head and said, ‘If you are to finally fasten a marriage,

you could have done some scouting at Syorbak. There were plenty of fine young folk with grand lineages and even grander treasures to be found there. Or you could at least find a handsome girl and make yourself some heirs. But, seeking the sun, you have peered down a well. You are better than that.'

'Has he not proven himself a worthy fellow?'

'Let me be clear. I trust him well enough with a sword, for now. But with my son's heart? Never.'

'Then tell me this: do you not trust my judgement?'

'That would depend upon which head you heed. I know how you young men are.' Karvalo paused, glowering, and then he went on, 'But yes. You are my son, Awldano, and the lesser of the two. Your lot in life is all the meager than your brother's, and your shames more readily forgotten. I will trust in your judgement. Do not make me regret it.'

It was around then that Thalo and Awldano began sharing a bed. Where Thalo had previously slept in one of the large houses, Awldano, being a man of high status, had a private bedroom in the hall which he shared with only three other men. They were called Knodho, Beo, and Lodnaro.

Awldano went to Karvalo and Seyglena while they were eating breakfast together, and he asked that things be rearranged so he and Thalo could sleep alone together. Karvalo did not want to agree to that, but Awldano was very much his father's son, and he refused to leave the room until he had his way. Seyglena also said Karvalo should appease him.

'It would be good,' she said, 'for him to make such mistakes while he is still young enough that they will not be consequential.'

Awldano did not much like her reasoning, but he nonetheless appreciated her support. Karvalo relented, and he said he would sort things out.

In the end, Thalo came into Awldano's bedroom, while his former fellows were moved out of the hall and into one of the large houses where there was enough room for them to stay together. However, when Awldano came to tell them of the changes, Beo and Lodnaro were quite upset.

'Now, now,' said Knodho, 'it would not be fair for us to come between our friend and his joy, not least since there is so little for us in either case.'

'That may be so,' said Beo, 'but you need not say as much. This is the only dignity for our sorry three. What respect is there for us but to sleep in Karvalo's hall?'

'Do not be disheartened.' Knodho put his hand forward, inviting Beo and Lodnaro to each take it. 'We may get no respect from anyone else, but we get it at least from each other. Let nothing shake that.'

'I am so wracked with self-pity,' said Lodnaro, 'that I will do anything for a fellow who so much as smiles at me.' He took Knodho's hand in his own. 'I,

pathetic as I am, do not deserve such worthy comrades, but I will stand beside you all the same. Let nothing shake that.'

Beo huffed and put his hand atop those of his friends. 'I suppose there is nothing for it but to relieve myself of all my pride and cry into my beer. We are cheerless men indeed, but we are cheerless together. Let nothing shake that.'

Then they all embraced one another, their tears flowing readily. Awldano had been present all the while, trying to tell them how much he valued their company, but they would not listen to him. Together, they went out of the room, and nothing more is remembered of them.

As they left, Awldano was stricken by a pang of guilt, but it was not so much to bear that he thought twice about it—at least not until Essero came to visit. He was unimpressed with the new arrangements, and he made it known.

'It is appalling,' he said, 'that our most dignified father, and his second most dignified son, should be busying themselves like this to satisfy the whims of some upstart rabble-man. It is not at all fitting for so many of our good friends to all be ejected from the majesty of this fine hall for his sake alone. No, it is outrageous and unfair. I beg you, Awldano, listen! Your companions have done far more for you—and are far more deserving—than this bitty-booted bandit of a man.'

Then Awldano asked Essero to leave, but he refused.

'I will leave when I am ready,' he said. 'As it stands, I have more to say.'

Indeed, Essero voiced his complaints on many occasions thereafter, as did some others whom he had convinced to back him up, but their protestations all came to nothing. Thalo and Awldano remained eager bedfellows.

XXX

A Deepening Rift

Now two years passed, during which Thalo and Awldano grew ever closer in every way, although there is nothing truthful written about that.

It was also during these years that Arleno, Lord of Samnew, finally died. He had been ill for so long before his eventual death that no one grieved for him, for they had spent all their tears in the years prior. Instead, they said only how remarkable it was that he had managed to cling to so little life for so long. He was succeeded in the lordship by his eldest surviving child, Trewgeo, who wasted no time in bringing his father's retinue to heel.

When Karvalo heard about this, he sighed, saying, 'So it goes.'

He sent a messenger to Samnew to invite Trewgeo to affirm their fathers' oaths, but Trewgeo refused this.

'I will not bend before Karvalo,' he said, 'unless he stabs me with his own hateful hands. Death alone will bring my knees to buckle.'

Then he sent the messenger home to tell Karvalo what he had said.

'This is no surprise,' said Karvalo, 'though it is unwelcome all the same.'

About a month or so later, Ewglena, Lord of Knessyar, hosted a meeting of the lords of Yaranweg and Fedhalonn, who had long been bound to one another as sworn allies. Karvalo chaired this meeting, as was the right of the Lord of Pearmol, and Trewgeo also came along. In the fourth seat was Yarnaga, Lord of Syornes. Karvalo made his grievances their priority.

'We will speak of nothing else,' he said, 'until we have established that we are four of one mind. I bid we each affirm our mutual oaths and bind ourselves together as mortal allies.'

Yarnaga and Ewglena both agreed to this, but Trewgeo refused, saying, 'What I think you mean, Karvalo, is that you will not listen to what we have to say unless we swear not to say anything you dislike. Is that not so?'

'It is not. My intention here is to make each of us the others' equal, and to render our oaths of friendship fate-fastened. If that means I must hear all your horrible words, Trewgeo, that is a price I am willing to pay.'

‘How very generous of you, but I have already sworn myself to the king, my kinsman, with whom my prospects are very much greater.’

‘You have two hands, Trewgeo.’

‘But I am no treacherous fellow. Unlike some, I honour my oaths. I will not swear one I do not mean to keep.’

Then Trewgeo left the room. Karvalo went away himself, leaving the ladies alone together. Ewglena asked Yarnaga if she wished to continue the meeting.

‘It would seem the decision has already been made,’ said Yarnaga, ‘whether I wish it or not.’

They both agreed to retire likewise.

Karvalo had now lost all faith in Trewgeo, and he decided that something must be done about it. He could not let Samnew free itself from his influence. Thus, he brought to his side a woman named Eyge, who was among his most trusted thanes. Her task was to go to Samnew in secret, and to keep an eye on everything that happened there. Indeed, she proved so excellent a sniffer that she returned to Pearmol only a few weeks later, and with some very interesting news. She told Karvalo that Trewgeo had hosted the king and his lot, that they had bound themselves together as mortal allies, to be six of one mind, and that Trewgeo had not been truthful when he said this had already happened.

Karvalo heard this news with anger swelling as swiftly in his heart as it never had before, but Eyge bade him hold it in a moment longer.

‘There is more to say,’ she said, and she told him that Trewgeo had met recently with a handful of Karvalo’s sheriffs and paid them to disregard their obligations as his bondsfolk. ‘Nor, from what I gather, is this the first time it has happened.’

That was enough. Karvalo stood up, and with his eyes clouded by rage, he beat the table with his fists, wishing Trewgeo were there to soften the blows. Once he had loosed the last of his wrath, he steadied his breathing and sat back down. His thoughts turned to the shrieval assembly of the year prior, and to Osbago’s death, and to Yorlayvo’s, and the truth of things became clearer in his mind.

‘Eyge,’ he said, ‘fetch Thorreda for me. We three have much to discuss.’

Karvalo sat down with Thorreda and Eyge that afternoon, and together they sought to determine exactly what was afoot. Karvalo said Trewgeo must have been involved in Yorlayvo’s murder, and that there could be no forgiveness for that. Thorreda was not so sure.

She said, ‘This was a matter between the northerners and your sheriff, was it not? What place would a man of Samnew have in that? And the present lord, no less?’

‘And how,’ said Karvalo, ‘do you suppose a pair of northerners found their

way to Fnarslad, a farm so lacking in notoriety, to capture one man, and only one? It could not have been a coincidence. Trewgeo has known me all his life, and he knew Yorlayvo likewise. He would certainly have been able to facilitate this. He must have done, the spiteful wretch that he is.'

'As could many others, as are many others. If your love for Yorlayvo was a secret, it was poorly kept.'

'But why Fnarslad, then? Let me tell you. Trewgeo seeks to turn my sheriffs against me, and Osbago must have stood among the traitors, colluding with him to bring me low. Trewgeo sent them to Fnarslad, knowing Yorlayvo would go there.'

'Then what brought them to Samnew in the first place?'

'I turned them away. It should not be surprising that they visited Samnew next, given the friendship that has formerly been fostered between our halls, the friendship Trewgeo would so recklessly abandon. Anyone would have gone there next, until recently.'

Thorreda, ever cautious, was not convinced, but there was no doubt at all in Karvalo's heart—if he could blame Trewgeo, he would. He knew him well enough, and how he liked to do things, and he would not be swayed.

'Fate itself is on my side,' he said. 'I know it to be true.'

'Very well, said Thorreda. 'What, then, are you to do about it?'

Karvalo wanted to march a troop over to Samnew, capture Trewgeo, and kill him and be done with it, but he had already sworn himself to the king, who would surely seek to avenge him. To kill him, then, would be to invite war to Pearmol, and to his allies' domains, and then surely into the whole kingdom. And though he did not lack confidence, Karvalo was not eager to wage such a war. He would instead prefer to sort things quietly.

Thus, he started by summoning another shrieval assembly, during which he seized from their seats those sheriffs who had been accused of conspiring with Trewgeo. They were eightfold, excluding Osbago. Their names were Anlava, Enyana, Odo, Oldea, Reyfneo, Rollawga, Thnesdeo, and Tholreda. They were each dragged onto the platform and forced to prostrate themselves with their arms stretched forwards, and a big man knelt atop each of them to prevent their rising. Karvalo then took up an axe and cut off their hands one by one as they lay crying out beneath him. This was not a usual punishment, and it would garner him fear and grievance in equal measure.

It should also be noted that Oldea protested in particular, for she had not met with Trewgeo at all. Eyge had only named her due to a personal grudge. In any case, wrathful Karvalo had not interrogated the matter at all, so she suffered no less than the others.

The behanded sheriffs each had their stump wrists burnt, and then they were

made to kneel on the platform while Karvalo spoke about the treachery of his bondsfolk. He warned that any who dared to defy him would thenceforth be subject to only the harshest of penalties.

‘My patience,’ he said, ‘is utterly spent.’

Then he ended the assembly.

In the following weeks, he set up many booths across his domain, one for each of his shrievalties. Each of these was manned by two of his thanes, to keep watch over the sheriffs, to raise the alarm should Trewgeo try to coerce them into treachery, and to defend them should he instead try to inflict upon them retribution. This proved effective, and Karvalo had no further trouble with his sheriffs for a while. However, it would not be sustainable to have so many of his thanes spread so widely across his domain. It became clear that he would need to find a more permanent solution.

XXXI

Awldano Goads Fate

The tale will now dwell on a very old town called Ennaslad, which was one of Pearmol's most important steward towns. The stewardship was often granted to the lord's eldest child, but the present holder was a man called Arrono.

Arrono was the husband of Karvalo's older brother, Yalmalo, who had held the stewardship before him. Though their love for one another was great, they were nonetheless a quarrelsome pair, and their marriage quickly grew bitter. The day before Yalmalo was meant to leave Ennaslad to head northwards with the king, Arrono found him sharing his joy with another fellow, Faffedhe. This gave rise to a most vehement row, and in a bid to turn his thoughts away from Arrono's hurt, to flee from his guilt, Yalmalo left earlier than planned, and with Faffedhe at his side. Arrono would not see Yalmalo again until he lay beneath his funerary cloth.

In Yalmalo's absence, Arrono continued to hold the stewardship—though he had been wounded and left to bleed alone, they were still married. This did not last long, however. After Rogwalo was slain and Yalmalo named himself his successor in the lordship, his mother, Gonwela, did the same. She visited Ennaslad, and she told Arrono what had happened in the north.

'What woeful news,' said Arrono, 'but tell me, what of Yalmalo? What of my husband, and what of your son? Does he yet live?'

'He does,' said Gonwela, 'though he has shown his folly once more. He has named himself Lord of Pearmol, but that is not his inheritance yet, nor will it ever be now. Pearmol is mine. I will not let it fall into the hands of so shameful a son. Thus, Arrono, I present you with a choice. You have proven yourself to be a worthy man, so I will let you keep your place here and hold the stewardship in your own right, but you must divorce Yalmalo. If you do not agree to that, I must assume you support his claim to the lordship over mine and will be forced to outlaw you from my domain, and those of my allies.'

Arrono did not want to divorce his husband—there was yet such love for

him in his heart—but neither was he eager to be outlawed. He took some time to consider his options, and then agreed to divorce Yalmalo and swear himself to Gonwela. Only a couple of years later, news of Yalmalo's death came to Ennaslad, and Arrono was moved to tears.

'O Yalmalo,' he said. 'Perhaps, had you been a wiser man, you might yet live, and so too might I.'

Arrono held Ennaslad for many years thereafter, until he died in the twenty-sixth year of his stewardship. By all accounts, he did a fine job of it.

Following Arrono's death, Karvalo granted the stewardship to Essero, and he accepted this with much enthusiasm. He and Ernala chose to finally marry one another on wedding day, shortly before they left Pearmol together. There was a great deal to eat and drink, good music and good company, and everyone had a lovely time. Then they made their way to Ennaslad, and there they would remain for many years to come.

Now time moved along, but the pleasant atmosphere Essero's wedding had fostered did not quickly wane, and least of all in the love-laden heart of his brother. So it was that Awldano took Thalo out riding one morning later that year, though he did not say where they were going. After roving for a while, they got off their horses and walked along the beach until Awldano pointed out a cave at the base of a cliff, from which a river spat into the sea.

'See that cave,' he said. 'That is where we are headed. I beg of you, Thalo, hold your breath tight in your breast, lest it be taken from you.'

Then Awldano ventured into the cave, close and damp. The river ran down its middle, and daylight shone in from the other end. Thalo went in behind him, and though Awldano had to crouch the whole way, he could stand tall and not worry once about bumping his head.

When they came out the other end, they found themselves in a great cavern, lit by gaps in its roof where it met the ground above. In its centre fell a waterfall, its spray wetting the surrounding stone, such that the whole place shimmered in the light. That was Lewvanvek, and it was a remarkable sight.

'Never before,' said Thalo, 'have I beheld such a place.'

Awldano said, 'This place was wrought by an ancient hero, or so they say. She was Lewva Thunder-hand, so called because she struck the rock with such force that it sounded as if thunder shook the sky.'

'She slew twofold trolls. Tell me, Awldano, is that why you have brought me here?'

'No. I have been here twice before. I was a boy the first time, my hand in Yorlayvo's, shortly after my mother's mother died. He brought me and Essero here for some cheering up. The second time I came alone and that was the last.'

'How could you come to such a place only twice?'

‘When last I came here, something very frightful happened. As I swam in the river, it seemed to grip me, whereupon a woman appeared before me, her form veiled by the water. She said she was a seer, you see, blinded by visions of all of time, and she bade me leave. I was not to return until I found the man whom I cherish most deeply.

“‘Bring him here,” she said. “Drink from the river, and that will bind you more firmly than any oath or vow. Irrevocable fate will then be your eternal warden.”

‘I have since thought much about this portent, and I thought myself a fool, that I had fallen asleep and dreamt it all. Yet in recent years, it has become all the clearer that she was true, that my eyes saw the water woman, that my ears heard her prophecy, for here is the man she foretold. Here is the man whom I cherish most deeply. So tell me, Thalo, will you drink with me?’

Thalo did not say anything just yet, his thoughts lying not with Awldano, but with his seer and her prophecy, and with another fellow’s fearful words.

‘I am gripped,’ said Awldano, ‘by a love unlike any I have known. I wish to bind myself to you forevermore, to death and beyond!’

‘No,’ said Thalo, and he tried to say more, but his words all caught on one another as his breathing quickened, and his skin grew hot, and his voice failed him altogether. Awldano took him in his arms and held him close, and then, after a moment, he pulled away. ‘You have told me about your water woman. Let me tell you about my elf.’

Then Thalo told Awldano about his dealings with Knale, about his role in the killing of the trolls, and about their final meeting at Ayrpor.

‘I fear he has put some curse on me, that all of those I love, all whom I hold dear, will be brought to ruin. I dare not believe it—surely one could not wield such power, however ancient he might be—but when I look at you, Awldano, I cannot put the words out of my mind. None can tell what strife I may bring upon you.’

Awldano took Thalo in his arms once more, and he said, ‘Have no fear. You need not trust the cunning words of cunning folk.’

And once more, Thalo pulled away from him.

‘I imagine,’ said Awldano, ‘we have each heard many a story of sly games and false curses. There is nothing to it. He cannot harm us, but even if he could, it will not come to that. Drink with me, Thalo, and fate will ever ward us, and we will live long together.’

‘How can you be sure?’

Awldano kissed Thalo’s cheek. ‘I would sooner walk through fire and ice than grow old and hoary without you. May sword and spear strike me down, if it means I will yet be beside you.’ Then he took Thalo’s hand in his own, lifted

them together, and cried out, ‘O mighty fate, bring forth calamity! Bring forth calamity, if I must endure it to love him!’

‘Do not speak of such dooms. I will not condemn you so.’

‘You need not condemn me. If fate should flounder and ruin should beckon, let me condemn myself.’

Thalo remained reluctant, but he saw in Awldano’s eyes such desperate hope that he could not deny him. Without another word, he nodded once, and they each fell upon the other.

Upon their parting, they took off their clothes and waded into the water together. Before the waterfall, they caught its flow, and as Awldano drank from Thalo’s hands, Thalo drank from his. Then Awldano brushed Thalo’s back, gently drawing the water up his spine and across his shoulders, and kissed the back of his neck.

‘Let yourself be unburdened,’ he said, ‘from the weight of evil words.’

Thalo turned around, put his arms about Awldano, and he kissed him.

They spent a little while longer at Lewvanvek and departed in the afternoon.

But once they had left the cavern, from the river emerged Water-Nela, and she was grimacing.

‘Killer of my kin,’ she said to herself, ‘wearer of my water, long have I awaited you. What is lost is lost for good, but it can be avenged. Fate is wholly inexorable.’

And then she spoke that same refrain:

‘Let he who deals be dealt the worst;
twice-over doomed, twice-over cursed.’



Thalo and Awldano were wed in the autumn after the main harvest. Karvalo hosted a feast in their honour, and he made it an event worthy of his hall, but it was decidedly quieter than Essero’s had been earlier that year.

Before they went to the hall, Seyglena came to the room where Thalo and Awldano were preparing themselves, and she bade Awldano leave, that she could speak privately with Thalo. Awldano granted her that.

Seyglena sat down and said, ‘Awldano speaks highly of you, Thalo, and much more so than many others.’

‘He is my husband,’ said Thalo.

‘As Karvalo is mine, but that is beside the point. Tell me, would you speak highly of him?’

‘I would.’

‘Then why are you so full of doubt? I hear it clearly enough in your voice, as if some dread weight drags out your every breath, each one spent against your will. Why?’

Thalo did not know how he might respond to this, but Seyglena would not let him be silent.

‘It is a strange fear,’ he said, speaking one truth to hide another, ‘to be the reason for this meal.’

‘Then take comfort,’ said Seyglena. ‘You are not the reason anyone is here. They are here for dinner. Your marriage is incidental to that, but an excuse for three drinks more. Do what you must to enjoy it, for we each have only so many feasts held in our honour. You have one more after this, and you will not be there for it.’

Then Seyglena rose and left the room. If she had meant to provide Thalo any comfort, she had not done at all well.

Now Thalo combed his hair and made his way into the hall. Karvalo was already sitting at the middle of the high table. Thalo sat one seat along, and they said nothing to one another. When Awldano arrived and sat between them, Karvalo arose, had one of the musicians toot his horn, and the hall fell quiet.

‘Oy-oy!’ he said, and the room cheered it back. ‘Hear me! We gather this evening, to feast for my son, Awldano, that greatest and most honourable man, and also his husband. I invite each of you to partake of my food and my drink, to make merry and spread good cheer on this happiest of days. But I encourage you likewise to hold yourselves with the grace and dignity expected of my hall. I will not be saying it twice, and there will be no warnings. Oy-oy.’

The room cheered in return, and they all got on with other things.

As Karvalo spoke, Thalo saw Ormana come into the hall with Kolmago at her side, but not Esleya. He gave her a nod, and she returned it, then sat at a bench near the end of the hall.

Later on, Karvalo had the wedding horn fetched. This was brought forth and placed at the front of the high table, a most marvellous vessel. It was carved from the horn of a bull, bound in silver and wreathed in gold, and etched with many images of the lovers Lota and Gaydea drinking against the troll Nawko. Karvalo arose again, called for quiet, and then urged Sedweo to stand up and sing a fitting song.

‘At once!’ said Sedweo, and bouncing up and down, he spoke these verses:

‘Hark ye and hear my tale to tell,
of love, of drink, of things gone well!
Gaydea did so long to wed
her Lota fair, and so she said,

“Loffalo proud, my lord so stern,
might we be wed if we two earn
the father’s favour, e’er held back,
the only love our lives yet lack;
if we poor two, together one,
with horn of highs, with blood of fun,
should best thy best in that gay game,
whate’er their stock, whate’er their name?”

‘Loffalo now long thought, and stalled,
until he swore an oath and called
his favoured drunk, that choicest sot,
the guzzler troll, the grouch, the grot;
how Nawko roared, so fat and broad,
and as he sat, the drinks were poured.

‘Gaydea first put back her part,
those thoughts of love bound in her heart.
She gulped and glugged and downed with zeal
each fresh-poured horn, each drunkard’s meal,
while fastened in that girl-grabbed head,
she held her hopes that she’d be wed
to Lota dear, her brightest hope,
but ‘spite that love, she could not cope.
She was no match for wet-tongued boor;
for all she drank, he drank yet more.
And though she drank and drank so well,
she toppled quick, and down she fell.

‘Left senseless, she was dragged away
while Nawko saw as clear as day;
she boaked and spewed and hurled in fits,
while Nawko thought with all his wits.
He laughed and croaked in pleased tones,
with joyful jokes and moistened groans,
to see his foe, the girls’ best chance,
sprawled on the floor in soaken trance,
then looked to Lota’s face of care
above her love, hands round her hair,
so keen to free her dearest mate
from wretched throes of mullered fate.

“‘Arise, my love,” she said with pain,
beneath the gaze of drink-fain thane.

“I beg that thee, my love-laid dear,
should kindly words with clear head hear:
this foe we face must be laid low,
but in my breast, I fear I know
that I alone, the softer tongue,
willn’t see this match be rightly won.
So heed me, dear, on bended knees:
arise, my love, I beg thee please!”

‘But though these words were softly said,
no heart-loosed plea could soothe that head.
As Lota looked upon her friend,
that lovèd chum she could not mend,
she knew at once what must be done;
it fell to her to see this won.
So forth she came, one goal alone:
to shove the git from sodden throne.

‘Of wine she drank, that love-spurred lass,
her gulping grim, her coughing crass,
and Nawko too, he drank the same,
new horn and more, their hearts aflame,
each keen to be the winning throat,
to of their tongues soon rightly gloat.
All night and on they drank and drank,
till all was done, till Nawko sank!
The sot was down, too spiffed to think,
for all that booze and all that drink,
while Lota fair kept steady head,
but merried some and flushed all red.

‘Loffalo quickly swelled with rage,
but just as quick he wrought its cage.
Though hurt to see his best drunk lose,
an oath’s an oath—he’d not refuse
to wed to Lota, his dear girl,
Gaydea sly, the tawdry churl.

‘So wed were they with joy-starred eyes,
and time then passed, as oft it flies,
with each stood close by lovèd wife
to hold her dear, make good her life
with heartfelt care for cherished spouse,
that love which quelled the jeering souse.

And with that love they each had vowed,
they eased the heart of one e'er proud,
Loffalo grim, that heart so stern,
whose favour they had fought to earn,
that he, in time, his folly saw,
for ne'er had he been jolly more
than when he drank all gay and fain,
and laughed as one with dearest twain.

‘That is, fine folk, my tale to tell,
of love, of drink, of things gone well.
And since Gaydea longed to wed
her Lota fair, it's e'er been said:
“Put up thy cup in earnest hand,
and drink thy love, that good oaths stand.”’

When Sedweo was done, he cheered an ‘Oy-oy!’ and received one in reply, and he did a little jig because he was very drunk.

Thalo and Awldano each stood up and linked arms, and Seyglena took up the wedding horn. She first presented this to Awldano, who took a long sip of the wine, and Thalo did the same, and then Karvalo drank for the witnesses. Finally, Seyglena spat into the wine, took a sip herself, and splashed the rest onto the fire. Thus was the marriage fastened.

Thalo later found his way to Ormana's side. After she congratulated him, he noted that Esleya had not come to dinner. He asked her how she was.

‘Oh!’ said Ormana. ‘How she maddens me! Utterly miserable! I understand that well enough—I often feel the same way. Not a day goes by without me thinking of my father, of what was lost, and what can never be regained. But that was some time ago now. I cried, and I smiled, and I got on with things, but she will not. I wish I could help her, but she will not allow it, and neither will she help herself. We, I fear, are stuck. Yes, it is as if we are in a bog. Kolmago is free of it—he is over in the grass, wishing he had taken another path, but glad at least to be beyond the worst of it—yet my mother and I are still in the mud. I am trying to get myself out, to push through and pull myself up, but I cannot. I have my mother's hand in mine, and she is lying face-first in the peat, waiting for it to swallow her. I dare not release her hand, Thalo—I dare not abandon her—but as long as I cling to her, I cannot free myself. I need to get her out of it before it consumes us both, but she will not allow it. It is a wretched place to be. I know not what I ought to do.’

Nor did Thalo know what he ought to say, so he put his arms around her and gave her an encouraging pat on the shoulder. After a moment, Ormana

stepped back.

‘No,’ she said, ‘this is a day for joy. You are smiling at last, and I ought not let my woes steal that from you.’

The wedding games were played on the next day. Thalo and Awldano led opposing teams in the rope pulling, although Thalo was very unwilling to take part in this. He only agreed because everyone else threatened to abuse him if he did not. I have been told it was once customary in those parts for newlyweds to lead opposing sides in a contest of this sort, but I have never heard of another such example.

There were many other games, and at the end of the day, Solmodo won the barrel, as he always did. A chap named Kettelo Brows took the rag.

There is absolutely nothing more to be said about the wedding.

XXXII

The Seeds of Strife

Let us now turn our attention back to Klagenn. Word of Gaymono's failure to avenge his father did not come home until he had been dead for some two and a half months, and it came in the mouth of a woman called Yewe, who was a professional trader. She had recently been to deal with the Lord of Pearmol, and though he had afforded her no consideration, she had heard of the deaths of two northerners who picked a fight with him and paid the price. At once, her ears pricked up.

'This,' she said, 'might yet prove to have been a profitable venture.'

Yewe tried to glean as much knowledge about the matter as she could, but no one could give her much more than one name alone: Gaylodho the Earl.

In the days since Gaylodho's death, Meola had become the most prominent person at Klagenn, having inherited his house and much of his wealth. She was accordingly the highest authority in the town, and when Yewe arrived and asked to be shown to the person in charge, she was brought to Meola.

Meola asked her who she was and why she had come.

'I have heard some interesting things,' said Yewe, 'concerning Gaylodho the Earl. Tell me, did you know him?'

'I knew him,' said Meola. 'He was my husband.'

'Then tell me this: have any relatives of yours made their way southwards to Pearmol of late?'

'Two of his relatives, yes, though I do not consider them to be mine. They were his son, Gaymono, and Gaymono's wife, Broyndea. I have been told they ended up heading to Samnew, though we know nothing of what came to pass thereafter. Why do you ask about this?'

'I know what happened. What would you pay for my knowledge?'

'Nothing. I wish to think no more of them than I must.'

As Meola said this, an elderly woman came into the room. She was called Pala, and she was Broyndea's grandmother.

'Cheapskate,' she said. 'Rotten, sodden cheapskate. Where is your honour?'

Where is your love for your kinsfolk? If you do not pay this woman and hear her knowledge, such strife will strangle your household that you will forever regret it. And I know this to be true, for I shall sow the seeds myself.'

'If you insist,' said Meola. 'Tell me what you know, Yewe woman, and I will reward you accordingly.'

Then they agreed a price, and Yewe said that Gaymono and Broyndea had taken up arms against Karvalo, Lord of Pearmol, and that both had died with neither honour nor glory.

'Oh!' said Pala, and she went weeping from the house.

'This,' said Meola, 'is saddening news. How woeful it is that my husband should lie yet unavenged, that his son's every effort should amount to such a paltry attempt at justice. It is disgraceful.'

Yewe asked for her payment, but Meola refused.

'If you think I will pay you for so souring my mood,' she said, 'you had best buy yourself a brain.'

Then she shoed Yewe from the house, who sailed away from Klagenn and out of the story.

In the following days, Meola spent much time considering her options. She thought she might lay the matter of vengeance aside and live the rest of her life as best she could without it, but she could not bring herself to that. No, when she went outside one evening, sat before Gaylodho's burial stone, and looked up the valley, she knew in her heart that she could not abide inaction. Watching the sunset, she saw the evening twilight filling the woods where once Asfoa's house had stood, and where her husband was murdered.

'The sun has set,' she said, 'but my spirit will not sink likewise. Justice must be done.'

If anyone could force Karvalo to yield the murderer, Meola determined, it would surely be the king, and so she embarked on a journey to visit each of the earls and encourage them to demand that the king intervene in the matter. She first visited Bealnew, where Beyla still held the earldom, and requested lodging in her house. Being a person of high status, she was granted that pleasure, and she spent the next few weeks there. Time and again, she tried to convince Beyla to support her in beseeching the king, though she was always turned away.

'Though I would very much like to put my fist up the king,' said Beyla, 'the time is not right. We must be cautious, Meola, and I fear you may share your late husband's temperament.'

'What do you mean by that?' said Meola.

'You are a guest in my house, but not an honoured one.'

'Fie! I came here in search of honest folk with honest hearts, but it seems I would have better luck seeking a phallus between your thighs.'

Meola left Bealnew shortly thereafter, and the road took her northwards to Fawnavol. The earl there was a woman called Balkena, and her seat was at a town called Srandar. Meola spent the winter with her, but nothing came of her stay there. She left again once the new year was underway, and amid a similar quarrel.

In the next months, Meola stayed at Eyssavek in Rogavol, then Mornawl in Syenavol, and then Syammol in Syamlavol, and she found no luck anywhere. Though none of the earls had any kind words for the king, they were not in the mood for warring when so many of them yet remembered the last time it had come to that.

Then, while she was still over at Syammol, she sat on a grassy knoll one evening to watch the sunset, just as she had before she left Klagenn.

‘O mighty sun!’ she said. ‘How is it that you let your spirit darken so each night, and yet still you find the strength to rise again each morning? I beg you, do not let your light dwindle. My spirit is dark already, and if it should further blacken tonight, I fear it may never regain its light.’

Then something strange unfolded. As Meola’s face fell weeping into her palms, she felt a hand fall softly upon her shoulder. She turned to face its bearer, and she saw at her side a boy, but not just any boy. This boy wore the face of her very own son, young Kolbeo.

‘What sort of vision are you?’ she said.

‘I am no vision,’ said Kolbeo Not. ‘I have come to guide you on behalf of my master.’

‘And who is your master?’

‘You will know her well, for her name is Meola. Now heed me! You must not let your heart’s sun set, not until you have the vengeance you seek.’

‘But all is lost, and I most of all. All I have done has come to nothing. I have won nothing but grief and sorrow. I have watched as good folk die at my urging, too blind to have loved them while they yet lived. Fair vengeance is beyond me now. There can be only scorn for she who scorns.’

Kolbeo Not pointed to the setting sun and said, ‘When the sun sets, the day will be lost, and it will be lost for good. Yet the sun will rise again, and a new day with it. Arise, Meola! What is lost is lost for good, but it can be avenged. Arise, Meola! Arise and avenge!’

Then Meola arose and said, ‘I will! O craven sun, flee! Bring forth the night, that my heart’s sun may shine all the brighter!’ She turned to thank Kolbeo Not for his guidance, but he had vanished without a sound. She put her hand on her heart and said, ‘My son, I do this for you, for your father, and for the honour of all our kin.’

Meola set out for Bealnew once more. The journey was long, but she found

her strength growing with every step. When at last she arrived, she came into the earl's house and found Beyla chairing an assembly of the lesser magnates. Without a thought for propriety, she burst into the room, drew her beltknife, and cast it to the ground.

'Beyla!' she said. 'I have come at the behest of fate itself to contest your earldom, and to claim it as my own. Will you meet me, or will you yield?'

Beyla shook her head and said, 'I will meet you as I met your husband. It will go the same way again.'

And it did. Beyla soon summoned a full assembly at Fnoytovl, and there she and Meola spoke against one another. However, while Meola had plenty of conviction, that was about all she had. In the days since her arrival at Bealnew, she had met with only a few of the magnates, and she had been able to offer them little more than notions of justice and pride.

'I have told you,' Meola might have said, 'about the murder of my husband, who was once your earl, and that is but one hair on the wretched head of the kingship. The king lords over us from the south, thinking himself fit to govern us, and yet I daresay he has never set foot north of Fegennas.'

'That may be so,' a magnate might have said in reply, 'but I have no stake in such matters either way. What difference does it make whether I pay tribute to the earl's man or the reeve's? I lose in either case, and I would rather know what I stand to lose with Beyla, than risk everything with you.'

Thus, when the magnates were to pick their earl, they chose Beyla.

'This is my earldom,' she said, 'and so it will be until my dying day.'

Meola then wept beneath a tree as the magnates made their way back to Bealnew, and she did not go back herself until the sun had set.

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While Meola was at Bealnew, so too was Bane-of-the-Tongues, watching it all unfold on Karvalo's behalf. They sent news of Meola's failed challenge back to Pearmol, whereupon Karvalo grew concerned.

'If this matter goes unaddressed,' he said, 'it may become a problem for me, and more so than it already has been.'

'Perhaps we should quiet her?' said Thorreda. 'Once and for all, as it were.'

'That will not be sufficient. We have a better option, one which will strip this Meola woman of all her influence, and one which will likewise imperil the earldom itself.'

Then Karvalo sent his instructions back up to Bane.

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After failing to claim the earldom, Meola remained at Bealnew for a little while, trying to claw back some of her esteem. While she was there, Enlovo the Reeve arrived to meet with Beyla. This was just over two years after he had been appointed to the high-reeveship, and he had spent much of that time either in the south with the king, or else hidden away at Andenn tending to personal affairs.

‘What you mean,’ said Beyla, ‘is that you have no time for your proper obligations, and yet somehow plenty for all manner of depravities and vices. But what more can be expected of the king’s lapdogs? They learnt from their master, after all.’

‘I will not tolerate such a slight,’ said Enlovo, ‘and nor will I tolerate your company a moment longer.’

Then Enlovo left, and as he went, he wrapped his hand about the hilt of a beautiful dagger on his belt, and then swung his hip towards Beyla.

Beyla only scoffed, saying, ‘He is not the sort of man his forebears were.’

Beyla’s daughter, Godleda, was also standing nearby, and she noted this exchange.

On the same day, Meola forced Enlovo to sit with her. She told him about everything that had happened following Gaylodho’s death, and she asked him if he could take the matter up with the king and have him force the Lord of Pearmol to turn over the murderer.

‘Why should I?’ said Enlovo. ‘I met the Lord of Pearmol a while ago, and he seemed chuffed indeed to have that Thennelo man at his side. I expect he would not turn him over unless he had no other option.’

‘Then give him no other option,’ said Meola. ‘If even the king cannot do that, what sort of king is he?’

‘The king can, but I would rather he did not. I am doing very well for myself at the moment, and I would like to keep it that way.’

‘Have you no shame? Is there no dignity at all within you?’

‘As the king’s foremost representative in this land, I must ward his peace. I fear you are threatening that, Meola, so we shall resolve this here and now. If you set this matter aside and go home, I will offer you compensation for the loss of your husband.’ Enlovo took from his belt that same dagger he had earlier flashed at Beyla, and he withdrew it from its sheath, glinting in the light. ‘This is Thrawre, a blade borne by many of my forebears, and which my father gifted to me upon my accession of the high-reeveship. It was with this dagger that my great-grandfather, mighty Rollayvo, slew Folgono the King, and it is worth more than any sum of silver, though I myself bear no great fondness for it. If you lay your quest aside, Meola, I will in turn gift this treasure to you.’

‘Very well,’ said Meola. ‘I will do as you ask.’

But though Meola accepted Enlovo's gift gladly, she had no intention at all of keeping her promise. She left their meeting place with the dagger in her hand and thoughts of vengeance yet in her head, but she did not go unseen. Bane was watching.

That night, when everyone was asleep, Bane crept into Beyla's house and stole the dagger Thrawre, believing it to be Meola's. They went into the room where Beyla was sleeping (she slept alone), covered her face with a pillow, and cut her throat. Beyla awoke at once, sputtering into the pillow, but she died quickly and quietly. Bane cast the bloody dagger to the floor, and then escaped through the window, though they did not leave the town.

Enlovo himself discovered Beyla's body shortly thereafter. He came into her bedroom to rouse her from her sleep and give her a piece of his mind, but instead he found her dead in her bed, his ancestral dagger on the floor. His surprise very soon gave way to panic, and he tried to hide the dagger, but his desperate, haphazard rummaging served only to make a commotion. Those who slept closest to the bedroom overheard him, and they came to the scene to find him standing beside Beyla's dead body, his hands bloody from holding the murder weapon.

Godleda stood among them, and she said, 'Murderer! The king's dog is my mother's murderer! How do you defend yourself, Enlovo, if you dare deny this deed?'

Enlovo said he had not murdered Beyla, but had instead only discovered her body.

'But the blood yet adorns the blade,' said Godleda. 'It is your blade, in your hand. I saw it on your belt just this morning as you swung it at my mother. I took that to be a threat, but I now know it was a promise of treachery to come.'

'No!' said Enlovo. 'I gave this dagger to Meola. She must have done this, she who contested the earldom and lost, who we all know to be of vengeful disposition. There can be no doubt about it!'

Though Enlovo spoke with utter conviction, none would be swayed.

Godleda said, 'You, Enlovo, are a fool, but even you are not so lacking in sense that you would part with so eminent a blade. No, your guilt is beyond doubt. You alone have been discovered here, my mother's blood upon your skin, staining your honour. But that, it seems, is not disgraceful enough for you. Not only would you murder the earl, but you would seek to blame another. Meola and my mother were often at odds, but I know that her heart is unerring. She knows what is moral, and what is right. There is no such grief-fed frenzy that could move her to so deceitful a deed.'

Enlovo said, 'You must believe me! I had no part in this!'

But no one believed him.

‘There can be no reconciliation here,’ said Godleda.

Then, as Beyla’s heir, she proclaimed Enlovo an outlaw and commanded those nearby to set upon him. This they did, but they did not get him. Enlovo dropped the dagger and flung himself out the window. He pushed a nearby man off his horse and rode it home to Andenn without stopping. At home, he closed the gate and bade his thanes protect him with their lives.

Godleda held the earldom on her mother’s behalf until the magnates could be assembled once more for another election. Beyla ended up being succeeded by a woman called Solvega. She was Enlovo’s sister and another ally of the king. Though none who backed her admitted it, everyone knew she had spent much of the king’s wealth buying the magnates’ support.

Solvega’s first act was to revoke Enlovo’s outlawry. Beyla’s old allies all decried this, but Solvega had enough of her own to prevent it becoming a fight. Even so, Enlovo did not want to stay in Norlonn any longer. He had his thanes escort him southwards, but he was attacked by a mob as he came out of Andenn. Though he was wounded in the arm, he survived and managed to get himself across Fegennas, whereafter he stopped over at Pearmol to rest awhile. Karvalo granted him his hospitality, and Enlovo told him everything he knew about the recent events in Eylavol.

‘What a shame,’ said Karvalo, ‘that this should all have come to pass.’

‘Everything was going so well,’ said Enlovo, ‘and now all is lost.’

‘Not all.’

No one had blamed Meola, but Karvalo deemed Enlovo’s supposed guilt to be satisfactory enough.

After a few days, Enlovo left Pearmol for Syorbak. Karvalo offered to lend him one of his ships, but Enlovo refused this.

‘Fate has had me suffer enough,’ he said. ‘I will not risk any further woe by putting out to sea.’

He set off on a horse, and he and his thanes soon came to Syorbak at last. The king offered them all his protection and a place in his hall.

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Meola left Bealnew the morning after Beyla was murdered. Though she was not the murderer, and no one at Bealnew meant to accuse her of the crime, she did not want to be there if they changed their minds. She packed her things and resumed her tour of the earldoms, this time heading westwards. She had no luck with Frewdha, the Earl of Syagavol, whereafter she came to Kyalannes, the seat of the Earl of Noynavol.

The earl at that time was a tall, broad, and imposing man named Thrandeo.

He was a warrior of great renown, and he had fought against the elder Arkelo when he brought his army up to Norlonn, though he was barely a man at the time. His father was called Fero, and he was beholden to Kolmodo the Earl. Thrando's mother was a woman called Anthroma, who was one of Kolmodo's chiefest attendants. Fero and Anthroma had six children together, of whom Thrando was the eldest. Younger than him were two brothers, called Kolvero and Sammodo, then two sisters, called Welrava and Orthroma, and then another brother, called Lossero.

Fero died fighting at Falswol, where he stood alongside his eldest sons, Thrando and Kolvero. Both his sons survived the battle, but while Kolvero went back to Kyalannes with the earl, Thrando was sent riding northwards to Syenavol in search of help.

After the battle, the king took a few days at Ewmennes to consider the way forward. The Noyns had laid waste to a large portion of his army, but they had borne many losses themselves, and their spirit was low. He decided to make the most of this situation and took his army westwards to Kyalannes, where Kolmodo was resting. Some of those within the town were able to get away before the king's army arrived, but many left too late, and were either slain as they went, or forced to flee back behind the walls. The king had his warriors surround the town, attempting to starve his foes into surrender, though this did not come to pass.

By then, morale within Kyalannes had already fallen so low that a group of Kolmodo's closest allies determined they would have better odds betraying him and appealing to the king's mercy than if they sat and starved to death. Thus, they swarmed the gate in the night, threw it open, and welcomed the king. He rushed his warriors inside before the gate could be closed, and a great slaughter followed. Everyone in the town was a foe, including those who had opened the gate, and all but a very fortunate few were slain.

Anthroma was in Kolmodo's house with all but one of her children when a gang of the king's men burst inside. Kolvero and Sammodo picked up an axe each, but that only got them killed faster. Welrava hid herself in a storeroom, but the man who found her bashed her head with the pommel of his sword, then threw her out of the room to be set upon by his comrades. Orthroma and Lossero, the youngest pair, both clung to their mother in terror, but they were peeled away, put in bonds, and made to watch on as Anthroma was stripped and butchered on the floor. When the king's men were done, only those who had been taken captive survived—Kolmodo and the children of the household, among whom were Orthroma and Lossero.

Only then did the king come into Kyalannes. He went up to Kolmodo's house, and there he found the earl bound on the floor and the children held

likewise around him. The king had the children lined up on their knees, and Kolmodo was knelt opposite them.

‘Children,’ said the king, ‘your master has fought against his own, and has thereby fastened his fate, and that of all his people. Know that this could have been avoided, but his pride made it certain.’

Then he bowed his head, and one by one, the children were stabbed through the back. All the while, the king gripped Kolmodo’s head, forcing him to face them.

‘Do not look away!’ he said. ‘This is your cause, your purpose, your fault.’ When the last of the children was dead, the king picked up his sword. ‘This is the cost of defiance.’

Then he chopped off Kolmodo’s head.

Thrandeo did not return to Kyalannes. While he was with Gova, the Earl of Syenavol, another survivor brought news of the massacre. He said the king had entered the town and slain everyone within. Thrandeo asked what had become of his family, but the survivor did not know.

‘No one was spared,’ he said. ‘Man and woman, young and old—all met the same fate. I do not know what became of your kinsfolk, but if they were at Kyalannes, they are dead.’

Upon hearing these words, Thrandeo fell weeping to his knees, and he vowed not to rest until the king was defeated.

However, this news was all Gova needed to make her decision. She said she would not fight the king and dismissed Thrandeo. He travelled westwards to Syamlavol, and he outlasted the fighting, but he never had the chance to bring his vengeance against the king.

Thus did Thrandeo hear Meola’s plea with eager ears.

‘I will support you,’ he said, ‘but we will not petition the king.’

‘Say more,’ said Meola.

‘I have heard that the high-reeve himself murdered your earl, and that no justice has been done. Now you tell me that much the same happened to your husband, an earl of like stature, slain by a man who is now warded by the king’s lackey? Such ills must be met with the appropriate severity. The king’s father claimed this land with bloodshed, and with bloodshed shall it be freed. With bloodshed shall your husband be avenged, my kinsfolk avenged, our people avenged. The king will die, and I will kill him!’

Then Thrandeo swept out of the room.

Meola lowered herself to her knees, stretched her hands across the floor, and said, ‘Kolbeo! My dear Kolbeo, how I thank you. You alone have given me the strength to see this through. At last, my efforts bear fruit. I hope only that the fruit is sweet.’

XXXIII

Trewgeo's Folly

There was a man called Rogyoro. He was beholden to Yalmalo Rogwalonnan when he was the Steward of Ennaslad, and when he went north with the king, so too did Rogyoro. He proved himself to be a stalwart fighter, but nonetheless a shrewd and discerning fellow. Though Yalmalo died at Falswol, Rogyoro survived the battle, choosing not to avenge his lord, but to save himself, and likewise survived the war. He returned to Pearmol with Karvalo, and there he became a distinguished member of Gonwela's retinue. Neither she nor Karvalo held his betrayal of Yalmalo against him.

Rogyoro later took up the Stewardship of Syarglad. Syarglad was a steward town of the Lordship of Samnew, but the steward was customarily appointed instead by the Lord of Pearmol. The previous holder was Alfrela, the youngest daughter of Gonwela, although Arleno, Lord of Samnew, was the one to offer it. He sought to make amends following the death of her husband, Godmalo, whom he had so eagerly sent off to war. Alfrela did not want to accept this. Her heart was yet much too heavy for one so young, but her mother forced her.

'Foolish girl,' said Gonwela. 'I raised you better than to turn your nose up at a hot meal freely given. You will accept this offer, or you will regret it.'

And Alfrela, the canny lass, managed both. She accepted Arleno's offer, and she held the stewardship for nine years, hating each twice as much as the last, until she could bear it no longer. She cast aside her lordly life and went southwards to Baklalonn, where she became a priest for a while.

Gonwela then granted the stewardship to Rogyoro, and Arleno concurred. Upon Gonwela's death, Karvalo made his own oath with Rogyoro, reaffirming his position. Rogyoro would hold the Stewardship of Syarglad for very many years thereafter.

When Arleno himself died, he was, of course, succeeded by Trewgeo. He deemed Rogyoro to be little more than Karvalo's lapdog intruding in another lord's domain, and he wanted nothing more than to oust him from the town. This did not come to pass, however, for Trewgeo was counselled against it.

‘Rogyoro is a man of utmost honour,’ said his uncle Kardano. ‘I have fought beside him, and I know him to be true. He may be Karvalo’s man, but he will serve you just as nobly, if only you would let him.’

‘And furthermore,’ said his aunt Yorrana, ‘it would be best not to provoke Karvalo if you can help it. I understand you have your differences, but you must put yourself above them if you are to hold your lordship with dignity.’

‘That is no concern,’ said Trewgeo. ‘I have the king behind me. Karvalo is a bull-man, but even he knows when to lift his horns.’

To this, Yorrana said, ‘Heed me, Trewgeo. Do not count upon the king to free you from the consequences of your every fault. He is a valuable ally, but he will not swim to your rescue if you choose to drown yourself.’

Trewgeo did as Yorrana bade. He did not oust Rogyoro from Syarglad, but neither did he give him his blessing.

So things were quiet for Rogyoro until a year or so later. That was shortly after Karvalo discovered Trewgeo had been responsible for the failures of his sheriffs. He went to Syarglad to make an agreement with Rogyoro.

‘This matter,’ said Karvalo, ‘cannot be resolved peacefully. When the time comes, I bid you stand not beside your lord by right, but by the lord who stands beside you. And worry not about your mutual oaths. I will not ask you to break them before Trewgeo breaks them himself.’

‘Say nothing of our oaths,’ said Rogyoro, ‘for no such oaths yet bind us.’

Then Karvalo went home, and he was right chuffed with himself.

Early in the following year, Karvalo visited Rogyoro again, and he asked him to invite Trewgeo to Syarglad. Trewgeo accepted the invitation, but he did so begrudgingly. When he arrived, he came to the gate and demanded to be let in, but the gate did not move. He called out again and again, and he received no reply, until Karvalo appeared atop it.

‘Trewgeo!’ he said. ‘Welcome to Syarglad. Tell me, why is it I must suffer you now?’

‘Bah!’ said Trewgeo. ‘I have no time for this.’

‘You always have time for me, man. Indeed, you seem to have no time for anyone else, or is your wife merely too timid to ever be seen? If only you were the same.’

‘I did not come here to listen to your bluster. Where is Rogyoro?’

‘Rogyoro has nothing to do with our meeting here, nor will he. You will not turn him against me.’

Trewgeo now understood what Karvalo meant, and a great anger welled within his breast, but he held it in.

Karvalo continued, ‘You want to take my sheriffs from me? Then I will take your steward, for such is my right. Your domain is mine, your hall mine, your

life mine. You will not step foot beyond this gate unless I alone will it.'

Though he was right fuming, Trewgeo turned away without a word, and he went home. Karvalo went home likewise.

Not three days later, Trewgeo, against all good advice, sent a troop to lay siege to Syarglad and force Rogyoro out. They were led by a beautiful young man named Yorvadho, and he was called Yorvadho the Tall, because he was quite tall. They set up outside the town and tried to force their way inside, but Rogyoro kept up the defence long enough to send a ship northwards to Pearmol. When Karvalo heard what was going on, he leapt up from his seat, his heart filled with as much pleasure as rage.

'That miscreant!' he said. 'He will rue this day!'

Karvalo sent Awldano to ride to Syarglad with all haste and break the siege. Thalo went in his company atop relentless Ondayo, as often he was, and they reached Syarglad as the evening was setting in. Awldano held his axe aloft, let out a fearsome howl, and rushed forth his troop. The folk from Samnew saw them coming, all glittering in the sunset, and that was enough. They fled the scene before any blows could be exchanged.

Awldano brought his horsemen to a halt before the gate, where Thalo came up beside him.

'Why are we stopping?' he said. 'We must follow them, run them down, and lay waste to the lot of them. Not one should leave this place alive!'

'No,' said Awldano. 'There is no need for that. We were sent here to clear them off, and we have done just that.'

'And what if they return?'

'Then so shall we. But for now, our work is done.'

Thalo was not best pleased with this, but it was not his place to say so.

Awldano and his company spent that night at Syarglad and went home the next day.

After this affair, Trewgeo knew Karvalo would be more than willing to meet him in battle.

'It seems,' he said, 'that I must get ahead of him.'

Then things were quiet for a couple of months while Trewgeo made his arrangements. As the summer was waning, he gathered his most trusted thanes and told them what he meant to do.

'We must be the first to move,' said Trewgeo. 'To that end, I have devised a most cunning plan. We will muster all the might we can, force our way into Pearmol, and capture Karvalo. Then I will do with him as I will, and this will all be behind us.'

Everyone else in the room agreed that this was a terrible idea.

'What nonsense,' said Yorrana. 'How do you mean to get into Pearmol?'

None but old Folgono have done so, and even he had to be let in.'

'Know that I love you, nephew,' said Kardano, 'but never have I heard such nonsense. Such an attack would risk everything, and for what?'

'I trust in my companions,' said beautiful Yorvadhó, 'but we are not fit for fighting against the men of Pearmol, at least not by ourselves.'

Trewgeo said, 'What treachery is this? Am I not the Lord of Samnew? Are you not my retinue, bound to do my bidding?'

'You are the Lord of Samnew,' said Yorróna, 'bound to serve your thanes as they serve you. Sending them all to die at Pearmol is unwise.'

'Shut up! I am your lord, so do as I say!'

Then Trewgeo left the room.

Kardano agreed to lead the attack on Pearmol, even though he knew how it would end. He was a fellow of such profound dignity, such unbending honour, that he could not refuse his lord, even if it would cost him his life. Yorróna, however, was much more reasonable. She could not let this go ahead. Thus, she gathered as many of Trewgeo's thanes as she could and marched them into his hall to depose their lord.

'What is the meaning of this?' said Trewgeo.

'You are not fit to hold the lordship,' said Yorróna. 'I have come to relieve you of it. Surrender to me, and there will be no need to fight.'

'I will do no such thing!'

Then Trewgeo called forth his bodyguard, and they all set upon Yorróna and her allies. The fight was long and hard, but when it was done, Trewgeo's side took the victory. Yorróna was captured and put in bonds, while those who had fought alongside her were all either slain or forced to flee.

Trewgeo held Yorróna captive for a few days while things settled down, after which he had her dragged outside and into the town. She was pushed down to her knees, and Kardano stood above her, his sword drawn.

'This wretched woman,' said Trewgeo, 'tried to usurp my lordship. There can be forgiveness for that.'

Kardano lifted his sword, and shedding a single tear, he said, 'Forgive me, my sister.'

Then he stabbed her through the back.

'I am Trewgeo,' said Trewgeo, 'and I alone am the Lord of Samnew!'

Then he went back inside.

Although Yorróna failed to seize the lordship, her death was not wholly fruitless. These events left Trewgeo's retinue in such a sorry state that even he could not justify attacking Pearmol. He put his plan aside, and it would never come to fruition.

On the day of Yorróna's death, her daughter, Odwala, fled Samnew. She

left in the company of only one other, an accomplished thane named Oze, who had fought alongside Yorrna, and who had since pledged himself to Odwala in her stead. Oze was sometimes called Oze the Bald, for they were bald. This was uncommon among well-to-do folk in those days, except, of course, for old men who had no say in the matter. But unlike them, Oze chose to be bald, and they often got strange looks for it.

Odwala and Oze came to Pearmol and fell upon Karvalo's mercy.

'I bring dire news from Samnew,' said Odwala. 'Lord of Pearmol, I bid you hear me and house me.'

'Tell me what news this is,' said Karvalo, 'and only then will I decide what I am to do with you.'

Odwala told Karvalo all she knew. She said that Trewgeo had planned to attack Pearmol, and that Yorrna had tried to seize control of his retinue and prevent it, though she was slain in the effort.

'A likely story,' said Karvalo. 'Even stones-for-brains Trewgeo would not be so reckless as to fight me here. No, he has no doubt sent his cavegirl cousin to spread lies in my house, and to thereby attempt to induce in me great folly. To that, I say this: your efforts are futile. I see through you, Odwala woman. I will house you as I house a pig set for slaughter.'

Then Karvalo had Odwala bound in ropes. Oze drew their sword to defend her, but they were bested and bound likewise, whereupon the sorry pair were dragged out of the hall and stored in the dark to await their punishment.

Yet their captivity was brief, for keen-eyed Eyge arrived the next day, and she told Karvalo about all that had happened at Samnew. She said much the same as Odwala had the day prior.

Karvalo heard this with his head shaking, and he said, 'I dare not believe it, but you are a trustworthy pair of eyes.'

He had Odwala and Oze released immediately. When they came back to the hall, he knelt before them and offered them each his sincerest apologies.

'But you must surely understand my need to be wary,' he said. 'Stay in my house awhile and let there be no need for satisfaction.'

'I understand,' said Odwala, and she bade Karvalo rise. 'I fear I would have enjoyed no better treatment at home than I have here. Let there be no need for satisfaction.'

Thereafter, Odwala and Oze remained at Pearmol together, and Karvalo would in time be glad to have them. He was likewise pleased by Trewgeo's troubles.

'We need concern ourselves with him no longer,' he said as he spoke with Thorreda one morning. 'I have long sought to bring him down, but he is doing a fine enough job of it himself.'

‘Do not be complacent,’ said Thorreda. ‘Has he not proven his willingness to act without thought?’

‘Such a foe is more easily managed than one who is careful and cunning, so long as I am the mightier of us. I will not be complacent, but neither will I be too forward about things. Time has ever been my most dependable ally.’

Then they parted ways.

XXXIV

The Earls and the King

Now we are with Meola again. She and Thrandeo put their minds together and sought to bring the other earls to their side. This was no simple task, but the earls found it easier to get behind Thrandeo, the mighty warrior, than Meola, the bitter widow, particularly after the high-reeve's supposed murder of Beyla the Earl. By the time Meola had been working with Thrandeo for nearly a year, they had the backing of all the other earls but one: Solvega, the Earl of Eylavol. Meola and Thrandeo agreed that she would not be easily parted from the king's influence and chose to ignore her for now.

With allies behind her at last, Meola travelled southwards to meet the king as the year was coming to its end. She went alongside Thrandeo, who brought along a company from Kyalannes, and Seybeo, the Earl of Syenavol, and some of his thanes. When they came to Syorbak, the king agreed to hear their pleas, but he stipulated that only one of them would be allowed to come through the gate. Meola, Thrandeo, and Seybeo each put themselves forward.

'I can see,' said Seybeo, 'that my conviction pales next to that of you two. I shall withdraw. Which of you will join me?'

'Certainly not me,' said Thrandeo. 'Why should one of my high standing let another walk before me? It would not be fitting to let the foremost men of our lands be represented by anything less than themselves.'

'And certainly not me,' said Meola, 'for it was my striving that brought you here in the first place. Were it not for me, you would still be slumped in your chair wishing you had not cowered in exile as your kinsfolk were slaughtered.'

Thereupon, Seybeo knew that this would not be resolved with words alone. Neither Meola nor Thrandeo would withdraw and let the other go inside, so he proposed another solution.

'Firstly,' he said, 'we must be three of one mind. There can be no grudges between us, lest they turn our attention away from the matter at hand. Thrandeo, Meola was the wife of a man much our equal and is thusly of the same standing as the two of us. Meola, we both know that Thrandeo has not cowered once in

his life, so firm is his spirit. I bid you make amends.'

Meola and Thrandeo each took the other's hand and apologised.

'Secondly,' said Seybeo, 'I shall propose a fair resolution to this quarrel.' Meola and Thrandeo agreed to this, and Seybeo continued, 'This is your task: whichever of you finds the fellow with the finest feet among us will meet the king. You have until dinner time. I will judge your selections after eating, so as not to spoil my appetite.'

Then Seybeo turned away to oversee the building of the booths.

Thrandeo went away at once and commanded the men in his company to take off their shoes and socks and hitch up their trousers. He lined them up and judged the quality of their feet one by one, but he found them all to be lacking. The finest feet were little better than fair, and the worst were quite unsightly. Dissatisfied, he interrupted the booth building and did the same with the men of Seybeo's company, but he found their feet no finer. In the end, the finest feet he could find belonged to his own young son, who was called Osfero.

'Osfero,' said Thrandeo, 'you get your looks from your beautiful mother, toes and all.'

Meola did not look at anyone's feet, and instead helped with the booths.

When dinner time had come and gone, Seybeo called a council of as many people as could fit in one booth. He asked Meola and Thrandeo if they had each found a pair of feet. They said they had, and Seybeo invited Thrandeo to present the finest feet first. He had Osfero stand up in the middle of the crowd and show off his feet, soft and smooth with youth. Seybeo went to Osfero, and he caressed each foot before taking his seat once more.

'Fair,' said Seybeo, 'but I have felt finer.'

Now it was Meola's turn, and she said, 'I suspect, Seybeo, that the fellow with the finest feet is none other than yourself. Show us.'

Seybeo smiled and arose. He took off his shoes and his socks, revealing so dainty a pair of feet that everyone in the room gasped.

'You flatterers!' he said, and he invited everyone to come forth and feel his feet, that they could be assured of their quality, but there was no need for that. There could be no disputing the victor.

'So it is decided,' said Seybeo. 'Meola shall meet the king and speak on behalf of us all.'

Meola turned to Thrandeo and said, 'Do not be saddened, dear Thrandeo. You will, in time, be glad for this outcome.'

Thrandeo had nothing to say to this and left the room.

Meola went into Syorbak the next day, and as promised, she was granted the king's attention. He asked her why she and her companions had come to his hall, and she said they had three demands to make of him.

‘The first,’ she said, ‘is that the high-reeve should be held accountable for murdering Beyla, the Earl of Eylavol.’

‘Nonsense,’ said the king. ‘Enlovo did not kill her. That was the work of another, the wandering widow, or so I am told, though her name escapes me. What is your second demand?’

‘The second is that Thalo Asfoannan, a man yet warded by the Lord of Pearmol, be held accountable for murdering Gaylodho, Beyla’s predecessor in the earldom.’

‘What the Lord of Pearmol does with his thanes is nothing to do with me. But that reminds me—it was Gaylodho’s widow who slew Beyla, unable to best her rival by honest means, though her name still sits beyond my reach. What is your third demand?’

‘The third is that you relinquish your claim to any kingship in Norlonn.’

‘Had that been the first, we would have saved ourselves some time. Tell me, who are you to make such ridiculous demands of me? You have come in the company of twofold earls. Why do you stand here in their stead?’

‘Meola is my name.’

When the king heard this name, his eyes widened with recognition. ‘The widow walks willingly into my hall. Why should I not slay you here and now, and exact bloody recompense for the murder of your earl?’

‘I have the backing of all of the earls, save only the most spineless of them. If you were to seek vengeance against me for a crime I did not commit, they would see that for what it is—yet another instance of your wilful disdain for our people—and would surely turn to violence in kind. But let us not get ahead of ourselves. After all, why should one who has hitherto been so blind to justice suddenly care to deliver it now?’

The king took a moment to whisper with one of his attendants, and then stood up, saying, ‘Leave my hall at once and return to your companions. I will consider your plea and deliver my ruling in three days’ time.’

Meola turned away and left the hall without another word. When she came back to the booths, Thrandeo and Seybeo both set upon her, eager to know what had happened. She said the king had accused her of murdering Beyla, but she had skilfully warned him against indicting her. On the matter of their demands, she said the king would make his reply in three days.

‘He first said six,’ she said, ‘but I very artfully haggled it down to three.’

Seybeo applauded her guile, while Thrandeo only grimaced.

Over the following days, the king considered what he was to do about his guests. He summoned his council to discuss the matter, and although everyone had something to say, few agreed on any of it. In time, the councillors grew so heated that there was no need for chairs, and one portly fellow threw his across

the room. Soon enough, Rago, the chancellor and the father of both Enlovo the High-reeve and Solvega the Earl, put out his hands and called for dignity.

‘Close your mouths,’ he said, ‘and be done with this madness.’

The king seconded this, and after a short recess, the council resumed with rather less violence.

The last to say their piece was the king’s younger brother, Arneo, who said, ‘Brother, you must maintain your authority. Let nothing assail it! We two alone are our father’s heirs, the heirs to his legacy and his kingdom alike. Do not let his glory wane, nor his kingdom crumble. That would amount to a most dire dishonour.’

The king said, ‘Quite right. Our father’s kingship over Norlonn was granted by none but the will of fate. To lay that aside, to let his legacy be lost, would imperil us all, and not least the northerners themselves.’

The following day was the third since Meola had come into the king’s hall, the day upon which his ruling was to be delivered. With a great throng of his stoutest thanes beside him, he went out of Syorbak to meet his guests. They all came forward to hear him, with Meola, Thrando, and Seybeo standing in a row at the front.

After some initial greetings, the king said, ‘You have asked very much of your king, but he has neither the means nor the willingness to give you any of it. You will get nothing from him but the right to leave here peacefully and promptly.’

At this, Thrando scoffed, and he said, ‘Wretch! You have no right to call yourself my king.’

‘Quell your tongue, man. My kingship in Norlonn was rightly won, and so it will be held for all my days to come.’

‘Rightly won? Tell me, were you there with your father? Were you there when he brought his army into our homes, when he butchered all who stood before him? None were spared—not man nor woman, not the young nor the old, nor even the children, my brothers and sisters. Your father’s blades fell upon them all just the same. If you were there, king, you would know there was nothing right about it.’

‘Tell me then, earl, were you there?’

Thrando said nothing to this. His only reply was the tightening grip on his sword. Meola took his hand in her own and gently lifted it away.

The king went on, ‘My father was thorough, but so upstanding a man could never have stooped so low. Do not presume to tell me what is true and what is right. I am your king, and so I shall remain.’

‘We shall see,’ said Thrando, and then he turned away and went back to his booth. The king turned likewise and went back through the gate.

Meola and the others left Syorbak the next day, and all so cheerless that not a word was said until they had crossed over Fegennas.

In the new year, Thrandeo summoned an assembly of the earls, joined by many of their magnates. They met at Mornawl in Syenavol, and Thrandeo sat at the front of the room with Seybeo and Meola, who was by then as much a member of his retinue as were any of his thanes. They told their peers about everything that had happened in the south, and when Meola had recited the king's words, the room erupted with fury.

'Your anger is understandable,' said Thrandeo, 'but please hold on to it. I wish to propose a solution to our problem, and one which will give you ample opportunity to turn your wrath against those who deserve to suffer it. Do not let your anger flicker out before then.'

The magnates asked him what his solution might be.

'We must rebel against the king. We must oust his dogs from our lands, and if he wishes to reclaim his kingship, he must fight for it, and fight to the last. There is no other way.'

This was a very significant proposal. The magnates were hesitant to rally behind it, and so Meola arose and said, 'Where is your honour? Where is your courage? How many of us must die because of the king's closed eyes before you open yours?'

In turn, Seybeo arose and said, 'And where is your wit? We pay the king's tribute each year, and what have we to show for it? I would venture to say we have nothing at all.'

'Nothing but grief,' said Meola.

'Nothing but disrespect,' said Thrandeo.

They each sat down, whereupon Solvega arose and asked to speak against this most disproportionate proposal. Thrandeo refused.

'No,' he said. 'The time for speaking is over. Now is the time for doing. If you wish to speak against this, speak with your vote.'

Then the earls voted on the matter. Solvega alone opposed rebelling against the king, and six of the earls voted in favour of it. The eighth vote would have been that of Balkena, the Earl of Fawnavol, but she was not present at the time, and Thrandeo refused to let one of her representatives vote on her behalf.

On the first day of summer, they made their rejection of the king official by murdering as many of his reeves as they could. Solvega had not been told about this, but it was brought to her attention shortly before it all unfolded. At once, she sent messengers out to each of the reeves to warn them of their impending murder, but this was not enough to save them all. Most of her messengers either failed to reach the reeves alive, or else they arrived too late. In the end, five of the eight were killed.

Enlovo, the Reeve of Eylavol, survived because he was already in the south with the king, most of his duties having been taken up by Solvega. The only other survivors were Yale, the Reeve of Fawnavol, and Owvo, the Reeve of Rogavol. Yale had received Solvega's messenger and fled into her protection. The rider sent racing off to Owvo never arrived, as her horse tripped on some loose gravel, and she was flung out of her saddle and over a cliff. Nonetheless, when Ollavo, the Earl of Rogavol, brought a troop of warriors to Owvo's house at Nottamol, he and his thanes fought them off. Though many died in the effort, Owvo reached Bealnew, whereafter he and Yale were escorted southwards.

After this, Thrando and Frewdha, the Earl of Syagavol, gathered an army from their earldoms and began a period of frequent raiding in Eylavol, hoping to force Solvega into submission. He also sent Meola back to Bealnew to find support within Solvega's own domain. Solvega let her into the town, but Meola snubbed her entirely, instead seeking a meeting with Godleda Beylannan.

'If my mother were yet alive,' said Godleda, 'I am sure she would be glad to rebel against the king. I will support you.'

Then they started working together to speak against Solvega and her allies at every opportunity, although this did not achieve as much as they hoped it would. After all, Solvega had the king's wealth behind her, and her magnates were not all too eager to support those who were pillaging their homes.

'It is for your own good!' said Meola, but this was not convincing.

When the king heard about all this, he brought the matter before his council. There was much less disagreement this time.

'This threat,' said Arneo, 'must be met swiftly and sternly. Show them that the king is not to be prodded, for the king prods back, and firmly.'

The king agreed with this and set about mustering an army. He made up the bulk of this with a levy from the shires, and then began a tour of the lordships in search of additional fighters. His closest allies were reliable, each putting up a troop in support of their king, but few of the others were forthcoming, not having been given the chance to vote on the matter. Last of all, the king sent trusty Gefyona home to Samnew to get Trewgeo's support, while he made his way to Pearmol.

XXXV

The First King's Plea

When the king came to Pearmol, he came in the company of fifteen big and burly men, each armed and armoured with their very best. Amfredha let them through the gate, and they all went into the hall together. Not until they had waited patiently for a little while did Karvalo come to meet them. He took his seat, and then stood once more to welcome his guests.

'Who are you,' he said, 'and why have you come to my hall?'

'Are your old man's eyes failing you?' said the king.

'Not at all. The problem lies rather with your old man's face.'

The king scoffed and told Karvalo why he had come. He said the earls were unhappy, that he had met two of them at Syorbak and denied their demands, and that they had cruelly slaughtered the larger portion of his reeves in Norlonn.

'A woeful tale,' said Karvalo, 'but what has this to do with me?'

'The earls will not be placated,' said the king. 'Instead, they must be met with all the force I can bring to bear. I am, therefore, mustering an army to take northwards, where my kingly glory—and that of my kingly father—awaits. As my ally and my peer, I bid you support me in this expedition.'

'No.'

'Answer not so swiftly, Lord of Pearmol. As a member of my rede, it is your duty to support your king.'

'Perhaps it would be so, had you put the matter before us, but you did not. As it stands, I have no such obligation to fight your war for you.'

'Understand, the matter is quite urgent. They must be quashed forthwith.'

'Such urgency for a rabble of northerners? If you deem such measly folk a threat, then you are clearly not fit to rule them.'

The king said, 'Quite right. That is why I will make it irrefutably clear that I am. I will show them that they cannot treat their king with such dishonour, that I will not tolerate their disloyalty.'

'Your words are quite commendable, king, but I yet fail to see why I should bother myself with this.'

‘And you yet flaunt your short-sightedness. You are involved in this matter already, whether you would wish to be or not.’

With his gaze fixed unmoving upon the king, Karvalo said, ‘How so?’

‘When I met the earls at Syorbak last winter, they were not alone. Among them stood a woman named Meola, widow to Gaylodho the Earl. She is the one in the middle of all this, the one who brings the earls together. They chose her alone to come into my hall—they respect her above all else, above even each other. And why does she incite them? Why does she make herself the foe of all good folk? Because you denied her the justice she sought. Your man murdered hers, and instead of doing what was right, you turned her away. Now, look what trouble has come of it.’

‘If you think one man’s murder caused all this, you are quite the dullard. Surrendering my thane will do nothing to allay this. And even if it would, let us not forget that you and your high-reeve are no different. Enlovo went and murdered an earl himself—and while she was sitting, no less—and still you shield him. The earls’ grievances are not with me and my thanes, but with you and yours.’

‘Come, we both know Enlovo is no cunning killer.’

‘Indeed. There was nothing remotely cunning about his crime.’

‘I will have you know, I have it on good authority that the murderer was none other than the Meola woman. She had means and motive both. I am told Beyla snubbed her, and so she contested the earldom, lost, and dealt out violent retribution. This would not have happened had you let your little swordsman face the proper justice. That being said, you can make things right between us and also keep your man. You need only provide a troop for my army. Do that, and I will consider this disagreement resolved.’

Without a moment’s thought, Karvalo said, ‘No. You will get nothing from me but the comfort of a bed, the warmth of a fire, and the right to leave in peace. No friend of mine shall set foot in that wretched land, lest they be my friend no longer.’

The king shook his head, stuck out his nose, and went out of the hall. He nonetheless accepted Karvalo’s hospitality, and he and three of his thanes were put up in the hall, while the rest were in booths in the yard. He hoped, having been granted some time to stay, he might be able to change Karvalo’s mind, or else find some other support.

Meanwhile, Karvalo ensured his message was spread to every member of his retinue: no one was to go with the king.

On the following day, the king summoned two of his burliest boys to his side and went hunting for one man in particular. After some searching, they found Thalo out of Pearmol, washing some clothes in the river. The burly men

seized him from the water, dragged him onto the bank, and threw him before the king.

‘Why are you jostling me like this?’ said Thalo.

‘I am your king,’ said the king. ‘I can have jostled whomever I wish to be jostled, and the pleasure today is yours.’

‘I have more important things to be doing.’

‘I am your king. If I wish to speak with you, I shall speak with you. There is certainly nothing more important for you to be doing.’ The king sat down, and he continued, ‘But I will not hold your disrespect against you, Thalo man, for I understand you are a worthy fellow. Tell me, do you know why I am here?’

Thalo nodded. He did not know everything, but he knew enough.

‘Then you will surely understand why I am sitting before you now. I want you to come with me. Your lord has refused to send anyone, but you are your own man, and so I wish to appeal to you directly.’

Thalo only shook his head.

The king said, ‘You should know that the war I wage is a war of your own making. I trust you know a woman named Meola?’

Thalo said nothing, nor did he need to—his wince alone said quite enough.

‘Yes,’ said the king. ‘She is the one behind the earls’ fury. You murdered her husband, and denied any recompense at all, she has moved her countrymen to war. You caused this, Thalo man, but you can likewise end it.’

‘Tell me,’ said Thalo, ‘if I refuse, will you nonetheless seize me and hand me off to die by Meola’s blade, but in your bonds? That is the sense I get.’

‘Fear not. I do not intend to appease the earls. They must learn that I am their king, and I will not be ruled. They are not to make demands of me. No, I have come to you for one reason alone. It would be a great honour to count the man they call Thennelo among my warriors—I am sure that we together could quickly quell these upstart warmongers. I bid you ride with me. Free yourself of this stagnant hall, come north with me, and the glory of Thennelo will rise to even greater heights.’

Thalo considered the king’s plea, his thoughts dwelling upon Asfoa’s dying words. The orphan son of an orphan mother, his glory could only be that which he won for himself. But just the same, he had no family but that which he chose for himself.

‘My lord has forbidden it,’ he said. ‘I am a man of Pearmol, my husband just the same. I will not forsake him.’

The king only sighed. He arose, and the two burly men picked Thalo up and hurled him back into the river.

That evening, Thalo told Awldano about his meeting with the king.

‘He bade me join him,’ he said.

Awldano said, ‘And you refused him, I hope?’

‘I did, but if it were not for you, Awldano, I would have agreed to go.’

‘Then let us both be glad for me.’

Thereafter they hugged and went to bed, but the day’s trials were not yet done. That night, Thalo was beset by another queer dream. There he was, sat at a table in the woods, and about it sat the same host of silver-sheened foxes, the same glittering platter in the middle of the table. Upon this platter lay threefold corpses. The bottommost was Gaylodho, and above him was Gaymono, and Broyndea was on the top.

‘How for!’ said the old fox, for the old fox had now appeared. ‘How for!’

Then all the foxes in the hall—the table was now inside—set upon their meal. And how delightful it was! To see his dead foes devoured, Thalo was moved to a joy unlike any he had known before.

‘Good riddance!’ he said, and he danced a merry jig. The old fox threw him a cup, and he put back a merry swig, only to bring it all sputtering back up.

‘Blood,’ he said, ‘and surely a pig’s.’

‘How for!’ said the old fox again, and that was that.

Thalo awoke in the night, Awldano snoring beside him. He lay back and closed his eyes, but sleep did not reclaim him.

The king remained at Pearmol for a few days more. Thalo did all he could to avoid him, for he feared he had not the strength of will to refuse him twice. To his relief, that strength was never tested. The king left Pearmol with nothing to show for his stay.

On the same day, Karvalo sent a messenger to Bane at Bealnew. Once the messenger had relayed Karvalo’s instructions word-for-word, Bane said, ‘My task is clear. Begone man, lest your dawdling be your doom!’

Then the messenger rode home, and Bane made their way out of Bealnew to await the king’s coming.

XXXVI

The King Goes North

From Pearmol, the king went northwards to Oydawl, not far from the southern bank of Fegennas, where his army was mustering. The full host numbered nearly half a hundred sixties, which put it among the largest amassed by any of his predecessors. They first set off for Fegenlog, intending to cross the river and proceed northwards to Bealnew, whereafter the king would be joined by Solvega the Earl. However, the whole army was brought to a halt mid-crossing when the old forewarden came out of his tower to stop them. Standing alone in the middle of the bridge, his spear aloft, he said he could not allow so large a warband across.

The king came forth at once and said, ‘Move out of my way, man, or I will move you. I am your king. I will cross this bridge whensoever I choose.’

‘You are the king, are you?’ said the forewarden. ‘If you had said so sooner, this embarrassment could have been avoided. The earl has bidden you be let across unimpeded.’

Then the forewarden slunk away. It turned out his comrades had recognised the king’s royal helmet at once, but they had nonetheless let their old foreman try to stop him.

‘It would be quite a lark,’ one of them doubtless said, ‘to let him make such a fool of himself.’

They found the matter rather less of a lark when the forewarden found out about this. He went straight back out to tell the king what had happened, and the whole tower was evacuated. The king had the wardens lined up before his army, and they were each stripped bare and beaten with clubs until they were bruised all over. It was not until every one of them had begged for mercy three times that the king put a stop to this.

‘Your tomfoolery,’ he said, ‘has cost me valuable time, and your penalty yet more so. It is only fitting that you pay the appropriate price.’

Then they were each thrown into the river, and most of them drowned, too weak to get themselves out of the water.

So the king marched his army onwards, but it soon became apparent that the whole expedition had been more than poorly planned. They were far too often stopped by obstacles that could have very easily been avoided, such that they had not travelled even half as far as expected by the time they stopped for the evening.

It was then that Bane-of-the-Tongues crept into the matter. They found the king's booth, where he was discussing the route to Bealnew with some of his chiefest companions, and put their ear against it. After much discussion, the king had agreed a new route, and Bane had heard every detail. As but another shadow in the night, they stole out of the campsite and rushed off westwards.

The next morning, while the king resumed his march up to Bealnew, Bane found their way to none other than Thrandeo, the Earl of Noynavol. He had spent the past months moving around the western reaches of Eylavol with an army of his own, harrying Solvega's magnates in a bid to turn them against her, or else to permanently diminish their number. When Bane came to him, they said the king had come into Eylavol, and that they could tell him exactly what route he was taking to Bealnew.

'Who are you?' asked Thrandeo. 'Why should I trust you?'

'You are my earl,' said Bane, and they did so with a voice much like those heard in Noynavol. 'I came to this land as a trader, but with all that has been happening, it has been more than difficult to find the courage to leave. I was finally able to flee not two nights ago, only to catch sight of the king's army, many sixties strong. I deemed it my duty to tell you about this, that you can turn it to our advantage—we are fellow countrymen, after all.'

'If what you say is true, I am quite glad to have heard it. But tell me this: how do you know the king's course exactly?'

'I am very clever. I know the lay of this land better than many who have lived here all their lives. The king's route is the only route, or the only route worth taking. There is a valley east of here called Thwenawl. There is a high ridge on one side, and the lake Snakkyal stands on the other. The king will pass between them. Need I say more?'

'You need not.'

Then Thrandeo had Bane bound in ropes and rushed his army eastwards. They came to Thwenawl late that afternoon. Thrandeo set some of his warriors up atop the ridge, with a troop of horsemen hidden near each end. There they awaited the king.

Soon enough, the king's army came through the valley just as Bane had foretold. When the bulk of the army was between the ridge and the lake, Thrandeo let up a fearsome cry, and his fighters all put up their shields and rushed down the slope. They formed their line and pressed the attack so swiftly

that the king's army had barely a moment to rally their resistance.

Many on the western side of the valley were killed outright, struck down by spear or axe before they had even a hand on their own. Many more took flight the moment battle was met—much of the king's army had been levied from his shires, comprised more of over-eager farm boys than proper warriors. To be attacked in the heart of Eylavol, where they were supposed to be safe, proved unexpected enough that they fled without thinking.

Some tried to rush on northwards and escape the confines of the valley, but a troop of Thrandeo's horsemen awaited them there, ready to force them back or lay waste to them as they fled. Some tried to go back southwards, but much the same fate awaited them there. Some even found themselves desperate enough to turn to the east and flee into the lake. But though it was a warm day for that time of year, the water was nonetheless bitterly cold. Those who were not dragged below by the weight of their armour were struck hard by the chill and drowned all the same.

Yet amid this turmoil, some stalwart few still chose to fight. The king rallied his choicest thanes, and they put their shields together and fought Thrandeo's company with all the courage they could muster. But it was not enough. Even though the king started with some five or six fighters for each of Thrandeo's, once his army was routing, the few who stood firm were far outstripped. They soon faltered and succumbed to the slaughter likewise.

Thrandeo stood in the middle of this, and he himself struck the king's death blow. As his line crumbled around him, the king was wounded in the leg, and he fell weeping to the floor, his thanes all falling around him. There it was that Thrandeo loomed above him.

'I beg of you,' said the king, 'have mercy. I am your king!'

'There can be no mercy given,' said Thrandeo, 'where no mercy is received. Blood can only be repaid with blood!' Then he picked up his axe and cut off the king's head. Still encased in its glittering helmet, he lifted it into the air and cried out, 'O glory! You southern men, heed me! Thrandeo is my name, and I have killed your king! The glory is mine!'

Only a very fortunate few of the king's army survived this battle. Among the dead were Gefyona and the whole troop from Samnew, as well as Enlovo the High-reeve, whom the king had forced to come, lest he be stripped of his position. The king's eldest son, Arveno, was also slain fighting alongside his father. He had only seventeen years behind him.

As for Bane, they were able to free themselves from their bonds and slip away while no one was looking. They poked their nose over the ridge, saw the slaughter of the king's army, and knew at once that their work was done. With great haste, they went southwards out of Eylavol and came back to Pearmol for

the first time in many years, where they rushed forthwith into the hall and cried out, 'The king is slain! The king is dead!'

Karvalo happened to be in his seat as Bane entered. He strode down the aisle to meet them, and there he bade them say what had happened. They said Thrandeo had ambushed the king as he was travelling through Eylavol and laid waste to the whole army, including the king himself. When Karvalo heard this news, that spiteful man, he could not contain his joy.

'Oy-oy!' he cried. 'The king is dead! Oy-oy for the king!'

Never before, it is said, had he been moved to such verve, not even at his wedding feast, nor those of his sons.

Karvalo sent out a great many messengers to spread the word as far as it would go. There was not to be a lordly hall anywhere in the kingdom that was not abustle with the news of the king's death. That is, all except one. No news was sent to Samnew.

XXXVII

The Battle of Samnew

The very next day, Karvalo had Awldano up and armed by daybreak, and Thalo just the same. They were to make their way to Samnew and capture Trewgeo, but they did not expect him to come willingly, so they prepared themselves for a fight full and proper. They each put on a thick shirt and a coat of mail, and Awldano donned also a finely laced cuirass of iron. Over their shoulders they slung a pair of matching shields, although the patterns painted thereon are not faithfully recorded. They also brought a spear each, and where Thalo had Sleme at his hip, as often he did, Awldano wore the sword Gantewre.

‘Just this once,’ Karvalo had said, ‘you shall wield your father’s blade, as you dole out his judgement.’

Last of all, Thalo put on his head that same helmet he had worn since he left Klagenn all those years ago. Awldano wore one rather more becoming, a gift he had received from his grandmother on the day of her death, and what a gift it was! Wrapped in all manner of intricate designs, it was a beautiful thing, with the nosepiece wrought in the image of a golden stag, its antlers forming the brows.

When both were ready, Thalo and Awldano joined the warriors gathering in the yard. In all, they numbered a full sixty, although they would not go alone. Karvalo had bidden Odwala join them, not to fight, but to take control of Samnew once the fighting was done. Oze, her faithful bodyguard, went beside her.

Last to be counted were Kolmago and his dearest friend, Fenneo, who was the adoptive son of Amfredha of the gate.

Amfredha had gone out into the woods one day many years ago looking for a boar to wrestle, and while she was prowling the lesser-trodden tracks, she found a bag hung from a tree branch. Within the bag was the infant Fenneo, sleeping bundled in a blanket.

‘Oy-oy!’ she said. ‘A lucky orphan!’

Then she took the bag down, carried Fenneo home, and raised him as her

own. Though he was a fine young lad, and Kolmago's second shadow, he was not an important person to remember, all things considered.

Just as Awldano was about to lead his troop out of Pearmol, Kolmago and Fenneo came to him, each armed and armoured, and asked to come along for the ride. They were by that point a pair of firm young men, but Awldano was nonetheless reluctant to allow it.

'Hold a moment,' said Kolmago, 'and tell me this: what do you know of my father's final days?'

Awldano thought for a moment, then said, 'What of it?'

'My quiet days have been many since then, and I have found in myself a knack for hearing that which ought not be heard. With my ear against a door closed tight, I heard from your father's own lips the true reason I am bereft of mine—Trewgeo alone, Lord of Samnew, was the man behind it. I have held this knowledge fast in my breast, but Karvalo now moves to right this wrong, and I will be a part of it. I will avenge my father!'

'And even were it not so,' said Fenneo, 'it would nonetheless be our right and our privilege as men of Pearmol to fight on behalf of our lord, just as it is yours. If you are to deny us that, Awldano, you are to deny us any honour that might be found within this hall.'

Awldano was not convinced. He looked to Thalo, standing slumped beside Ondayo, and he said nothing, but nodded once.

'So be it,' said Awldano. 'I will count you two among us.'

It happened that Ormana had been by the hall, watching over the troop as they mustered in the yard. She saw Kolmago and Fenneo join them, and not a moment passed before she was rushing down into the throng to strike them both upon their helmets.

'Twofold twits!' she said. 'What are you doing out here?'

'You have eyes, do you not?' said Kolmago. 'And a brain? Use them.'

'I could say much the same to you.'

'Whatever you say, I must do this. Trewgeo was the one behind our father's murder. I will fight, and I will avenge him. That is the duty we each bear as his children, though only one of us dares take it up.'

'There is no need for that, not now. What will our mother think when she learns you have upped and made off to battle so?'

'I daresay she would think nothing much of it at all.'

'Do not say such things.'

'Whyever not? She has paid me little to no heed for years now. Why should I sit by and lessen my honour waiting for her to change that? I have waited long enough already, and for what? Nothing but regret, I fear, and wasted hopes. But no longer. If she wishes to mend this rift between us, she may do so, but until

that day comes, I will not bother myself caring for those who do not see fit to care for me likewise. Perhaps, Ormana, you might do the same.'

Then Kolmago leapt upon his horse and rode out of the yard without another word. Fenneo offered Ormana a brief farewell and went behind him.

As Kolmago left, a single tear rolled down Ormana's cheek, but she held the rest in check. She went to Thalo, took his hand in her own, and said, 'Please, Thalo, keep them safe.'

But before Thalo could reply, Awldano said, 'We will do all we can do, for each of our lives depends as much on the courage of the fellow beside us as our own. But know this, Ormana: once the spear-woods sound their bitter fury, only equivocal fate can foresay what will come of it. That is no comfort, I know, but what more comfort can be offered?'

Then Awldano said his own farewell and led the troop out of the yard.

Thalo lingered briefly, his hand still in Ormana's, but he would not be left behind. He let her go, climbed upon Ondayo, and said it was time for him to leave. Ormana wished him luck, and to this he said, 'I have all the luck I need in my name.'

Then he rode away, and Ormana went inside.

Awldano's company came to Samnew later that morning. Before they went to the town, they set Odwala up on a nearby hill, where she would remain a safe distance from the fighting, and Oze stayed with her, should the fighting nonetheless come to her. Then they all went down into Samnew, got off their horses, and made for the hall. Of course, such a troop could not have arrived unnoticed. A small band of Trewgeo's thanes came to meet them on the path, and at their front stood Kardano, Trewgeo's uncle.

'Hold it,' he said, 'and tell me why you folk have come here. It looks very much like you mean to fight, but I can scarcely believe it. I recognise you, Awldano, to be a man of Pearmol. We two are sons of friendly halls, so why do you arrive dressed for battle?'

'We come,' said Awldano, 'with a request from Karvalo, my father, Lord of Pearmol, though he does not expect it to be granted. We must be prepared for whatever we will be given instead.'

'What request is this?'

'Karvalo wishes to make Trewgeo a guest in his hall. That is all.'

Upon hearing these words, Kardano scoffed, and he said, 'There is no need to so conceal your intentions. I will not forsake my lord, but will shield his life with my own. That is the oath I have sworn, the same oath sworn by all worthy folk. I will not grant your request.'

Awldano said, 'It is not for you to grant it. Bring me Trewgeo, that I may tell him where we stand. If he were to submit willingly, perhaps we could avoid

a fight, and he could live to tell of it.’

Kardano considered these words, eyeing up Awldano’s glittering friends all the while, until he said, ‘So it will be. Trewgeo will hear your plea, should he so wish, but you will not take a step further.’

Kardano went up to the hall while the rest of his company stood before Awldano and his. During their conversation, more of Trewgeo’s thanes had come to join their companions, and their numbers were bolstered further still when Trewgeo came strutting down the path with another ten or so behind him, all armed and armoured in much the same fashion as their visitors.

‘What is this about?’ said Trewgeo, without greeting anyone. ‘I am told you have a request for me.’

‘Indeed,’ said Awldano. ‘Karvalo, Lord of Pearmol, your friend and peer, kindly bids you submit to him, surrender your lordship here, and be welcomed as a guest in his hall. That is all.’

Trewgeo was, for a moment, speechless.

‘What do you say?’ said Awldano.

‘What do I say?’ said Trewgeo. ‘Filth! I will not submit to him, nor will you dare make me. I have the king behind me! Prod me, Awldano, and we will prod you back all the harder.’

‘The king is dead.’

‘Eh? Say more.’

‘What more is there to say? The king is dead. His army was attacked in Eylavol, and he did not survive the battle. Neither did your sister, nor any of those she took with her. Fate is once again against you, Trewgeo. Submit, and you will be treated fairly.’

When Kardano heard this news, he was stricken with shame. ‘Gefyona bade me join her, but I refused. What cowardice! Had I been with her, perhaps I might have seen her safely away. Alas, another of my kinsfolk lies dead for my weakness.’

‘No,’ said Awldano. ‘There is no weakness in you, nor can you be allotted any blame. Stand down, Kardano. There need be no further death.’

Kardano said nothing more, his head hung low, and thereupon Trewgeo stepped forth. This news only filled him with a greater spite.

‘It cannot be so!’ he said. ‘You are surely lying, sent here to frighten me into submission. But I am no fool. Hear me, lapdog, and know this: the king is beside me. I do not fear you, nor your fat-fingered father. I will not submit to Karvalo as long as I live. I would sooner be dead in a ditch than bend before that hateful man and suffer the indignity of bitchery! I am the Lord of Samnew, and so I will remain. If you wish to fight about it, have at it!’

Then Trewgeo called upon his thanes to fight, but though many took up their

positions, Kardano yet stood stoic.

‘There need be no further death,’ he said, ‘but mine. I will not betray my oaths. I will fight in defence of my kinsman, and thereby redeem myself. Put up your shields, lads! The tide of battle will settle this!’

With that, Kardano held his spear aloft, and the men of Samnew formed their line as Trewgeo retreated to the hall.

‘It need not have come to this,’ said Awldano, ‘but that it has is no surprise,’ and he stepped back likewise to join his companions.

Once the lines were drawn, Awldano spoke this verse:

‘Hold fast thine axe, hold fast thy spear,
and firm thyself ’gainst fright and fear.
Steadfast we stand, all shield-to-shield—
we fate-feared folk are ne’er to yield!’

Awldano thought he had the advantage, so he wanted to press the attack quickly and shouted out a staunch, ‘Oy-oy!’

As one, his troop returned it. They repeated this twice more, and upon the third chant, they stepped towards their foes. Kardano let them bring the battle forward while the men behind him threw rocks and spears and axes. This did little to rattle Awldano’s stouthearted comrades, however, and very soon, the two sides came against one another, brought forth their weapons, and did all they could to force the opposing line apart.

After a short while, it looked as though Kardano was about to break through Awldano’s line, so he put up his spear and had his comrades step back.

‘They are faltering,’ said Kardano. ‘Do not let them rest!’

Thus, for each step Awldano’s line took backwards, Kardano’s took one forwards. Yet despite their enthusiasm, Awldano had many hardy warriors with him. They bore Kardano’s attack with minds unmoving, and when their foes began tiring, starting their own steady retreat, it was time for them to turn the battle in their favour.

‘They have fought with courage,’ said Awldano, ‘but their points are poorly tempered. Step forth, boys! Oy-oy!’

Awldano’s troop returned his cry once more and renewed the attack. Thus, for each step Kardano’s line took backwards, Awldano’s took one forwards. They laid into their foes with such relentlessness that Kardano’s fighters began huddling together, each man eager not to be the fellow at the front, each trying to stand behind someone else’s shield. They only squashed themselves closer and closer together, until, when they were much too tightly knit to fight, or even to move, some of those in the front row were knocked over, and they all fell

into one another.

Panic followed thereafter, whereupon Kardano knew the battle was as good as lost. He did all he could to rally his comrades, to steel their resolve, but he knew his efforts would come to nothing. His line broke, and the larger part of his troop fled the scene.

Thalo was the first to break away in pursuit. When he saw his foes falter before him, when he heard Kardano let up his voice in vain, he recognised a most fortuitous opportunity to show his worth. As the men of Samnew turned their backs, he clutched his spear, braced his shield, and gave chase. Only then did he truly inhabit himself. Only then did he yield to the rising violence that welled within his heart and let loose the whole tumult of the sea in one dreadful wave. And he was enraptured, that war-wooed man! He leapt after the men of Samnew with fervour, cutting down any fellow he could put within reach of his spear, and all with the sort of lusty glee one might expect to find in a man past his prime being offered comforts thought long lost.

This most brazen display was sufficient to embolden his comrades, and a great many of them joined him in rushing after their foes. Awldano bade them all come back, to reform the line and see the battle through to a nobler end, but the vim of victory was already hot in their blood. They tore through the town bringing their weapons against anyone who might bring one against them, and even a few poor folk who happened only to be in the way.

But where his comrades stopped often to take whatever booty their foes might yield, there was no wealth, no gem nor jewel, nor any treasure at all that could bring Thalo to a halt. So long as his hand yet gripped his spear, greater joys lay ahead of him. Indeed, his passion did not subside until he chased a man into a shrine on the edge of the town. Within, a pair of priests stood aghast as the poor man fell cowering upon the altar, crying and begging for mercy, and as Thalo drove his spear hard through his chest.

‘You villain!’ said the first priest, and he went to cradle the dying man.

The second priest drew his beltknife and said, ‘You have stained our altar with blood, and have likewise stained your honour. Get out of here!’

Thalo did not move just yet. He stood still, watching the first priest lift the man off the altar. He lowered him to the floor, knelt beside him, and held him gently as he died in his arms.

The second priest took another step forward, his knife out before him, and said, ‘I will not warn you again, man.’

After staring a moment longer at the blood on the altar, at the day’s final triumph, Thalo said, ‘The wind blows.’

Then he left the shrine house.



Despite the flight—and the slaughter—of many of his troop, Kardano himself remained stalwart. He rallied his firmest friends and fought on. Awldano's own troop was now similarly diminished in number, and though both sides fought with dignity, fair-handed fate awarded the victory to the nobler man.

When Kardano alone yet clutched his shield, all his comrades having died or fled, he cast it aside, fell to his knees, and shook off his mail shirt.

'I am defeated,' he said, 'but there is no greater honour for me than to die in defence of my kinsman. Come forth, Awldano, and put an end to this.'

Awldano bowed his head. He drew Gantewre from its sheath and stabbed him through the chest. Kardano fell to the floor, and there he died.

Only then did Awldano turn his back to reckon the losses. They numbered twelve in all, but the weight that settled upon his heart was much the heavier, for there among the dead lay Kolmago and Fenneo both. They had been at the back of the troop, but after Kardano's line broke and Awldano's peeled away in pursuit, they found themselves rather closer to the front. Fenneo fell first, his neck spear-struck, and he collapsed, gargling out the last of his life.

Kolmago dropped to his knees and wrapped his hands around his face.

'Fenneo,' he said, 'this is no time for napping! Fenneo, awake!'

As he said this, another spear found its way between the shields and into his neck just the same. Kolmago fell atop his friend, and he died.

'Alas,' said Awldano, 'that I must count you two among us.'

Then he swallowed his grief and began gathering the dead.



But what of Trewgeo? Although he retreated from the site of the battle before it began, he had lingered by the hall to watch, confident that Kardano would claim the victory without any trouble at all. Thus, when Kardano's line broke and his fighters all fled, Trewgeo stood quite bewildered. His bewilderment turned to terror, however, when he spotted a handful of warriors barrelling headlong towards him amid the chaos of the rout.

'Aiee!' he cried, and he ran into the hall, but no safety awaited him there.

From the shadows came the flash of a sword, the glint of an eye, and forth stepped Eyge, Karvalo's faithful servant. As Trewgeo ran past, calling out for anyone at all to defend him, she put out her leg, tripped him over, and pressed her sword against his neck.

'Get away from me!' said Trewgeo.

'No,' said Eyge, and she held him there.

After a moment, a gang of Trewgeo's thanes burst into the hall, ready to defend their lord. At their front stood Yorvadho, tall and beautiful.

'Return our lord to us,' he said, 'and we will pursue no further violence.'

'No,' said Eyge, and nothing more.

'Come, we have you outmatched.'

At that moment, those men who were rushing up to the hall came through the door, and they numbered five or six more than those behind Yorvadho.

'Now tell me,' said Eyge, 'do you still wish to fight for this wretch?'

'You do!' said Trewgeo. 'Fight! Make good your oaths and fight for me!'

But Yorvadho looked between the men behind him, and those before him, and he sighed.

'When all is said and done,' he said, 'I am beholden only to the course of fate, as are we all. One day it will claim me, and I will lament my oaths as my dying breath is drawn from my breast, as my mind fills with longing and regret. But that will not be today.' He sheathed his sword, took off his helmet, and knelt upon the floor. 'Today, I am done.'

His companions all followed suit.

'Treachery!' said Trewgeo. 'Where is your honour? Where is your mettle? Fight for me! Fight!'

Eyge pressed her sword closer to Trewgeo's neck, quieting him, and she said, 'You men are wise indeed. In return for your surrender, I offer you this advice: gather your families and leave this place at once. I do not expect my lord will fancy keeping you here.'

Yorvadho arose and said, 'I have forsaken my lord. It is only fitting that I should likewise forsake the hall in which I served him. Perhaps I can atone for this elsewhere.'

Then he led his comrades out of the hall, and out of the story.

Eyge now moved away from Trewgeo. He immediately jolted upwards, but her companions set upon him, bound him in rope, stuffed his mouth, and dragged him outside. There they found Awldano overseeing the gathering of the dead, Thalo beside him—he had just come back from the murder-shrine—and brought Trewgeo to them. Eyge asked Awldano if he wished to speak with him, but he said he did not.

'I want nothing more,' said Awldano, 'than to be done with this.'

And so it was. Awldano took Thalo and seven others back to Pearmol the same day. They commandeered three large wains from the locals and loaded them with four of the dead each, as well as all the booty they had looted from Trewgeo's thanes. Awldano rode at the front, with Trewgeo being dragged by his ankles behind his horse, crying out all the while.

The rest of his company stayed at Samnew for a little while, as did Eyge.

With their help, Odwala and Oze took control of the hall, whereafter they set about making arrangements with those of Trewgeo's retinue who had neither died nor fled. On the day after the battle, Odwala summoned an assembly of the foremost folk of Samnew, and she bade them accept her as their lord. They were reluctant, but when Rogyoro, the Steward of Syarglad, and a man who commanded much respect, came striding into the hall and spoke on her behalf, they put their doubts aside.

Thus did Odwala succeed to the Lordship of Samnew.

XXXVIII

Grief Returns

Awldano returned to Pearmol with a tremendous melancholy hanging upon his heart. Amfredha was the first to spot him coming up the path. She had the gate opened and raced down to meet him, then took off her helmet and said, ‘Tell me, Awldano, what has become of my son?’

Awldano said, ‘You may not be able to see him, but he is behind me.’

Amfredha closed her eyes, bowed her head, and without another word, she put her helmet back on and returned to the gate. She remained there for the rest of the day, and long after it was time for her to come down.

Many folk came out to see the wains come into the yard. Each had been covered with a cloth to protect the bodies and the treasure alike, so everyone was eager to know who lay beneath them, and how many they were. One by one, the cloths were removed, and a chorus of grief arose each time as the dead were revealed, put on boards, and taken inside.

Karvalo had Trewgeo dragged into the hall to be held under armed guard, and then he came back outside to ask Awldano how he had fared.

‘That is for you to decide,’ said Awldano. ‘Trewgeo is yours, and Samnew, too. I hope only that they are worth the cost.’

‘Say nothing about that,’ said Karvalo, his eye upon the wealth-laden wains. ‘This has surely been a worthwhile endeavour.’

Then he clapped Awldano on the back and went to oversee the unloading of the cargo. Awldano went inside.

Thalo stayed in the yard for a short while, where he caught sight of Ormana clutching Kolmago’s lifeless hand as he was raised onto a board. He climbed down from Ondayo’s back, stood behind him, and watched from a distance as Ormana followed her brother inside. He could not hear her weeping above the others, but he did not need to.

‘And nor do I want to,’ he said, kissing Ondayo’s muzzle. ‘Not yet, boy. We have been here before, but it is no less miserable now.’

Then Thalo went inside, but when he came to his bedroom to take off his

armour, he found Awldano standing alone in the middle of the room, still in his mail, but staring at his helmet on the bed.

‘What wretched days,’ said Awldano. ‘When I was sailing in my younger years, I did it all very well. I fought and I looted, and I thought nothing of it. That was my lot in life, and it troubled me none. But as time passes by, the weight grows ever heavier, the weight of the lives ended by my hand. When we rode to Syarglad last year, I was glad it did not come to battle. I thought it cowardice, that I was unworthy of my stock, so I rode to Samnew this morning eager to prove otherwise, to prove myself a man of honour and renown. Yet I stand here now, the weight bearing down on me all the heavier. It should not be so—I am a son of Kawo!—but here we are, nonetheless.’

Thalo’s thoughts flitted back and forth, desperate to grasp at some pithy truth, some words of comfort, until they settled rather uncomfortably upon the sight of Ormana weeping in the yard. Perhaps, he thought, he would feel much the same, if only he dared to think twice.

‘You are the most courageous man I know,’ he said. ‘I trust there is no such weight you could not bear, but if ever there were, know that I will be beside you to share the burden.’

Then Thalo took Awldano in his arms, and Awldano took him in his, and neither said anything more.

A while later, Thalo visited Ormana while she was preparing Kolmago’s body. She rose from her seat, welcomed him, and brought him to the bed where Kolmago lay.

‘It feels as if it were only yesterday,’ she said, ‘that I sat beside my father, that I washed away his blood. I thought my days of grief were behind me, yet here I am again, as if they had never ended at all. Whenever will they?’

Then her tears overtook her, and she lowered her head to weep upon Thalo’s shoulder. As he held her, he looked to Kolmago, lying still on the bed beneath a cloth of red and green. About each arm he wore a golden ring, and a third adorned his neck, covering the mortal wound. Ornamented so, he was the very image of his father.

Ormana pulled her head away and said, ‘Thalo, let me thank you for coming here. Mine is no enviable task, and even less so when I must do it alone.’

‘What of your mother?’

‘She will not come to him—she would not before, nor will she now. Not even as her own son lies dead will she stir to see him. She says he abandoned her, just as his father did. But what can be done? Life marches on. We must keep pace, lest the horns sound our halt while we stand yet apart from one another. She is falling behind, Thalo. The distance between us is widening, and I fear there is no way to shorten it.’

Then Ormana let loose her tears once more, and Thalo held her.

Karvalo had the funeral pyres built overnight and through the next morning. In the afternoon, a great procession gathered in the yard and brought the dead across the river to the cemetery. There the bodies were laid upon their pyres, whereafter Seyglena performed the appropriate rites for each of them. When she was done, she raised her arms aloft.

‘Hear me!’ she said. ‘Hear me and heed me! All things in this world are fleeting! As day will ever pass to night, so too will night ever pass to day!’

Then she knelt and sang a sorrowful song as the pyres were lit, and all watched on as their once lively friends succumbed to the fire.

Once the flames had diminished and much of the procession had returned to Pearmol, Amfredha came to Ormana as she stood arm in arm with Thalo. She pried them apart and offered her the warmest embrace she could find in her grief-cold breast. Thereafter, she said it would be fitting to bury Kolmago and Fenneo in the same urn.

‘Let them lie together in death,’ she said, ‘as they did in life.’

Ormana agreed with that. They gathered their bones and their finery into a single urn, and that was buried next to Yorlayvo’s. Atop this they placed two stones, one for each of them, and thus were they truly dead.

That evening, Karvalo hosted a funeral feast in honour of the fallen. Near the end of the meal, he rose from his seat and lifted his cup.

‘Oy-oy!’ he said, and the room returned his cheer. A flock of attendants left the room at once, and as the high table was cleared, Karvalo thanked the dead for their courageous service. ‘For that I repay them with this feast, that we shall hold them evermore in the highest esteem. But let us also give our thanks to those who stood so stoutly beside them.’

His attendants returned with a selection of boxes, each laden with a portion of the booty won at Samnew. They laid them on the table behind Karvalo, and Thorreda handed him a list of names and allotments.

‘I repay them with nothing less than the wealth they won me.’

Awldano was called up first, but when he refused his share, the largest by every measure, Karvalo said it would be rather manfuller for him to accept it with pride and dignity.

‘Awldano,’ he said, ‘do not dishonour your comrades by letting their deaths be fruitless. If there is to be no profit for you, whatever did they fight for?’

‘Whatever indeed?’ said Awldano. ‘Only one among us can answer that.’

He sat back down.

Scowling, Karvalo said, ‘Come, you have served your father well. Let him serve you likewise.’

Without standing up again, Awldano took a sip of his drink. ‘He has served

me much already. He need not put himself out any longer.'

Then Karvalo presided over the dealing of the rest of the booty, although many said the prizes he gave back to his thanes seemed rather stingy next to the total takings. Last of all, he called up Thalo. Though Thalo was very eager to claim whatever wealth Karvalo might offer, he thought Awldano might have something to say about it. He took his hand, but received his answer before he had asked.

'We two are one,' said Awldano, 'but not the same. If you wish to claim your share, I will not begrudge you that.'

Thalo kissed him, and then he went before Karvalo. He received Awldano's share.

After a moment of panic, Thalo said, 'This is significant.'

Karvalo said nothing. Thalo looked to Awldano, but he only smiled with resignation and looked away, so he accepted the prize and took it out of the hall. He did not return that evening.

Though Karvalo and Awldano thought much about this in the following days, neither saw fit to address it.



Dragged away from his home, Trewgeo spent two nights sore and alone at Pearmol—unfed but for an offering of water twice daily—before Karvalo came to treat with him. He burst into the room alongside two big fellows who pushed Trewgeo to the floor and bound his hands. He tried to get up again, but Karvalo pinned him down with his foot.

'Long have I awaited this day,' he said. He bade his companions leave the room, then hoisted Trewgeo off the floor and threw him down onto a nearby table. As he thudded into it, Karvalo loomed above him, his beltknife in hand. 'Your fate, Trewgeo, was sealed long ago.'

'Please,' said Trewgeo, 'have mercy. Let us make amends.'

'Time and again I have offered you that opportunity, and every time you have squandered it. There can be no peace between us, not after what you have taken from me.'

'And I can pay you back for that, if you would only let me live.'

Karvalo leant over Trewgeo, glowering above him. 'No, Trewgeo. I have more honour than to let you live. There is no price I would accept from you, but one. You stole my Yorlayvo from me. You spilt his blood, and I will not be satisfied until yours is spilt alike!'

Then Karvalo held his knife aloft and brought it down hard, stabbing into Trewgeo's stomach. Trewgeo cried out, pleading for his life—if it could yet be

spared—but that was not enough. Karvalo stabbed him again and again, in the stomach, the chest, the neck, so swept up in that long-delayed delight that he kept up his frenzy until Trewgeo was well past dead. When finally his passion subsided, Trewgeo had been dealt thirty-three wounds, but he had only lived long enough to suffer the first eleven.

Karvalo stepped away, gathered himself, and left the room. Thorreda was there, ready to meet him, and he asked her to see Trewgeo's body dumped on the moors.

'Let the wolf and the raven have their fun,' he said.

Thorreda said it would be done, and so it was.

That evening, Karvalo went alone to the cemetery. He prostrated himself before Yorlayvo's grave, kissed the grass, and then rose to his knees, the sun setting behind him.

'My friend,' he said, 'it is done. You are avenged, and never has the weight on my heart been lighter.' He took out the knife with which he had slain Trewgeo and lay it upon the grave. 'Your spirit may at last be yielded back to the earth. I ask only that you wait for me.'

Then he arose and went home.

XXXIX

The Lordship of Samnew

Now Karvalo turned his attention to remedying the ills of Samnew. Odwala had taken the lordship for herself, and though Karvalo was happy enough to support her for the time being, he had no intention of leaving her there. Thus, in the days after Trewgeo's death, he and Rogyoro, the Steward of Syarglad, went to seek a private audience with her. Odwala received them warmly and bade them state their reason for coming.

'You are to sit alone with us,' said Karvalo, 'to hear what I have to say, and to do as I bid.'

'I will entertain this,' said Odwala. 'That is the least I can do for you, after all you have done for me.'

But Karvalo had done nothing for her. When the three of them sat together later that day, he stated his intentions plainly.

'You have taken up the lordship of this place, but we must all understand that this is not where the matter will end. Samnew is mine by right, and its succession mine alone to determine. I have determined that it is not for you.'

Odwala said, 'Was it not agreed that I would take control of the town?'

'So it was, and so you have. I am willing to let you hold the lordship, but only until a more suitable successor is found. When that time comes, I expect you to vacate your seat willingly and without contention. Agree quickly, and we will all be merrier for it.'

Quite disheartened, Odwala turned to Rogyoro and said, 'You spoke on my behalf, Rogyoro. Will you do so now?'

Rogyoro said, 'Your succession to the lordship has been swift and able, and I am proud to have supported it, but I did so knowing it would be brief. My foremost loyalty is to Karvalo, my friend and peer, and if this is his wish, so too is it mine. I urge you to agree to this arrangement, Odwala, that you may yet live long in high esteem.'

'Indeed,' said Karvalo. 'Do as I wish, and there will always be a place for you at Samnew, just not in its lordly seat.'

Odwala did not want to do this, but sitting before a pair of large, sworded men, and recalling all that had happened in the years prior, she understood this was about the best outcome for which she could hope.

‘Very well,’ she said, and the three of them fastened their agreement with oaths each sworn in kind.

Karvalo stayed at Samnew for a few weeks, during which he and Odwala sought to ensure they both held the thanes’ continued loyalty. The retinue was at that time of two halves: those who had come with Awldano and stayed at Samnew, whose honour Karvalo dared not doubt, and those who had formerly served Trewgeo, of whom he was rather more suspicious. Thus, he summoned them all to the hall, told them how things would be run, and invited them to speak their doubts aloud.

‘Only if I know your true thoughts,’ he said, ‘can I duly address them.’

‘I find it most disagreeable,’ said one daring thane, ‘that I will have no say in choosing the lord I serve.’

‘I second that,’ said a second. ‘That my lord should be ruled by another is yucky to say the least. That is not how things are supposed to happen.’

So Karvalo arose, drew glittering Gantewre from its glittering sheath, and lay it flat on the floor before him.

‘If you find it so disagreeable,’ he said, ‘I bid you take up my sword and do something about it. Come forth, thanes, and prove your conviction!’

None came forth.

Karvalo picked Gantewre back up and sheathed it. ‘As I thought.’

Then he left the room. The retinue felt no surer about the new management, but they trusted Odwala at least, and that would have to be enough.

Karvalo went home the next day. He had spent much of his time at Samnew considering the succession of the lordship, after which he determined that there was only one man to whom he would offer it.

‘Awldano,’ he said, cornering his son late one night, ‘I have a proposition for you. I expect you will accept it with the honour befitting a man of your fine upbringing.’

‘First,’ said Awldano, ‘tell me what this proposition is, and we can measure my honour thereafter.’

Karvalo told Awldano about his business at Samnew and the agreement to which he and Odwala had come.

‘Therefore,’ he said, ‘she will move aside once I have found someone more fitting for the lordship, or else I will move her myself.’

‘And therefore,’ said Awldano, ‘you come to me with a proposition, though I expect my honour will be found lacking.’

‘Oh? Wherever has gone my Awldano, my most filial of sons? Who is this

man before me, who would deny such a gift even before it is given?’

‘Know, it is not for any grudge against you, nor for any want of shame, that I would deny such a gift. I simply do not want it.’

Upon hearing these frightful words, Karvalo said, ‘Get over yourself. What place does wanting have in any of this? I need someone I can trust at Samnew, and I trust you—or so I thought. If you truly mean to refuse me, Awldano, do it not so swiftly. I will afford you the time you need to reconsider, to bring to mind the great love you bear for your father, for it is matched only by that he bears for you, that which you find yourself very close to squandering. Let us both hope you get no closer.’

Then Karvalo went away.

Awldano only sighed. He spoke to Thalo about this proposition later on. He told him that Karvalo had taken control of Samnew, that he had offered him the lordship, and that he had refused it.

Thalo said, ‘Why?’

Awldano shook his head. ‘It would not be fitting.’

‘Say no more of that. There is no lordlier man to be found anywhere in the world. There is no man more courageous, more stalwart, more judicious than Awldano, and no man more fit to take up this task.’

Awldano stepped back, and he looked away. ‘What nonsense you babble, but even were it so, I would want it no more. I can think only of the blood—the blood I spilt at Samnew, the blood that has long caked the hand of shame, clutched tight about my heart, the blood of friends and foes alike.’

‘Say no more of that. What better way to be rid of the blood than to scrub it away yourself? Do not let it rule over you, but rule over it. Rule as the Lord of Samnew!’

Awldano sighed, and he said, ‘It is a strange thing to hear my Thalo, the dark and dreary vagabond, speaking in favour of a lordly life in hall.’

‘And say no more of that. Such a life may not be the sort I would choose for myself, but I am not choosing it for myself.’ A great passion was now rising in Thalo’s breast, and his words came more freely than they had in many years. ‘I am telling you, Awldano, to choose it for yourself. This is the life you were born to live, the life you deserve. This is your inheritance, your honour, your glory! Do not let it pass you by!’

Awldano said, ‘Very well. I will accept my father’s offer. But know, Thalo, that I do so only because I know my hall will likewise be yours.’

‘As it should be.’

Not the next day, but the day thereafter, Karvalo came to Awldano and asked him whether had come to a decision.

‘I have,’ said Awldano.

‘Then say it,’ said Karvalo.

‘I will accept your gift. I will hold Samnew.’

Karvalo clapped his hands and said, ‘That you will! I will be pleased indeed to count my standout son among my peers and allies.’

Then they got to business. Karvalo summoned an assembly at Samnew to present Awldano to the lordship. The whole household was in attendance, as were all of Samnew’s sheriffs, and Rogyoro, the Steward of Syarglad. Thalo went too, as was his right as Awldano’s husband, but Karvalo had forbidden him from speaking.

‘You boys are here to claim the thanes’ loyalty,’ he had said. ‘We will not risk it all by calling twigs trees.’

At the assembly, Awldano stood on the platform before the retinue, Karvalo to his right, Odwala to his left, and Thalo behind him, and he spoke at length about how excellent he was. When he was done, he cheered a hearty ‘Oy-oy!’ and received one in reply. If anyone objected to his lordship, none dared to make it known. That is, none but one alone.

Here a young woman named Mora enters the story. She was the daughter of Gefyona, Trewgeo’s sister, and her husband Arneo, the late king’s brother. Mora had received a priestly upbringing at Fessos, a monastery near Arbak in the south, but she was nonetheless a forceful and rowdy woman. In the weeks after the battle at Samnew, she had heard about Trewgeo’s death and Odwala’s succession to the lordship, and she deemed the whole affair quite unacceptable.

‘Samnew is rightfully mine!’ she said, and she made for the town posthaste.

Mora came into the hall as Awldano was speaking. She waited until he had cheered, and the retinue had cheered back to him, and then she said, ‘I am here to protest. I see three lordly sorts sitting before me, and a fourth fellow behind them, but none are fit to sit so, and least of all the man in the middle.’

‘Who are you to say this of me?’ said Awldano, for he was the householder now.

‘Mora is my name, daughter of Gefyona and Arneo, and the only rightful heir to Samnew.’

Awldano turned to Karvalo, and quite earnestly, he asked, ‘Is that so?’

‘No,’ said Karvalo. ‘Her right to Samnew is no stronger than Odwala’s, and Odwala claimed it first.’

‘Then why is it,’ said Mora, ‘that this man sits in Odwala’s place?’

‘This man is Awldano,’ said Awldano. ‘He is the son of Karvalo, and the Lord of Samnew.’

‘And it is so,’ said Odwala, ‘for I claimed Samnew first, as was my right as the kin of Ekkeo. It was thenceforth mine to yield to whomever I wished.’

‘Then yield it to me!’ said Mora.

‘There is no chance of that!’ said Karvalo.

‘Let us see.’ Mora turned her back to the platform and spoke to the retinue. ‘Who among you will defend the honour of Samnew and accept me as your lord and protector?’

‘Yes,’ said Karvalo, rising from his chair, ‘who among you will back her? And speak up! I wish to hear you clearly.’

Whether it was out of fear or genuine loyalty, no one spoke up.

‘There you have it,’ said Karvalo, and then he turned to Awldano. ‘Lord of Samnew, bid this woman leave your hall at once, for she has nothing good to offer you.’

Awldano nodded. ‘Mora, you heard him.’

‘This is quite preposterous!’ said Mora, and she left the room.

Thus did Awldano succeed to the Lordship of Samnew.

XL

A New Home

Let us now turn our attention to oft-bereaved Esleyna. When she learnt of the death of her only son, it did little to move her. Seyglena had been the one to tell her the news (Ormana did not yet feel fit to speak it aloud), saying, ‘My friend, it brings me no joy to say that your son, Kolmago, is dead.’

‘Alas for me,’ Esleyna had said, and not a word more.

There was no joy left in her then. Where before she had spent each day sat in her chair, staring out to the sea, now she could bear neither the sight nor the sound of it. The endless rolling of the waves had once been a comfort, ever a reminder of her being; through one last window looking out into the world, she could await the day when their tumult would finally be quelled. But that was a comfort no longer. Esleyna arose one evening and closed the window, and so it remained. Thereafter, she paid no heed to aught but the most basic of her bodily needs, eating only the meagrest of meals, drinking only what water she needed, and saying nothing to anyone. Of course, everyone else had something to say about it.

‘What a waste!’ said one man. ‘Why should we work to house her when she offers no work in return, nor even a word of thanks?’

‘Lay off it,’ said another. ‘Do you know what troubles lie behind her? That she has yet to do herself in is proof of our masterful hospitality.’

‘Perhaps she ought to,’ said a third, ‘for we gain nothing either way.’

‘What cruelty!’ said a fourth. ‘Far from nothing is the satisfaction of having done good.’

Ormana happened to overhear all this, and once her disbelief had turned to temper, she threw herself amid the gossips.

‘Close your mouths, men,’ she said, waving her fist, ‘if you wish to keep your teeth in them. You have no right to be meddling in the grief of another.’

With nothing more to say, the men took in their tongues and cleared off.

Ormana then went to her mother, and as she came to her side, she asked after her mood. Esleyna had nothing to say about that. She turned away and

closed her eyes. Ormana asked again and received much the same reply, so she left the room. She found herself a quiet spot elsewhere in the hall, sat herself down, and there she cried.

A few days later, Thalo and Awldano came back to Pearmol and began preparing to move to Samnew, although they did not leave until a few weeks had passed. Karvalo had demanded that they wait until after the midwinter feast, where he meant to feast in his lordly son's honour, and that he did. As the household descended upon his hall, sat at his benches, and partook of his food and his drink, Karvalo put up his cup and revelled in the majesty of his unparalleled fatherhood.

Yet not all the feasters were so cheery. Ormana came along to enjoy the meal, but with Thalo beside Awldano at the high table, she came alone. To see the hall abustle with such mirth, to hear the joyful clamour while she sat with no friend beside her, Esleyna's absence became all the bitterer. Ormana slipped away while everyone was still seated.

The following morning, she happened to be speaking with Thalo when he said he and Awldano would be leaving for Samnew the next day.

'We had planned to leave today,' he said, 'but Awldano hurt his ankle in the night. He is not fit for walking.'

'What if I were to come with you?' said Ormana, and as if without thinking, she continued, 'I want to come with you, if you will have me.'

'What about your mother?'

'What about her? I have been waiting, Thalo, staying beside her, being there for her, but she will not be there for me. There is nothing more I can do. With each passing day, the pain only grows, and I cannot bear it any longer. It is time, I fear, to let her go. I have to get away.'

Thalo put his hand on her shoulder and said, 'So be it. I would be glad to have you, but it is not for me alone to decide.'

Together, they went to Awldano as he was resting his ankle, and Ormana asked whether he would take her into his retinue.

'Are you quite sure about this?' said Awldano.

'I am,' said Ormana. She was not, but it did not seem right to say so.

'Then I will trust in your judgement and be glad to count my friend Ormana among my worthiest thanes.'

Ormana thanked him and excused herself. She went back to the room she shared with her mother, where once Kolmago had slept alongside them, though no longer, and there she began collecting her possessions. Esleyna was in the room all the while, sitting silently in her chair. Ormana said nothing about her business, nor did Esleyna ask.

Then, when the night had come and gone and another new day was afoot,

Ormana stood before Esleyyna and told her Awldano was soon to be leaving.

‘Would you like to see them off?’ she said.

Once again, Esleyyna said nothing.

‘Mother?’ Ormana said, but to no reply. ‘Please, I ask that you only look at me. Give me some sign that you at least hear me.’

Esleyyna did not stir, her head bowed, her eyes down, her lips together.

Ormana stepped back, and with a scoff, she said, ‘In any case, I am going with them, so this will be our parting.’

Ormana turned away, but as she was passing through the doorway, Esleyyna said at last, ‘So you too will abandon me.’

Without turning back to her, Ormana replied, ‘Tell me, Mother, which of us has abandoned the other?’

Then she left.

Ormana made her way out into the yard, where Awldano was preparing his troop to leave. Seyglena alone saw them off, for Karvalo was away at Knessyar on other business. She wished Awldano well and bade him hold Samnew with dignity, and he said he would.

‘It is one thing to say it,’ said Seyglena, ‘and another entirely to do it. Now tell me, where is Thalo? I do not think he is fit to face the trials ahead of him.’

But Thalo was there beside her. ‘I am here.’

‘Very good. Understand, you are not fit to face the trials ahead of you. You have a lord for a husband, Thalo, as do I. May fate be forgiving.’

Seyglena then turned away and went inside.

Thalo repeated her words to himself, but at Awldano’s request, he put them aside. He climbed atop Ondaño and Ormana joined Awldano in a carriage where he could rest his ankle, and when everyone was ready, they made their way to Samnew.

Awldano took thirty-six people away from Pearmol, or thirty-nine if he, Thalo, and Ormana were also counted. Among them were fifteen hardy thanes, each of whom had formerly been sworn to Karvalo, and an assortment of their relatives made up the rest of the number.

Odwala came out of the hall to welcome them. Awldano entrusted Ormana with oversight of his retinue’s arrangements, and then he and Thalo followed Odwala inside. His previous visit had lasted only a week or so, and he had spent the majority of it sat at Karvalo’s side. Now, however, Samnew was his own, and it was about time he became properly acquainted with his new home.

Odwala took them through the hall to the small rooms, and the smithy, and to Samo’s shrine, and last of all they came to the treasury, which they found in a rather sorry state. Trewgeo had not been a particularly frugal fellow, and it turned out his relationship with the late king had been rather more material than

many knew, and rather more profitable for one party than the other. Awdano had not intended to spend much time there, or at least not yet, but the very moment Thalo stepped inside, his attention was ensnared by a beautiful axe hung glittering upon the opposite wall. With a blade of blue, and studded with gems of brilliant white, it shone as if it were wrought from the sky itself to cut through the darkness of the night.

‘Whatever is this?’ said Thalo, enraptured before it.

That was Fedhewve. In the days when Thyomalo yet held the Lordship of Pearmol, he had commissioned it for his husband, Samnew-Samo, who had worn it proudly. When Samo died, it was mounted in his shrine, but it had since been moved to the treasury for safekeeping. Both Gonwela and Karvalo had tried to reclaim it for Pearmol, but Arleno considered it the chiefest treasure of his lordship and had ever refused to yield it.

‘But that was not the end of it,’ said Odwala. ‘He tried to take it from Trewgeo, too, but nothing came of that, of course, and he has recently tried to take it from me likewise. That did not come to pass. It is yet where it belongs, where it must remain.’

‘It is a beautiful thing,’ said Thalo. ‘I am pleased to count it as my own.’

His eyes now fell to the treasures laid out below the axe, all trinkets from Samnew’s early days. There he found a pair of silver rings, each intricately twisted around itself, and each twisted in the opposite direction. Thalo asked Odwala if she knew as much about them as she did Fedhewve, but she did not.

‘They were one for Thyomalo,’ she said, ‘and one for Samo. Nothing more is to be said.’

Thalo showed them to Awdano and said, ‘What do you make of these?’

‘They look fine indeed,’ said Awdano.

‘Fine indeed.’ Thalo took Awdano’s hand and put one of the rings on his little finger. ‘One for you.’ He put the other in Awdano’s hand and presented his own. Awdano put the second ring on Thalo’s forefinger.

‘And one for you,’ he said.

Then they kissed one another, and Odwala moved along.

That evening, Awdano sat in hall for the first time to take his thanes’ oaths. Odwala came up first, and she was followed by Eyege. She had not left Samnew since capturing Trewgeo. As a trusted friend, Karvalo had bidden her stay and swear herself to Awdano.

‘It would be most imprudent,’ he had said, ‘for your intimate knowledge of that place to go to waste.’

Eyege agreed to that, as did Awdano, and so she stayed at Samnew.

Then the rest of the retinue came up in small groups to speed things along, until only Ormana had yet to make an oath. At last, Awdano called her up, and

she came forth alone. As she stood before the firepit, Awldano opposite her, they each swore to bind themselves to the other, to each count the other among their closest friends, and to each maintain their mutual obligations in life and death alike.

‘So our oaths are fastened,’ said Awldano, ‘and each before magnanimous fate. Oy-oy!’

The room cheered an ‘Oy-oy!’ in reply, and that was that.

Now a few weeks passed, and Awldano ruled Samnew well and virtuously. Those who had initially begrudged him soon saw sense, and the scars that had previously been inflicted upon the lordship could heal at last.

Rather slower to heal, however, was the state of the treasury. To this end, Awldano worked tirelessly to fasten his relationships with his bondsfolk, such that he had brought more farms under bondage in only a few weeks than any of his predecessors had in all their days. But that alone could only change so much, so he also sent a handful of his thanes away to raid in foreign lands. He had been reluctant to do this, but Karvalo had demanded it.

‘With any luck,’ he said, ‘they will all come home with a boat laden with booty, with many fanciful tales of their exploits, and with your name, Awldano, known all the farther afield.’

Thalo was very keen to put himself on the ship, but Awldano forbade it.

‘I would like you to stay where you are needed most,’ he said, ‘and that is at my side.’

‘Would it not be more useful,’ said Thalo, ‘to have me earning you wealth and fame with my sword, than to have me sitting around here? I am Thennelo, after all, a hero of great renown.’

‘So you are, but more than that, you are Thalo, my husband, whom I would like to support me here.’

That did not satisfy Thalo, but he let the matter rest. They had only recently taken the lordship, after all—there would be further opportunities to prove his worth. Odwala’s bodyguard, Oze, ended up in charge of the ship. When they were ready to leave, Awldano came to see them off.

‘O Awldano!’ said Oze. ‘Worry not for me! I will fight, and I will loot, and that will be your glory. All my foes will know your name, the last they hear!’

Then they set off, and Awldano was glad not to be among them.

Around this time, Awldano attended his first lawmoot in the lordship. This was convened to elect the late king’s successor, but more will be said of that in due course. Before departing, he first welcomed Karvalo to Samnew, and after only a brief reunion, they went on to Syorbak together as kinsmen and allies. Thalo went with them. He sat in the rede hall as the lords did their business, a man of like status by right of marriage, and though he loathed every passing

moment more than the last, he suffered it all willingly—he was much too proud of his lordly husband to leave early.

Then, at the closing feast, Karvalo came to Awldano and took him aside to speak privately. Awldano asked him what he wanted to discuss.

‘We are not here to discuss,’ said Karvalo. ‘I will make a demand, and you will agree to it.’

‘That must depend on the demand,’ said Awldano.

‘Do not be so clever, boy. It does not suit you. This is my demand: you have recently come to possess a treasure which is rightly mine. Within your hall is the axe Fedhewve. My grandfather had it made, but it was stolen and hidden away at Samnew. I know it is there, for I have seen it. Many times over have I tried to reclaim it, to restore it to the hall in which it belongs, but my pleas have thus far found only ignorant ears.’

‘Odwala has told me about this axe, and about your attempts to claim to it.’

‘To reclaim it. And pay no heed to her words, or at least those about this—it was her kinsman who stole it. I now call upon you, my noble Awldano, my Lord of Samnew, my beautiful son, to do what is right and return it to me. Do this, and when it is time for you to claim your inheritance from me, you will be glad for it.’

Awldano dithered briefly, then said, ‘Please afford me the time I need to properly consider this.’

‘Of course. Once we have come back to Samnew, I expect you to have made a decision. I expect also to be going home with Fedhewve hung upon my belt.’

With that, Karvalo rejoined the feast, and Awldano followed him.

So they came back to Samnew together, and as Awldano took his seat in the hall, Karvalo came to him and demanded Fedhewve. Odwala was nearby at the time, and she replied before Awldano could.

‘Enough of this,’ she said. ‘Fedhewve is a founding treasure of this hall, and in this hall alone it belongs. If you think your son’s lordship will change that, think again.’

‘There is no need for thinking,’ said Awldano. ‘I will give it to him.’

‘Whyever would you do that? Have you no respect at all for the hall in which you sit?’

‘Alas, this is not a matter of respect. My father, Karvalo, Lord of Pearmol, is my chiefest ally, and I am loath to sunder the friendship that has only so recently been reforged between our halls. I will take whatever steps I must to rid this place of the misfortune which has long dwelt here.’

‘But this is a step too far. Fedhewve belongs here. If you are to surrender it to another lordship, you might as well surrender your sovereignty entirely.’

‘I understand your concern, Odwala, but this is not a gift to Pearmol. This

is a gift to Karvalo alone, to be returned to Samnew once Domnadhe's children have accounted for him.'

That was little consolation, but Odwala was nothing if not pragmatic.

'I can see my words will not sway you,' she said. 'It would appear my days of warding the sanctity of this place are spent. If you truly mean to give it to him, let that be your decision alone. No other hands shall touch it.'

Awldano agreed to that and went to fetch the axe, while Odwala waited in the hall with Karvalo. He had said nothing since making his request, keen to assess his son's quality. He was pleased.

When Awldano came back from the treasure room, he came with fabulous Fedhewve held in both hands. He first took it to his seat, then rose once more and approached his father. Karvalo lowered himself onto his knees and put out his hands, ready to receive his prize, and the moment he had the axe in his grasp, he gripped it tight, felt its heft in his hands, and enamoured by its sunlit sheen, he laughed out.

'Fedhewve!' he said. 'Fedhewve is mine!'

With that, Odwala left the room without a word.

Awldano returned to his seat, and Karvalo arose and hung Fedhewve on his belt. He said he was glad to see his son taking so well to the lordship, and that he eagerly awaited a long and fruitful friendship. Then they wished each other well, and Karvalo left the hall.

Thalo was not in the room while this unfolded (he was hiding away where he might not meet Karvalo), but these events were soon brought to his attention. At once, he came storming into the hall and called out for Awldano. Awldano went to him and asked why he had brought such a temper inside.

'Where is Karvalo? Where is Fedhewve?'

'My father has already left,' said Awldano, 'and Fedhewve with him. What of it?'

'What of it? Whyever did you yield it? What did he say to you?'

Awldano stated his reasons, and they were much the same as those he had given Odwala.

'Though I would wish otherwise,' he said, 'Samnew needs whatever allies can be found, and now more than ever. There are few whose friendship will prove as valuable as that of the Lord of Pearmol. I feared this might upset you—I could not rightly say that I am not upset myself—but I hope you will hear my reasons with a steady head and be understanding.'

Thalo, however, was not well known for his understanding.

'You are the Lord of Samnew,' he said, and loudly, 'not Karvalo. You ought to act like it, not some dog twirling for its master. This is your hall, our hall, my hall. What benefit will come of the wanton relinquishment of your authority

to another? You should not be prostrating yourself before your father.'

'I have not yielded my authority.'

'But you have yielded Fedhewve, the treasure of Samnew, my treasure. If you would give over even that, what here is safe from your father's wretched fingers?'

'Understand, my choice was not made without careful consideration, nor without difficulty.'

'You speak of consideration, but consideration for whom?'

Then Thalo left the hall.

Awldano tried to speak with him again later that day, hoping to resolve their disagreement when they were each of lesser passion, but Thalo said it would be better to put it aside altogether.

'What is done is done,' he said Thalo. 'Let us say no more of it.'

Awldano agreed to that, and though a certain tension lingered in their house for a while thereafter, it lessened with each passing day, until it was as if it had never visited at all. They would not speak of Fedhewve again.

XLI

Concerning the Kingship

It is time to return to the kingship. News of the slaughter at Thwenawl swiftly came to Syorbak, whereupon Rago the Chancellor took control of the town. The very next day, he summoned the royal council to determine the succession of the Lordship of Syorbak. Two claimants came forth. The first was Yordhoa, the late king's widow, and the second was Arneo, his brother. Standing before the council, Yordhoa said the lordship was rightfully hers.

'I was Arkelo's wife,' she said, 'and am therefore more entitled than anyone to inherit his property, lordship and all.'

'That may be so,' said Arneo, 'but Syorbak is rather grander than any old lordship. This is the seat of the kingship, to which you have no right at all.'

'We are not here to contest the kingship, but the lordship, to which my claim is unassailable, or it should be.'

'In every practical sense, the lordship is the kingship. Why else would we be discussing this before the king's council?'

'Why indeed? It ought to be a private affair, but I am willing to overlook that if it will expedite the delivery of my late husband's inheritance.'

So it went on, and when all was done, the council determined Arneo to be the more suitable successor. Yordhoa was more than a bit displeased, but she bit her tongue and went away to consider her options.

Later that day, a woman called Lota came to Syorbak. She was Arneo's half-sister, being the daughter of the elder Arkelo by his second wife, Gondola (who was also Rago's sister), whereas Arneo and the younger Arkelo were the sons of his first wife, Awdha. When Lota came to the hall and learnt that Arneo had already succeeded to the lordship, she was outraged.

'I am outraged!' she said. 'I have no weaker claim to this hall than you, and yet where was my fair hearing?'

Arneo had no respect at all for his half-sisters, so he sent Lota away without addressing any of her concerns. She left neither willingly nor quietly.

Yordhoa heard about Lota's visit the next day, and the pair came together

to conspire. Lota made clear her intention to contest the kingship come what may, while Yordhoa hoped her daughter, Kara, would succeed her father. Kara, however, was young yet, and unlikely to be chosen unless no one opposed her. Between Arneo and Lota, her chances were slim, and so Yordhoa agreed to support Lota in exchange for a considerable sum of silver, as well as assurance that she would be appointed to the chancellery. With this decided, Lota left Syorbak to seek support from the other lords.

Shortly thereafter, another aggrieved visitor came to Arneo's hall. This was Afdea, Lord of Awlteyr, whose husband Arbeyno had died fighting alongside the late king, as had a great many of her thanes. She demanded compensation for their loss.

'They swore their service to the kingship,' she said, 'and the folly of the kingship betrayed them.'

'This is a woeful thing to hear,' said Arneo, 'but I am not the king. I have no obligation to make up for the loss of your thanes, thanes whom you willingly yielded to my brother, and least of all while my losses are no less than yours.'

'A pathetic excuse,' said Afdea, and she left the hall.

In the following days, she and her bodyguards went into the town and whipped up a great riot. The folk of Syorbak had likewise suffered their own losses, and their grief was very easily forged into wrath. A great mob amassed, Afdea at its centre, and they rampaged through the town, sowing such chaos that Arneo closed his inner gate and shut himself in his hall. For three days he hid away from the looting and the violence.

Then, on the day of the harvest festival, he did not hold a marvellous feast in his marvellous hall. No, he instead went out into the town with his thanes and offered alms to the bereaved. As he stood before them, he swore that he would see justice done.

'Your grief,' he said, 'is the work of none but the earls of the north, and your pain their savagery. I share in that grief, that pain, and thus I share with you what amends I can. And know, my friends, I will not rest until our mutual enemies are held properly accountable for this tragedy, and justice is done.'

The rioting settled down after that. Some thought this was little more than a paltry gesture and kept it up, but they were few enough to be more easily managed. Afdea herself was caught while she was still at Syorbak, and she was brought before Arneo. She agreed to lay aside her demand for compensation in exchange for her life and an oath of submission, and then she went home.

The damage caused by this riot was severe enough that Rago and the royal council agreed to delay the coming lawmoot to get the town in order. Thus, where before it had been planned for the midwinter, it was now expected to take place early in the new year.

During this time, Arneo received a third angry visitor. She was his daughter, Mora, who had come from Samnew with her own complaints.

‘Samnew should be mine,’ she said, ‘but Karvalo has filled its lordly seat with his arse-licker son and the runt-pup he calls his husband. I say! The whole affair is vile beyond belief.’

But Arneo’s patience was wearing thin.

‘Mora,’ he said, ‘I do not know what has happened at Samnew, nor do I much wish to. That was my brother’s concern, and he is dead. I will not give my attention to such petty squabbles when the kingdom itself is at stake.’

‘This is no petty squabble. This is about the home of your wife, the home of my mother, the home Karvalo has snatched while her body has barely cooled. This is about honour—mine and yours, but most of all hers!’

‘Hush! I want to hear nothing more about this. If you can put this aside, I will make you a reeve once I have claimed my kingdom.’

‘No! I want Samnew! I want to rule in my own right, not at your behest!’

‘You are my daughter, from whom I would expect rather more grace than you have shown today. Do as I say, and you will succeed me here. Until then, a reeveship may fashion you into a worthier king.’

Mora remained unsatisfied, but this was perhaps the best outcome for which she could hope. She agreed to her father’s offer and left him in peace.

But that peace was soon to be disturbed once more. While Lota was staying at a town called Wolam, she learnt that the coming lawmoot was to be delayed and was moved to outrage.

‘Arneo, you!’ she said. ‘This is surely some ploy to win more favour for himself. It is most unscrupulous of him, and shameful too.’

Lota left Wolam as soon as she could and returned to her home at Wolsrok. Her wife, Kadleya, was the lord there, and she shared Lota’s outrage.

‘That Arneo!’ said Kadleya. ‘Has he no respect for his forebears and the kingdom they built?’

‘None at all!’ said Lota. ‘If he means to upset the proper order of things, we must do the same to prevent it.’

Together they mustered a company of warriors and sailed a ship each up the coast towards Syorbak, intent upon besieging the town. Arneo, however, had been forewarned of their coming, and he managed to put out a pair of ships to meet them. They came together off the coast near Brogues, and though the foreman of Arneo’s ships tried to turn them back, they refused. Thus did a battle ensue, and when it was done, Arneo’s side took the victory. Kadleya’s ship was boarded first, and she was captured while everyone else was killed, or else they leapt overboard and took their chances in the sea. Lota did not mean to continue the battle with such a disadvantage. She sailed away from the site of

the battle and fled southwards into Ayslonn.

Kadleyna was brought before Arneo, and he agreed to spare her life if she divorced Lota and forsook the Lordship of Wolsrok. Kadleyna did this and went eastwards to the island of Lerneu, where she came into the protection of Syoma, Lord of Gwonvek. The Lordship of Wolsrok was granted to a woman called Ewssea Odonnan to resolve a separate dispute following the death of Arnalo, Lord of Arbak, who had also died alongside the late king.

Yordhoa had no role in Lota's revolt, and she was not best pleased to hear about it. She met with Arneo soon afterwards, and they agreed a resolution to their dispute. Yordhoa would be granted a large swath of the northern portion of Arneo's lordship, as well as the southern part of the Lordship of Awlteyr, which Afdea had been forced to yield, and she would thenceforth govern this domain as the Earl of Soyna. In exchange for this, Yordhoa forsook her claim to the Lordship of Syorbak, and her daughter forsook her claim to the kingship. They met again at Awlteyr a few days later to formalise a treaty to this effect. Arneo, Yordhoa, Kara, and Afdea each signed it, as did several witnesses, and it was ratified shortly thereafter by the royal council.

Yordhoa came at once to Glannas to take up her earldom, where she married a man called Yono, a cousin of Mesdea, Lord of Reykam, early in the next year. They would have one son together, whom Yordhoa named Thollayvo after her father.

It now seemed that Arneo would face no opposition for the kingship, and he set about preparing Syorbak for the lawmoot. This happened in the spring, and when the lords gathered to choose the new king, Arneo alone came before them. He stated his case and was duly elected. Rago vacated the king's chair forthwith, and Arneo took it, and thus he succeeded to the kingship.

He took his kingly mantle at a ceremony held in the temple at Brownos, near Awslad in the west of his kingdom, on the first day of summer. All of his reeves—including Mora, newly appointed as the Reeve of Syoglonn—and the majority of the lords were in attendance, as was Yordhoa, the Earl of Soyna. Though all of the earls of Norlonn had been invited, only Solvega, the Earl of Eylavol, had accepted the invitation, but even she could not go herself. In her stead, she sent an ally of hers called Lokkele, who had been married to Enlovo the High-reeve until he died at Thwenawl. Arneo's other messengers were each sent home with nothing more than insults, except for the poor chap sent to Noynavol, whom Thrando executed on the spot.

'But that was to be expected,' said Arneo. 'Let his sacrifice be honoured forevermore.'

The most significant guests of all were a party who had come on behalf of Thewra, King of Baklalonn. They were fronted by a woman called Tholvoa,

Thewra's aunt, and Tholvoa's son, Aldoro, both of whom would come to be kings themselves. That was the first time since Folgono's days that southern folk of such standing had been welcomed in Mawon.

'This,' said Arneo, 'is proof of the will of fate, and of the bounty over which I shall reign.'

But fate cannot be proven, and its bounty is hard-won indeed.

XLII

Fessos

In the days after the lawmoot, the king oversaw the dissemination of his laws to all his domains, and those of his peers. Karvalo was among the first to receive a new lawbook, and at once, he set about producing copies for his allies. One such book made its way to Samnew, and Awldano received it with pride.

‘What an excellent thing it is,’ he said, ‘to hold in my hands proof of my place in the world. I was among the deliberators of this law. I made it fast, and fast are the leaves on which it is set. But faster still is the wonder with which I behold its beauty. No earthly power could shake it from my breast.’

Awldano was so moved by the book’s artistry that he decided to produce a book of his own to commemorate his accession to the lordship. However, though Samnew did at that time have the means to produce whatever logs and accounts the lordship demanded, it had no proper scriptorium, and certainly not the talent required to produce a work bearing even a fraction of the lawbook’s eminence. Awldano resolved to change that.

‘I will make this place a place of art,’ he said, ‘and a place of culture, where before it has been a place of strife.’

‘Yes,’ said Thalo. ‘It would be better to produce your own work than to get only what Karvalo cares to give.’

To this end, Awldano had one of the small bedrooms set aside and made his way to Pearmol, where he asked his father to give him a scribe or two.

‘Why would you ask this of me?’ said Karvalo.

Awldano explained his decision to establish a scriptorium at Samnew, for which he would need more accomplished scribes than he had available.

‘That seems a wasteful effort,’ said Karvalo. ‘I gave you the laws recently, did I not? Did you not find it a satisfactory production?’

‘More than satisfactory,’ said Awldano, ‘it was right inspiring!’

‘That was not my intention, nor is it my intention to entertain this. If you need a book, come to me, and I will see what I can do about it. Until then, I advise you go home and turn your attention to more important endeavours.’

Then Karvalo left the room.

Awldano went home empty-handed, but his luck was not yet spent. Odwala came to him and said there was another way, and a better one. She said she had received a priestly education at a small temple called Swotteyr, not far south of Samnew, and she had been taught her letters by a wise old priest named Owvo.

‘He was from Fessos,’ she said. ‘They produce the foremost hands in the kingdom, and they are ever eager to loan them out. If you ask the high priest there, I am sure you will find yourself some finer scribes than your father’s.’

As reluctant as he was to dismiss his father’s counsel, Awldano’s thoughts turned readily to Thalo’s. He alone was the Lord of Samnew, not Karvalo, and he would make it a place of art, and a place of culture. He would have his scriptorium. Just so, he sent Odwala sailing down to Fessos a little while later to procure some priests. He did not go himself, for autumn was approaching, but he sent Thalo in his stead.

‘What queer jest is this?’ said Thalo, sitting on the ship. ‘Why is it that I sit aboard this ship, but not those bound for greater exploits?’

‘Thalo is not aboard that ship,’ said Awldano. ‘You are Awldano, my will and my voice. I should be going myself, but my lordly obligations deny me that honour. As my husband, you are the most fitting replacement. If that is not to your liking, you can go to Pearmol on my behalf and ask my father again.’

Thalo stayed on the ship. Even so, Odwala was in charge of the expedition, for she best knew her way around a monastery. After her and Thalo, the rowers were twelvefold, six on each side, and when everyone was ready and the sea had been adequately appeased, they set off.

The wind was fair, and as they were approaching Flatteyr, they decided to stop for the night. The Lord of Flatteyr at that time was a man called Addeo—he will be important to remember. Addeo was a proud and forthright man, but he had only recently taken the lordship amid a dispute following the death of his sister, Kona, at Thwenawl, where she fought alongside the late king. Addeo granted Odwala his hospitality, and though nothing is said of Thalo’s time in his hall, I imagine Addeo had much to ask his guest.

They set sail again early the next morning and followed the coast until they came to Kwelnas. They had to row their way upriver, going past Syorbak and on until they came to Arbak, and there they disembarked at last, to walk the rest of the way to Fessos. When they came to the monastery, they all went in together, halted a passing priest, and asked for an audience with the high priest.

‘Who are you?’ said the priest.

Odwala said, ‘We have come on behalf of Awldano, Lord of Samnew, to speak with the high priest.’

The priest said he was in the temple and led them there. They came through

the south door into a room of black stone, lit only by candles hung along the walls, and a distant glimpse of sunlight at either end. Dug into the middle of the floor was a pool of water, in which sat a short, round man. He was Saffero the High Priest, and the water came up to his nipples. The right one was called Thlewze, and the left Thlowze, and he was otherwise alone.

‘Who are you?’ said Saffero.

Odwala said, ‘We have come on behalf of Awldano, Lord of Samnew, to speak with the high priest.’

‘That is all well and good, but that is not what I asked. Who are you?’

‘I am Odwala, former Lord of Samnew, albeit briefly, and foremost servant of my very own successor. Beside me stands Thalo, the lord’s husband, who has come in his stead.’

Saffero asked them why they had come to Fessos.

Odwala said, ‘The Lord of Samnew wishes to establish a scriptorium in his hall, for which he will need the appropriate scribal staff. We hope you will be willing to provide this.’

‘No, no! More than willing! I am ever proud to hear how highly our art is regarded. It is most pleasing to know that this is no less even in the northerner and simpler reaches of the land.’

Thalo could not let such a slight stand. Stepping forth, he said, ‘What do you mean by that, priest?’

Saffero only laughed as bubbles welled up about his nipples.

‘Thlewze hears,’ he said, his gaze fixed upon Thalo, ‘and Thlowze judges. I will sort you out.’

Then he rolled out of the pool and left the temple without putting on any clothes, or even drying off.

While Saffero made the necessary arrangements, his guests were put up in the monastery. The twelfold rowers were hidden away in two bedrooms of six each, where they might be readily ignored, while Odwala and Thalo were put in a very small room together near the temple. Neither found this situation at all comfortable, but neither were they willing to say anything about it. They were both invited to explore the monastery as guests of moderate esteem, but only one took up this offer.

As Odwala was leaving the room, she turned to Thalo and said, ‘Would you care to accompany me?’

‘I am well enough as I am,’ said Thalo, and he lay upon his bench.

Odwala did not ask him again. She returned to the temple, now empty, the candles all unlit, and spent the rest of the day there, marvelling in silence. The whole building was wrought from stone, as was not the fashion in those days, and every stone was black all over, save only veins of a dull grey, brought many

lifetimes ago from a faraway land. So fully did the walls consume the daylight, so thick was the shadow they cast, that though the temple was open-ended on both the east and west faces, it might as well have been entirely enclosed. But the darkness was not absolute, for as if infused with some ancient magic, the pool in the floor seemed to glow with a pale light. After she had walked the entire length of the temple and back, Odwala went to it, knelt before it, peered into it, and was transfixed. With a cautious hand, she reached out.

‘Withdraw it,’ said a voice behind her. It belonged to a young priest who had come to fetch her. ‘That is not for touching.’

‘Its light is most intriguing,’ said Odwala.

‘And its light is faintly golden. Turn away.’

Odwala did as she was told, but though she had turned her eyes away from the beauty of the pool, she was swiftly stricken by a new one, though one she could scarcely see. ‘And the darkness is ever so deep.’

The priest took Odwala by the hand and said, ‘Only when the eyes are blind can the heart truly see. Come, it is bedtime.’

So she led Odwala out of the temple and back to her bedroom. Thalo was still lying on his bench—he had not moved at all—and they both went to sleep.

On the following day, Odwala shared her breakfast with her companions and the priests, and then took to wandering once more as she awaited Saffero’s choice of scribes. And just the same, Thalo waited alone in their bedroom and said nothing to anyone.

It was not until the evening, when Odwala had returned and was about to lay upon her bench, that a priest arrived to invite them to the temple.

‘Saffero will see you now,’ said the priest. ‘Follow me, and swiftly.’

This they did, both yet in their bedclothes, but Thalo picked up his belt as he left, so as not to be parted from his sword.

When they came to the temple, the candles were all lit again, and there they found Saffero sitting by the little pool with four priests, a young woman and three men, two big, one small. At once, Odwala recognised the woman to be the priest she had met the day prior, but where before she was veiled in the darkness of the temple, now she saw her all the more fully, and grew all the more smitten.

Saffero welcomed them and introduced his fellows. The first to be named was Foyva, the youngest of the four, but she was nonetheless an experienced and worthy scribe, having been orphaned at birth and raised at Fessos since her toddlerhood. Then there were the three men. The oldest of them was a man named Orveo, and he was called Orveo the Fat, for he was fat. He was by birth a man of Pearmol, but he had left early in Gonwela’s lordship to hone his art elsewhere and had become a renowned illuminator. The other big man was

Olmodo, from Wolnew, but his bigness was of the stouter sort, and he was thusly called Olmodo Stock. The small man was Gezoro, a man from Lagovol, and he was called Wibble-wobble, for he seemed so lacking in constitution that even the gentlest breeze would put him off balance.

‘Now you know them,’ said Saffero. ‘It is only fitting that they should know you.’

‘I am Odwala,’ said Odwala, ‘predecessor and foremost thane of Awldano, Lord of Samnew, granddaughter of Ekkeo, who first held the lordship, and once a student of one of your own.’

‘Tell me about that,’ said Foyva. ‘Who was it?’

Odwala was all too happy to oblige, and she spoke fondly about her days at Swotteyr, and her education under the priest Owvo.

‘My hand is his,’ she said, ‘though scarcely so artful.’

‘If he was a priest of Fessos,’ said Foyva, ‘then his hand is likewise mine, and mine is therefore yours, or will be.’

Odwala’s wits abandoned her then, and with nothing more to say, it was Thalo’s turn. Saffero invited him to speak, but he said nothing.

‘He is Thalo,’ said Odwala, ‘Awldano’s husband.’

‘But that is not who you are, Thalo man.’ said Saffero. ‘You have not the grace of a lordly fellow. Tell me who you are.’

Thalo remained silent, and Olmodo spoke in his place.

‘Hold on,’ he said. ‘I have heard something or other about a Thalo man. Might that be you?’

‘It might be,’ said Orveo. ‘It is no common name, after all. Say, lad, what have you heard?’

‘Old Albyoga was only recently at Syorbak for the laws, and there she heard about a certain Thalo man, whom they called Thennelo.’

‘Thennelo?’ Orveo turned to Thalo and said, ‘Is that right? Is that you?’

‘So I would reckon,’ said Olmodo. ‘Albyoga said there was very much to hear, but little at all to see.’

Brimming with manful pride, Thalo broke his silence at last, saying, ‘Do you doubt me?’

‘Tell me, however does one meet a troll, let alone kill one?’

‘What is a troll but an ugly man? There are four here before me.’

Olmodo leapt up from the floor, saying, ‘Oy-oy, then! Stand up and try it, if you dare!’

Thalo arose, drew his sword, splendid Sleme, and held it out. ‘I have killed two trolls. Let me make it three.’

Saffero said, ‘You would not spill blood in a place of peace, would you?’

‘It would not be the first time.’

A moment passed, and without a word, Olmodo returned to the floor. There was a dreadful sincerity in Thalo's words, shining in his eyes, and one he did not mean to test.

Yet Thalo did not move. With Sleme still outstretched above the pool, he stood unflinching, his mind belocked by the twinkling light upon the sword's edge. He had seen that light before, a golden light glimmering in the darkness, and in it he saw his everlasting life.

'It would not be the first time,' he said again, his voice low and hesitant. 'He is watching. He is waiting.'

No one was quite sure what he meant by this, and none dared ask.

'Thalo,' said Odwala, 'sit down.'

Thereupon he remembered where he was, sheathed Sleme, and sat down, allowing the conversation to return to the matter at hand. Saffero and Odwala agreed a price for the priests' service, and they each said they were willing to go to Samnew. In turn, Odwala agreed to have them.

'With that decided,' she said, 'you must prepare yourselves for an early departure tomorrow.'

'So soon?' said Saffero. He turned to Thalo, staring silently into the pool. 'I had hoped to have you longer.'

Thalo did not respond. With his gaze held downward, lost in the water-light, he found some small comfort in a memory beckoning from days long past. For a moment, the warmth of a mother's love, his mother's pride, washed over him, and soothed him, but only for a moment.

'And we would be glad to stay longer,' said Odwala, 'but we must hasten homeward. Autumn is approaching.'

'So be it,' said Saffero, and he led everyone out of the temple. The priests hurried off to gather their possessions, while Thalo and Odwala returned to their room with not a word said between them.

That night, Thalo slept very poorly. He dreamt, as often he did, of the foxes at their dinner table, but where before it had been out in the woods, now it was inside. He knew that place, he thought, a place of regret, or of fear, or of blood, but he could not discern its location.

'An altar?' he said. 'A tomb?'

There in the middle of the table lay Kolmago, dead on the glittering platter. The foxes all licked their lips, all braced their swords, and as one they plunged the points into his flesh.

'How for!' said the old fox, for the old fox had now appeared. Around his head sat a golden circlet, an acorn set upon his brow.

'How for!' he said again, and thereupon the foxes picked up their spears (their swords were spears now), hoisted Kolmago up into the air, and danced

around the table, all screeching or rubbing their bellies—all except one, sitting opposite the old fox.

Thalo took up his cup, glowing with pale golden light, and had a sip to drink. Only then did the terror befall him, but he could not discern its source.

‘An altar?’ he said. ‘A tomb?’

‘How for!’ said the old fox, his acorn circlet grown into a golden oak, its roots his brains.

‘Blood?’

Thalo awoke when it was still nighttime. He reached for his belt-bag at once, groping for his golden acorn. It was still there. He held to his breast for a moment, cherished it, and then stowed it once more in the bag. Though he tried to go back to sleep, the night would not take him.

So he slipped out of the room and stole into the vast blackness of the temple. He sat beside the pool, stared into its glow, until he was stirred from his trance by the sound of footsteps ahead of him. There was Saffero, emerging from the gloom.

‘Bedtime is behind us,’ he said, ‘and it will soon be time to wake.’

Thalo jolted onto his feet, but he did not speak.

‘Tell me,’ said Saffero, ‘why are you here?’

Thalo stepped away from the pool without a word.

Saffero’s face hardened, and his voice grew grim. ‘Hide, then. It will change nothing. I know who you are, Thalo Thennelo, and what you will become.’

But Thalo would not hear it. He took a purposeful, prideful step forth and said, ‘Had I my sword.’

‘What then would you do? Would you kill me? Would you make me but another corpse to climb over?’

‘Readily.’

Saffero sat beside the pool with a scoff, fixed his eyes upon the water, and said, ‘I know who you are, Thalo, but there can be no immortality in a wholly mortal world. The gods are dead, my ancestors dead, and yours dead likewise. I will die, and you will die, and every memory of us will die thereafter, until it will be as if we had never lived at all. We each will become one with the earth itself, until that too is reduced to nothing. But though all things in this life are fleeting, not all with like haste. The longevity of one’s memory is determined not by one’s willingness to be remembered, but by the willingness of others to remember.’ Saffero looked up at Thalo and said, ‘Tell me, Thalo Thennelo, who will remember you? What will they remember?’

He did not await an answer, but stood up again, turned away, and left Thalo alone in the temple. Thalo took one last look at the pool and returned to his bedroom. He would not sleep again that night.

Thalo and Odwala left Fessos the next morning, with the fourfold priests in tow. They set off shortly before dawn, eager to get as far as they could in a day, but once they had come back to Arbak and boarded their ship, they found the wind and waves were not so agreeable. They did not make landfall that night until they came to Owffek, when the sun had long since set.

They sought the night's lodging with the lord there, who was still Seymodo, and he welcomed them with pleasure. They were all put up in his hall, but Thalo did not sleep at all that night, and instead spent it sulking beneath the stars.

Then, as dawn approached, they thanked Seymodo for his hospitality and set off again, sailing homeward at last. They returned to Samnew later that day. Awldano came down to the shore to welcome them, but as they disembarked, there was not a smile to be seen among them.

Thalo was the first to leap off the ship. Awldano came to greet him, kissed him, and asked why they had come home with such sour moods.

'Tell me,' said Awldano, 'has some tragedy befallen you?'

'No,' said Thalo. 'You wanted priests, and we have some priests.'

Then he went straight up to the hall without another word.

Awldano brought the priests inside to welcome them properly, whereafter they were shown to their bedrooms. They had all been given positions of high honour, so the sleeping arrangements had been altered to accommodate them. Orveo, Olmodo, and Gezoro were together with a fourth man named Gawrrono Mountain-mane, about whom nothing more is remembered than the awesome height of his hair. Foyva ended up in a room with Odwala, Ormana, and Eyge, and together they were the chiefest four of Awldano's thanes.

Awldano had his scriptorium ready as soon as he could. To commemorate it, and to commemorate his lordship, he put them to work on a book chronicling the history of Samnew. This was dictated by Odwala herself, for she knew the most about that. Eyge also contributed many details about more recent events, but these were mostly omitted.

Foyva oversaw the creation of this book, and she and Odwala grew very well acquainted during this time. They had put themselves together within a week, sleeping more often atop one another than each on their own, and they were wed before the year had ended.

Oze the Bald returned from their voyage shortly thereafter, and in triumph. They had raided far and widely, and their ship is said to have been laden with so much booty won in Awldano's name that it was barely afloat. Oze also came with many tales of their adventures, but those are told elsewhere.

Thus, after the strife of recent years, peace and prosperity seemed to be returning to Samnew at last.

XLIII

The Earls and the King Again

After slaying the king, Thrandeo took possession of his corpse and brought it to Bealnew, where he and his followers set up a campsite, donned their armour, and entered the town. Standing before Solvega's gate, firmly shut, Thrandeo bade her let them in, that they might discuss important matters. Solvega came to meet him atop the gate, but she would not let him take another step.

'I have rather more sense,' she said, 'than to welcome into my home a pack of wolves, each laden with swords and axes.'

'Such is your right,' said Thrandeo, 'but when this is done with, Solvega, remember that I have tried to do this peacefully, and you have refused it.'

'I need not barter for peace. The king is coming, and with very many more spears than you have. You would do well not to trap yourself between us.'

Thrandeo whispered briefly with his followers, whereafter they produced the king's corpse, and Thrandeo threw down the severed head, still clad in its kingly helmet. To see it glittering in the evening light, Solvega let out a little whimper, but she said nothing.

'This king?' said Thrandeo. 'There is no milk left for you in his wretched teat. Surrender to me. Let us fight as one against our common foe.'

Solvega took one last look at the king's helmet, then turned away. Without a word, she came down from the gate and went into her house.

'So it is,' said Thrandeo, and he took the king's body back to his campsite.

Meola happened to be near the gate as this unfolded. As Thrandeo left, she went after him, eager to know what had happened, and came to his booth. He received her cordially, and he told her about the battle at Thwenawl, about his masterful ambush of the king's army, and about the king's death.

'But what is to come of it?' asked Meola.

'Solvega's surrender,' said Thrandeo, 'and nothing less.'

'That will not be forthcoming.'

'It is fortunate, then, that I am a patient man. I will wait.'

Meola and Thrandeo spent the rest of the night discussing their progress and their plans, and the evening proved to be a fruitful one. Meola stayed with him overnight, and they both stayed warm.

The next day, they received a messenger from Bealnew. He said he had come on Solvega's behalf to treat with Thrandeo.

'Has she not the courage to meet me herself?' said Thrandeo. 'Of course not. There never was a slug with a spine. Tell me what you mean to say, man.'

'Solvega yet stands with the kingship,' said the messenger. 'She will not be swayed. She humbly requests your prompt departure from her domain, and that the king's body be relinquished, that he may be taken home and committed to the pyre with dignity.'

Thrandeo had only brought a small troop of warriors up to Bealnew, and he did not intend to spend his time sitting idly before Solvega's gate, so he agreed to leave.

'But this,' he said, 'should not be misconstrued as my surrender. I would greatly value Solvega's allegiance, and I will do whatever I must to have it. It merely happens that waiting here is not the path thereto. As for the king, he is mine. I will not yield my prize for any price at all.'

'That is no justice,' said Meola. 'You have killed the king and had your vengeance. There is no need to inflict it likewise upon his kin. The pain of those who live is no less than that of those who die.'

'Tell me, were my brothers and sisters granted a pyre each when this king's father had them butchered? Who performed the rites for my father, left to rot in the mud? My cause is not the king's honour, nor consideration for his kin. My cause is the dignity of my people, the dignity he and his lot have ever denied us. So I deny them. You, Meola, should understand that better than most.'

'And I understand just as well what little comes of it. You have had your vengeance. It is time to lay it aside, to grant the king his right to a fitting burial, and to turn your attention to the war you wage not for vengeance's sake, but for your people's.'

Thrandeo would hear no more of this. Standing up, he drew his sword and said, 'By my hand was the king slain. I will hang his head above my door, to stand testament to my glory. Leave at once, unless you mean to join him there.' The messenger left without a second thought, whereupon Thrandeo turned to Meola. 'Both of you.'

Meola refused. 'Would you so readily cast me aside, have your fill and flee? You stand here because of me and my striving, your glory won because I dared to demand justice, so what of it? Where is my justice in this?'

Thrandeo put his sword away. 'Your justice is beyond you now. The chance for that escaped you long ago, but if you still want vengeance, this is it.' From

a nearby box, he withdrew the king's severed head. 'This is the war we wage. Look at it! There is no place for honour here, nor dignity, nor justice. Only vengeance, whatever the cost.'

Meola bowed her head and said, 'Then the cost is all too steep.'

Then she turned away and left the booth. They would never meet again.

Utterly deprived of all her former verve, Meola returned to Bealnew, where she met once more with Godleda.

She said, 'This is my fight no longer. I sought vengeance for my husband and called it justice, but there is no justice to be found on the edge of a sword. Only spite, and I have spat my share of that. No more. I can bear it no more. It has taken everything from me, I have given it everything, everything but my Kolbeo. Perhaps he can yet be spared.'

'Go to him,' said Godleda. 'Go home. You have done enough.'

'No. I have done too much, given too much of myself, my time, too many of my kinsfolk, and all for nothing. My heart's sun has set at last.'

'But it was not for nothing. The king is dead, the tide is turning. Norlonn will be its own again, and that will be your doing.'

'Fate alone will determine that.'

Then she went away and returned to Klagenn. Kneeling before Gaylodho's burial stone, she took her son in her arms, looked to the setting sun, and wept.

'Kolbeo,' she said, 'do not let your fire die.'

As for Thrandeo, he did as he said he would. He left Bealnew and returned to Kyalannes, where he hung the king's head above his door. The body was dumped in a bog on the way home, never to be recovered, and his helmet was destroyed and reforged for Thrandeo to wear with pride.

A few weeks later, Seybeo, the Earl of Syenavol, chaired a meeting of the earls at Srandar in Fawnavol. Everyone but Solvega was in attendance, and she sent no one to represent her. They assessed the situation following the king's defeat, and while they were determining the way forward, Ollavo, the Earl of Rogavol, noted that the king's successor had yet to be decided.

'The nature of his successor,' he said, 'must be considered. If they are more reasonable than the late king, our first priority must be to negotiate.'

'The time for negotiating is behind us,' said Thrandeo. 'We must not let up the fight, and least of all while we stand the stronger. We must bring Eylavol to heel. Only then can a settlement be considered.'

'I am not afraid to fight,' said Balkena, the Earl of Fawnavol, 'but we will all fare better if a peaceful resolution can prevent the need to do so.'

'And would you so readily cast aside the victory I won at Thwenawl?'

'No,' said Ollavo. 'As we stand atop this victory, we have our best chance to force the kingship out of our lands for good. That may yet be done by spear

and shield, but it may likewise be accomplished by artful diplomacy.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Frewdha, the Earl of Syagavol, ‘but I very much doubt the kingship will back down after such a blow. Solvega still stands with them. They will not yield now, but will only fight harder. We must do the same.’

So it went on, and when they had at last reached a consensus, the solution was clear—there would be no peace in Norlonn yet. To this end, Frewdha and Aslawga, the Earl of Latavol, came together and proposed the election of one of their number to take up overlordship of Norlonn and control their joint effort in opposing the kingship.

‘Only when we move as one,’ said Aslawga, ‘can we move with purpose and properly contend with the kingship.’

Thrandeo was pleased to hear this proposition—it was in truth his, though he had made them bring it up on his behalf. At once, he stood up and put himself forward. Ollavo did not like that prospect and stood in opposition, whereupon Gretteo, the Earl of Syamlavol, did the same.

‘I am the most warlike among us,’ said Gretteo, ‘and would therefore be the most fitting choice.’

‘Sit down, men,’ said Seybeo. ‘I am in control of things today. We shall first vote upon whether we shall vote.’

They did this, and four voted in favour of establishing an overlordship (they were Thrandeo, Frewdha, Aslawga, and Gretteo), and three against it (they were Seybeo, Ollavo, and Balkena).

‘So be it,’ said Seybeo. ‘Stand up, men, and speak.’

Ollavo spoke first, and he spoke in support of himself. Gretteo spoke next, and he spoke against his opponents. Then Thrandeo spoke, and he spoke neither in support of himself, nor against opponents, but against the kingship.

‘For that is the task ahead,’ he said. ‘To oppose the king. None have done more for this cause than I have.’

Then they voted. Gretteo received no backing besides his own. Ollavo had the backing of Balkena, but Thrandeo had support from Frewdha and Aslawga. Seybeo was the last to vote, and he could bring the matter to a stalemate. He thought much about who he would support, then said, ‘The coming fight, I fear, will be long and hard. One man alone is fit to shoulder this burden. I will vote for Thrandeo.’

So Thrandeo took the victory. At once, he proclaimed himself the Overlord of Norlonn, and at once, Gretteo disputed it.

‘This is no fair!’ he said. ‘The overlordship should be mine!’

‘If you want it,’ said Thrandeo, drawing his beltknife, ‘come and claim it!’

Gretteo drew his own knife, and they each stepped forth ready to strike, and to kill. That did not come to pass. Ollavo stepped between them.

‘Gretteo,’ he said. ‘Lose with honour, man! We have each stated our cases, and Thrando has been fairly chosen. We must lay our quarrels aside and stand as one. There can be no divisions between us.’

‘Hmph!’ said Gretteo, and he put his knife away and returned to his seat.

‘As I thought,’ said Thrando. ‘I will see this through.’

His first goal was to force Solvega into submission. Thus, he mustered an army and brought it to Eylavol early in the following year, where they began pillaging the magnates’ homes. His intent was not to lay waste to Eylavol, but to diminish Solvega’s support among her allies, and to thereby see a more agreeable earl replace her. Yet waste came nonetheless, for Gretteo, eager not to be outdone, brought his own small army and went rampaging through the countryside, besetting whatever petty settlements he stumbled upon.

When Thrando learnt about this, he immediately halted his raids and made his way to a village called Bloazam, upon the wreck of which Gretteo had made his base. He arrived well before dawn and was brought straight to the house in which Gretteo was sleeping. Thrando went inside and kicked Gretteo awake.

‘Who is it?’ said Gretteo, slumber-stunned. ‘What is it?’

‘It is Thrando,’ said Thrando, ‘your lord, with his sword drawn. Tell me, what are you doing here?’

After taking a moment to become fully aware of the situation, Gretteo’s voice shrank, saying, ‘We are forcing Solvega’s hand.’

‘No. We are not forcing Solvega’s hand. I am doing that. You, Gretteo, are only hindering me.’ Thrando brought his sword closer to Gretteo’s chest, until he could feel its bite upon his skin. ‘You are nothing but trouble. Why should I not do you in here and now? Speak! Your next words may be your last.’

‘We must stand as one. I came here to support you, my peer and ally, but I see now that I was misguided. Let me return to my land, and we will both be glad to know this will not happen again.’

Thrando shook his head. ‘Allies we may be, but we are no longer peers. I am your overlord, for whose mercy you must grovel.’ He withdrew his sword. ‘Now grovel!’

Gretteo was a prideful man, but he feared death no less than anyone. He slunk off his bench, onto his knees, and at Thrando’s feet, he wept.

‘O Thrando!’ he cried. ‘It will not happen again! I beg of you! Spare me!’

‘What a pitiful sight. It would not be fitting to kill such a mewling baby.’

Thrando put his sword away and left the house.

Gretteo led his warriors home the same day, and that was just as well, for they had largely lost their respect for him. When they finally came home, word of Gretteo’s submission spread quickly, and a group of his magnates came forth to challenge his earldom. Everyone expected him to lose, but his challengers

all died in a very unfortunate and untimely accident. He managed to hold on for a while after that.

Thrandeo now resumed his raids in Eylavol and kept them up all summer and through the autumn, until he settled in for the winter. Solvega hoped that was the end of it, but once another new year was afoot, Thrandeo came forth with all the more vigour. Thus did her magnates demand action, and urgently. They had done all they could to fend off his fighters, to scrape through a meagre winter, but they could only bear so much of it. Solvega agreed to meet with Thrandeo to come to a resolution.

‘Your quarrel is not with me,’ she said, ‘but with the kingship. There is no need for this.’

‘My quarrel is indeed with the kingship,’ said Thrandeo, ‘the very same kingship that yet suckles you. So long as that continues, you stand in opposition to your countrymen, and my quarrel is with you likewise.’

Their meeting would, of course, come to nothing, and they parted ways with the matter unresolved. Thrandeo returned to his pillaging, and Solvega returned to her magnates. She told them about their meeting and Thrandeo’s refusal to yield, whereupon they let up their voices in outrage.

‘Hush,’ she said. ‘That will not be the end of this. I will meet him again, but this time with spears and axes behind me.’

Solvega mustered her own army and began a more purposeful defence of her domain, fighting alongside her warriors as they repelled Thrandeo’s raids. This culminated when the two armies met near Oadha, in the western portion of Eylavol. Each side came against the other with its full weight, and though Solvega fought valiantly, Thrandeo, that war-forged man, fought all the fiercer, and he took the victory. Solvega fled the field and escaped back to Bealnew, and Thrandeo followed her. Once again, he set up a campsite outside the town and awaited her submission.

It was around this time that Godleda came back into things, more eager than ever to see the earldom change hands. She went with her cousin, a man named Ayrmodho, to a town called Ordenn, the ancestral home of Solvega’s kin. At that time, it was controlled by a woman named Rendea, who was Solvega’s elder sister.

Godleda and Ayrmodho requested Rendea’s hospitality, saying they were on their way to bolster the western side of the earldom on Solvega’s behalf. Believing them to therefore be her allies, Rendea welcomed them into the town, as well as every one of the warriors behind them. Only a few days later, she became painfully aware of this mistake. Godleda and Ayrmodho slew Rendea in her bed, as well as many of her thanes and relatives, and seized control of the town, where they began gathering support for themselves.

Word of Ordenn's capture came first to Thrandeo, still awaiting Solvega's surrender outside Bealnew. He relayed the news to her himself, but this only strengthened her resolve.

'If you think this will dishearten me,' she said, standing tall atop the gate, 'think again. Now I have all the more reason to fight, to reclaim my ancestral home and avenge my fallen kinsfolk.'

Then she went inside, and Thrandeo returned to his campsite.

This went on for a few weeks more, until Thrandeo received an unexpected messenger. That was Balkena, the Earl of Fawnovol. She told Thrandeo that she and the other earls had come to an agreement.

'Seybeo and Wove,' she said, 'are travelling southwards now. They will meet with the king and seek a settlement on behalf of us all.'

Wove was the Earl of Rogavol. They had taken up the earldom following Ollavo's death late in the previous year and had swiftly proven themselves to be an artful diplomat.

'Ollavo would surely be proud of his successor,' said Balkena.

But Thrandeo said, 'What treachery is this? I am your overlord, and yet you act without my knowledge, and against my will?'

'Yes, for the good of us all.'

'Tell me, what did Frewdha have to say about it? And Aslawga?'

'They supported us, although it may comfort you to know that they did so reluctantly.'

'Do not speak to me of comfort—there is none to be found in such betrayal. Begone, Balkena, lest I dispense my justice here and now.'

Balkena left, and Thrandeo left soon after. He abandoned Bealnew once more and went home to reconsider his approach.

Shortly thereafter, Solvega sent a troop to reclaim Ordenn, but they were attacked by a flock of manic sheep on the way and were forced to turn back. She then sent a messenger to the king to request his support, but he refused to help, and her own allies were all much too weary to start a new fight just as Thrandeo had left. She ruled Ordenn lost for now, but only for now. A day would come, she was sure, when the town would be reclaimed.



This was an important time for the king. Since taking up his kingdom, a great many pirates had begun prowling the coast, raiding in his lands, and those of his allies. That had always been the case, but their numbers had recently grown as never before—the bulk of the dead at Thwenawl were levied from the king's domains, and many of their kin now found their farms shorthanded. Unable to

fulfil the king's tribute, they were all too often forced out of their homes, and though many found places for themselves elsewhere, others gripped destitution in one hand, retribution in the other, and turned to piracy.

Indeed, the problem became so widespread that the king stood atop his gate one day and swore to kill every last one of them, speaking this verse:

'Ye raiders and reavers and robbers, ye boors!
Ye killers and cowards who harry our shores,
who pillage and plunder and make wives your whores,
then hoist up your sails and put out your oars!
Now hear this and fear this, our united cause,
that rich folk and fair folk, and likewise the poor,
will scorn you and warn you to heed well our laws,
or curse you and catch you and take up your wars!
Now hear this and fear this, this fair fate is yours:
to hang from your foul feet above our fine floors!'

The king entrusted the pirates' eradication to the joint efforts of Syoma, Lord of Gwonvek, and Rena, Lord of Yolbrog. They conducted this campaign commendably, but that was not to be the end of it. While the king was touring, a pair of ships fought their way past Yolbrog and sailed on to Syorbak, where they set upon the town.

The pirates were led by an old warrior named Tholbrano, and he was called Tholbrano the Devourer, so insatiably did he tear through his every foe. He had in his youth been a thane of Bodleo, the first Lord of Gwonvek, and had married one of his daughters, Gova, but she divorced him only a few years after their wedding. He soon left Gwonvek, but he did not go alone. As he went, he stole a toddler, a lad named Rokkaro, to be his protégé, and kept him ever at his side. Tholbrano made himself one of the most infamous men in the kingdom, earning a full outlawry and much disrepute as a seasoned pirate lord.

Tholbrano was able to force his way through the outer gate and spew his comrades into Syorbak, whereupon the king's thanes came forth to meet them. Just about every one of the pirates was slain, but not before they had wrought such terror and destruction that the king was forced to come home. When he arrived, he was mobbed by an angry crowd and fled into his hall, from which he oversaw once more the restoration of his home.

Tholbrano was captured alive, and true to his word, the king had him strung up by his feet and killed in his hall. Rokkaro too was captured, but he was only barely a man at that time, so he was spared this punishment. Instead, he was sent in bonds back to Gwonvek, where he came into Syoma's service and was

made to atone for his wrongdoing.

The earls Seybeo and Wove arrived when Syorbak's splendour remained much diminished. They went before the king together and bade him meet with the earls to agree a peaceful settlement to their dispute, and much as his brother had before him, the king told his guests to return to their booths and await his response.

The king summoned his council to discuss their request that evening. As he sat in his kingly chair, he said he was conflicted on the matter.

'I have suffered many woes,' he said, 'and would like to prevent any more where I can, but these folk will not be satisfied unless I surrender my kingship over Norlonn completely. That I cannot do, for therein lies my father's legacy, and my own. To surrender that would be to surrender all that I hold dear.'

His councillors were of similarly mixed opinions.

'You must not yield,' said Owvo. He was the Reeve of Rogavol, and he had been appointed to the high-reeveship following Enlovo's death at Thwenawl, though he had not returned to Norlonn since he fled three years prior. 'If you have any love for your old kinsman, or for yourself, you will fight for your kingship to your dying day.'

'That would be most foolish,' said Rago the Chancellor. He had been in a bitter mood recently, ever since the king had refused to help Solvega reclaim Ordenn, his home. 'Twice has your home been ravaged by your own people, and mine just the same. You have thus far held this house—and this kingdom—with all the skill and tact of a butchered pig. I believe it is rather too big for one of such small stature.'

'What dishonour!' said the king.

'Pay no heed to him,' said Erlawga. She was one of Karvalo's sisters, and his representative in the king's council. 'He speaks as one of them, surely out to benefit from your misjudgement.'

'Pay no heed to me,' said Rago, 'and nothing much will change, or else things will only worsen for you.'

'Say a word more,' said the king, 'and things will only worsen for you!'

So the topic of discussion moved away from the earls' plea and towards the personal grudge between the king and his chancellor. Some of the councillors backed the king, as they ever would, and some backed Rago, and neither side was lacking in passion. Their voices grew louder, punches were thrown, swords were drawn, and the council was adjourned with nothing resolved.

Yet the earls would not be forgotten. The king went to them at once, and with Rago's words sounding in his mind, he said, 'I am your king! There is nothing for us to discuss, no need to negotiate. There will be no settlement between us but the settlement of the earth above your graves. You will submit

to me, or you will die. Take this message back to your peers, and let them fear their king, as all men should!’

Seybeo and Wove left Syorbak the same day.

Upon their return, the king’s message was spread far and quickly. Thrandeo resumed his raiding in Eylavol, and Solvega her defence, while the other earls all sat dispirited in their chairs, waiting to see what would happen.

Soon enough, something happened—Gretteo grew impatient. He set about conspiring with Aslawga, the Earl of Latavol, and they led an army southwards into Rewgrawd and harried its people. The king’s reeve there, a woman named Rena, brought forth her thanes to repel them, and they came together in battle near a village called Sleam. Despite their verve, Gretteo and Aslawga were defeated, but both survived the rout and fled back northwards into Latavol.

The moment Thrandeo caught wind of this, he loosed an almighty howl.

‘Gretteo!’ he said. ‘That rotten, sodden fool. He will regret this!’

Thrandeo summoned a meeting of the earls at Kyalannes, and when they all gathered in his hall—all but Solvega—he called Gretteo up to the front of the room. Gretteo came forth, and Thrandeo said he was going to kill him.

‘Hold on a moment,’ said Gretteo. ‘You may call yourself our overlord, but you nonetheless lack the authority to pass such a judgement.’

The other earls agreed, and they resolved to outlaw him instead.

‘So be it,’ said Thrandeo. ‘By the consensus of your peers, Gretteo, you are hereby outlawed.’

Then he drew his sword and killed him on the spot.

Everyone in the room stood aghast, but Thrandeo did not put his sword away. No, he whistled a grim tune, and in came a troop of his thanes, all armed and armoured. They put their weapons up at the earls, then looked to Thrandeo, Gretteo dead beneath him.

‘This cannot go on,’ he said. ‘I am your overlord, elected by yourselves, and you will respect that. Now hark! Gretteo’s earldom will be contested as his magnates wish, but I will be the final arbiter of his succession. Thereafter, I will have sixty fighters from each of you, given willingly and until I deem their work to be done. If you refuse, you will be killed, and your successors will agree in your stead. I will make up the rest of the number myself, and I alone will command this army, leaving each of you to hold your own domains. The king is coming, and I will meet him.’

And so it was. The earls each swore to uphold this agreement, little choice though they had, and went their separate ways. In Syamlavol, the earldom was taken by a woman named Begfala, and Thrandeo deemed her election suitable. She offered him his sixty fighters, as did each of the other earls, and after nearly a year’s preparation, Thrandeo gathered his army at Ordenn, where Godleda

yet held the town. There he would await the king.

‘He will come,’ he said. ‘He must.’



Following the battle at Sleam, the king summoned his council once more, but he sought no advice.

‘The earls have overstepped once too often,’ he said. ‘I must assert myself at the earliest opportunity. Thus, I shall gather an army, march northwards, and bring them to heel once and for all.’

‘Nonsense,’ said Rago. ‘You should strive to find a more peaceful solution. There is nothing to be won from further fighting.’

But the king was not in a patient mood. As Rago spoke, he went to him, clenched his fist, and struck him hard on the jaw, knocking him out of his chair.

‘Get up,’ he said, ‘and get out. You are my chancellor no longer.’

As Rago arose, he said, ‘It would seem all sense has abandoned you,’ and he left the room.

Rago left Syorbak the next day and went northwards to Bealnew. When he came there, he told Solvega, his daughter, about the king’s plans.

‘He will come to you,’ he said. ‘You must make him see reason.’

‘What reason?’ said Solvega. ‘I will stand beside him, come what may.’

‘Why? You are inviting war into your domain, and for what?’

‘Father, war is already here. We have been fighting for years. Thrandeo has made himself a king in all but name, and he wants my loyalty no less than Arneo. Whomever I support, war is unavoidable.’ Solvega loosed a tear. ‘I can only choose a side, and hope I choose well. For my own sake, and for that of my people.’

Rago shed a tear in turn and took his daughter in his arms. ‘Solvega, you have ever been stout of heart. I will trust in your judgement. If this is the path you will walk, walk it proudly.’

Then Rago kissed Solvega’s forehead and left Bealnew. He did not intend to get caught up in a fight, so he went in search of somewhere to spend the latter days of his life in peace. The place he found was Fessos, where Saffero the High Priest welcomed him as a learned man of high esteem. He spent his time there writing about the kingship, and not entirely spitefully.

In Rago’s absence, the king passed the chancellery to a woman named Fena Awdbegannan. She had become the Lord of Flatteyr following the death of her wife, Kona, at Thwenawl, but she was ousted by Kona’s brother, Addeo, whose name is important to remember. Fena was the king’s second cousin, both being great-grandchildren of Endelo, the first King of Mawon, and her brother, a man

called Yargeo, was by marriage the uncle of the King of Baklalonn in the south. It was for these connections that the king appointed her to the chancellery.

With that sorted, the king set out once more on a tour of his kingdom to gather support and muster an army to bring against the earls. In time, this would bring him to Samnew.

XLIV

The Seed Is Sown

When Karvalo learnt the purpose of the king's tour, he deemed the whole affair to be very iffy and summoned a meeting of his allies to discuss the matter. They convened on the day of the summer lights at a town called Oyfnawl, in the south-west of his domain, and those in attendance were thus: Karvalo, Lord of Pearmol; Yarnaga, Lord of Syornes; Ewglena, Lord of Knessyar; and Awldano, Lord of Samnew. They were also joined by a man named Rodholo, the Steward of Oyfnawl, whom Karvalo hoped would soon become a lord in his own right, but more will be said of him in due course. Together they resolved to refuse the king, just as they had his brother three years prior.

'But do not let this be grounds for poor hospitality,' said Karvalo. 'He will surely visit each of us, begging for our support. You must each feed him well and keep him warm, then send him on his way. After all, Rodholo must have his writ.'

This they all agreed, and after they had shared in the autumn feast the next day, they went home.

A short while after his return to Samnew, Awldano summoned a meeting of his own, attended by the foremost members of his retinue. They were Thalo, Ormana, Odwala, Foyva, Oze, and Eyge. Awldano told them about the king's tour, and that he and his allies had agreed not to support his expedition into Norlonn.

'We should expect the king to visit,' he said, 'though I cannot say when. As it stands, he has no legal right to draft my retinue into this matter against my will, and thus he shall not. I have chosen to forewarn you all today, that when the time comes, we can be as one.'

Then Awldano asked them to state their understanding. Each of Ormana, Odwala, Foyva, and Eyge said they understood, but Thalo and Oze were more hesitant.

'If that is what you mean to do,' said Oze, 'I suppose I should get behind it.'

But know this, Awldano, my gracious lord: if ever you change your mind, your foremost warrior stands ready to fight.'

Awldano thanked Oze for their get-up-and-go, but he assured them his mind would not be changed.

Thalo was the last to speak. He said, 'Tell me, Awldano, who decided this? Was it you, or did your father decide for you?'

'We decided this jointly,' said Awldano, 'as peers and allies.'

'Peers and allies? Believe that if you wish, but that is not the nature of your relationship. Karvalo is a shrewd and callous man. He sees in people only what he can get out of them, and in you he sees a dutiful son too soft to defy him. I have suffered this dishonour as best I can, but my patience is wearing thin.'

'What would you have me do?'

'Whatever you like. There is more for you—more for us—than to be your father's lackeys. I am willing to fight for you, for your honour and your glory—willing and eager.'

'And I am grateful for your willingness, but my decision has been made. Tell me you understand, Thalo, and we can be done here.'

So the room fell silent, all eyes upon Thalo. They awaited his response, but he offered none and left with a huff.

'I will go to him,' said Ormana.

'No,' said Awldano. 'This is our quarrel, and we two shall settle it.'

'Awldano, do not mistake my honesty for discourtesy, but the two of you will settle nothing. Thalo is much too stubborn, and you are much too patient.'

Then Ormana left the room, and Awldano adjourned the meeting.

Ormana found Thalo where he always went after his marital squabbles—the treasury. There he stood longingly beneath Awldano's ancestral helmet, mounted where once the axe Fedhewve had hung.

Without greeting him, Ormana said, 'You have some nerve, muck man.'

'Why are you saying this?' said Thalo.

'Ask yourself the same.'

'Ormana, Awldano is dishonouring himself, and I will not stand for it.'

'Then sit down and look around you. As far as I can see, his lordship has thus far been quite commendable.'

'But his lordship is not his own.'

'Nor was it ever to be—Karvalo put him here himself. We all must make sacrifices.'

'No. Say nothing more of sacrifice. I have sacrificed more than you realise. If things go on as they are, I will have sacrificed all that I am owed, all that I seek, and for what? To sit by as Awldano dances for his father? Where is the glory in that?'

‘Need there be any? Would it not be enough just to dance with him? Be it soon or far ahead, the song will end, and there will be no more dancing then.’

Then Ormana left him. He and Awldano did not address the matter that day, and they went to bed with little said between them.

The next morning, before Awldano had so much as risen from his bedplace, Thalo swallowed his pride and offered up an apology.

‘I find myself increasingly apprehensive,’ he said. ‘Your father and I have long been at odds, but I have suffered him with dignity. He should be glad for that. I have known men of his ilk before, and I have killed them. When first we came here, I hoped I might finally be free of him, but now that such a freedom seems closer than ever, the weight of having not yet reached it is all the heavier. How cruel it is that his presence persists even in his absence. I sometimes wish we had never come here at all, that we had instead fled into the night together, never to be seen again. But here we are, and I must bear it.’

Awldano said, ‘I meant to decline the lordship, but you bade me accept it. Now I am glad to hold this house with honour, while you wish to flee. How cunning fate is.’

Thalo did not share his amusement. ‘That is not where we are. I urged you to become a mighty lord, not your father’s choicest lamb. I came here to be your sword and shield, the dispenser of your judgement, not some lapdog you keep for cuddles. You are Awldano, a son of Kawo, a son of the gods, and I am Thalo Thennelo, a man of glory, a violent man. We are better than this.’

Awldano got out of the bed, took Thalo’s hand in his own, and said, ‘I did not marry Thennelo. I married you, Thalo, you who can be so much more than any sword or shield. What more glory is there to want? If glory is but blood for blood’s sake, I want none of it—none for myself, and none for you.’ He kissed Thalo’s hand. ‘I love you, Thalo, more than anyone. I want you here with me, not dying in the mud for glory’s sake.’

But Thalo stood up, freed his hand from Awldano’s, and said, ‘And I want to fight for you. That is my glory, my destiny, and I will have it, come swords and axes! When you bade fate bring forth calamity, was that not your vow?’

‘I swore to suffer whatever hardship might come, not to seek it out.’

‘And I swore otherwise.’

Then Thalo left the room. He spent the rest of the day moping about, until the afternoon brought into his possession a small cask of wine. That was a gift Karvalo had given to Awldano upon his succession to the lordship, to be saved for a special occasion.

‘And what specialer occasion can there be,’ said Thalo, ‘than the occasion of my desire?’ He was not well known for his drinking, but he had known some drunkards before, and they were generally all very satisfied with themselves.

‘Tell me, cask, what healing magic hides within your swell?’

So he made off with the wine and a cup. He crept around to the back of the hall, and sitting there alone, he took one sip, winced at the bitterness, and could not bring himself to have any more. He nevertheless remained slumped against the wall until a good while later, and until he was alone no longer.

Ormana had not seen him all day, and looking out to the sea, she feared he may have gone in search of his father, or hers. She was glad, then, when she found him hunched behind the hall. He welcomed her, though he did not stand, and offered her a drink.

‘There is plenty more to be had,’ he said.

Despite being among the foremost members of the household, her life at Samnew had thus far been a lonesome one. She had no kin there, and though Awldano and his thanes were polite enough, they were not at all close. Indeed, Thalo remained her only trusted friend, but even he had become ever more distant. Keen to cling to whatever joy she could, she took the cup, and each drink came more readily than the last.

She said, ‘Awldano told me what you said to him this morning. My head was ever so heavy with shame, my counsel wasted. But what did I expect? No one listens to me.’

‘Neither should you listen to him,’ said Thalo. ‘He has it wrong. I made my mother a promise, and he refuses to let me see it through.’

‘What promise is this? You have mentioned it before, and often, but you have never told me what it was. What was it?’

Thalo looked Ormana in the eye, and he said, ‘Glories to sound through the ages, everlasting life! I swore to seek it out, to do all it takes to win it for myself. There is more for me than this. There is more for me than Samnew. I need only seek it, but Awldano will not let it happen. I fear our minds are misaligned.’

Ormana chortled, and she said, ‘That seems quite silly to me.’

‘How often have we been through this, Ormana?’

‘Too often, and I daresay we will go through it again. You could do with some humility, and some gratitude.’

‘Gratitude for what? Do you not want more than to sit idly in this house?’

Ormana sighed. ‘What more is there to want? This house is warm enough.’

They paused for a moment. There was always more, Thalo thought, another foe to vanquish, more treasure to claim, but that would not convince Ormana. With much to prove, with vindication to be won, Thalo said, ‘Tell me, are you not lonely?’

Ormana said, ‘Be quiet.’

‘No. You pretend otherwise, but I know what I can see. That is fair enough. Your father is dead, your brother dead, your mother might as well be. You have

no husband, no children, no friends. You have no one. Do you not want more?’

Ormana put down her cup and said, ‘I have you.’

He was not all she had, but Thalo shushed her before she could account for anything more. He wiped a tear from her cheek, then stood up, offered her a hand, and said, ‘You have me.’

Ormana understood. She loved him dearly—he had long been a cherished friend—but not like that. Or, at least, so she thought, but how could she know? Perhaps there was yet more for her. Perhaps she would be alone no longer. She took his hand, stood up, and kissed him, and their lips had barely parted before their business was underway. I will not say what happened next, except that the indecency of it was matched only by its brevity. After only a moment, Ormana stepped away.

‘Thalo!’ she said. ‘You prickard! Back off!’

Thalo did that. He sat himself back down by the wall, and with a prideful smile he said, ‘There is always more.’

But Ormana wanted none of it. She took a moment to collect herself, and then she said, ‘Consider what we have done here. I will say nothing of this, but you must tell Awldano what has happened. Swear it, Thalo.’

Only then did Thalo fully appreciate the situation, and his mind flitted back through the years to one spring evening at Gawslad long ago. Who would weep for him? If no one else, Awldano would. He must.

‘No.’

Ormana said, ‘Thalo, he is your husband.’

‘And so he shall remain. We will say no more of this, and all will be well.’

‘Do it, Thalo, or I shall do it for you.’

Then Ormana rushed away, leaving Thalo still slouched by the wall. And as he sat there, he thought he glimpsed some movement around the corner, like a black shadow shuffling in the twilight, sniffing around for trouble.

‘He is watching,’ he said, and he arose. He came forth, but when he turned the corner, he saw nothing. ‘He is waiting.’

Thalo did not tell Awldano anything about his time with Ormana. Instead, he came to him that evening and apologised for his previous, failed apology, and for stealing his special wine, and also for hiding from him all day.

‘Say nothing of that,’ said Awldano. ‘You are here now, and wine can be made anew. In truth, I am not blameless in this matter. You came to me with humility, and I challenged it. For that, Thalo, I too must apologise. Let us lay the matter aside.’

So they kissed and went to bed.

Thalo tried to avoid Ormana the next day, but she likewise did all she could to corner him. When finally she got him alone, she asked him whether he had

told Awldano about the day prior. Thalo said he had not.

‘There is no need for it,’ he said. ‘The matter is resolved.’

‘Thalo,’ said Ormana, ‘you must tell him, and the sooner the sounder. You two are one, your bonds fate-fast. To tarry is to toy with fate itself, and fate alone decides the way of things.’

‘And fate is on my side.’ Thalo put his hand on Ormana’s arm ‘I ought have heeded you sooner, but let me heed you now. Awldano is more precious to me than anything. I have taken that for granted, but no more. Ormana, give me this chance. Let us each turn away from our shame and walk on. Let nothing come of it.’

Ormana smiled weakly, and she said, ‘Very well. Let nothing come of it.’

Then Thalo thanked her, and she left him. Though things remained very awkward between them for a spell, neither said anything more of their ill deed, and nothing came of it. That is, not for a while. Time passes as time does, and though Thalo thought otherwise, none can foretell what conniving fate will bring.

XLV

The Second King's Plea

The king's tour went on for over a year. He was eager to garner as much support as he could, to draw up the firmest plans that could be conceived, so as not to repeat his brother's woeful expedition three years prior. Thus, he did not come to Samnew until the winter was halfway through. Awldano received him with all the grace and poise the king would expect, though he did not expect to get much more from his visit. That, after all, was Karvalo's country.

'Awldano,' he said, 'Lord of Samnew, your king calls upon you. The earls of the north are revolting, and we must stand together to meet them, lest their warmongering imperil us all. My requests are threefold: firstly, that you swear to me a warband of no less than thirty-six fighters, and preferably your finest; secondly, that you offer likewise three months' dole to keep them strong and hale; and thirdly, that you offer me a place in your hall, to be held until I choose to unhold it.'

'I will meet only one of your requests,' said Awldano. 'You are welcome to stay in my hall, O king, but you are to take nothing from it.'

'Then let me make one further request: tell me, son of Karvalo, how you came to hold this lordship. I have heretofore chosen not to look too closely at the matter, but my eyes may yet be opened, and past wrongs righted.'

'So they may, but tell me, son of Arkelo, how many battles can you fight at once? It is best not to shoulder too many, and least of all those which are easily avoided. Take comfort in my hall, king, and let us not part as foes.'

The king agreed to that and stayed in Awldano's hall for three days. Thalo spent most of that time avoiding him, as was his manner, though he did not need to, for the king never sought to meet him.

'What of this Thennelo man?' one of his followers had said.

'What of him?' the king had said in reply. 'I met him at the last lawmoot and let me tell you: that man is nothing but words, and even they are lacking.'

After leaving Samnew, the king went straight on to Pearmol, where Karvalo

gave him much the same reception, and then carried on up the coast until he came to Oydawl, where his army was mustering. He would spend the rest of the winter there before marching forth.

And as he stood one evening beneath the setting sun, he turned his gaze northwards, and he saw ahead of him his glory, his birthright, and his destiny.

‘Father,’ he said to himself, ‘this is your kingdom, and so it is mine. Nothing short of death will keep me from it.’

XLVI

Ormana Goes Home

It was around this time that Ormana realised she was pregnant. She had in the preceding weeks been afflicted by feelings of weariness and discomfort, but it was not until the king was at Samnew that she fully noticed the emerging bump at her belly. After a few days spent worrying to herself, she went to Thalo.

‘Thalo,’ she said, ‘I am pregnant.’

This was quite the surprise—Ormana was not known to be frolicsome—so Thalo said, ‘Who is the father?’

He knew who it was, but he held some small hope that it might not be so.

‘You, Thalo.’

‘It cannot be.’

‘I know what I have done and where I have been. It can only be you.’

‘No. You are wrong. Here, someone may have visited surreptitiously in the night and done their work without waking you.’

‘Maybe so, or maybe it was the snail I found in my ear. You are a foolish man indeed, and certainly the father of my little tenant. I like it no more than you do.’

Thalo paused for a moment, and then he said, ‘Are you certain of the nature of your affliction? You do eat a lot. Perhaps you suffer some other sort of bloat.’

Ormana thumped him. ‘Foolish and wretched as well! I know what ails me.’

‘Then what of it?’

‘Nothing was to come of it, and this is quite something. We each swore not to speak of our moment of distaste, but I cannot conceal a pregnancy. You must tell Awldano what we have done.’

Thalo shook his head. ‘It is too late for that.’

‘I told you not to tarry, to toy with fate, but did you listen? No. Whenever have you? Try it now.’

Ormana was happy to end things there, but Thalo stepped forth and placed his hand upon her stomach.

He said, ‘All that is made can be unmade. What if we can be rid of this?’

Ormana placed her hand upon his. 'How?'

'I cannot say, but someone must know such a remedy.'

That someone turned out to be Foyva the Priest. The day after the king left, Ormana told her about her predicament, and her wish to end it, though she said nothing of the circumstances in which it had come about. When Foyva asked as much, Ormana said the father was a man named Oro, who had spent a few days in town before moving along. She said she had a brief affair with him, but she had not been able to speak of it, for he was an outlaw.

'The shame I bear is immeasurable,' she said. 'I wish to bear nothing more.'

'What a sorry tale,' said Foyva. 'Let me help you. I know a certain herbal remedy that will clear you out. Give me some time to gather what I need, and I shall prepare it for you. And have faith, Ormana—none will know of my work but me and you.'

Ormana thanked Foyva and left her to it.

A few days later, Foyva came to Ormana with a drink in a skin and said, 'When you are ready to drink, drink it hot. It will take a day or two to work, so be sure to keep yourself well wrapped. There will be blood. Should weariness strike, lie down and rest. That will pass swiftly, as will your squatter.'

Ormana dithered a moment, but she took the skin and thanked Foyva. She drank it later that morning, wrapped herself up, and went about her day, though there was nothing to say of it. That night, however, proved long and restless. It was not until a new dawn drew near that she finally fell asleep, only to be swiftly reawoken with a dread weight hanging upon her every limb, her skin flushed hot and caked in sweat, her every breath laboured. So wretched was the illness that had festered within her that she lay bedfast for a week and a day.

During this time, Foyva came to her with further concoctions to ease her aches, though she declined them all.

'Then tell me this at least,' said Foyva, 'have you had any bleeding?'

'None,' said Ormana, a tear in her eye.

'Oh dear.'

Ormana's illness passed with time, though not nearly as swiftly as Foyva had reckoned. When she was feeling rather haler of body, if not of mind, she brought the matter back to Thalo. He asked how she was feeling, and she said she was better.

'But my womb,' she said, 'is none the lighter.'

Thalo sat down, shaking his head, and said, 'Try again.'

'After this dreadful spell? I could not bear it. I have no better option than to see the birth through, whatever should come of it.'

'Then what will you say when people notice? They will ask questions.'

'I will say the truth.'

Thalo stood again, and he stepped towards Ormana. 'No.'

'What other choice do we have?'

'You told Foyva it was some other man's child. Say it again.'

'I told her that in secrecy, and it pained me twice over—once to lie, and once to call myself wanton, that she may now think less of me. I can suffer that once, but not again.'

'Ormana, we swore ourselves to secrecy.'

'And we swore nothing would come of it. Our oath is broken.'

'No.' Thalo took another step towards Ormana, and he seized her arm, a grim look upon his face. 'Our oath yet stands. I will not let you sunder it.' He pointed to her womb. 'Unmake it, or all will be unmade.'

Ormana had never before seen Thalo quite like that, his eyes full of anger and fright alike, the last wolf of the pack, cornered and staring down its hunters, certain to lunge, and certain to bite. Never before had she feared him, but she knew him well. She knew the sorts of things he had done, the things he could do. She saw him then, alone in the room with her. That was Thennelo, many times over a killer.

'Get out,' she said.

Thalo did not move.

Ormana tore her arm from his hand and backed away. 'I will not say what we have done, what you have done, but I can stay here no longer. I am going home.'

'This is your home.'

'No. I am going back to Pearmol. I wish I had never left at all. I wish a great many things were different, but too few can now be changed. This yet can be.'

Thalo stepped forth again, eager to dissuade her, to offer whatever comfort he could, but she pushed him back and left the room.

Ormana stayed at Samnew for only a week or so more. Thalo tried to make amends with her, to bridge the rift he had torn between them, but the time for that had passed. The day before she left, she told Awldano of her impending departure, and he first asked whether she was well enough for the walk.

'After all,' he said, 'you were only recently stricken by illness.'

Ormana said, 'I am as well as I will be. When I lay sick upon my bench, it brought to mind the order of my life, a life which felt ever so close to its end. I need to go home now.'

'Then let me offer my warmest wishes. You have been a valuable member of my household, a dear friend, and I am saddened that we must be parted.'

'Say no more, Awldano. This is no time for sadness, and least of all yours.'

Then they parted.

Ormana left the next morning. Thalo came out to see her off, but when he

wished her well, she said nothing in reply. She only bowed her head and went on her way. It was well into the evening when she came to Pearmol. Karvalo welcomed her into his hall, and he asked why she had returned.

‘My own willingness,’ said Ormana, ‘and nothing more.’

‘Fair enough,’ said Karvalo, and he agreed to put her up in the hall again.

But before she went away, Ormana asked where her mother was.

‘She has moved out into one of the houses,’ said Karvalo. ‘It was Kettelo’s, I believe, though I have heard little enough to have since forgotten. She was much too gloomy to stay in here. Know, Ormana, that I opposed it, but we hold our house with honour. We can tolerate only so many idle sighs.’

Ormana said she understood and left the hall. She went straight to Kettelo’s house.

Kettelo was one of Karvalo’s lesser thanes, and he was known as Kettelo Brows because he had a most extraordinary pair of eyebrows that stuck out from his forehead. He liked to stroke them at his every opportunity, particularly when deep in thought. He was also sometimes called Kettelo Egg, for he was said to resemble an egg. He had previously been a friend of Enyalo, Karvalo’s brother, and Fenlovo, Ormana’s uncle, but they had both died fighting for the king in Norlonn—that is, the elder Arkelo, rather than the younger. Kettelo had not been old enough to go with them, so of the three, he alone yet lived.

When Ormana came to Kettelo’s house, he happened to be spinning yarn in the doorway, and at once, he stood to welcome her. She greeted him amicably, but her eyes lingered instead upon Esleyna, sitting at the back of the room, her head down.

‘Kettelo,’ said Ormana, ‘could we have a moment?’

‘Of course,’ said Kettelo, and he left them.

Ormana approached her mother, and she said, ‘I have returned.’

Esleyna looked up to her, and for but the briefest of moments, she seemed to smile, but it faded quickly. She put her hand upon Ormana’s cheek and said, ‘My daughter is hurting. You have only yourself to blame.’

That was enough. Ormana threw Esleyna’s hand away and left the room. She had meant to tell her mother of her pregnancy, hoping it might renew their love for one another, but there was no need for that. Kettelo watched her stride back into the hall without a word, then went inside to resume his spinning.



Now a woman named Yondea comes into the story, though she has previously been mentioned. She was the daughter of Yarnaga, Lord of Syornes. Earlier that year, while Ormana was still at Samnew, Yondea had accompanied her

mother on a trip to Pearmol to discuss lordly matters with Karvalo, and while she was walking through the cemetery one day, Sedweo the Poet fell out of a tree and landed in front of her. Yondea asked him who he was.

‘I am Sedweo,’ Sedweo said with a bow, ‘and a poet.’

‘If you are poet,’ said Yondea, ‘tell me why you were in that tree, but sing your reasons.’

So Sedweo composed a verse on the spot, and with a flappy little jig, he sang it thusly:

‘The wren, the lark, the chat, the tit—
each one a bard with all the wit
and all the smarts and all the tact
the poet’s art has always lacked.
But though his words are oft aswing,
the worthy wordsmith knows one thing:
there is no sounder spot to sing
than ‘neath the songbird’s soulful wing.’

Yondea applauded his composition, and not a day had passed before they knew each other very well indeed.

A few days later, when it was time to leave, Yondea told Yarnaga that she would not be going. She said she had fallen in love with Sedweo, and that she wished to stay at Pearmol with him.

‘He would make for a disappointing son-in-law,’ said Yarnaga, ‘but your pairing is not one to which I shall wholly object, at least not yet. That said, you must not stay here. You are the better bred; he must come with you.’

‘Respectfully,’ said Yondea, ‘no. I have also fallen in love with the cliffs, and like them, my heart stands unerring against the battering waves of your objection.’

Yarnaga shook her head and let it happen.

Thus, Yondea stayed at Pearmol, not that Karvalo ever agreed to it.

Being of reputable stock, Yondea ended up in a small bedroom alongside Thorreda, Amfredha, and also another woman named Srare. She was called Srare Well-ear, for she had rather large ears, but that did nothing to spare her a grisly death. While she was in the woods one day, she slipped on some wet leaves, fell into a ditch, and broke her leg. Unable to get out, she could only call for help, but none came. Then, when night fell and she remained stranded, she was eaten by wolves.

It was Srare’s bed that Ormana took upon her return to Pearmol, and she was thereby introduced to Yondea, her new roommate. When first they met,

Yondea said, 'You must be new here. Where are you from?'

'I was born here,' said Ormana.

'Then you must be very good at hiding.'

'No, I have been gone for a while. But I am back now, and back for good.'

It turned out that Ormana and Yondea got along very well, and a stout friendship soon blossomed. It was good, Ormana thought, to have someone who knew nothing of her, someone with no expectations, no preconceptions, someone with whom she could start afresh. It was good, Ormana thought, to no longer be alone.

XLVII

Fathers and Sons

As Ormana's belly grew, so too did the interest with which her pregnancy was discussed. Everyone wanted to know who the father was.

'But whoever could it be?' a man said. 'Ormana is not the sort to talk about politics, or not that I have heard. I daresay it has never rained in those woods.'

To which his wife said, 'Well, it must have done, or else she has a terrible case of something-or-other. Every drought will eventually end with a storm.'

Then the man, recalling years gone by, said, 'Say, there was that Thalo man. She liked to grin beside him, did she not?'

'She did,' the woman replied, 'but grinning was surely the end of it. He was a most thwartful fellow.'

In the end, their curiosity only grew until it became too much to bear, until there was nothing for it but to put their shame aside and ask outright.

'How did this come about, then?'

'Who watered the flowers?'

'Just what have you been up to?'

And every time, Ormana said the same—the father was a man called Oro, whom she had known briefly at Samnew before he moved along, and there was nothing more to be said about it. That was convincing enough to satisfy her inquisitors more often than not, but there could be no like satisfaction for her. It was a rotten thing to suffer such meddling, and to each time end it with a lie. But she bore it, and as time passed, the gossips all turned their tongues to other matters.

Some three months after returning to Pearmol, Ormana finally gave birth to a pair of identical twin boys. She named them Rendeo and Eyveno. It had been a long and difficult birth, but with Yondea holding her hand, she saw it through. And the moment Ormana saw her sons' faces, the moment she held them in her arms, all the doubt in her heart was dispelled.

'How remarkable it is,' she said, 'that such love should be borne from such pain. Fate is ever unforgiving.'

Thalo was not present for the birth of his sons, nor had he meant to be. Indeed, he knew nothing about it until a month or so later, when Essero arrived one afternoon ahead of a meeting to be convened at Pearmol. Since they had not been reunited for some time, he and Awldano had much to tell one another. After the initial pleasantries, Essero said he had recently been home, only to discover Ormana mothering a pair of twin boys.

‘Twins?’ said Thalo, standing nearby.

‘Twins!’ said Essero. ‘And birthed from her very own loins, no less.’

‘How queer,’ said Awldano. ‘I do not mean to slight her, but this is quite unexpected. Say, who is the father?’

‘Someone or no one or so. A vagrant, or some other sort of crook. She said his name, but as paltry as it was, it now escapes me, as he escapes his paternal obligations.’

Essero was by that time a father himself. His daughter, Ewffoa, was born at Ennaslad early in the previous year, and he took great pride in his fatherhood.

‘Yes,’ he continued, ‘I should like to meet the man who coaxed the huntress into bed. What manner of man must he be? Or what witchcraft must he have wrought to have his way with her?’

Thereupon a great shame arose in Thalo’s heart. He went outside, and in the darkness of the night, with none but the stars for company, Thalo said to himself, ‘Who will remember the nameless vagabond, hiding in the shadows of history? Who will weep for him? Someone? No one? What manner of man must he be?’

When Thalo came back inside, Awldano was already abed and asleep. He lay himself down and closed his eyes, but no weariness at all could have stilled the tumult of his mind that night, or none but death itself. No, it was not quelled until the birds let up their dawn-song, until Awldano stirred himself awake, and until the time for sleeping had passed without any.

‘Time,’ said Thalo, ‘is a formidable foe.’

Later that morning, Awldano asked Thalo to join him on his trip to Pearmol. Thalo refused, unwilling to see what had come of his misdeed, but he was just as unwilling to say so.

‘I will not walk behind Essero,’ he said, ‘nor will I have him behind me.’

Awldano said, ‘Then you shall walk beside one another.’

‘I will not walk beside him.’

‘Then we shall walk three abreast, and I will walk between you.’

‘We cannot walk abreast, whoever is between us.’

‘Then we shall go ahead, and he can arrive later.’

‘I will not let him hold that against me.’

‘Then he shall go ahead, and we can arrive later.’

‘I will hold that against him.’

Then Awldano decided to force the matter. ‘As the lord of this domain, as the holder of this house, and as the keeper of your bed, I bid you come, however we must walk. Do it not for my sake, Thalo, nor your own. Ormana has recently given birth. She will be right chuffed to see her dearest friend again.’

Thalo feared otherwise, but he agreed to go.

So did Thalo, Awldano, and Essero stride three abreast into Karvalo’s hall that evening. They came down the aisle and stood together before the fireplace to await their host. Karvalo came into the hall, sat in his chair, and arose once more with lordly grace.

‘My sons,’ he said, ‘welcome. As you honour me, you honour all your kin.’

He bowed his head to Essero, and then to Awldano. Then, as his eyes fell finally upon Thalo at the end, his gaze stiffened, and his neck was slower to bend, though bend it did. Essero and Awldano bowed their heads likewise, but Thalo did not. He kept his head high, his gaze held unwavering upon his host.

Karvalo only grimaced and said, ‘My twofold sons, I bid you join me in my bedroom to speak of private matters.’

Then he left the room.

Essero went behind him, but Awldano chose to wait a moment. He turned to Thalo and said, ‘What was that about?’

‘What is given is gotten,’ said Thalo. ‘I will honour him no more than he does me.’

‘And yet you honoured him less than that.’

‘We have known one another for many years. It will be many more before his debt is paid in full.’

‘Here, reckon a full account, and when the day is done, I will honour you on his behalf. Until then, Thalo, say nothing more of debts.’

Then Awldano left to speak with his father, while Thalo took himself out of the hall to look for Ormana. He first went to the bedroom she had formerly shared with her family, but there he found five or six large men undressing each other. They told him which room he should go to, and there he found Ormana alone, but for a pair of baby boys on her bed.

After a few terse words of greeting, Thalo said, ‘It is as they say: a pair of twins.’

‘So it is,’ said Ormana.

‘And each one my son?’

‘And each one mine alike.’

Though time had not yet drawn out their features, Thalo could see in the boys’ faces nothing but his own, his own eyes staring back at him, scorning him twice over. Born of his blood, what manner of men would they be?

‘Tell me,’ said Ormana, ‘have you told Awldano?’

Thalo shook his head. ‘They are some other man’s sons. There is no need to say otherwise.’

‘Then you had best leave us here.’

‘Not yet.’

Thalo sat beside Ormana, but as he came down, she stood up and stepped away.

‘What sort of father will they find in you? If you cannot acknowledge your sons, you need not be here.’

‘But you are here, Ormana. I am here for you.’

Ormana said again, ‘You need not be here.’

She turned away, and Thalo returned to the room in which he was put up.

That evening, Karvalo accompanied Awldano there to find Thalo sulking on the bed, though he straightened himself the very moment they appeared in the doorway.

‘Thalo,’ said Karvalo. ‘I hope you have found my hospitality satisfactory.’

Thalo made no reply, but a subtle nod from Awldano prompted him to nod likewise.

‘Good. I wish to speak with you, and secretly.’

‘Then I will leave you to it,’ said Awldano, but Karvalo rooted him in place with a palm upon his shoulder.

‘No. We will leave you.’

Karvalo bade Thalo arise, and though he was slow, he came along—he had little choice in the matter. Together they went through the town, out of Pearmol, and along to the cemetery, where Karvalo knelt before Yorlayvo’s grave. He invited Thalo to join him, but he refused. Standing behind Karvalo, alone in the twilight, Thalo’s hand found its way to his beltknife. He clutched its hilt, held it tight, but made no movement. He let it go.

‘Kneel,’ said Karvalo.

As Thalo knelt beside him, Karvalo closed his eyes and said, ‘Tell me, what has happened at Samnew?’

‘Much,’ said Thalo, ‘though much of little. What is this about?’

‘Something is amiss. Ormana came home full of sorrow, and she gave birth a while thereafter. She claims it was this Oro man, whoever he was, but I have known her for as long as she has known the sun. She is a poor liar. I have also heard about your squabbles with Awldano, your bickering. He has told me all about it, and though he thinks little of it, I do not. Whatever has been unfolding in your hall, it must stop. The harmony of the house must be upheld. I will not let your petty strifes imperil Awldano’s lordship.’

Thalo said only, ‘Nothing is amiss.’

Karvalo turned to him, his eyes bright and cold, and withdrew from beneath his lordly cloak a certain axe, wrought from blue steel. That was Fedhewve. He laid it atop Yorlayvo's grave, and he said, 'Do you recall the widow, Thalo, the Meola woman?'

Thalo did, of course. He nodded.

'I could have yielded you to her to be dealt a shameful death, but I chose otherwise. I could have yielded you to the pair who came thereafter, but I chose otherwise. I could have sent you northwards to die with the king, but I chose otherwise. I could have killed you myself, but I chose otherwise. I alone am the arbiter. I alone am in control. Now look upon Fedhewve, Thalo, and understand that although Awldano holds it, Samnew is mine. Hold it with honour, or I may choose otherwise.'

Thalo took a moment to consider these words, then said, 'Nothing is amiss. You need not fear for Awldano's lordship.'

'Swear it.' Karvalo picked up Fedhewve and pointed it at Thalo. 'Swear upon this axe, the chiefest relic of your house, and my kin.'

Thalo took hold of the blade, kissed it, and said, 'I swear it.'

'One fate alone awaits the oath-breaker.'

Then Karvalo arose and went home, and Thalo followed him.

Upon Thalo's return, Awldano asked him what he and Karvalo had spoken about.

'You were gone a fair spell,' he said. 'He must have had much to say.'

'No less than usual,' said Thalo, 'and I will say nothing more.' But then he paused, considered the day behind him, and said, 'No. There is something I must say.'

Awldano awaited Thalo's words, but none came forth.

'Say it quickly,' said Awldano, 'and have no fear. There is nothing you can say that will diminish my love for you.'

Thalo hesitated a moment longer, all clammy and tight, and then he said, 'Ormana's sons are mine.'

'Oh dear.' Awldano sat down, keeping his eyes on Thalo, his face solid, inscrutable, but he did not say anything more just yet.

Thalo continued, 'We grew rather unsettled one evening, and there was a short happening between us—very short, but long enough, it seems, to have come to this.'

'When was this?'

'Some time ago now. Seven months, or so. We agreed not to say anything at the time, for it would not happen again—nor has it—but once Ormana knew where it had led, she said I should tell you. And I should have, but I could not bring myself to do it.'

‘Until now.’ Awldano’s eyes remained unflinching. Whatever wrath or hurt tore through him, he let none of it show.

‘Until now. Time is a formidable foe.’

‘And one you need not have faced. There is nothing you can say, Thalo, that will diminish my love for you. I swore that much.’

‘Even now?’

‘Even now.’ Awldano shook his head and arose with a smile. ‘Do you not see? You are not to blame, and neither is Ormana. This is your elf’s doing. He must have bewiled you both, meaning to tear us asunder, but he must do better. Fate will ever ward us, Thalo. We two are as one.’

That was not the case, but Thalo could not reject Awldano’s absolution. He lowered his head, thanked him, and they fastened his innocence with a kiss.

‘Now,’ said Awldano, ‘I suppose this is why Ormana left us?’

Thalo said it was.

‘Then we shall put this right!’

Awldano came before Ormana the next morning, Thalo behind him. He said Thalo had told him everything he needed to know, and that he bore no grudge against either of them.

‘There is no need for feuding,’ he said, ‘and so I wish to invite you, Ormana, to return to Samnew with us, where you can both be together with your sons.’

That was the last thing Ormana wanted. With a sigh, she said, ‘I thank you, Awldano, but I would rather stay here. This is my home.’

‘Are you quite sure? Thalo has told me you left to hide your holding, but the need for that has passed, not that there was ever such need to begin with.’

‘That was not my cause for leaving.’

‘Was it not?’

Ormana’s eyes turned to Thalo by the door, though his fell heavy upon the floor. ‘Not entirely.’

‘I see. Should you change your mind, the offer yet stands.’

Then Awldano turned to leave, but Ormana held him a moment longer.

‘Awldano,’ she said, ‘please keep this matter between us three.’

‘Of course,’ said Awldano, and he left the room.

After a short but severe silence, Ormana said, ‘You told him I left to hide?’

‘Did you not?’ said Thalo.

‘No.’

‘Then why?’

Ormana paused for a moment, considering what she might say, how Thalo might respond, then said, ‘To be rid of you. I needed you, Thalo, but you would not stand beside me. When I fell ill, when I needed you more than ever, you only seemed further away. I still feel it now and then, your hand upon my arm,

your grip. I feared what you might have done that day.'

'And what might I have done?'

Ormana looked away from him.

'Not you.'

'Truly? Consider it. Consider all you have done—consider who you are—and then tell me you could not hurt me.'

Thalo meant to refute her, but at once, all the blood came back to him, the ease with which it was spilt, and the joy, and his words failed him. What might he have done? Surely nothing so violent. He was a hero, after all, a worthy warrior, a man of battle and a man of fame, no petty murderer. His foes got only what they deserved, condemned by fate itself. He had merely effected the sentence. There was no blood upon his hands, or none that ought not have been there.

'I cannot go back to Samnew,' said Ormana, 'and neither can I have you here. I wish it were not so, that none of this had come to pass, but I cannot abide this doubt, this fear.'

'And what of my sons?' said Thalo. 'They are no less mine than yours. Would you deny me my right to fatherhood?'

'You cannot claim what you have already forsaken. They are some other man's sons. There is no need to say otherwise.'

Thalo took a step forward. 'Is there nothing I can do to remedy this?'

But Ormana took a step away. 'You can leave.'

And he did. Thalo sighed and bowed his head, and she bowed hers, and then he left the room.

Thalo and Awldano left Pearmol early the next morning (Essero stayed a few days longer), and though Awldano returned quite often, summoned by his father, Thalo never did. It was better, he thought, to let days gone by fall behind him.

'All things must come to an end,' he said. 'The river has run its course.'

XLVIII

The King's Troubles

Our attention will now return to the king. Once his army was fully mustered and counted at Oydnawl, he marched northwards over Fegennas until he came up to Bealnew without interruption. Solvega received him with pleasure and put him up in her house, while the bulk of his army camped nearby. They spent the better part of a month laying out their plans.

'I will not repeat my brother's mistakes,' said the king. 'I alone yet ward my father's legacy, and I will not let it be lost.'

At that time, Thrandeo was still staying with Godleda at Ordenn, though he was very soon made aware of the king's movements. He sent a handful of his trustiest watchers to keep an eye on him, though they all came back saying the same: the king was not moving.

'It would seem,' said Thrandeo, 'that he does not mean to walk where he cannot see the way. Perhaps I can show it to him, though I doubt he will look.'

He resolved to send a rider off to request a meeting with the king. Much to his surprise, the king agreed. They came together at Fnoytovl, near Bealnew, on the first day of the new year. As they stood among the trees, the king asked Thrandeo what he wished to say.

Thrandeo said, 'I have brought you here to state the terms of your surrender. I wish to see it done swiftly, and to dispense with the need for bloodshed.'

'I am not here to surrender,' said the king. 'If you wish to dispense with the need for bloodshed, the terms are thus. Firstly, you and your peers must swear yourselves to me, your king, and fasten your fealty with a treaty acknowledging my kingship. Secondly, you must pay the appropriate fee for the murder of my reeves and the slaughter of my people. Thirdly, you, Thrandeo, must submit yourself into my custody, to face whatever justice your misdeeds are found to warrant, and those of all who have misdones on your behalf. That is all.'

'You misunderstand me,' said Thrandeo. 'I am here to tell you the terms, and the terms are thus. Firstly, you will forsake your claim to kingship over any of the folk of Norlonn and fasten your oath with a treaty acknowledging my

sovereignty. Secondly, you will pay the appropriate fee for the thirty years of hardship to which you and your forebears have subjected my people. Thirdly, you, Arneo, must submit yourself into my custody, to face whatever justice your misdeeds are found to warrant, and those of all who have misdone on your behalf. That is all.'

Of course, neither party would submit to the other, nor would they consider negotiation, and so they parted with nothing accomplished. The king returned to Bealnew to finalise his arrangements, and Thrandeo to Ordenn to do much the same. War, it seemed, was renewed.

Only a few weeks later, the king hastened northwards. His destination was a town further up the coast called Greyvos, in Fawnovol, which he meant to besiege. He and his army moved with such spirit, such deadly verve, that they arrived the very same day.

Thrandeo's watchers came to him with news of the king's departure as swiftly as they could. He set out to intervene, but as he took his troop across the river Tezennas, they were intercepted by a warband led by a woman called Elgowa Bodleonnan. She was a close friend of the king, the sister of Syoma, Lord of Gwonvek, and the wife of Alkeo, the Steward of Andenn and son of Rago the Chancellor. Elgowa and Thrandeo met in battle, and although Elgowa was slain, her comrades dealt out enough bloody vengeance to force Thrandeo back the way he came.

Thus, the king's siege of Greyvos went unimpeded. The town was wholly unprepared to hold out against so determined an attacker, and the steward there, a man named Ronleo, knew it better than anyone. After only six days, he told his thanes to surrender.

'If any help were coming,' he said, 'it would have come. As it stands, we will all have starved before any one of our foes is slain.'

'If we surrender,' said one of his thanes, 'you will surely suffer the greatest penalty. We cannot condemn you so.'

'If you have any love for your lord, then do as he bids. If my life will buy each of yours, I will gladly spend it.'

'And we each will gladly spend our own for yours. If we are to die here, let us die as one!'

'No! Your lives are much too dear to me to be wasted here. You must each live on and honour me without regret, nor guilt. Swear it, boys!'

His thanes all swore it. They would live for him, as he would die for them.

That day, Ronleo invited the king into the town and submitted to him, but he stipulated that none of his thanes were to be slain. The king agreed to that. He entered the town, took control of it, and expelled Ronleo's entire retinue. And as Ronleo watched his beloved friends being bundled out of his hall, his

home and theirs alike, he wept.

‘However it must end,’ he said, ‘a life full of love is a life well lived.’

Then the king stabbed him in the back, and that killed him.

Thrandeo heard about the king’s seizure of Greyvos shortly thereafter, and the news filled him with such rage, such manful shame, that he could not let it be. Within a month, he and Balkena, the Earl of Fawnovol, were riding side by side on their way to reclaim the town. When they arrived, they set themselves up outside, and then Thrandeo came to the gate to demand the king’s surrender. The king refused, and they all got to waiting.

Yet they did not wait long, for the king had been forewarned of Thrandeo’s approach and sent his swiftest rider rushing to Bealnew. She was pursued the whole way, but she had enough of a lead and more than enough conviction to get herself to Solvega’s house unscathed. She told Solvega what had happened and said the king had requested her help.

Solvega was quite unsure whether she should offer it. She had thus far very purposefully kept her warring within her own earldom, defending it as was her right. Now, however, the king had bidden her march into and against another. She asked her magnates for their opinions, and for each who told her to answer the king’s plea, another told her not to. After a few days of consideration, she chose to heed the king, and after a few days more, she set off for Greyvos with all the spears she could summon in the time allotted.

Solvega arrived the following day under the cover of the morning mist. She presumed anyone outside the town to be an enemy of those within and promptly sent her warriors rampaging through the first campsite she found. That turned out to be Balkena’s, and though she and her followers put up a stout defence, they had not been ready for a fight so early in the morning. They soon routed, affording Solvega the victory.

Thrandeo had set his company up rather closer to the town. Upon hearing the commotion of battle cutting through the mist, he sent a handful of brave lads off to investigate while he prepared the others to fight. Only one of them came back, and he did so with dire news.

‘Balkena is dead!’ he said.

Balkena was not dead. She had instead fled alongside her companions, but as Solvega was rifling through the corpses, she found a woman who looked somewhat like her, and not having seen her for a while, she took her to be the earl. Overcome with pride, she threw back her head and shouted in triumph, ‘Balkena is dead! Let it be known that Solvega is the worthier!’

Thrandeo’s lad heard this boast and brought it back to his lord.

‘Tell me,’ said Thrandeo, ‘who did this?’

The lad said, ‘Solvega. We alone now stand between her and Greyvos. If

the king were to come forth, we would be struck on both sides.'

Thrandeo had not expected Solvega to so willingly fight for the king. He sat the lad down, listened for a moment, and then said, 'All things considered, I retain the upper hand. There is no need to fight just yet.'

Thrandeo had his company pack up and make their way to a nearby town called Draga, a little further up the coast.

When Solvega came to Greyvos and told the king about the battle she had so expertly won, he was impassioned.

'Balkena is dead,' he said, 'and Thrandeo is in flight. This is my chance to prove my quality and reclaim my father's kingdom!'

Then he sent Solvega home to hold her domain and set off to seize Srande, the seat of Earldom of Fawnovol. Yet when he came there, he found the town abustle and the gate firmly shut.

'I am your king,' he said. 'Let me in. Your earl is dead, and I will rightfully take possession of her authority.'

The wardens atop the gate whispered between themselves, and the tallest one said, 'No.'

'No?'

'You are not our king. We will not let you in. Our earl is not dead. You will not take possession of her authority.'

'Not dead?' The king stood briefly bewildered, and then demanded proof that Balkena yet lived.

After a short wait, she appeared atop the gate and said, 'I am Balkena, the Earl of Fawnovol, and I am very much alive.'

So the king's gumption all but deserted him. He had not come to attack the town, but to be let in amid the sorrow of the common man, deprived of his lord. There was no such sorrow to be found at Srande, and no such deprivation. He turned around and went back the way he came.

But alas, it happened that Thrandeo's eyemen had brought him news of the king's venture. Thrandeo laughed out, and with his troop all hale and rested, he put them on their horses and rode them westwards until they crossed paths with the king mid-retreat at Eofnawl.

'Oy-oy, boys!' said Thrandeo. 'Assail!'

Thrandeo and his warriors brought forth their full force, striking at the king's company with all the fury of the north. The king did not stop to fight. He rode on, and he kept riding until he came at last to Greyvos, until he fell gasping from his horse, and until his followers stood much diminished. And before he had found the strength to stand, a certain large man appeared above him. That was Addeo, Lord of Flatteyr, who had come to Norlonn just as his late sister, Kona, had come with the king's late brother.

‘How pathetic,’ said Addeo. ‘What sort of king is this?’

‘Your king,’ said the king. He arose and struck Addeo on the cheek.

‘Was that meant to hurt?’

The king said nothing more and went up to the hall.

As for Thrandeo, he was right chuffed.

‘What did I say?’ he said. ‘I have the upper hand. There is no glory in this war but mine.’

Thereafter followed some three months of nothing much. From Greyvos, the king sent regular raids up the coast, or into the surrounding countryside, while Thrandeo oversaw the ravaging of great swaths of the eastern reaches of Fawnavol, eager to see the king’s reavers all sent packing empty-handed. If Balkena had anything to say about this, she knew better than to do so. The king, however, did not. Whenever he caught wind of further wasting, he sent a troop to drive the culprits off, and this very often ended in a fight.

Then, after the king had weathered many such skirmishes, and as autumn approached with no harvest for him to reap, nor any prospect of plunder, Thrandeo besieged Greyvos once more. The king had thus far gained little more from his campaign than the first town he came to, and trapped therein with dwindling supplies, his heart grew heavy with despair, and his thoughts turned to surrender. He summoned a council of his foremost allies and asked them for their views.

‘If you surrender,’ said Addeo, ‘you will be surrendering rather more than your kingship in Norlonn. You will be surrendering your life, your legacy, and whatever little dignity to which you yet cling. If we are to die in this land, let us die with honour.’

The rest of the council was divided, though the majority sought to continue the fight, whatever might come of it. Last to speak was a crafty man named Yono Reyfneonnan. He has already been mentioned in this tale, for he was the second husband of the king’s sister-in-law, Yordhoa. Yono wanted the king to surrender himself to Thrandeo, but he would not speak the less popular opinion.

‘If you will think of nothing else,’ said Yono, ‘think of your father, and of the sacrifices he made to win this land. What would you sacrifice to keep it?’

‘Why sacrifice anything at all,’ said the king, ‘to keep what is already lost?’

Then the king retired.

That evening, Addeo and Yono met one another in secret, and they agreed that the king’s defiance of his council’s advice was cause enough for killing. They bade the king’s bodyguards betray him, and though they were reluctant to do this, they were eventually swayed by promises of wealth, and status, and rather more glory than they would gain from surrender. With the bodyguards’ backs all turned, Addeo stole surreptitiously into the king’s bedroom, drew the

king's own sword, and stabbed him as he lay asleep in his bed.

The king jolted awake, and upon seeing Addeo before him, he cried out, 'Father! Father, forgive me!'

Then he died.

Addeo cast the sword upon his corpse and rushed out of the room, only to step back inside with Yono and the bodyguards.

'O king!' said Yono. 'Whatever have you done?'

'The king has forsaken us!' cried Addeo. 'The king has killed himself!'

News of the king's death spread quickly, and a great commotion ensued. Addeo, with the backing of his fellow conspirators, took control of the town and did whatever he could to quell the upset, but the king's supposed suicide had done little to bolster his comrades' mettle. After three days spent wrangling with the king's army, Yono urged him to speak the truth.

'A man only kills himself,' said Yono, 'when his plight is truly hopeless. We must tell our friends otherwise, or we will have no chance against the foe that awaits beyond these walls. If they have any dignity, they will recognise what good you have done for them. If not, they are doomed whatever they do.'

Addeo summoned an assembly forthwith, bringing as many of the king's thanes into the hall as it could fit. Amid the bustle of the crowd, he bellowed a plea for quiet, then spoke thusly: 'The king is dead. We each have heard many foul whisperings about it, but I can put your minds at ease. He was slain not by his own hand, but by that of another—by mine.'

Addeo meant to go on, to justify his deed and win the thanes' loyalty, but the hall erupted with such uproar that he never had the chance. Yono bade the king's bodyguards draw their swords and avenge their lord, and it was done.

'Yono?' said Addeo. 'What treachery is this?'

'The treachery you suffer,' said Yono, 'is the treachery you deal.'

Addeo wailed, but with the hall so tightly packed, he could not shove his way out. The king's thanes all set upon him, and he was slain.

Thereafter, Yono took control of Greyvos. He summoned another, smaller assembly to determine the way forward, and those in attendance were now much more willing to give up, weary after the fuss of recent days. They put the matter to a vote, and its outcome was decisive. Greyvos would surrender.

The next day, Yono himself went out to meet Thrandeo. He said the king was dead and avenged, and asked for all the mercy Thrandeo would give them.

'The king is dead?' said Thrandeo, a grim glimmer in his eye.

'He is,' said Yono. 'There is no further need to fight. Greyvos is yours, this land likewise, and we will go home.'

'Take me to him.'

'Not before we agree the terms of our surrender. Understand, we must be

assured of your mercy.'

'That is the only term. Take me to him.'

'If that is your only term, swear it. Let us make an oath.'

Thrandeo swore it, and Yono was satisfied. He led Thrandeo, as well as a great throng of his warriors, into Greyvos, up to the hall, and showed them the king's corpse, still lying on his deathbed. Thrandeo went to the king, put his hand on his cheek, cold and sunken, and shed a single tear.

'How cruel it is,' he said, 'to come between a hunter and his quarry. This cannot be forgiven. Swords, men!'

Then Thrandeo drew his sword, and with a single blow, he hewed Yono's head from his shoulders. His followers took up their weapons likewise, and at their lord's bidding, they rampaged their way through the hall and out into the town, slaughtering everyone who fought against them. Soon enough, they came to the gate, let their comrades in, and Thrandeo's whole army rushed inside to join the sack. And what a sack! They tore through the town as if they were scything wheat, so dispirited were their foes, sparing neither man, woman, nor child the violence. In all, only a very few were fortunate enough to survive.

When everything had settled down again, Thrandeo returned to the hall, cut off the king's head, and had his body dumped in the sea. He presented the head to his followers, lauded their courage, their loyalty, and then dismissed them all to spend the winter at home. He himself went home to Kyalannes, where he hung his prize above his door.

'That makes two,' he said. 'Who will be next? Who would dare? There is no king in this land but me.'



News of the king's death swiftly came home to Syorbak, and the moment she heard about it, Yordhoa summoned the royal council to appoint his successor in the lordship. They convened the next day, but only one claimant came forth: Kara, Yordhoa's daughter.

'No,' said Fena the Chancellor. 'We ought to hold on a while. After all, the king's daughter was his preferred successor. She ought to be granted the chance to make her claim.'

'Consider all that has happened in recent days,' said Yordhoa, 'and consider whether Mora the Mouth is fit to follow it. Kara's claim to the lordship is no lesser than hers, but her temper surely is.'

Fena had no interest in quarrelling, and least of all with Yordhoa. She said she would overlook propriety and chaired the council. They accepted Kara's claim, and she thusly succeeded to the Lordship of Syorbak.

Yordhoa arranged a modest funeral for the king, even though there was no body to burn or bury, and then went westwards to Reykam for that of her late husband, Yono. The lord there, Mesdea, was Yono's cousin, and they had each counted the other among their dearest friends. After a feast in Yono's honour, Yordhoa and Mesdea swore themselves to one another.

'Much is lost,' said Mesdea, 'but let this not be a time for partings. Let our friendship instead be all the firmer, for we two are alike in grief.'

But though Mesdea had shed many tears for her beloved cousin, if Yordhoa had wept at all for her husband, none had seen it.

With Mesdea's friendship fastened, Yordhoa turned her attention to the coming lawmoot—Kara would take the kingship, whatever the cost. To that end, she had Rago, the former chancellor, brought to Syorbak, and offered to restore him to the chancellery in exchange for his support of Kara's kingship.

'I cannot agree to that,' said Rago. 'I will not return to that room unless my lifeless corpse is dragged there.'

'Then do something else for me,' said Yordhoa. 'The fighting in the north has dragged on long enough. I see nothing to be gained from its continuation, so I wish to propose a settlement to bring it to its end.'

Her proposal was thus: Kara would relinquish her claim to seven of the eight earldoms, retaining only Eylavol, which would become a shire subject to the king's law. Solvega would be invited to take up the reeveship, and to fasten their friendship, Kara would be betrothed to Solvega's son, Enroko.

'Your lineage, Rago, will thereby be raised to even greater status. All I ask of you is that you bring this offer to Solvega.'

'Very well. But if she refuses, I will not be held accountable.'

Yordhoa thanked him for that and went on with things.

Rago came to Bealnew to meet Solvega a while thereafter, and he came in the company of his grandnephew, a striking young man named Alvaro. He was Kara's cousin, being a grandson of the elder Arkelo through his second wife, Gondola, who was herself Solvega's aunt, making Alvaro Solvega's cousin-once-removed. It was for these relations that Yordhoa had chosen him to go on Kara's behalf.

Solvega received her guests with pleasure, offered them a place in her house, and invited them to dine with her. As they ate, she asked her father why he had come to visit.

'Do not mistake me,' she said, 'I am glad indeed to be reunited with you. In truth, I feared our previous parting would be our last. Nonetheless, I can only wonder what has brought you back here, and in such perilous times.'

'I have come on behalf of Yordhoa,' said Rago, 'your cousin's widow.'

'I was not aware Arneo had remarried.'

‘He had not,’ said Alvaro. ‘The widow in question is that of my half-uncle, the younger Arkelo, your step-cousin.’

Rago said, ‘Her daughter has claimed the Lordship of Syorbak.’

‘That is Kara, your step-cousin-once-removed.’

‘Yes. I expect Kara will have claimed the kingship likewise before the year has ended.’

‘And such is her right.’

‘Thank you, Alvaro. Solvega, Yordhoa has proposed a new agreement by which we may bring this war you fight to an end.’

‘Whatever it is,’ said Solvega, ‘it will not be agreeable to Thrandeo.’

‘Save your doubt, please.’

Then Rago told her Yordhoa’s proposition.

Solvega said, ‘I would be glad to restore peace in my domain, to see it free of strife. I would be glad to take up the Reeveship of Eylavol, and to have my Enroko marry a king. I would be glad to support this, Father, but I alone cannot make this decision.’

Solvega summoned a meeting of the earls a few weeks later. At Thrandeo’s request, they met at Forsyorenn in Syagavol. That was the first time they had all come together in many years. Solvega relayed Yordhoa’s proposal to her peers, and they seemed broadly supportive of it, until Thrandeo arose.

‘Time and again,’ he said, ‘I have stated my terms. Norlonn will be as one, the kingship will pay amends according to my judgement, and the king will be surrendered to face my justice. I will accept nothing less.’

‘You have no right,’ said Solvega, ‘to decide that alone.’

‘I am your overlord. This land is mine to rule, and I will rule it—all of it! If that displeases you, lay your earldom aside, and I will let you live out your days in exile. Otherwise, we will fight until my demands are met.’

Solvega turned to the other earls and said, ‘My friends, how often have our people fought against kings? Why do you now bend before this one?’

Seybeo said, ‘Why do you bend before yours? If we are to be subjugated either way, I would rather be subjugated by my countryman—the man I chose.’

The other earls had little to add. The kingship seemed to have given up on their lands, so they deemed it wiser to stand beside Thrandeo.

Solvega turned back to Thrandeo and said, ‘Thus is your legacy assured. This land you claim to love will never know peace, and that will be your doing.’

Then Solvega left the room, and she left Forsyorenn the same day.

**

Between the king’s death and the lawmoot to elect his successor, Lota, his half-

sister, came out of exile to contest the kingship once more. However, Yordhoa would not allow Kara's claim to be contested, and so she met privately with Lota, just as she had four years prior, and they came to a new arrangement. Yordhoa meant to have Tholmodo, Lord of Flatteyr, stripped of his lordship, for he was the son of Addeo, who had murdered the late king.

'Someone must be punished,' she said, 'and he is nearby. If you lay aside your claim to the kingship, I will grant you the Lordship of Flatteyr.'

Lota agreed to that. 'But I have just one quibble. Has Kara not signed away her right to the kingship?'

'She has, but that will be remedied.'

And it was. With the consent of all the living signatories, the royal council repealed the treaty by which Kara had forsaken her claim to the kingship. This was also the treaty which established the Earldom of Soyna, so Yordhoa had a new one written to re-establish it. She signed this at Glannas, the seat of her domain, as did Kara, Lota, Afdea, Lord of Awlteyr, and Fena the Chancellor, whereafter it was ratified by the royal council, and her earldom was restored.

By then, only one problem remained: Mora. She was, of course, very upset when she came grieving to Syorbak, only to find her inheritance snatched up by her cousin. She went before the royal council to complain, to demand that Kara yield the lordship to her, but Fena refused her.

'What folly is this?' said Mora. 'Syorbak should be mine! Were my father's wishes not clear?'

Fena said, 'The Lordship of Syorbak is granted only by the king's council. Your father's wishes have no legal weight in this matter, though we nonetheless considered them.'

'And still you granted the lordship to little Willow-hips? Preposterous!'

Mora strode seething from the room. The lordship was lost, but she might yet claim the kingship. To prevent that, Yordhoa tried to broker a deal with her, just as she had with Lota. Mora declined, and not in the least bit respectfully.

'I need not plot and scheme,' she said, 'to get what I am owed. Get out of here, and when I am your king, hope I am a merciful one.'

So the matter came before the rede. At the lawmoot, both Kara and Mora stood before the lords and made their pleas, but there was only one way it could end. The petty lords bound to Syorbak all backed Kara, as did Mesdea's allies. Karvalo also supported Kara, for he suspected Mora would be an altogether more grudgeful king following their dispute over the Lordship of Samnew. The last to vote was Fena on behalf of the royal council, but she could have chosen Mora ten times without changing the result, for it was decided long before the lawmoot was convened. Fena vacated the king's chair forthwith, and Kara took it, and thus she succeeded to the kingship.

Mora left at once and returned to her home at Openn.

At Yordhoa's urging, Kara's first order of business was to forcibly strip Tholmodo of the Lordship of Flatteyr. After some discussion, the matter was put to a vote, and the lords supported it. Tholmodo did not stay in the room a moment longer, but his fate was set. Shortly after the lawmoot, Yordhoa levied an army and brought it to Flatteyr, where Tholmodo was hiding.

'Tholmodo,' she said, standing before the gate, 'if you surrender, no harm will befall you. I will not kill you for your father's crime, but this lordship cannot be retained by a king-killer's kinsman. Take whatever time you need to consider it—I will wait.'

She did not wait long. After much discussion, Tholmodo's wife, Arnora, convinced him to give up.

'If this comes to battle,' she said, 'you are outmatched. Your only chance is to do as she asks. Surrender, and I am sure she will treat you fairly, for you have done nothing wrong. If you resist, you will be putting us all at risk.'

Tholmodo came out of Flatteyr the same day and surrendered himself to Yordhoa. She agreed to dispossess him and let him live out his days on some farm somewhere, but Lota urged her to reconsider.

'You promised me Flatteyr,' she said. 'If you stand by that, you will ensure my lordship is unassailable.'

'You have been a stalwart ally,' said Yordhoa. 'I suppose I can grant you that, but you must do the deed yourself, and I will not vouch for you should it become a judicial matter.'

'Fair enough.'

Lota drew her beltknife.

'Hold on,' said Tholmodo, 'that was not the agreement.'

But before he could say anything more, Lota cut his throat. The matter never became judicial, for she hid his body, and when Arnora asked what had become of him, she said he had gone off to live in obscurity.

'That is some comfort, at least,' said Arnora. She swore herself into Lota's service there and then. 'This is the very least I can do in return for the generosity you have shown me and my husband.'

Shortly thereafter, Lota's former wife, Kadleyna, arrived. Lota was glad to see her, and she said, 'I was sure you had died. There are no words for the utter joy with which I see that I was wrong.'

She asked Kadleyna what had happened after their battle against the king, and Kadleyna said she had married a woman named Gova, a sister of Syoma, Lord of Gwonvek.

'But when I heard of your return from exile,' she said, 'I was gripped by a clawing need to be with you. Nothing could stay my heart, no love nor reason,

for there is no love for me but yours, no reason for me but you. I meant to divorce her, but she was much too dear to me. I could not inflict such a pain upon her, but neither could I stay—I needed you, your voice, your touch. I killed her. That seemed the kindest thing to do, to leave, a widow of my own making, knowing she would not suffer.’ Kadleya dropped to her knees and bowed her head. ‘Now all that remains, my Lota, my love, is you.’

Lota went to her, knelt before her, and with a gentle hand, lifted her chin.

‘Welcome home,’ she said, and then she kissed her.

They were married again within a month.

XLIX

The Serpent Wakes

It is time to return to Knale. Having delivered the twin trolls' heads to Water-Nela, and having thereby finally brought ruin to all of Glamo's hateful progeny, he grew rather listless.

'My purpose,' he said to himself, 'is spent. What is left for me, undying in a dying world?'

He sat down to consider his options, whereupon his thoughts turned to his brother Feydo, who had very cruelly treated Glamo's grandsons with dignity and compassion.

'I should kill him for that,' he said. 'In fact, I think all my wretched brothers could do with a throttling. Yes, my purpose is not yet spent, for neither are my grudges. If the world is dying, I shall be the one to kill it!'

So he went in search of his brothers, or those who yet lived. He knew many were already dead, for he had been involved in most of their deaths, albeit to varying degrees, and he knew Feydo and Flawko yet lived, for he had met them both in recent years. They proved difficult to find, however, for neither wanted to be found. Only three of his brothers remained unaccounted for. The first was bull-horned Glavo, he who stood among the mightiest of the elves. Second was black-beaked Thwere, the raven of the west, but no one had heard anything of him for a good long while. The third was snake-fanged Bleygo.

'There we go,' said Knale. 'He had something or other to do with the little sage. Gesdelo will tell me what became of him, or I will make him.'

When Knale came up to Bradhambelow, he found Gesdelo seething above the world and asked what he knew about Bleygo.

'I know all there is to know,' said Gesdelo, 'but I will tell you none of it.'

'How gloomy!' said Knale. 'This is no way to treat your auntie. Come, be a good boy and tell me all about him.'

'I have nothing more to say to you, elf.'

Indignant, Knale changed his face to resemble that of Bleygo, at least as he remembered it, and said, 'And what do you say to me, my master?'

But Knale and Bleygo were identical of face, as were all the elf brothers.

‘I see past your little tricks,’ said Gesdelo. ‘Begone, I say, and spend no more time here than you must.’

Knale ended up spending a very long time at Bradhambelaw. At first, he kept trying to coax whatever information he could from Gesdelo, but that sour man was much too stoic to relent. Thus, he turned instead to snooping around, sniffing about for any knowledge there might be to find. One day, he chanced upon a fragment of a claw.

‘And a serpent’s claw at that,’ said Knale. ‘I wonder whose this might be!’

It was Bleygo’s, of course, a piece of his claw that had been fractured during Gesdelo’s battle with his brothers. Gesdelo had kept it as a keepsake ever since.

‘And now it is mine!’ said Knale. ‘If you will not give me what I want, magic man, I will take it.’

Then Knale crept away in the night. He put on his fox fur, took a big whiff of Bleygo’s claw, and followed its scent. The trail led him all across Eymalonn, along that ruinous path Bleygo had carved centuries ago, until, at last, he came to a barrow up on Draffel, in the moors of Syoglonn. Knale laid his fingers on the sealing stone, and at once, he felt a great power emanating from within.

‘Glavo?’ he said. ‘Dead. Good riddance, I suppose. Now tell me, Brother, whatever have you hidden in here?’

Knale dispelled the seal, shoved the stone aside, and saw his quarry at last. There was Bleygo, asleep in his serpentine skin upon a bed of ancient treasures, the furnishings of a royal grave long forgotten. Knale went to him, felt the cold of his scales, long untouched by the light of day, and then stepped away. For all his faults, he knew them—however much he longed to slay his brother, he would stand little chance against so fearsome a beast.

‘No,’ he whispered, a deadly smile on his face. ‘There are better ways to go about this.’

Then he donned his foxen coat and scurried away.



After the birth of Thalo’s sons, things were quiet at Samnew for the better part of three years. Awldano continued to hold his lordship well and honourably, and Thalo continued to spend his days at his side, or else brooding here and there, and getting up to very little. Nothing much more is said of that time, until, one night, Thalo was afflicted by yet another terrible dream.

There were the foxes at their dinner table, silent, solemn, but so thick was the darkness settled upon the room that he could not discern its location. He could see only the golden light shining from their golden eyes, all locked upon

him. In the middle of the table, on the glittering platter, opened another pair of eyes. Thalo could not see his face, but he knew those eyes.

‘Wavo?’ said Thalo. ‘No, no. Goldhego.’

‘How for,’ said the old fox, his voice little more than a whisper.

No one moved. Someone should have been dancing, Thalo thought, but no one was.

‘Which of you will dance?’ he said. ‘Dance!’

The old fox gave him a cup. He had a sip to drink, but coughed it all back up again.

‘Where is Awldano?’

Thereupon Thalo awoke. Awldano was beside him. He could not sleep after that, so he spent a while outside, and then made his way into the stable. He sat himself beside Ondayo, his oldest friend, his faithfullest companion, and spoke his woes away.

‘My boy,’ he said, ‘how many years has it been? How many deaths? The count may be the same each way.’

He reached up to pat Ondayo’s rear, but as he did so, the horse cowered.

‘What is it?’ said Thalo, but Ondayo did not reply, for he was a horse.

Then a peculiar feeling arose in Thalo’s heart, like dread, but more erotic, and it drove him up and outside. As he stepped into the darkness, a sultry voice drifted down from atop the stable.

‘Oy-oy!’ said Knale, behind him.

‘You!’ said Thalo.

‘Yes. Me.’

‘Why have you come here?’

‘I promised you glory, did I not?’ Knale dropped down from the roof, came up to Thalo, and rested his hand gently upon his chest. ‘I am here to deliver it.’

‘That was a long time ago.’

‘For you, maybe. And in any case, time never settled a debt.’

‘There is no debt to be settled.’ Thalo stepped away and put his hand upon his beltknife. ‘Begone, ghoul, or I will strike you.’

Knale flashed a cheeky grin. ‘Come on, then! Take out your little knife and strike me.’ He wiggled his bottom. ‘Strike me hard!’

If only he could! Thalo tightened his grasp about the knife, but he could not find the strength to draw it. Despite the terrible aura swelling around Knale, despite the preternatural air of malice that seemed to seep from his every pore, his beauty remained utterly beguiling. Thalo’s hand fell away from the knife.

‘Your glory awaits,’ said Knale, ‘but I will not spoil the surprise. When fate beckons, you will stride forth to meet it. You must, witch boy, or all will have been for nought.’

Knale stepped forth once more, kissed Thalo's cheek, and then put on his fox fur and vanished into the night as abruptly as he had arrived. When he returned to Bleygo's barrow, he stood in the opening, the dawning sun behind him, and looked upon the sleeping serpent. His slumber elf-spelt, only an elf could wake him. With his fingers outstretched, Knale spoke this verse:

'Awake! Arise! Arise! Awake!
O brother beast! O sleepful snake!
Arise! Awake! Awake and slake
thy wrath, thy rage, thine ancient ache!
Awake! Arise! Arise! Awake!
Awake and wake thy dread-drake's quake!'

Bleygo's breathing shallowed. Within the dim light of the opened barrow, the pale dwimmer-glow of elfin eyes emerged, then the glimmer of a dragon's sheen, then a snort. Bleygo had awoken. He unfurled himself, unravelling his whole length, and stepped towards his brother.

'O Bleygo,' said Knale, 'just how long has it been? I hope, for all that time, you still remember this.'

Then Knale took out Bleygo's fragmented claw, dropped it, and stepped away, out into the light. At once, the memory of that day beset the beast. The agony of years long ago was renewed, the pain searing his skin, his mind, and after spitting forth his deadly venom, bitter and rankled, he roared. The rage of ages past stirred within him, welled within his breast, and he went barrelling from the barrow.

For three days Bleygo terrorised the local farms, wreaking such destruction that wherever his temper took him, he alone would leave. On the fourth day, he went once more from his barrow bed and came to a village called Marnawl, not far west of Samnew, where the local farmers were all bonded to Awldano's lordship. There he did as he had done each day before. With dagger-fangs and a whip-tail, he destroyed the buildings, laid waste to crops and livestock, and slew everyone he saw, melting their skin with a maw of poison. Yet, for the first time since his awakening, one man survived.

He was a chap named Ogo. He had been out hunting a hoary hart, but after stalking it for some time, his first arrow missed its mark, and it was long gone before he could notch another. He went home in a sullen mood, only to find his home destroyed, his friends and neighbours dead, his family just the same. But as Ogo sat grieving in the ruin of his house, he heard a terrible grunt nearby. He poked his nose out from behind a portion of wall, and just as quickly ducked back down again, for there was Bleygo slithering away. Ogo was struck with

such terror that it stole his every breath, and he could only crumple to the floor and hope he went unnoticed.

He did. A little while later, when it seemed Bleygo had gone away, Ogo slunk out of his hiding spot and saw the full measure of the damage. Everything was destroyed. He wiped a tear from his eye and said, 'My house, my home, my happiness. My every love lies ruined, but this is an otherworldly affair. I should be compensated.'

Ogo found a dead pig in the pig shed, its head mauled, its side bearing three great gashes, then slung his bow on his back and went at once to Samnew.

Upon his arrival, Ogo came into the hall and said, 'A dragon! A dragon has attacked!'

Awldano came to meet him and said, 'A dragon? Have my ears grown old before the rest of me?'

'Not at all! A dragon has destroyed my home, slain my family, my friends, and everyone else. Everything is lost.' He held the dead pig aloft. 'Not even the livestock were spared.'

'Is this meant to be proof? Anyone can strike at a pig.'

'Not like this. Come and see.'

Awldano came down to have a look at the pig's injuries. He knew too well what sorts of wounds were wrought by the weapons of war, and these were not those. Whatever had dealt them was surely a terrible beast indeed.

'Given the nature of my misfortune,' said Ogo, 'and my newfound state of destitution, I had hoped that my very benevolent lord would compensate me.'

'We can discuss such matters later,' said Awldano. 'Ogo, I bid you stay in my hall and enjoy its comforts. Let that your compensation until I can reckon a satisfactory award.'

Ogo accepted that. In exchange for Awldano's kindness, he offered him the pig, though Awldano declined it and asked him to recount the dragon's attack as fully as he could. Ogo said he had been out hunting when he came home to find the village utterly ruined, and that he saw the culprit slinking away.

'I was stricken,' he said. 'My bones themselves became as ice. Once they melted, I found my resolve again and came straight here.'

'You have done well to bring me this news,' said Awldano. 'If all you say is true, this beast cannot be allowed to roam as it pleases. Something must be done forthwith.'

Thereupon Thalo strode into the hall and said, 'I will kill it!'

He had been down on the beach all morning, but as he was coming back up to the hall, he heard talk of a dragon, and with each step he took, it became all the clearer that such a beast was abroad, and that fate was beckoning.

'I will meet it,' he said. He pointed at Ogo. 'Man, take me to this dragon.'

Come tomorrow's dawn, it will be dead, and by my hand alone.'

'No, no,' said Awldano. 'This is no little lizard. It would be foolish indeed for anyone to fight it alone.'

'It is fortunate, then, that I am not anyone. I am Thalo Thennelo, and this is my task, my glory, my fate! I must stride forth to meet it.'

Then Thalo went away to prepare himself. Awldano tried again to dissuade him, but his mind would not be changed. He donned a thick shirt and a coat of mail, strapped his sword to his belt, and readied a shield and a spear. Last of all, he took out his mother's helmet, old and faithful. For many years it had served him well.

'And how many more?' he said to himself.

'Many,' said Awldano, 'if only you would hear me.'

Thalo ignored him.

'Thalo, as your lord and your husband, I bid you lay aside this folly.'

'The man before me,' said Thalo, 'is not my husband, for I did not marry a coward.'

Then he left the room.

In the hall, Thalo told Ogo to take him to Marnawl. Ogo was unwilling to do that, but Thalo pointed his spear at him and said, 'I will not ask you again.'

'Nor need you,' said Ogo. 'We can leave right away.'

That they did. They rode together to Marnawl, Ogo in front, and Thalo just behind. When they arrived, they got off their horses and Ogo showed Thalo where he had seen the dragon.

'It slithered off this way,' he said, 'but I could not say where it went.'

'No matter,' said Thalo.

It was quite apparent where Bleygo had gone, for he had left in his wake a trail of barren earth, as if all life had withered beneath his cursed feet. Thalo followed it, and Ogo followed him, until they came to the barrow, draped in the evening twilight. Carefully, Thalo went to the entrance and peered within. There was the mighty stonework of ancient days, dust stirred up in the waning light of the day, the glint of manifold treasures softened by time and stillness, and amid it all, a sleeping dragon.

'Here we are,' said Thalo. He clutched his spear, braced his shield, and brought to mind his joys and his sorrows, and all the days of his life. 'All have led me here. This mound will be a tomb once more, but mine or yours, beast, only fate can decide.'

He stepped forth, but at once, a hand pulled him back. It was Awldano's.

'Thalo,' he said, 'hold!'

Thalo turned to him, and he saw beautiful Awldano in his beautiful armour, his resplendent helmet, his shining mail, a worthy warrior. His shield and spear

lay on the ground beside him, cast aside to reach for Thalo, to cling to him.

‘Why have you come here?’ said Thalo.

‘I came to stop you,’ said Awldano, ‘but I know better than to command the tide. If you will not be stayed, Thalo, I shall follow you.’

‘No. This is my deed to do, and I alone will do it. This will be my greatest feat, my immortal glory, my everlasting life. I alone will slay this dragon.’

Awldano took Thalo in his arms and said, ‘And I will not be parted from you. Fate may bring forth calamity, but I will walk beside you, come what may. That was my oath, my vow, and I will hold it.’

‘So it was.’ Thalo kissed him and stepped away. ‘The sun is setting, the day fleeting. Pick up your shield and show me Awldano the Bold! Show me the Writhe-wrangler! Show me Kawo’s might!’

Then Thalo spoke this verse:

‘Hold fast thine axe, hold fast thy spear,
and firm thyself ‘gainst fright and fear.
Steadfast we stand, all shield-to-shield—
we fate-feared folk are ne’er to yield!’

‘Oy-oy,’ said Awldano. He picked up his shield and spear. ‘Ne’er to yield.’ Then they strode together into the barrow.

There Bleygo slept, all curled around himself, and what a magnificent thing he was! His skin glittering in many colours, brighter and more beautiful than any jewel or gem, he was the greatest of the barrow’s treasures. To see that sight, Awldano’s feet failed him, stopped fast in the entrance. He could only marvel—first in awe, and then terror. But Thalo stood beside him.

‘Have no fear,’ he said. ‘I am with you.’

Awldano’s heart wavered no more. They gave each other a single nod, slow and purposeful, and then got down to business.

Thalo made the first strike, plunging his spear into Bleygo’s belly, and then Awldano followed up likewise. Bleygo awoke at once, cornered and snarling. He seized Thalo’s spear in his teeth, sundered the shaft, and stung his shield with his tail. Thalo would have faltered, so forceful was Bleygo’s blow, but Awldano stood behind him. He kept him up.

So Thalo drew his sword and renewed the attack, hacking at Bleygo’s side. The wyrm recoiled, sprang forth, and gripped him in his maw, his teeth biting into his mail, venom seeping into his body and burning his flesh. Thalo dropped his sword and cried out. He fought to free himself from that deadly grip, but he had not the strength to pry those fetid fangs apart. It was not until Awldano came forth once more, bore a blow from Bleygo’s tail, and drove his spear hard

into his side that he was released.

Yelping, Bleygo dropped Thalo and turned to face his new foe. He hissed, snapped his tail, and lunged at Awldano, bowling him over and taking his head in his jaws. And as Awldano cried out below him, as his once handsome helmet splintered beneath Bleygo's bite, as the serpent's fangs cracked into his skull, Thalo arose. He laid aside all his pain and his weariness, the deadly heat rising in his blood, and set his mind upon vengeance alone. With his sword in hand, spite-spiced Sleme, he leapt forth and struck at Bleygo. That blow fell with such fervour, such violent wrath, that it cleft through his neck unwavering, sundering his spine and removing his head, one final hurt to end centuries of torture.

Thalo looked upon his fallen foe, his greatest deed, but as his gaze turned to Awldano, his head and helmet mangled and bloody, he at last succumbed to his exhaustion, the venom in his blood.

'Awldano,' he said, and he fell to the floor, his sword beside him.

Outside, Ogo heard Bleygo's death cry and the silence that followed. He waited a moment for Thalo and Awldano to come stumbling forth, but neither appeared, then waited a moment more before finding the courage to venture in himself. There was the dragon's glimmering body lying still, his head severed, his blood upon the floor. There was Thalo beside him, unconscious but yet alive. And there was Awldano, slumped whimpering on the floor, his eyes torn, his head mauled.

'Ogo?' said Awldano. 'Ogo! I cannot see!' Ogo went to him, knelt above him, and he continued, 'Tell me, Ogo, does Thalo yet live?'

'He does,' said Ogo, 'but barely.'

'Take him home.'

'And what about you?'

'Kill me! This pain I suffer is utterly unyielding. Ogo, I cannot bear it!' He took out his beltknife and pressed it into Ogo's hand. 'I beg of you, Ogo! You must do this for me!'

Ogo did as he asked. He took the knife and stabbed into Awldano's chest, beneath his mail coat. Awldano loosed his last breath, and clutching Ogo's wrist, he muttered his dying words.

'Thalo,' he said. 'To death and beyond.'

Then he died.

Ogo took Thalo home at once. He carried him out of the barrow and slung him over Ondayo's back, but as he was about to leave, his eye was drawn back behind him. Atop the mound he saw a certain silver fox, and it seemed to be grinning.

'An ill omen,' he said, and then he rode away to Samnew.

L

Awldano Goes Home

Ogo came back to Samnew as a new dawn approached and told Odwala all he could. He spoke of their arrival at the barrow, of the battle with the dragon, and of Awldano's death, although he chose not to mention that he had been the one to deal the mortal wound. Meanwhile, Thalo was laid on a bench to rest. Foyva the Priest tended to him with her many ointments and remedies, but she was often unsure of their usefulness.

'What mortal toil,' she said, 'can heal immortal wounds?'

None but immortal time could tell.

Oze the Bald led a company of Awldano's thanes to the barrow to recover their lord's body. They also collected what they could find of his belongings, and Thalo's likewise, and laid claim to the treasures of the barrow. The takings were thus: two swords and their sheaths; two shields, spears, and long-hafted axes; two helmets and hauberks; two gold-wound belt buckles and some related pieces; the fittings of a saddle and bridle; a glittering silver platter and matching set of cups; a whale-bone broach, many golden rings, and other fine jewelleries; the remnants of an ornate box, once filled with red and white gemstones; and a single gold coin from the south. Last of all, they took possession of Bleygo's severed dragon head, proof of the deed.

Odwala put the treasures aside and had Awldano taken to his bed. In Thalo's absence, she and Foyva stripped Awldano of his bloodied clothes and washed his skin, and in so doing they discovered a stab wound on his chest.

'I wonder how it got there,' said Foyva.

But Odwala said, 'The dragon did this.'

They covered his body with an embroidered cloth of green and blue. The cloth they used was larger than was proper, for they sought to cover him from his head to his thighs and thereby hide his wounds. They did not bedeck him yet, for as long as he still lived, that could only be Thalo's task.

The same day, Odwala sent word of Awldano's death to Pearmol. No one wanted to be the one to take it, and so Odwala sent Eyge, whom she hoped to

be trusty enough to soften any wrath that arose in Karvalo's heart. When Eyge came before him, she told him everything she knew.

'What woeful news,' said Karvalo. 'My second son of two lies dead, and I am thusly bereft. This is a sad day.'

Karvalo decreed that Awldano would be buried at Pearmol and ordered the construction of a pyre by the cemetery. He accompanied Eyge back to Samnew and told Odwala that he was arranging Awldano's funeral.

'Therefore,' he said, 'he will come home tomorrow.'

'It would not be fitting,' said Odwala, 'to conduct his funeral before Thalo has woken.'

'Do you expect him to wake?'

'He fought a dragon. Whether one can wake after that, none can say.'

They agreed to wait three days. If Thalo had not awoken by then, Odwala would bring Awldano home without him.

While he was still at Samnew, Karvalo appointed Odwala to the lordship, sparing no time for an assembly. Odwala accepted the appointment with grace and humility, and together they negotiated the division of the barrow-booty. In the end, they split it in two. Odwala kept half for the lordship, and Karvalo took the rest as Awldano's personal share, including Bleygo's head.

Karvalo spent the rest of the day at Awldano's bedside, where he happened to pull back the funerary cloth and discover a stab wound on his chest. He put his fingers upon it and said, 'However did this come to be?'

He covered Awldano once more and began questioning his thanes to learn whatever he could about the circumstances of his death. No one could say much more than he already knew, so he returned to Pearmol the following morning, but he did not go alone—he took Ogo with him.

The night before Awldano was due to go home, Thalo finally awoke after three days. Foyva happened to be in the room with him, and after hawking up blood and phlegm, he said, 'Where is Awldano?'

Foyva told Thalo everything she knew, and then she said, 'He yet lies upon your bed. You must go to him.'

Thalo did that. He arose and went sore and stumbling to his bedroom, where Awldano lay dead. Thalo fell upon him, put his hands on him, and then pulled back the funerary cloth to reveal his head, mauled and lifeless. He winced, but he shed no tears.

'Awldano,' he said. 'I did it. I slew the dragon.' He took up Awldano's hand and kissed the twisted silver ring upon his little finger. 'You are avenged.'

Odwala soon came into the room, and she said she had taken up the lordship at Karvalo's request.

'You are Awldano's husband,' she said, 'or, rather, his widower. We ought

to agree the new arrangements.'

Thalo kept his eyes on Awldano and said, 'The lordship is yours. There is nothing to discuss.'

'There is also the matter of the treasure. Karvalo has taken one half, and I the other, but I would not deprive you of a share. You won it, after all.'

Thalo said, 'The treasure is yours. There is nothing to discuss.'

'Of course. We will be going to Pearmol in the morning. I will leave you for now.'

Odwala bowed her head and left the room, and once she stood alone, she said to herself, 'The lordship is mine, and the treasure likewise. The seeds of strife indeed yield the sweetest fruits.'

Thalo got himself dressed, and the household took Awldano to Pearmol that morning with a solemn silence hanging over them. Odwala led the procession, and Awldano went behind her on the back of a wain, surrounded by his finest things. Beside him rode Thalo, all his belongings either on his person or hung from Ondayo's saddle. He did not intend to return to Samnew, for there was no longer any reason to stay.

When they came to Pearmol, Awldano was brought inside and laid upon a bed, where Thalo bedecked him. He put a ring of gold about his neck, and one about each of his arms, wrists, and ankles. However, as he did this, he took off the funerary cloth and saw the wound upon Awldano's chest.

'What is this?' he said. 'I have seen your every scar, but not this. This was not a dragon's work. Who did this?' Thalo traced the wound's outline with his fingers, considering all he had been told about Awldano's return to Samnew, and its cause became clear. 'There is yet vengeance to be had.'

Thalo kissed the wound, then finished bedecking Awldano and covered him once more.

Karvalo and Seyglena were the first to visit the deathbed. Karvalo's crying was over and done with, so he stood stoic and held Seyglena's hand as she wept for her son. No one had anything to say, but Karvalo's eyes said more than any words could, giving Thalo every foul glare he had.

Essero and Ernala visited next, having come from Ennaslad to honour their kinsman. Essero came with little Ewffoa in his arms, eager to reunite her with her uncle one last time.

'And alas that it should be so,' said Essero. 'Had I been with you, Awldano, perhaps you might still live. One more shield, one more spear—would that have been enough? No, there is nothing to be done about that now.' Essero bowed before Thalo. 'He was a worthy brother, my brother by womb and oath alike. I am glad, Thalo, that you were able to uphold our covenant as I was not. Our sworn brother is avenged.'

Then Essero kissed Thalo's cheek and left the room, and Ernala went with him.

Thalo oversaw further visits throughout the day, until Ormana came in the evening. She came alone. At the time of Awldano's death, her mother, Esleyna, had died not three months ago. Kettelo, one of Esleyna's housemates, had gone out hunting one day and caught a hefty quail, brought it home, stewed it, and given her a hearty portion. However, she fell suddenly ill shortly thereafter. Kettelo supposed she would recover swiftly, for no one else who had eaten the stew was similarly afflicted, but she did not. Despite everyone's efforts to allay her sickness, her condition only worsened, until Kettelo feared it could only come to one conclusion.

Ormana did not visit Esleyna at all during that time, but Kettelo nonetheless threw himself at her feet and said, 'Ormana, you must come to your mother. She is dying!'

Ormana did that. She sat beside Esleyna as she lay dying on her bench, and with a tear in her eye, she took her hand.

'Mother,' she said. 'I love you. I always have. You must know that. Please know that I tried.'

Esleyna said nothing, but she kept hold of Ormana's hand as she died.

Her grave was dug next to Yorlayvo's, such that his urn lay between hers and that of Kolmago and Fenneo. Next to them was Amfredha, for she too had died in the previous years. After Esleyna's grave was filled and the funerary procession had departed, Ormana remained with only faithful Yondea to hold her as she wept.

Just so did Ormana sit beside Thalo and take him in her arms. His head fell upon her shoulder, and for the first time since Awldano's death, he wept.

Karvalo held the funeral the next morning. He took the procession over the river to the cemetery, where Awldano was laid upon a pyre at the far end, past the shrine and the trees. Seyglena performed the funerary rites.

'It is a cruel thing,' she said, 'that I must sing for another of my sons.' After sprinkling some soil and water upon Awldano's body, she raised her arms aloft and said, 'Hear me! Hear me and heed me!'

She spoke this verse:

'As day will ever pass to night,
so wrongs will ever be made right.
As joy will ever pass to strife,
so death will ever yield new life.'

Then Seyglena knelt and sang a dirge as the pyre was lit.

Once the flames had gone out, most of the mourners turned away, leaving only Awldano's closest friends and relatives. His bones were collected into an urn, alongside what treasures had survived the fire, and this was placed amid the remnants of the pyre. Some of his belongings were laid about it: his mail coat; his sword, axe, and spear; his shield; his splintered helmet; and all the things he treasured most. Last of all, Thalo took Awldano's silver ring from the ashes, kissed it, and placed it in the urn. He stepped away.

Karvalo had an upturned skiff laid above the grave goods, over which a burial mound was to be built. Seyglena threw on the first fistful of earth.

'O bounty!' she said. 'Let us beseech you! Let not this loss be lasting!'

Thus was Awldano truly dead.

Karvalo led the procession home as work on the mound began.

That evening, Karvalo presided over the funeral feast. Essero sat at his left, and Ernala sat next to him. Seyglena was at Karvalo's right. Beside her stood a fifth, empty chair. That was Thalo's seat, though he never came to claim it. Instead, he sat alone outside, turning his ring around his finger. And as he watched the sunset, as the sky turned red before him, so too did his mind.

'There is yet vengeance to be had,' he said.

So Thalo gathered his things and strode into the hall mid-feast.

'Ogo!' he said.

Ogo heard his name, but he could not discern his caller through the clamour of the hall. He hopped into the aisle and said, 'I am Ogo! Who are you?'

And at once, he wished he had not, for there was Thalo in the doorway, his sword drawn, ever-eager Sleme, his face dour and grim.

'I am Thalo,' said Thalo, 'and I am vengeance!'

Then he lifted his sword and sprang full pelt down the aisle. As Ogo fled, five or six of Karvalo's thanes leapt up to intervene, but Thalo had the fleetest feet. He seized Ogo's shoulder, and with one heady lunge, he drove his sword through his back.

'Aiee!' said Ogo, and he dropped dead.

Only a moment later, the thanes all fell upon Thalo and dragged him back, holding him in the aisle as Karvalo arose. He came down from the platform and stood tall before Thalo, his head high, his shoulders back.

'You have bloodied my floor,' he said, 'marred my hall, and disturbed my house. Today is a solemn day, and you have sullied it with a murder. What is your defence?'

Thalo said nothing.

'Of course. We all saw it.' Karvalo withdrew Sleme from Ogo's back and pointed the bloody blade at Thalo. 'Justice must be done.'

At that moment, Essero came down from the platform and put his hand on

Karvalo's, lowering the sword.

'Hold on,' he said. 'Tell us this, Thalo. You have spoken of vengeance, but vengeance was dealt upon the death of the dragon. How does this killing satisfy you?'

'Awldano was killed by no tooth or claw,' said Thalo, 'but by a knife in the heart. There was a stab wound on his chest. Ogo killed him.'

Karvalo scoffed, saying, 'And who can vouch for it? Who here knows this to be true? As long as Awldano lay dead, his body was covered, so grim were his wounds.'

At the edge of the room, Foyva turned to Odwala and whispered, 'We can vouch for the wound.'

But Odwala shook her head and said, 'The dragon did this.'

No one else spoke, and so Karvalo pushed Essero away and pointed Sleme at Ogo's body.

'No,' he said, 'this man did not kill my son.' He lifted the sword, holding it before Thalo's face. 'You did that. You tempted him with your baseborn wiles, lessened his honour, and led him headlong to his death. You killed him!'

But again, Essero lowered the sword.

'Hold on,' he said. 'This is no justice.' He pointed to Ogo's body. 'He was not your man.'

'All the same,' said Karvalo, 'this man is a murderer, a chancer and a crook. He deserves to die for his crime, and as the lord of this domain, it is my duty to perform the penalty—my duty and my privilege!'

Essero took his hand away from Sleme's hilt and put it on that of his own sword. 'Father, Thalo is my sworn brother, and I will avenge him. That was the oath I swore, and my oath is binding.'

'You would threaten me? Where are my twofold sons? They are gone! One dead, the other foolish. These are not the men I reared, and whose fault is that?' Karvalo turned his eyes back to Thalo and raised the sword once more. 'You took them from me, scourge of my house!'

Thalo's gaze fell to the floor, his body slack in the grip of Karvalo's thanes. He would die that day, at long last. He deserved nothing less.

Watching from the benches, Ormana saw the last of his spirit escape him, and she arose.

'Hold on,' she said. 'Consider, Karvalo, what my father would think if he could see you now. What would he think of the man who insults his own sons, who would spill blood in his own hall, on his own floor? What would he think of his friend's dishonour?'

Karvalo looked to Ormana, and it was as if he saw in her stead Yorlayvo himself, his most beloved friend, standing to admonish him. At once, his wrath

diminished, and he lowered the sword.

‘You are to leave this place forthwith,’ he said. ‘Should you return here, the punishment will be mine alone to decide, and mine alone to perform.’

Then he dropped the sword and left the hall.

The thanes dragged Thalo outside and shoved him down the steps. No one was there to catch him. Essero picked Sleme up and went out after them, and Ormana followed him. As they came down the steps, Thalo seized his sword from Essero’s hand, and found his mettle anew.

‘He will die,’ he said. ‘Karvalo will die, and I will kill him!’

Essero said, ‘You will not walk out of that hall twice today.’

That made no difference to Thalo. He stepped forth, his sword in hand, but Essero caught his arm and held him back.

‘Put your sword away,’ he said. ‘Awdano gave his life to stand beside you, to spare yours. Do not let his efforts be wasted.’

Thalo looked to Ormana, but she only shook her head. He sheathed his sword.

Essero said, ‘Now go, and do not return to Samnew. There will be no peace for you there.’

Then Essero bowed and went inside.

Once he had gone, Ormana said, ‘Where will you go?’

‘Wherever the road takes me,’ said Thalo. ‘As it was. As it should be.’

He paused briefly, and then he thanked Ormana for speaking on his behalf.

‘Say no more of it,’ she said. ‘No one deserves to die.’

There were a great many other things she meant to say, but she could not find the strength to say them. Instead, she put her arms around him, and without a word, Thalo held her, clung to her. That was good, but it could not last.

They parted, and that proved to be their final parting. Ormana went inside, Thalo rode away, and nothing more would be said between them.

LI

Thalo Goes Home

From Pearmol, Thalo rode northwards for two days. Though he tried to sleep on the night he left, and again on the second night, the darkness would not avail him, and twice he lay restless beneath the stars. Then, as noon approached on the second day, Thalo crossed Fegennas at one of the lower fords and thereby came into Eylavol, a land where he was not only a wanderer, but an outlaw. He took a moment to sit beside the river and look back over the southern bank.

‘All sorrows come from the south,’ he said, ‘and all woes from the north.’ Then he climbed atop Ondayo and rode onward.

In the evening, he came at last to a valley he knew very well indeed. That was Klagenn. He slid out of his saddle and walked Ondayo through the trees, following the river until they came to the clearing above the waterfall. Two stones yet lay atop two graves, that of his birth parents, and that of Asfoa.

‘You are still here,’ he said. ‘But then, where else would you be?’

‘Who are you talking to?’ said a voice behind him. It belonged to a young girl he did not recognise, half-hidden in the nearby shrubbery.

‘No one.’

‘You look ill. Are you ill?’

Thalo did not answer her, for another girl appeared from the bushes. She was a few years older, barely a young woman. When she saw Thalo, she seized the younger girl’s arm and pulled her back.

‘Who are you?’ she said.

Thalo said, ‘I have no name. Know me only as a wanderer, a luckless man cursed to walk the wilds, deprived of my people and all worldly pleasures.’

‘What a bore!’ said the younger girl, and she scampered away.

‘How rude of her!’ said the older girl. ‘I would apologise on her behalf, but I would need your name.’

Thalo said nothing.

‘Everyone has a name. Here, I am Brala. My little sister is called Klata, but you ought to forget about her because she is a git.’ Brala and Klata have already

been introduced—they were the daughters of Gaymono and Broyndea. Brala went on, ‘Are you lost? You can come back home with me. We should be able to put you up if you want. You look like you could do with a bench and a bowl.’

‘No,’ said Thalo. ‘Go home.’

Brala asked again, and Thalo replied just the same.

‘Suit yourself,’ she said, and she left him there.

Once she had gone, Thalo knelt before Asfoa’s burial stone, unsheathed his sword, seldom-stayed Sleme, and laid it flat atop her grave.

‘I did it,’ he said. ‘You told me to seek my fame, my glory, and I did. I did it for you.’ He kissed the stone. ‘But it was not without cost. What now is left for me? Nothing. It is fitting that your grave should likewise be mine.’

Then he picked up the sword, and only a moment later, it fell back to the ground, and Thalo beside it. But he was not dead—not yet. No, as he lifted the blade, as he prepared to face his final, greatest foe, the prior days’ weariness set upon him all at once, and he fell asleep before he could strike.

And as he slept, he was visited once more by an unhappy dream. There he was at the foxes’ dinner table, set beautifully in Bleygo’s barrow, the glittering platter empty, but the foxes were not in their seats. Instead, they all cowered in the shadows.

‘Such cowards!’ said Awldano. He was there. ‘I am much the braver, and very good-looking.’

Then Dragon-Bleygo came roaring into the barrow, and the foxes yelped.

‘Wherever is my meal?’ said Bleygo.

‘How for!’ said the old fox.

‘Not good enough!’

Awldano arose and said, ‘I am good enough, and very good-looking.’ He took off his clothes, climbed atop the table, and lay upon the platter. ‘I can be your meal.’

Thalo smiled.

‘You will do,’ said Bleygo, and he picked Awldano up and swallowed him whole. At once, his eyes shone with light, and he was seized by a spirited jig. ‘More than do! Delectable! Most delectable! Let us drink!’

Bleygo spat up Awldano’s blood, and everyone had a cupful.

‘How for!’ said the old fox.

Thalo took a hearty swig and said, ‘Yummy!’

And that was that.

Thalo awoke shortly thereafter to a sharp knock upon his head. Above him stood Meola, the stars behind her. Since returning to Klagenn, she had taken to living quietly with her family, doing all she could to put her grudges out of her mind. That had proven difficult, however, for her last days with Thrandeo were

more fruitful than they had at first seemed, and not in the way she expected. A few months after coming home, she gave birth to a baby boy, whom she named Gayravo, and who always reminded her of the trials of her past. Her elder son, Kolbeo, had also left home amid a bitter row with his mother, and in his place, she had taken in Brala and Klata, who had previously lived with their mother's relatives.

So it was that when the girls spoke one night of a queer tramp loitering in the woods, Meola was there to hear them.

'Whereabouts?' said Meola.

'Just above the waterfall,' said Brala.

'And what did he look like?'

'Death,' said Klata, 'and he smelt the same.'

'Quite right,' said Brala. 'All short and gaunt-like, as if he stopped growing before he started. I offered him hospitality, but he refused.'

'If he wants to starve, let him starve.'

Meola shook her head and left without another word. Brala asked if she was going to meet him, or to shoo him away, but Meola said only, 'Stay here.'

Thus did Meola come to the woods to find Thalo sleeping atop his mother's grave, his sword beside him. She kicked his head and said, 'What nerve you must have! Have you come to surrender yourself at last? Or are you here for a second, no, a fourth helping of murder?'

Without standing up, Thalo said, 'I am here to die.'

'We can sort that out.'

Meola picked up Sleme. Thalo did not try to stop her. She felt the sword's weight in her hand, pointed it at him, curled up on the floor, and held it there, and held it there, and held it further. Looking down the blade, the edge glinting in the moonlight, she saw him anew, a small and pathetic figure.

'How long I awaited this day,' she said. 'How much I gave, but for what? For you?' She lowered the sword. 'I will waste no more time on you. You are the killer here. If you want to die, do it yourself.'

Then Meola dropped the sword and went back down the valley. As she left, she found Brala and Klata skulking in the bushes, having followed her up.

'Who is he?' said Brala.

'No one,' said Meola, and she took them home.

Thalo stayed on the floor for a while longer, but he could not lull himself back to sleep, and neither could he pry his eyes from Sleme. Not until he had lain there for a good long while did he find the strength to arise once more and sheathe the sword.

Before leaving, he went down to the pool beneath the waterfall to wash. He took off his clothes, waded into the water, and said, 'Klage, my father, will you

have me?'

Then he ducked his head under the water, but only a moment later, someone grabbed his arms and pulled him up.

'Not yet!' they said.

And as Thalo came up, he saw Asfoa before him. His words utterly failed him, but his eyes did not. That was Asfoa, until he realised otherwise.

'No,' he said. 'Your eyes were never so golden.'

With a sigh, Asfoa became Knale, naked in the pool, still clutching Thalo, holding him tight.

'Why is no one ever as pretty as me?' he said.

'Why?' said Thalo. He shook his head. 'How?'

'How what?'

Before Thalo could fully comprehend much of anything, Knale pulled him closer and put a kiss upon his lips. Thalo was much too weak to resist. He stood helpless against such ancient beauty, such elfin wiles, and was utterly taken in by his charms. Then they began their business, but as Thalo's joy overcame him, a very strange thing happened. Knale leant forward and whispered into his ear, 'How what? How for.'

At once, Thalo's joy fell away. He turned to Knale behind him, but there he saw Asfoa once more, on him, in him.

'Mother?' he said.

'Mother is dead,' said Asfoa.

Then she pulled away and pushed Thalo beneath the water. He scrambled up and out of the pool, but as he fell snorting upon the bank, neither Knale nor Asfoa were anywhere to be seen. He awaited any sign that they might still lurk there, but none came. He would not stay there a moment longer. He dried off, got himself dressed, and returned to Ondayo to make away.

Now Thalo went back southwards.

'One last sanctuary may yet await me,' he said.

Thus, he came in time to Alvennawl, the closest thing he had known to a home since setting his own ablaze. As he approached the farm, one of the lads happened to see him coming and rushed up to the house to raise the alarm.

'Yonnago!' he said. 'Thalo is coming!'

'Him!' said Omvedho. 'I shall see the bummer off.'

'Hold on,' said Yonnago. 'I want to know his cause for coming first. He may only be passing by.'

'That man is little more than a scoundrel! He stole your shield!'

'Omvedho man! I gave it to him, and I will not say it again. The problem was not his taking Yamveke, but what he did with it. I will at least let him speak on the matter.'

Yonnago picked up a nearby axe, hung it on his belt, and then went outside to meet his visitor. His fellows gathered around him, and together they waited in silence as Thalo rode up and got off Ondayo.

‘Yonnago,’ said Thalo. ‘It has been a while.’

‘That it has,’ said Yonnago. He stood with his axe-hip facing Thalo, his hand resting upon the weapon’s head. ‘What brings you here?’

‘I have nowhere else to go.’

‘Do you expect to be welcome here?’

‘I did.’ Thalo kept his eye on Yonnago’s axe. ‘I now see otherwise.’

‘Tell me why you gave Yamveke away, my only treasure.’

‘You gave it to me.’

‘I gave it to you, not Karvalo. I trusted you to look after it, and you threw it away at the first opportunity.’

Thalo said nothing.

‘Well?’ said Omvedho. ‘Speak!’

Thalo shook his head and said, ‘If you are going to use that axe, Yonnago, hurry up and use it. Kill me.’ He knelt down, drew his sword, and threw it aside. ‘I will make it easy for you.’

Yonnago was stumped. He looked around his fellows, all equally baffled by Thalo’s willingness to submit, and after a moment, he moved the axe around to his back.

‘I am not going to kill you,’ he said. ‘Do you want a bench?’

‘Yonnago,’ said Omvedho, ‘why would you offer him that after what he did to you—what he did to Kyale?’

‘I will not turn away a man in need, and I have seen few as needful as this one. If that displeases you, you are welcome to leave, though I would rather you did not.’

Omvedho grumbled his concession and went inside.

‘So, Thalo, do you want a bench?’

Thalo said he did, and so it was. He picked up his sword and went inside with Yonnago, while Ondayo was put up in the barn. After getting the farmboys back to work, Yonnago dished him up some stew and told him to eat.

‘And tell me,’ said Yonnago, ‘why do you have nowhere else to go? Did you not make off to Pearmol?’

Thalo said, ‘I am no longer welcome there.’

‘You and me both! What happened?’

‘A killing.’

‘Oh dear.’ Yonnago nodded towards Thalo’s stew. ‘Here, we can put such grim talk aside for now and have something nice to eat instead.’

Thalo did not touch the stew. ‘He deserved it.’

‘If you say so. Eat up.’

‘I should have killed Karvalo too. I had many chances, but I was too weak—too afraid.’

‘That would not have ended well for you.’

‘Karvalo would be dead. Whatever happened to me, that would be enough. There is nothing else left for me.’

‘No. There is always more. Whatever you might have lost, there is always more.’ Yonnago nudged the bowl of stew towards him. ‘Start with this.’

Thalo thanked him and ate the stew. That was the first proper meal he had eaten for some days, and it was good, even though it made him very gassy.

Thalo ended up staying at Alvennawl for about a month. He helped with all the household chores, although Yonnago eased him into it, for he was in very poor shape when he first arrived. During that time, Thalo told him about what had happened at Pearmol, and then at Samnew, and then everything with the dragon, though he did not mention his outlawry—he was still within Karvalo’s domain, after all. Yonnago listened to every word with a willing ear, but Thalo nonetheless remained ever unsettled, and particularly at night.

One evening, he suffered yet another of his frightful dreams. There were the silver-sheened foxes at their dinner table, set neatly in the twin trolls’ grave. Thalo sat proudly at the head of the table, his back to the river, and before him lay Klovo and Fowdho upon a glittering platter, each devoid of his head.

‘Eat up!’ said Thalo, and the foxes all arose and danced around the table.

‘Thennelo!’ they chanted. ‘Thennelo! Thennelo!’

‘How for!’ said the old fox at the other end.

Thalo looked to him, and the old fox’s belly cut itself open from the inside. Out crawled Fox-Knale. He joined the others’ merriment and danced along the table, over the trolls, until he stood half smiling and half snarling before Thalo, bile dripping from his fangs.

‘How for,’ he whispered, and he pushed Thalo backwards into the river.

Thalo lay in the water, letting it fill his mouth, his lungs, until it turned to blood, and Thalo awoke with a cough.

‘Shut up,’ said Omvedho, but he went straight back to sleep.

Not so Thalo. He tried, but after a little while, he gave up, put his sword on his belt, and stole out of the house. He went down the slope to the river, and then followed it to the site of the trolls’ grave. He had considered going there every day since he arrived at Alvennawl, but he had thus far resisted the urge. Now it proved too great. He knelt above the grave and drew his sword.

‘I am Thalo Thennelo,’ he said, ‘the bane of trolls twice-over!’ He stabbed the sword into the earth. ‘But what trolls remain? What is left for me?’

LII

Blood at Bealnew

A short while after her election by the rede, the young king took up her kingly mantle at Brownos. The lords were all in attendance, as were all her reeves, and all the other great folk of her kingdom. Of the earls of Norlonn, only Solvega had been invited. She came alongside her son, Enroko, whom she still hoped would be betrothed to the king. The pair were introduced before the ceremony, but Enroko was only fifteen at that time (some four-and-a-half years the king's junior), and he was nervous, and very sweaty, and generally lacking in grace. Yordhoa in particular was unimpressed.

'Solvega,' she said, 'what makes you think he is fit to marry the king?'

Solvega said, 'We made an agreement, did we not?'

'I proposed a settlement, and the settlement was rejected. There is not yet any such agreement between us.'

'Not yet?'

'Not yet. In time, there may be, but I recommend you make haste, Solvega, and convince your countrymen to agree to my terms. The deal is not done until the deal is done.'

Solvega said she would do just that and took Enroko away where he could not further lessen his chances.

All the same, his chances soon plummeted. The king's mantling was also attended once more by Tholvoa Asnyorannan from the south, but this time she came not on behalf of the King of Baklalonn, but as the king herself. Standing proudly at his mother's side was Aldoro once more, and after the ceremony, he went to the king and asked her to marry him.

'Let me think about it,' said the king.

'What is there to think about?' said Yordhoa. 'If you marry him, your heirs will be the heirs of twofold kingdoms, and your legacy will be great. You will accept the offer, and accept it quickly, for we must be leaving soon.'

'Let her think,' said Aldoro, 'and let me leave with you, if I may, that she may take all the time she needs.'

Yordhoa considered this request, and then she said, 'Very well. You should make for an acceptable guest.'

Thus did Aldoro accompany the king back to Syorbak.

On the day of their return, the king met secretly with a young man named Klozo. He was the son of Nyalo, the Steward of Feklam, and he had long been a close friend of hers, but in recent years, they had become rather friendlier. The king told Klozo about the proposals she had received at Brownos, and he urged her to accept Aldoro's.

'But what about you?' said the king.

'What we do in our own time,' said Klozo, 'is for us alone to know. Your marriage to another fellow ought not change that.'

'How unscrupulous!'

'Not unscrupulous, but pragmatic.'

The king took Klozo's advice and accepted Aldoro's proposal. They were married at Syorbak only a few weeks later.

Aldoro stayed with the king for a few more weeks thereafter. During that time, she and Klozo continued frolicking together. Then, shortly before Aldoro was to return home, he invited the king to rejoice with him.

'Today,' he said, 'is weddings day, and I am your husband, and you are my wife. It is only fitting that we should make merry together.'

'I appreciate that,' said the king, 'but I have had my fill for today.'

'What do you mean by that?'

Upon realising what she had said, the king flushed and fell silent.

'Say, Kara, what do you mean by that?'

'I am quite tired and have had enough of the day. Perhaps we can postpone that discussion.'

'I would rather discuss the matter now.'

'And I would rather not.'

The king left the room in a hurry, and she went straight to Klozo. She told him what had been said and bade him make himself scarce, but alas, there was to be no hiding for him—Aldoro had followed her. He came barging into the room to find them alone together, and he was enraged.

'This is the adulterator?' he said. 'This sniveller?'

Then he shoved the king aside, seized Klozo by his hair, and dragged him out into the hall to make their private matter public.

'What dishonour!' he said. 'This man is a rapist! He has raped my wife, and he has thereby raped me!'

Aldoro drew his sword, intending to slay Klozo on the spot, but before the blow fell, the king came forth, pushed him over, and divorced him.

'You cannot divorce me!' said Aldoro.

‘I can,’ said the king, ‘and I have. You are welcome neither in my hall, nor my kingdom. Begone!’

Aldoro did not move until Fena the Chancellor—she was his aunt—came out of the council chamber. He asked her to remedy the situation, but she said the only remedy would be for him to leave, and she led him out herself.

Aldoro left Syorbak the next day, and he ended up taking Fena with him, having offered her a position of high status in his retinue. In her place, Yordhoa had the king grant the chancellery to a woman named Foldea, Solvega’s sister, hoping her appointment might lessen any disgruntlement that had arisen after the king’s marriage to Aldoro, rather than Enroko. Given recent events, the possibility of a match with the latter suitor was renewed, and Yordhoa would let nothing jeopardise it. Thus, she came to Klozo with a stern look in her eye.

‘Your options are twofold,’ she said. ‘Your first is to cease your dealings with my daughter, leave this place, and never come back. The second is to die, but not before all your kin are forced out of their homes and into outlawry. Choose now, Klozo, and choose well.’

Klozo chose the first option. He came to the king one evening and said he needed to leave.

The king said, ‘Must it be so?’

‘It must. My love for you is no less than ever it was, but our being together has proven perilous. I cannot let you shoulder that risk. It is much too painful.’

‘No. I will shoulder that risk—I choose to shoulder it.’

‘But you deserve to love—and to be loved—without fear of retribution. I cannot offer you that.’

The king protested further, but Klozo’s mind would not be changed.

‘I will leave tomorrow,’ he said, ‘and that will be that.’

‘Will we ever meet again?’ said the king.

‘Who knows?’

Klozo left Syorbak the next day, and the king soon told her mother what had happened.

‘My dear girl,’ said Yordhoa, ‘You have squandered two men now, but fate has seen fit to grant you a third chance at marriage. I understand little Enroko is still on the prowl.’

‘I refuse!’ said the king. ‘I will never love again!’

‘Who said anything about love? Few ever prove to be as desirable a spouse as you are. Be grateful for his willingness to overlook your recent indignities and marry him.’

‘No!’

‘This is not a discussion. I am your mother.’

‘And I am your king!’

Yordhoa laughed. ‘As was your father, and his brother likewise. These are perilous times, Kara. Do as I say, and you will see them through. Refuse, and time alone can tell what troubles await you.’

The king ended up agreeing to marry Enroko. Solvega affirmed the match on his behalf, and they were married at Syorbak a month or so later. News of their marriage soon found its way to all the foremost folk of Eylavol, and many decided they did not much like it.

‘What treachery!’ said Godleda at Ordenn. ‘We are supposed to be cutting our ties to the kingship, not strengthening them. But perhaps I can turn this to my advantage?’

Thus, she set off for Bealnew to contest the earldom. The magnates were summoned for an election towards the end of the summer, and though both Solvega and Godleda still had many stout supporters who would not be swayed, there were enough in the middle that it could go either way. Godleda stated her case first, slandering the kingship and so on, and many of the magnates cheered. Then it was Solvega’s turn.

‘My friends,’ she said, ‘we must make a choice. Are we to be bound to the kingship in the south, or to the overlordship of Thrando of Noynavol? We are forced to choose between two kings, so tell me this: which of them has spent months and years harrying our lands, destroying our homes, and killing our people? When you choose your earl, you likewise choose your king. Let us all hope you choose well.’

At the end of the day, the magnates chose Solvega, but only by the slightest of margins.

‘You nits!’ said Godleda. ‘You have doomed us all!’

Then she returned to Ordenn, leaving Solvega to keep hold of her earldom.

Taking this victory to be proof of the magnates’ support for the kingship, Solvega made good on her side of the agreement with Yordhoa and proclaimed the dissolution of the Earldom of Eylavol.

‘Henceforth shall this domain be a shire of the king’s law,’ she said, ‘and I shall be its reeve.’

The king was due to come up to Bealnew to affirm the establishment of the new shire, but she had recently caught a terrible cold from Enroko. She was so brimming with phlegm that she could hardly breathe, and so Yordhoa sent her cousin Alvaro on her behalf. He came up to Bealnew, said ‘The king concurs,’ and then he went home again.

Of course, this left Solvega’s foes all the bitterer, and they began plotting, each only stoking the others’ fury until it was too much to bear, until something needed to be done. That something happened towards the end of the year, when Solvega was heading southwards to Openn to meet with a man named Tholreo.

He was Yordhoa's younger brother, whom she had appointed to the Reeveship of Syoglonn after forcing Mora to surrender it. As Solvega passed Thrawrsyog, Godleda attempted to ambush her, but she misjudged the approach, and her troop was spotted before she could make the first move. Godleda commenced the attack nonetheless.

'We have suffered too much to give up now,' she said. 'Go forth, thanes! Go forth and kill!'

The battle was fought on fairer footing than Godleda had hoped, and that was enough for Solvega to clinch a narrow victory. Her warriors held their shields just a bit firmer, thrust their spears just a bit harder, and Godleda's warband routed. Godleda herself was killed as she fled alongside them, but Solvega's side had taken enough of a battering that she was also forced to turn back to Bealnew.

Thus did war befall the magnates of Eylavol once more, but where before they had fought against folk from other lands, now they fought one another. And what miserable days those were! Those foes were so alike in stock and conviction that as sons slew their fathers, so fathers slew their sons, and as thanes broke their oaths, so their oaths broke them.

It was around this time that Godleda's cousin, Ayrmodho, found himself in the middle of things. He had taken control of Ordenn following her death, and he oversaw a series of successful skirmishes against Solvega's allies, bolstered with support from Thrando. His chiefest ally was his nephew, Eslayvo, and Eslayvo's husband was none other than Gaydeno Gaydeannan.

After Gaylodho had sent him away from Klagenn, Gaydeno came to a farm called Gronn in the western part of Eylavol, where he lived with his father's relatives. However, he had a very rotten time there, and as soon he had come of age a few years later, he made his way back eastwards to Bealnew to make a man of himself. There he found his way into Beyla's retinue, and thereafter into Eslayvo's bed.

'Did you hear,' Eslayvo said to him one morning, 'about Beyla's guests? They have come seeking justice for the murder of their kinsman, old Gaylodho. He was your uncle, no? Perhaps you could join them and get something out of it. They say he was quite rich, after all.'

'I will not be avenging him,' said Gaydeno. 'No riches could sway me to pledge myself to so wretched a fellow. Whoever the murderer was, he has done a good deed.'

'Just as we have!'

Gaydeno ended up marrying Eslayvo on the very same day Thalo married Awldano. They stayed at Bealnew trying to make themselves important men, but never had much luck until Ayrmodho took them into his retinue following

Beyla's murder.

'Boys,' he had said, 'heed me. Together, we shall make this land our own.'

To that end, Ayrmodho made arrangements with a magnate named Lokkele, who had previously been married to Enlovo the High-reeve, Solvega's brother. Though they remained one of Solvega's closest confidants, their relationship had become increasingly fraught, and Ayrmodho turned it to his advantage.

'If you will do for me,' he said, 'I will do for you. Remove Solvega from her seat, and it will be yours for the taking. I will see to that.'

'I will hold you to that,' said Lokkele.

One day in the spring after Godleda's death, Lokkele and Solvega met to share some domestic gossip, as often they did.

'Lean in,' said Lokkele. 'I have something to tell you, and even though we sit in private, it is so scandalous that I would still rather whisper it.'

'That sounds very juicy!' said Solvega, and she leant forwards.

But instead of whispering into her ear, Lokkele clubbed her over the head, bound her in rope, and took control of Bealnew.

Ayrmodho arrived a little while later and said, 'Good work, Lokkele! Now get lost.'

'I beg your pardon,' said Lokkele. 'I have removed Solvega from her seat. It is mine for the taking, just as you promised.'

'I do not recall making such a promise.'

Lokkele drew their knife and considered attacking Ayrmodho, but he had his stoutest thanes behind him, while Lokkele had just betrayed their closest friend. They left without making any more of a fuss.

At once, Ayrmodho chaired a council of Solvega's thanes. Once everyone had piled into her house, he brought her before them, shoved her to the ground, and told her to renounce her support for the kingship.

'I refuse!' said Solvega.

'Very well,' said Ayrmodho. He drew his sword. 'What will be your dying words?'

'Wait. I have changed my mind.'

'A poor choice.'

Then Ayrmodho stabbed Solvega through the back, and that killed her. Her thanes all threw up their voices, and his threw up their swords.

'Settle down, everyone,' said Ayrmodho. 'I am in charge now. If you accept that and submit to me, we will all be better for it: me, you, and all the folk of Eylavol. Who will object?'

All of Solvega's supporters shouted out their objections.

'Here,' said Eslayvo, standing up. 'How about a vote?'

'Yes,' said Ayrmodho. 'We shall vote.'

Eslayvo asked those who supported Ayrmodho to raise their hands. All of Ayrmodho's thanes did, as did Ayrmodho himself, but they made up only about a third of the room. Then Eslayvo asked those who opposed him to raise their hands likewise, and the remaining two-thirds did.

'No,' said Ayrmodho. 'The vote was unfair. That man there raised both his hands.' He pointed to an elderly fellow at the back of the room. 'Cut them off.'

The man's hands were cut off.

'Now, let us try again.'

Eslayvo conducted the vote again, and although fewer people voted against Ayrmodho, they still had the majority.

'No,' said Ayrmodho. 'That woman held up her son's hand. That is against the rules. Cut them off.'

Both the woman and her infant son lost their hands.

'Now, let us try again.'

Then Eslayvo conducted the vote once more, and though Ayrmodho gained no favour, his opposition had diminished sufficiently to give him the victory.

'As I thought,' he said. 'I am the one we all want in charge.'

Then he dismissed the household and took control of Bealnew.

The following days saw many of Solvega's supporters expelled from the town, or from Eylavol entirely, so long as they were fortunate enough not to be killed outright. Most of her relatives fled southwards, coming down to Syorbak to seek refuge with the king and her husband, their kinsman. They also brought news of Solvega's death to Rago at Fessos. The king granted the Reeveship of Eylavol to a woman named Rolkwea, another of Solvega's sisters, although she held it in exile.

With his dominance soundly asserted, Ayrmodho convened an assembly of the magnates, where he proclaimed the restoration of the earldom.

'Or rather,' he said, 'its continuation. It was never rightfully disestablished.'

The magnates accepted him as their new earl (many did so reluctantly), whereafter he travelled to Kyalannes and met Thrandeo. He acknowledged him as his overlord, as had all his fellow earls.

'At last,' said Thrandeo, 'my land is one, and I stand atop it.'

He returned to Bealnew with Ayrmodho, where he oversaw another council of the earls. He said he meant to offer the kingship the same settlement he had previously offered.

'I will have my oath,' he said, 'and my treaty. The king's wealth, and the king's head. I will accept nothing less.'

However, his fellows were not convinced.

'It would be better,' said Seybeo, 'to get this resolved sooner rather than later. We now stand as one. Perhaps we might soften our demands, and thereby

ensure they are met?’

Thrandeo refused, but the other earls all spoke in support of Seybeo.

‘I am your overlord,’ said Thrandeo. ‘The terms are mine to decide.’

‘Then why summon us all here?’ said Balkena. ‘Your overlordship extends only as far as we are willing to acknowledge it.’

‘What treachery is this?’

Thrandeo put his hand on the hilt of his sword, whereupon Frewdha arose.

‘What about this?’ she said. ‘Demand your oath and your treaty, and all the wealth you want, but let the king keep her head. She has not acted against us.’

‘Not yet.’

‘Then give her no such cause, and peace may finally return to our lands.’

‘And you have two kings’ skulls above your door as it is,’ said Seybeo. ‘A third would be quite gaudy.’

Thrandeo grimaced. ‘So be it.’

Thus the earls agreed a new settlement, but after the meeting, Thrandeo and Ayrmodho met privately.

‘Things can yet be done,’ said Ayrmodho.

‘That they can,’ said Thrandeo, ‘and so they will be.’

Eslayvo was chosen to take the new offer southwards, but he stopped over at Fessos to meet with Rago, who was by then very elderly. He did not much appreciate the visit.

‘Why are you bothering me?’ he said. ‘I have been parted from yet another of my children, and still you harass me with your politics. Can an old man never rest? Never grieve?’

‘Soon enough,’ said Eslayvo, ‘but until then, please listen to me.’

‘Speak.’

‘I have been charged with an important task—one, I fear, I am not equipped to meet. Indeed, I suspect no one is, except, perhaps, you. The earls have agreed a new settlement by which to resolve their dispute with the king. All I ask is that you present it, for you alone yet command respect in both the north and the south. You alone can broker the peace we all so desperately need.’

‘If I do this, will that be the end of it? Do you truly believe this will see peace restored?’

‘I do.’

‘Very well. If it will spare my kinsfolk and my countrymen of further strife, I will do as you ask.’

Eslayvo told Rago the new terms, and they went together to Syorbak.

When they came before the king, Rago told her the earls’ demands, and he said, ‘If you want my advice, this is a generous offer. I understand Eylavol has turned against you, and yet they no longer ask the king to suffer any personal

punishment. You should accept this settlement and put the matter to rest.’

‘I think I will,’ said the king.

‘No,’ said Yordhoa. ‘We can do better.’

‘And why should I listen to you? I am the king.’

‘Remember your father, Kara, as we discussed. Do not forget him.’

Then the king huffed and left the room.

Yordhoa invited Rago and Eslayvo to stay at Syorbak until they had come to a decision, and they both took up that offer. Rago stayed with his relatives, while Eslayvo spent his time snooping around, learning the lay of the land and meeting everyone who would spare him even a moment.

‘After all,’ he said to himself, ‘we will meet again—I will be an altogether mightier man then.’

Yordhoa summoned the royal council to consider the earls’ settlement the next day, but they could not agree. They met again the day after that, and their meeting came to much the same conclusion. This went on for another week or so, and still the council could not determine the appropriate course.

Thus did Foldea the Chancellor (Rago’s daughter) stand and say, ‘Enough of this. If we cannot decide, there is only one recourse. The matter must be brought before the rede.’

‘No!’ said Yordhoa. ‘This is the king’s decision, and the king’s alone. I will not let those smarmy connivers rule on matters so far beyond their purview.’

But despite her protestations, the council voted unanimously in favour of shifting responsibility to the lords.

‘That settles it,’ said Foldea. ‘This is their problem now.’

The king convened the rede for a petty moot later that year, and despite Yordhoa keeping her allies firmly in line, the other lords were quick to accept the earls’ settlement.

‘That which weakens the kingship,’ said Karvalo, ‘only serves to strengthen the rede.’

‘You will regret this,’ said Yordhoa, and she dismissed the lords.

Once they had all gone home again, the king came before her mother and cheerfully said, ‘I am the king. Do not forget it.’

‘Girl,’ said Yordhoa, ‘stop grinning. This is your legacy squandered, not mine.’

Then Yordhoa met once more with Rago and Eslayvo. She told them about the lords’ decision, and they were pleased to hear it. Rago returned to Fessos once more, and Eslayvo brought the news back to Norlonn.

They arranged to make the relevant oaths and sign a treaty at Bealnew in the following spring. The king arrived the day before the oath-day. She had in her company her husband, Enroko, and her cousin, Alvaro, as well as Alvaro’s

father, a hearty man named Tholo, and many others besides. She had invited Yordhoa, but this invitation was refused.

‘If you wish to throw away your father’s kingdom,’ she had said, ‘throw it away yourself.’

On the other side, Ayrmodho was hosting, and only Thrandeo joined him. None of the other earls were present, for he had forbidden it.

As the king approached Bealnew, Thrandeo and Ayrmodho came outside to welcome her.

‘Look at her,’ whispered Ayrmodho. ‘What a paltry girl. That is no king.’

‘Lay your pride aside,’ said Thrandeo, ‘and look at the thanes behind her. Even feeble arms can kill.’

‘I suppose so.’

Now the king came forth, lowered herself to her knees, and greeted them with a bow.

‘My friends,’ she said, ‘I am glad we have come together to lay our quarrels aside at last. May the coming days be fruitful.’

Thrandeo scoffed. ‘You are glad? Glad for what? Glad for the slaughter of my people, that they have suffered through years of hardship? Their blood is on your hands, the hands you inherited from your father, the hands he inherited from his, the hands that killed my kith and kin. There is no cause for gladness here.’

The king tried to apologise for upsetting him, but Tholo came to her side and picked her up off the floor.

‘Up,’ he said. ‘Grant this man no more respect than he would grant you, and do not bow to him again, not unless he bows first.’

‘This is my land,’ said Thrandeo. ‘I will not be bowing.’

Then he spat on the floor and went inside.

Ayrmodho brought the king and her company into Bealnew. They were put up in his house, but their horses were stabled down at the edge of the town.

That evening, Ayrmodho invited his guests to join him for dinner. He sat at the middle of his high table, and Thrandeo sat at his right. Next to him was his eldest son, Osfero, and beside him were Eslayvo and Gaydeno, Ayrmodho’s choicest friends. At Ayrmodho’s left was the king, then her husband, Enroko, then Tholo, and Alvaro was on the other end. No one had much to say, except Enroko. He was still of largely boyish temperament, and Ayrmodho had been very generous with the drink.

‘Lay off it,’ Tholo whispered to him. ‘This is no time for guzzling.’

‘It is always time for guzzling!’ said Enroko. ‘But alas, my wife seems not to agree.’

‘What do you mean by that?’ said the king.

‘As far as pleasures go, you are quite the stingy woman. Have you never eaten a parsnip?’

‘Like I would eat yours. I should divorce you for saying that.’

‘Maybe you should, but will you?’

‘Maybe I will.’

Now Tholo clumped Enroko’s head and took away his cup. ‘You have had quite enough.’

‘No!’ said Enroko. He threw himself over the table to reclaim it, but the king pulled him back into his seat, and Tholo pushed him likewise. Then he let up a piercing wail. ‘My life! My love! My cup!’ and ran squealing from the hall.

Tholo went after him, and the king left alongside Alvaro shortly thereafter, each dearly ashamed of Enroko’s poor behaviour. They caught Enroko outside, dragged him to their bedroom, and threw him onto his bench.

‘Boy,’ said Tholo, ‘go to sleep.’

‘I am not so tired,’ said Enroko.

‘Then you will lie here until you are.’

Enroko tried to stand up again, but Tholo pushed him down.

‘Sleep!’ he said.

Enroko closed his eyes and fell asleep at once. Alvaro and the king went to bed shortly thereafter, while Tholo sat down to keep vigil, just in case. He was, however, no youthful man, and he fell asleep likewise.

Late in the night, Enroko stirred groggy from his bench. He crept over to the king’s bench—they never shared a bed—and stood above her.

‘Dim-eyed doe,’ he said. ‘Why will you not love me?’ He stroked her cheek. ‘I am your husband. I am yours, as you are mine. Why do you deny me?’

Then he snuck out of the room, but as he walked away from the door, he saw Thrando and Ayrmodho leading a whole throng of warriors into the hall, all armed and armoured. Alas, they saw him too. Enroko tried to run, but he remained so muddled from the evening’s drinking that he tripped over his own foot and fell upon the floor. Only a moment later, Thrando appeared above him and stabbed him in the neck.

‘Aiee!’ he said, and then he died.

Thrando said, ‘Lads, with me!’ and he led his thanes into the room where the king was sleeping. There they found her half-dressed and halfway through the window, Alvaro pushing her through from below, and Tholo awaiting them in the doorway—Enroko’s death cry had awoken them all.

‘Sod off!’ said Tholo, swinging his axe.

‘Sod off yourself!’ said Thrando, and then they fought.

And though Tholo fought hard and well, he was but one man against many,

and he was slain. Alvaro got the king out of the hall and turned back to avenge his father, but Tholo said with his dying breath, ‘The king! The king!’

Alvaro knew then that his vengeance would have to wait. He put out his arms and sprang through the window, swords and spears biting at his heels. He and the king snuck through the shadows of Bealnew, and despite the uproar, they got themselves to the edge of the town unseen. But as they came into the stable where their horses were being held, they spotted Thrandeo leading his followers down the path towards them.

‘Get atop your horse and go!’ said Alvaro. ‘I will hold them off.’

‘I will not leave you behind as well,’ said the king.

‘If you are to live, you must.’

‘They will surely kill you!’

‘If that is what I must endure to avenge my father, then I shall endure it.’

The king relented. She climbed upon her horse, a striking white mare named Ewva, before bidding Alvaro farewell.

‘Tarry no more,’ said Alvaro. ‘Ride on!’

‘Oy-oy!’ said the king, and she rode out of the stable as her foes came racing towards her. Though she was no stout fighter, she was a nimble enough rider, and she got away.

Thrandeo’s followers came into the stable to ride after her, but Alvaro was there to meet them. He fought his way to Thrandeo and said, ‘Scourge of kings! I will avenge my father!’

Then they fought. Thrandeo was the mightier man, and Alvaro was slain.

Thrandeo got his troop on their horses and led them in pursuit of the king. He took the bulk of them as directly southwards as he could, but he sent many others to hunt for her every which way.

‘I will have the king’s head,’ he said. ‘I will accept nothing less.’

It later turned out that only a few of the king’s thanes escaped the slaughter. There were no important deaths on Thrandeo’s side. Ayrmodho was wounded in a tussle with some of the king’s followers, but he got over that.

LIII

Men of Glory

One morning, Thalo was bathing in the river at Alvennawl when he spotted a young woman approaching from the north atop a brilliant white steed. That was the king. Thalo recognised her from the lawmoot of her election, which he had attended with Awldano.

‘But those days are behind me,’ he said to himself. ‘I am no lordly fellow.’

The king rode up to Thalo and said, ‘You there, where am I?’ She did not recognise him.

‘Alvennawl,’ said Thalo.

‘Where is that?’

‘Here.’

It had taken the king a day and a night to get from Bealnew to Alvennawl, and the journey had left her in quite the sorry state, her horse likewise. Indeed, she was in much the same condition in which Thalo had arrived a month prior.

‘Are you ill?’ he said. ‘Or hurt?’

‘No,’ said the king, ‘only sore and weary.’

‘If you need a bench, Yonnago will put you up. He holds the house here. I can take you to him.’

The king thanked Thalo and asked him his name.

‘I am Thalo,’ he said, ‘Asfoa’s son.’

Thalo’s name did not remind the king of their previous meeting any more than his face. She bowed her head and said, ‘I am Koyndola. There is nothing to say of my ancestry.’

Thalo took Koyndola up to the house. Yonnago met her there, and after introducing herself, she asked to be put up for the night.

‘A bench and a bowl,’ she said. ‘That is all I ask of you. I will be gone tomorrow.’

‘Where have you come from?’ said Yonnago.

Koyndola considered where she might have come from, and then she said, ‘Dwalmol. It is some way west of here.’

Yonnago did not know that place. He asked the farmboys if anyone knew it, and Omvedho said he did.

‘They have queer tongues in those parts,’ he said. ‘My cousin went there once. She lost three of her toes and four fingers in a bet. I never found out what happened after that.’

Yonnago turned back to Koyndola. ‘If you are from Dwalmol, why is your tongue not queer?’

‘I have come from there,’ said Koyndola, ‘but I am not from there. I was only visiting.’

‘Then where is your home?’

‘Gewd. It is down in Lagovol.’ That was where the king’s mother was from. ‘That is where I am headed.’

‘Do you know that place too, Omvedho?’

‘I do,’ said Omvedho. ‘I was sued for arson there, but I was acquitted. No one saw me do it. That is to say, no one could have seen me do it, because it never happened. Or rather, the fire did happen, but I did not start it. I was not involved at all.’

‘I am satisfied.’ Yonnago patted Koyndola’s back. ‘Welcome to my house, Koyndola. If you wish to stay more than a night, you are welcome to do so.’

‘It will not come to that,’ said Koyndola. ‘I must be on my way.’

Then she thanked Yonnago for his hospitality and they parted.

Koyndola joined the household for dinner that evening. The farmboys were very interested in their new guest, the stranger at their table, and they gathered around to ask her all manner of prying questions.

‘This reminds me,’ said Yonnago, ‘of your first meal here, Thalo, all those years ago.’ He turned to Koyndola. ‘Say, have you a severed head beneath your seat?’

‘Why might I have a severed head beneath my seat?’ said Koyndola.

‘Whyever! Tell her, Thalo.’

Thalo did not say anything.

‘Stay silent, then. This here is Thalo Thennelo, the bane of trolls. Have you heard of him?’

Koyndola had not heard of him, but the king certainly had. He was the man in the middle of things, or so she had been told, the man who killed an earl and started a war, the war she sought to finish. She realised then that she had met him before, if only briefly.

Koyndola said to Thalo, ‘Is this true?’

‘It is,’ said Thalo. With a subtle nod, he went on to say, ‘I would not expect you to have heard of me, Koyndola.’

Koyndola returned his nod, and the meal went on.

After eating, Koyndola came to Thalo and asked him to join her outside, where they might speak without being overheard. Thalo agreed to that. They went out into the sunset together, and after going a little way down the hill, the king thanked Thalo for keeping her true name to himself.

Thalo said, 'What brings a king to this place?'

The king muttered to herself, and then fell silent, her mind stuck in the blood in the night. She had thought little of it thus far—things had been so frantic, so fraught, that she had thought little of anything at all besides her own survival—but now she was invited to tell of it at last, to relive it all at once.

'They are all dead,' she said.

'Who?'

'We were meant to sign a treaty to end the fighting, but there was an attack. It was at Bealnew. It was Thrando. He killed them all, my thanes, my friends and companions. All but me. They all died for me.'

Then the king fell sobbing upon Thalo's shoulder. He was not remotely comfortable with that, but he could only stand there as she clung to him.

'They died for me!' she said. 'What have I done to warrant that? What cause did I give them?'

'You are their lord. They made their oaths, and they held them. There is nothing more to it.'

'What oath is worth a life?'

'There are none worth less.'

The king stepped away from Thalo, shaking her head. 'No. What would you know? This is your fault. You caused this.'

Thalo sighed and said, 'Then kill me.' He drew his beltknife, pressed it into the king's hand, and brought it up to his throat. 'If your grief is my doing, then avenge your friends and kill me.'

The king felt the knife in her grip, but she lowered it. 'What good would it do?'

'None. Your thanes are dead. That cannot be changed, so put the blood out of your mind and let them die. Otherwise, they will only haunt you. The blood will haunt you, day and night. There is no reprieve from that.'

Without a word, the king nodded, dropped the knife, and went inside, where she became Koyndola once more.

Thalo picked up the knife and went in behind her.

That night, Thalo was visited by another foul dream. He was sitting once more at the head of the foxes' dinner table, laid out in Klagennas, the river flowing about his ankles. In the middle of the table lay the glittering platter, though it lay empty. And there, opposite him, the old fox sat alone.

'Where are your friends?' said Thalo.

The old fox did not stir. Then Thalo saw them. They were all dead, strewn upon the riverbanks, their blood seeping into the water.

‘What happened?’

The old fox arose, his belly cut itself open, and out crawled Asfoa.

‘Mother?’

Asfoa crawled along the table, reaching out for Thalo.

‘Mother?’

He took her hand, and she pulled him up and into her arms.

‘Mother?’

She laid him back upon the platter, her hand resting gently upon his chest.

‘Mother?’

Then the water rose, and rose, and rose. Thalo tried to sit up, but Asfoa kept her hand upon his chest, easing him back down. And as the water washed over him, he drank it in, let it fill his lungs, and with his mother smiling softly above him, he awoke.

‘Mother?’ he said.

‘No,’ said Omvedho. ‘I am Omvedho, and I am trying to sleep.’

As he often did in such circumstances, Thalo went back outside to cool off. Yet as he came out into the night, he spotted Ewva, the king’s bright white mare, drinking from the river down the hill. Her name was fitting, for the lustre of her coat was so radiant that it was as if she glowed in the moonlight. Beside her was a pair of men, and they seemed to be getting a very good look at her. Thalo watched them for a while, hidden behind a woodstore, until they left.

‘They will surely return,’ he said to himself, ‘and with how many more?’

Thalo stole back into the house, awoke Koyndola, and brought her outside.

‘Just now,’ he said, ‘I spotted a pair of men down by the river. They were paying very close attention to your horse, a horse that lights the darkness. You are being hunted, king, and they know where you are.’

‘Oh dear,’ said the king.

‘Do not despair. Let me take you to Pearmol. It is not far from here.’

‘You would have me place my trust in Karvalo?’ The king shook her head. ‘No. I would sooner trust a dog not to eat its dinner.’

‘Then place your trust in me. I know him. I was his man, his son-in-law. Make him a better offer than your hunters, and he will help you.’

‘And why should I trust you?’

‘You said it yourself. I started this war, and I will end it.’

The king considered this proposition for a little while, until she said, ‘We should leave at once.’

‘It is no good at riding at night. We can leave at dawn and be there before noon. No harm will befall you, king. I will see to that.’

The king agreed to his plan and went back inside to get whatever sleep she could before the coming day. Thalo, however, stayed outside, sitting quietly beneath the moon. He would have time to rest soon enough.

In the morning, when the foredawn twilight yet hung upon the land, Thalo gathered his things, prepared Ondayo for riding, and Ewva likewise, and then he sat down outside.

‘Not long now,’ he said. ‘We are nearly done.’

It then happened that he saw from the corner of his eye a flash of black and silver.

‘No,’ he said. He took a deep breath. ‘We are nearly done.’

He closed his eyes, and Knale did not appear.

Now Thalo went inside and woke the king. They crept out of the house together, but the sun was nearly up, and the household was stirring. Yonnago saw them sneaking out, and he followed them.

‘Tell me,’ he said, ‘just where are you two going?’

‘We must be off,’ said Koynbola.

‘Why so early? Come and have something to eat first.’

‘You are a most generous host, but I really must be on my way.’

‘Fair enough, I suppose.’ Yonnago turned to Thalo and raised an eyebrow. ‘What about you?’

Thalo said, ‘I am going with her.’

‘Is that so? I never thought you a man so minded.’

‘Think whatever you will. We are leaving.’

‘And without so much as a parting word?’

Thalo’s face remained unmoving as he said, ‘These are those. Do not await me, Yonnago.’

Yonnago recognised then that same single-minded purpose he had seen in Thalo when he left him awaiting Fowdho in the smithy all those years ago. He smiled weakly and said, ‘Good luck, lad.’

Thalo turned away from him. ‘I have all the luck I need in my name.’

Then he climbed atop Ondayo and rode away, and the king followed him. From Alvennawl, they went south-west, trying to keep their way to Pearmol as direct as possible. They moved swiftly at first, but the king soon heard the drumming of a great many hooves coming from the north.

‘We must go faster,’ she said.

‘No,’ said Thalo. ‘A rushed rider is a runner, and runners are easily run down. Trust me, king. We are nearly there.’

So they went on, but the hooves behind them only grew louder and louder until, as they came to a valley called Oydawl, their hunters came into view. They numbered fifty or so, each armed and armoured, and at their head rode

Thrandeo himself, his cuirass glittering in the morning sun, his blue-crested helmet a beacon.

‘There he is,’ said Thalo, ‘We are close now.’

‘Then we should keep it up,’ said the king.

‘But not close enough. They will reach us before we reach Pearmol.’

‘Can your horse go no faster?’

‘He is no young colt.’ Down in the valley, Thalo brought Ondayo to a halt.

‘If I ride him any harder, I will be riding him to his death.’

‘Even so, this is no time for stopping. We must ride on!’

‘No.’ Thalo climbed down from Ondayo’s back. ‘You go ahead. Follow the river to the first ford you find, and then go south. I will wait here to delay them.’

‘Did you see the man at the front? That is Thrandeo, the Earl of Noynavol. Do you understand who he is? He is a ruthless man, utterly devoid of scruples.’

‘And I am Thalo Thennelo.’

‘He will kill you nonetheless.’

‘And my life is my own. I have made my choice. You must make yours. If you want to live, ride. Ride hard, and they will not reach you. The longer I hold them here, the better your chances become.’

‘I will not allow it. Too many people have died on my account. No more.’

‘Whether you will allow it or not, I am staying here. If I should die today, let me die.’ Thalo shooed Ondayo away. ‘My boy, get out of here. This will soon be a place of battle.’

‘I am your king,’ said the king, ‘and you will heed me.’

But Thalo did not. He drew his sword, laid it flat upon the floor, and sat before it. The king knew then that he would not be swayed.

‘So be it,’ she said. ‘May fate favour you.’

Then she set off, following the river eastwards to the nearest ford.

And as she galloped away, Thalo whispered to himself, ‘Fate has already forsaken me.’

It was only a short while later that Thrandeo wheeled his troop down into the valley. He spotted Thalo kneeling cross-legged on the floor, rode up to him, and said, ‘You there! Not long ago, we saw two riders come down here. One was a young woman atop a bright white horse. Where did she go?’

Thalo said, ‘I did not see her.’

‘You saw her. Only a blind man could have missed such a steed.’

‘Perhaps, then, I am blind.’

‘With a sword for a seeing stick?’ Thrandeo brought forth his spear. ‘Know this: I am Thrandeo, Overlord of Norlonn. Tell me your name, waif, that I may slay you with dignity and be on my way.’

‘I am Thalo.’

As Thalo said this, Thrandeo's spear wavered ever so slightly. 'You are the Thalo man? Thalo Thennelo? The murderer?'

'I am.'

Thrandeo had heard so much about Thalo—and so much from Meola, the first widow he made—that he had formed in his mind a clear picture of the man behind it all, tall and broad, a true warrior. To finally have that fellow in his sight should have been a splendid thing, but the man before him was short, and gaunt, and altogether disappointing.

'Just how much of it true?' he said.

Thalo said, 'As much as you wish to believe.'

'And I am loath to believe anything at all. The king was not riding alone. I suppose that was you beside her, and yet you seem to have forgotten it. No, I see you for what you are, Thalo Thennelo, wretched rook of a man. The king has dumped you here to delay me, but I will not be stayed. I will have my vengeance.'

'The king is beyond your reach now, but that is beside the point. I am not here for her sake.' Thalo picked up his sword and arose, pointing the blade at Thrandeo. 'I am here for you. Fate has brought us two together. Tell me, what will come of it?'

Thrandeo lowered his spear and said, 'You would fight me?'

'If only you dare to meet me.'

Thrandeo considered this challenge. His followers all told him to refuse, to do him in and move along, but this was Thalo Thennelo. Undergrown though he may have been, such a name could not have been bestowed without cause.

'Where has the king gone?' he said.

'To Pearmol,' said Thalo. 'She will soon be a guest in Karvalo's hall.'

With a smile, Thrandeo said, 'Fate is fickle indeed.'

Then he cast his spear aside and leapt off his horse. His son, Osfero-with-the-fine-feet, came forth to dissuade him at once.

'What about the king?' said Osfero.

'I have bested two already,' said Thrandeo. 'If I must wait for the third, I will wait.'

'Here, we could ride on while you sort this fellow out.'

'No. The king will die by my hand alone, but not today.'

Thrandeo's followers offered many further objections.

'This is a waste of time,' said one. 'He will be no match for you.'

'The king's life is at stake,' said another. 'She may have taken a tumble in her haste and be easy pickings.'

'Stick him now,' said a third, 'and save yourself the disappointment of an easy victory.'

Thrandeo silenced them all. ‘My friends, whenever have I led you astray? Never. I ask that you trust me once more, as ever you have. Thalo the murderer will be brought to justice, however disappointing it may be.’

Then his thanes relented. They stayed on the north side of the river while Thalo and Thrandeo waded across to the south bank, where they agreed the terms of their duel. They would fight to the death, and each would use a sword alone, no shields, no spears, no armour—there would be only two men, two swords, and one victor.

‘One of us shall live,’ said Thalo, ‘one of us shall die, and fate alone shall be the arbiter.’

Once they had taken their positions, Osfero came up to the opposite bank to bear witness. ‘Are you ready?’

They both said they were, and then Thrandeo made the first boast.

‘Thalo,’ he said. ‘Thalo Thennelo. I have heard much about you, the things you have done, the foes you have slain. You will be long remembered for your deeds, but one man alone will live longer in history than you. He will be your killer, and his name is Thrandeo, the Earl of Noynavol, Overlord of Norlonn, and the foremost man of our age. Such is the will of almighty fate.’

Thalo’s gaze flitted across the river to Thrandeo’s thanes, all gathered to watch their lord slay his foe. When Thrandeo had finished his boast, Thalo said simply, ‘You cannot harm me.’

‘We shall see,’ said Thrandeo, and he nodded to Osfero.

‘Then the time is upon us,’ said Osfero. ‘Two shall become one.’

At that, Osfero turned around, and the fight began. Thrandeo spared not a moment and leapt forth, but Thalo avoided the blow. They exchanged further strokes, each one well considered, until Thalo caught Thrandeo’s leg with his sword and knocked him off balance. Before Thrandeo could regain his footing, Thalo stabbed into his chest, and he cried out.

‘I am slain,’ he said, ‘but my glory will never die!’

Then he died, and Thalo was the victor.

Upon hearing his father’s dying cry, Osfero turned back around to see Thalo glaring at him across the river. For a moment, he stood transfixed by the sight of his mighty father, the foremost man of the age, dead and bloodied on the riverbank.

‘Avenge him,’ said Thalo.

But Osfero did not move.

Thalo stepped towards him, into the river, and called out to his companions, all similarly stricken by Thrandeo’s death. ‘Avenge him!’

Still, no one moved.

‘Will none of you dare strike me?’ Thalo stumbled through the river and

back onto the north bank. 'Come! Avenge your lord!'

Finally, Osfero said, 'You agreed the terms, and you won. Such is the will of almighty fate.'

'No,' said Thalo.

Then he gripped his sword in his hand, death-drenched Sleme, and with a single frenzied blow, he parted Osfero's head from his shoulders. Only then did Thrandeo's thanes come to their senses. They let up the cry of vengeance and charged forth, striking at Thalo with swords and spears and axes, tearing through his flesh and biting at his bones. He did not resist. His sword fell to the floor, and he staggered sorely wounded back into the river, his blood mingling with the water. And as it washed over him, he thought he saw her, Asfoa, above him on the riverbank.

'Mother?' he said.

But her hair was of silver, and her eyes were of gold.

'Mother?'

Then he died at last.

LIV

The Battle of Oydnewl

The story will now dwell upon Essero. He had been summoned to an assembly of his father's stewards—of whom he was the chiefest—to determine the way forward now that the king's war in the north seemed to be settled. While he was there, it happened that he went one morning to the cemetery to visit his dear brother, beneath his burial mound. Mounted atop it sat dragon-Bleygo's skull, picked, polished, and painted with patterns of yellow and green.

'Awldano,' said Essero, 'I was ever the hardier of us two, but while you lie at peace, I remain utterly shaken, my brother dead, my oath unfulfilled. What glory is to be found in life when fairer men lie dead?'

Then he fell to his knees and wept.

Only a little while later, a woman named Lasbela appeared. She was one of Essero's junior thanes, and she told him he must make haste back to Pearmol.

'Your father calls for you,' she said. 'The king has come!'

Essero rushed back to Pearmol at once, and there he found the king, thin and weary, sitting opposite Karvalo in the small fire room.

'Sit,' said Karvalo. 'There is much to discuss.'

Essero sat down and said, 'Say, what brings the king here? And alone?'

The king turned her eyes to the fire and said, 'They are all dead.'

Karvalo shushed her. 'It would now seem that the king's war is, in fact, far from settled. She has told me of an attack at Bealnew, and one which she alone survived.' Karvalo paused to gauge the king's reaction, but she offered none, only a blank stare fixed upon the flames. 'Her flight brought her here, but her hunters have followed her south of Fegennas and into my domain. I will not tolerate these upstart northerners bringing war into my land. They must be met.'

The king said, 'They already have been.'

'Say more,' said Essero.

The king lifted her head. 'One man stands against them—Thalo Thennelo. He brought me here, or most of the way, but he stopped at Oydnewl to delay

them. I daresay he is already dead, and dead on my account.'

Karvalo could not help but grin as he said, 'How fateful it would be.'

But Essero stood up, his hand on the hilt of his sword. 'Say nothing more. Say nothing more! Wait for me, my oath-brother!'

Then he swept out of the room, calling up his thanes as he went, and they each answered. They picked up their weapons, donned only what armour they had within reach, and ran to their horses to ride behind their horn-helmed lord, shimmering in his battle dress.

'Oy-oy!' he said. 'Oy-oy and out!'

So Essero led his troop away. They came to Oydrawl soon enough, crested the ridge at the top of the valley, and there they spotted Thrandeo's thanes all huddled together, arguing about what they ought to do. Nearby, two bodies were slung over the backs of two horses. They were Thrandeo and Osfero. Then Essero saw a third body lying dead in the river, and that was Thalo.

'So it is true,' he said. 'Of threefold avengers, one alone yet lives.' His countenance turned grim, and he firmed his spear in his fist. 'I will uphold my oath. I must!'

Then he raised his spear aloft, and with an almighty roar, he led his troop thundering down the slope.

'With me!' he said. 'With me! Let each one die!'

Thrandeo's companions saw then their deaths speeding towards them. The boldest among them seized their weapons to fight, but most turned at once for their horses. That proved to be futile, however, for their steeds had been all the quicker to flee, so great was the deadly fervour within Essero's breast, so dread his roar. Only a fortunate few had been close enough to leap into a saddle and take flight before the horses bolted. The rest were slain as Essero came crashing against them, laying into them with soaring spear and twirling sword, his heart as hot as the midday sun, his blood burning beneath his skin. That man of fire! That man of flame!

When the battle was done and his fellows had begun plundering their foes, Essero rode his horse along the river, whooping for the victory. It was reckoned that only four of Thrandeo's thanes escaped, while Essero's side suffered nary a wounding, and no deaths at all.

'That is,' said Essero, 'but one.'

He halted his horse near Thalo's body, waded into the river, and pulled him out of the water, laying him in the grass on the bank.

'Consider yourself avenged,' he said, and he kissed Thalo's forehead. 'My oath is fulfilled, but alas that it should be so.'

It then happened, as Essero arose and stepped away, that Ondayo emerged, Thalo's oldest companion. Though he had been shooed away, he dared not stray

far from his beloved friend. He nosed gently at Thalo's face, but he did not stir. He nudged him again, and again, and then he whinnied.

Essero bowed his head and said, 'Noble steed, how my heart aches for you. I would offer you what comfort I could, but I fear that if you could understand my words, they would nonetheless fall utterly short. Come, there is nothing to be done but to make away. Let us be off.'

Then Essero slung Thalo's body over Ondayo's back, and they returned to Pearmol.

Upon his return, Essero went straight into the hall, Thalo's body in his arms, and told Karvalo what had happened at Oydawl. He spoke of the scene he had found there, of the slaughter of his foes, and of the booty he had taken from them, but Karvalo heard every word with a mind unmoving.

'Essero,' he said, 'you have proven your worth in war, but your honour may yet be squandered. In your hands you hold the body of a murderer, an outlaw. Why have you brought it into my house?'

Essero said, 'For burial, of course. It would not be fitting to put his grave anywhere but beside Awldano's.'

'No. I will not allow his wretched corpse to sully the graves of my friends and ancestors, your kinsfolk.'

'Then tell me, what of Awldano? Does he not deserve to lie beside the man he loved?'

Karvalo scoffed. 'I will not be governed by the desires of the dead, and least of all those whose desires killed them.'

Essero scoffed in turn as he said, 'And yet you would be governed by the pettiest of your grievances, grievances which would lead you to dishonour your son, and likewise yourself. That is not the father I knew. Whatever has become of him?'

Karvalo did not much appreciate that sort of talk. He arose, and without a word he came down from the platform and stood face-to-face with Essero, his son, his only equal in stature and pride alike. He put his hand on his cheek, and in a low, solemn voice he said, 'So be it. Honour the undeserving if you wish, but I will have no part in it. This will, in time, be your house to hold, so let it be your burden to bear when it crumbles, rotted from the ground up by the taint in the earth, when your crops wither and die, and famine prevails. Let it be your burden when Pearmol falls, and our line is brought to ruin.'

Then Karvalo stepped away and left the room.

Essero thought little of Karvalo's warning, an old man with an old grudge. He sent a gang of men off to the cemetery to build a pyre, and then he found a spot to lay Thalo's body and asked Ormana if she wished to prepare it.

'Ormana,' he said, 'I think it would be most fitting for you to do this.'

But Ormana refused, saying only, ‘That would be too much for me.’

‘Are you quite sure? You two were ever very close.’

Ormana said again, ‘That would be too much for me,’ and then she walked away.

No one else wanted to take up that task, and so it fell to Essero. He stripped Thalo of his clothes, washed his skin, and decked him in what little finery he yet had. But as he did this, he took to rifling through Thalo’s belt-bag, in which he found a very peculiar thing, an acorn of gold.

‘Whatever is this?’ he said to himself. He held it up to the window, and it was as if the sunlight set it aflame, so radiant was its sheen. ‘Queer men hold queer things, I suppose.’

Then he put the acorn in his belt-bag, covered Thalo’s body with a modest funerary cloth, and sat down to oversee the visits. No one came. Indeed, the only visitor at all was young Lasbela, coming late in the afternoon to tell Essero that the pyre was ready. They took him over to the cemetery at once, although the procession was similarly sparse. Essero walked at the front, singing dirges as he went, and behind him was Thalo upon a board borne by four of his thanes. Then there was the king.

‘I owe this man my life,’ she had said, ‘as I do many others. It is only fitting that I should honour his death.’

Behind the king were the rest of Essero’s thanes, who had come only at their lord’s bidding, and at the back, her hand in Yondea’s, was Ormana. She had initially refused to come.

‘I could not bear it,’ she had said. ‘I could not bear to look into that fire yet again, to see all the years burn and crumble as if they had never passed at all, as if it had all been for nothing—every smile, every tear, every pain pointless. All is lost in the flames.’

But Yondea had said in reply, ‘Look into the fire. See its light, feel its heat, and know that you live on. What has been has been, but you live on.’

Then she spoke this verse:

‘As joy will ever pass to strife,
so death will ever yield new life.’

‘Or so they say.’

Thus, Ormana agreed to join the procession, although she left her twin sons at home—they may yet have been spared their father’s legacy.

Karvalo also stayed at home, as did Seyglena, so when the procession came to the shrine in the middle of the cemetery, no one was sure who was to perform the rites.

‘Sedweo,’ said Essero, ‘you know words. You do it.’

‘Gladly,’ said Sedweo, and he hopped up onto the dais. He tossed some soil and some water onto Thalo’s body, and then, with a big old grin on his face, he spoke these verses:

‘It’s by my count (though I can’t count)
that this bloke’s glories all amount
to sixty-odd, or maybe more,
or maybe less. I can’t be sure.

‘In any case, I’d wager yet
that this bloke’s glories as one set
fall nonetheless so very short
of each of those my lord has wrought.

‘As short, I’d say, as his full height
would fall beside my lord’s full might;
as short, I’d say, as his stick-sword
would fall beside my lord’s broad board.

‘My point, I’ll say, should be quite plain:
my lord’s the one who’s not yet slain.
Though both might keep the ravens fed,
my lord’s the one who’s not yet dead.’

Essero was pleased with this praise, ill-timed though it was, and dismissed Sedweo before the pyre was set alight. All watched on as the flames rose around Thalo, and the fire consumed him. That was the time for weeping, but no one wept for him. Indeed, one tear alone fell that evening, rolling down Ormana’s cheek as she turned her gaze away from the pyre.

‘The smoke is thick,’ she said, ‘and harsh in the eye.’

Yondea wiped her tear away. ‘What has been has been, but you live on.’

Once the fire had burnt out, Essero oversaw the gathering of the bones and any surviving finery, and this was all put in a funerary urn. Last of all, he took out Thalo’s silver ring, kissed it, and added it to the urn.

Being the husband of a lord, Thalo was to be buried beneath a mound beside Awdano’s. Essero laid the urn amid the other grave goods, though these were few—there lay his mail coat, a shield and a spear, Asfoa’s old helmet, and also Ondayo’s riding gear. A wide basket was placed over the furnishings, just big enough to cover everything, and that would be the mound.

Essero threw on the first fistful of soil and said, ‘Let not this loss be lasting.’

Thus was Thalo truly dead, but there would be no feast in his honour, no mirth, no music, only a man beneath a mound built in the night. A man had

died, and the day went on.

That evening, after dinner, Essero came to Ormana as she sat alone. In his left hand he held Thalo's golden acorn, and in his right his sword, splendid Sleme—it was meant to have been buried with him, but Essero had forgotten to bring it to the cemetery. Instead, he offered them both to Ormana.

'You ought to have something,' he said. 'Something by which to remember your friend.'

Ormana cast a grim eye upon the sword, though her gaze was soon drawn past it to the acorn. She had never seen such a thing before, but the very moment she laid her eyes upon it, a certain dread seemed to well within her.

'No,' she said. 'I have enough to remember already.'

'Come,' said Essero, 'your heart may yet hurt, your grief profound, but in due course, you will come to be glad for whatever token you might have. Let these be those.'

Ormana wanted neither sword nor seed, but neither was she keen to make a fuss of it. She took the acorn from Essero's hand, the smaller of his gifts, and bade him keep the sword himself.

'You were his sworn brother,' she said, 'and I will have no use for it.'

Then Essero was satisfied. He bowed his head and left the room.

Ormana kept the acorn for a little while thereafter, though she did so with much uncertainty. Whenever she looked upon it, it seemed to fill her with awe, or fear, or shame, as if it exuded some great malice, some ancient evil, as if a single touch would invite some sickness to seep into her skin, her bones, her mind. Even so, it would not be fitting, she thought, to simply cast it aside, so enchanting was its lustre, so marvellous its gilded glint.

So it was that Ormana found herself beside Thalo's burial mound only a few days later, a spade in her hands. She dug a small hole nearby, planted the acorn, and then she said:

'As joy will ever pass to strife,
so death will ever yield new life.'

LV

The Price of Peace

The king stayed at Pearmol for only two nights. Karvalo agreed to provide an escort, but of course, he named his price. His demands were threefold. Firstly, his sister, Erlawga, who had ever been his representative in the king's council, was to be granted the chancellery. Secondly, Rodholo, the Steward of Oyfnawl, was to be granted a standing writ, and the king was to support his admission to the rede. Thirdly, the treaty by which the king's mother had been granted her earldom was to be repealed, the earldom thusly abolished, and Yordhoa herself exiled.

'The alternative,' said Karvalo, 'is for your mother to learn that her dearest daughter was slain in the north, just like her father.'

Though the king was reluctant to agree to this, she was all the more reluctant to die. She said, 'My mother will not yield her earldom willingly, but I will see what I can do.'

She and Karvalo fastened their agreement with an oath, and then he sent her on her way.

Upon the king's return to Syorbak, she told her mother all about her ordeal. She spoke of the attack at Bealnew, of her flight and Thalo's valour, and then of the help Karvalo had granted her.

'And although I am most grateful for what he has done for me,' she said, 'it was not done freely.'

Then she recounted Karvalo's demands, but with every word she spoke, Yordhoa's face grew ever grimmer, until she could bear not a word more, until she seized her daughter, her eyes alight, and said, 'Tell me you refused him! Tell me that much!'

'I did not,' said the king. 'Indeed, I swore by oath to uphold this agreement.'

Yordhoa's grip tightened as she said, 'You owe me everything, your lot, your life, and this is how you would repay me? What sort of daughter would swear such an oath? I am your mother!'

'And I am your daughter.' The king took Yordhoa in her arms. 'It pleases

me none, but I cannot let my oath be broken. For the sake of my kingdom—the kingdom you gave me—I bid you do as I ask and leave of your own accord, that I need not force you.’

But Yordhoa shook her away. ‘Force me.’

Then she left the room.

Yordhoa went home to Glannas, leaving the king in quite the quandary. She gave the matter much thought, and after a little while, she visited a seer who lived in a shrine near Ewgsyog, in the western reaches of her kingdom. She asked the seer about the fastness of her oath.

‘Tell me,’ she said, ‘how might I void it?’

‘Do not ask me,’ said the seer, ‘but the man himself. You made this oath by mutual consent, and only by mutual consent can it be unmade. That, or you can die.’

‘What if he died?’

‘Your oath would then be broken, but not undone. He has done for you, so you must do for him, lest you be spurned by fate.’

That would be no good at all. The king resolved to summon Karvalo and Yordhoa and arbitrate a meeting between them, each alike in stubbornness.

‘But also shrewdness,’ said the king, ‘or so I hope.’

They met at Syorbak near the end of the summer. The discussion was long and fruitless, Yordhoa refusing Karvalo’s demands, and Karvalo refusing to alter them. Then, as the evening approached, Karvalo sat back in his chair, a terrible grin upon his face.

‘Here,’ he said, ‘let me make a new proposal. You can keep your earldom, Yordhoa, but you must forsake your daughter instead and sever all bonds of kinship between you.’

The king arose in protest, but Yordhoa shushed her before she could speak. With her eyes locked unmoving upon her daughter’s, she said, ‘It is done.’

‘O Mother,’ said the king.

‘I am your mother no more.’

The king sat down without a word, holding back her tears.

Karvalo chuckled, saying, ‘The matter of the chancellery still remains.’

‘That is no longer my concern,’ said Yordhoa. ‘I suggest you take it up with the chancellor herself.’

Then she left the room, and the king’s restraint went with her. Her sorrows all flooded forth at once, and she fell weeping onto the table.

‘Grow up,’ said Karvalo. ‘We will reconvene tomorrow, when you will be of nobler bearing.’

And that they did. The next day, the king met with Karvalo once more, his sister, Erlawga, and Foldea the Chancellor, whom Erlawga hoped to replace.

That discussion was no less tiresome than that of the previous day, and it ended with Foldea refusing to relinquish the chancellery. Even so, Karvalo considered his trip to Syorbak to have been a great success, for the king had also agreed to grant him a second seat in her council, and to waive Rodholo's presentation fee when the time for that came.

'And yet,' he said to himself, 'her oath remains unfulfilled. But no matter. Things can be done.'



Let us return once more to the earls of the north. Broadly, they did not much appreciate Thrandeo's massacre at Bealnew.

'The king will surely be aggrieved by this,' said Seybeo, chairing a meeting of his peers at his home at Mornawl, 'and our settlement is thusly jeopardised, our long-sought peace delayed. The only consolation I can find is that the man himself has paid dearly for his treachery.'

'What do you mean by that?' said Godlawga, the Earl of Rogavol. She was always the last to know.

Seybeo invited Ayrmodho to speak, and he said, 'Thrandeo is dead. A pair of his fellows came to me at Bealnew, and with them they brought his body, and that of his eldest son.'

'Osfero,' said Seybeo. 'I have met him.'

'I sent them home for burial. They should be ashes in the earth by now.'

'Then that must be why you are here,' said Godlawga, and she pointed to the only person in the room she did not recognise. She was a woman called Asredha, and she had been elected to the Earldom of Noynavol in the weeks since Thrandeo's burial.

'That is why I am here,' said Asredha.

'And that is why I have summoned you here today,' said Seybeo. 'We must assume the king will seek to strike back, and we must therefore be as one and elect from among ourselves a new overlord to see these dire days through.'

The earls all agreed to that, and two candidates came forth—Seybeo and Ayrmodho. They each stood before their peers and made their pleas, and when the voting was done, Ayrmodho was backed by Balkena, the Earl of Fawnavol, and Frewdha, the Earl of Syagavol. Everyone else supported Seybeo, and he was thusly elected.

'Oy-oy!' he said. 'You have chosen well.'

'As well as a mole flies,' said Ayrmodho, 'or a swift burrows.'

Seybeo took the earls' oaths later that day. They each came up in turn, until only Ayrmodho remained. He did not arise. Seybeo went to him, put his hand

on his back, and kissed his cheek.

‘Make me an oath,’ he said, ‘or make me a foe.’

‘Then we are foes,’ said Ayrmodho, and he left the room and returned to Bealnew.

That proved to be very ill-judged. Seybeo arranged to meet the king once more to renegotiate, and to his surprise, she agreed to this. They met at Openn, and after several days of discussion, they came to a new agreement. The king was to relinquish her claim to kingship over Norlonn, and the claims of all her descendants. In exchange for this, the skulls of her predecessors, Arkelo and Arneo, her father and her uncle, would be returned from Kyalannes, where they yet hung above the earl’s door. Thrandeo would be posthumously outlawed, and his daughter, Throda, would be betrothed to the king’s younger brother, Olvero. Lastly, the king would retain the right to claim kingship over Eylavol.

‘If Ayrmodho will not bow to me,’ said Seybeo, ‘he is welcome to bow to you, if you can make him.’

He and the king made an oath to this effect, and they fastened it with treaties signed in red. Then they parted ways.

The king brought her treaty to Syorbak to be ratified by her council, but before she could present it, she was intercepted by Erlawga, Karvalo’s sister, and Thorreda, whom he had chosen to be his second councillor.

‘King,’ said Erlawga, ‘I have heard about this treaty you signed with the earl. Hold on to it for now.’

‘Why?’ said the king. ‘It would be all the better to get it sorted sooner.’

‘So you would think,’ said Thorreda, ‘but that is not the case. From what I hear, you have struck a rather poor deal. You would be wise to let it sit for a while, lest you make a fool of yourself and imperil your kingship.’

‘I think you have misheard. I have secured better terms than I had before, though it cost a great many of my thanes, and others besides.’

‘That may be so,’ said Erlawga, ‘but it would nonetheless be more fruitful to let us fully deliberate before the treaty is presented.’

The king remained sceptical, suspecting they were conniving on Karvalo’s behalf, but she was yet indebted to him. She dared not risk incurring the wrath of fate.

‘I suppose so,’ she said. ‘We can wait a while.’

Then Erlawga and Thorreda bowed in unison, and they moved along.

In the following days, Karvalo sent a woman named Owfdea to Sralof, one of his steward towns. Owfdea was his niece, being the daughter of Erlawga and her late husband, Knaffeno. Knaffeno’s cousin was a woman named Tholmana, and she was the Steward of Sralof. She was also Karvalo’s sister-in-law, being the half-sister of Seyglena, his wife, but most importantly, Tholmana’s wife

was none other than Foldea the Chancellor.

Owfdea was only at Sralof for a few days before Tholmana suddenly died. Her death was very unexpected, and no one could determine any cause beyond simple misfortune. Keen to swiftly appoint her successor, Karvalo arrived the next day and granted it to Owfdea. He sat her before the household and said, 'If anyone would dare oppose my appointment, stand up and say so.'

One woman alone stood up. She said, 'Would it not be more fitting for the stewardship to pass to her wife?'

'Her widow,' said Karvalo, 'cannot assume the stewardship on account of her chancellorship. Read the law, if you doubt me.'

That settled that. Tholmana was burned and buried the same day, whereafter Owfdea took control of Sralof and Karvalo went home, but not before he sent a rider racing off to Syorbak with word of the death of the chancellor's wife.

Upon receiving this news, Foldea turned at once to tears and hastened away to Sralof. There she found her wife dead and buried, her inheritance stolen.

'Thief!' she said to Owfdea in the hall. 'Have you no shame, sitting there upon your stolen seat?'

'Nothing in this house has been stolen,' said Owfdea, 'but the peace and quiet, and that was stolen by you. Get out of here, before I get you out.'

Foldea spat on the floor and made her way to Pearmol. She came before Karvalo, and she told him what had happened at Sralof.

'Your wretched niece,' she said, 'has swiped my inheritance from me. Lord of Pearmol, I bid you make this right!'

'There is no such need,' said Karvalo. 'The stewardship is mine to grant, and I granted it to her. I will say no more about it.'

Foldea took a moment to consider her words, but she ended up saying none as she fell weeping to her knees.

'Enough of this,' said Karvalo. 'Get out of here, before I get you out.'

Then he had her hustled out of the hall and tossed down the steps.

Finally, Foldea returned to Syorbak, but when she came to the hall, she was stopped by the king, Erlawga beside her. After being reminded of her oath, the king said, 'Foldea, you have been away awhile. During your absence, I had immediate need of my council, but my chancellor was nowhere to be found. I had to choose a new one. I hope you understand.'

'No,' said Foldea. 'Tell me what happened.'

At Erlawga's urging, the king had summoned the royal council to present her treaty, but she did so before she knew Foldea was away. The treaty could not be ratified without the chancellor present, and so she was forced to make a new appointment to ensure its ratification. Of course, Erlawga would not let Foldea know about that.

‘There is no need,’ she said. ‘After all, you are no longer the chancellor.’

Foldea sighed. ‘My wife is dead.’

Erlawga sighed in kind. ‘We are all widows here. Get over yourself.’

‘They buried her without me. Do you understand? They took her from me! You will not take this!’

Then Foldea attacked Erlawga, but they exchanged only a few blows before the king separated them.

‘My friends,’ she said, ‘let us be civil.’

‘What civility,’ said Foldea, ‘is there in you reavers, you looters who would plunder my heart, my life, for all you can take. Take it all! Take my life!’

Erlawga said, ‘There is nothing left worth taking. Get out of here, before I get you out.’

So Foldea left Syorbak utterly destitute. The king then affirmed Erlawga’s appointment to the chancellery, and her oath was nearly fulfilled.

With nowhere else to go, Foldea made her way to Fessos to visit her father and fell weeping upon his shoulder. ‘Father! All is lost!’

‘What is it this time?’ said Rago.

‘They have taken everything from me—everything!’

‘And yet you still draw breath. All is not lost. If they have wronged you, do something about it. Or you can put it behind you and go on. There is no shame in that.’ He kissed her forehead. ‘But whatever you do, my girl, do not give up. You are my daughter, Foldea. You lot are stronger than that.’

Foldea wiped her tears away and said, ‘And what of Rolkwea, yet suckling at the king’s teat?’

Rolkwea was Foldea’s sister. Being the Reeve of Eylavol (albeit in name alone), she remained a stalwart ally of the king, despite Foldea’s mistreatment.

Rago said, ‘We each do what we must to make our way in the world. There are sourer teats to suckle than the king’s.’

‘And there are many far sweeter,’ said Foldea. ‘I will make this right.’

Rago loosed a tear. ‘Foldea, you have ever been stout of heart. I will trust in your judgement. If this is the path you will walk, walk it proudly.’

Then he bowed his head, and Foldea departed.

She made her way northwards to Bealnew, where she met with Ayrmodho and bade him take her in as his friend and ally.

‘Why should I do that?’ said Ayrmodho. ‘You and your lot are the king’s lackeys, no? I ought to do you in here and now.’

‘Stay your sword,’ said Foldea. ‘I have no cause to serve them. Not now.’

‘Say more.’

Foldea told Ayrmodho about her recent ordeal, and about her newfound hatred of the kingship, and he heard every word with an eager ear. That is, until

her tale turned to the matter of Seybeo's treaty.

'He has ceded my earldom?' said Ayrmodho. 'It was never his to cede!'

'Quite right,' said Foldea. 'He has thrown you to the wolves, and the wolves are hungry. The king is coming—she will not forgive your treachery—but I can help you. I know her well, and the order of her kingdom. Together, we can overcome this. There is just one thing I ask of you.'

'What is that?'

'Ordenn. Return my home to me.'

Ayrmodho bowed his head. 'I think we will do good work together.'

Then Foldea made her way to Ordenn. Since taking the earldom, Ayrmodho had granted the town's stewardship to Gaydeno to keep it in a pair of trusted hands. Gaydeno received Foldea with poise, and though he did so reluctantly, he surrendered the stewardship to her.

'My first loyalty,' he said, 'is to my lord. If this is his will, it will be done.'

Gaydeno left Ordenn and returned to Bealnew. Ayrmodho soon received a messenger from the king, inviting him to Syorbak to determine exactly how his domain would be brought into her kingdom.

'What say you?' said the messenger.

Ayrmodho said nothing. He had the messenger seized and his fingers cut off one by one, and only when he had lost them all was he killed. The fingers were boxed up, and Ayrmodho sent the messenger's companions home with a warning.

'Tell the king,' he said, 'that if she is to stick her fingers in my business, she had best be prepared to lose them.'

When they brought these words back to Syorbak, the king knew at once that her war was not yet done. She spent that winter considering her options, until she came into the company of her uncle, Tholreo, at Openn.

'Or rather,' said Tholreo, chortling, 'I suppose I am your former uncle now, what with the rift between mother and daughter.'

'Say no more of that,' said the king. 'The price of peace is steep, but it is a price I must pay. I will end this war and bring my kingdom to heel.'

To that end, Tholreo was to lead a new expedition into Eylavol. The king did not go herself, for that had not proven wise in recent years, but Tholreo did not begrudge her for it.

'Pay it no mind,' he said. 'I will do you proud, my little willow wand.'

So he mustered an army from his shire and set forth, but he did not get far. Ayrmodho met him at Fegenlog, and there they fought. The battle was long and hard, each side pressed tight upon the bridge, but in the end, Tholreo's line fell first, and Ayrmodho took the victory.

He did not get the chance to enjoy it, however, for so hot was the fire in his

blood that he led the pursuit with nary a thought in his head. As he rushed howling behind his foes, he was beset by a throng of Tholreo's stouter thanes, and they slew him. His body fell into the river, never to be recovered. Foldea came to support Ayrmodho, just as she had promised, but she too was slain in the fighting, and the battle was rendered indecisive.

In the days thereafter, the magnates of Eylavol convened to elect a new earl, and the man they chose was Eslayvo. Eager to avoid further violence, he agreed to meet the king at Ordenn, and with his magnates' support, he negotiated one final settlement. Bealnew and its surrounding lands would become a lordship full and proper, and he its first lord, with the rest of Eylavol becoming a shire beholden to the king's law. Both parties agreed to these terms, oaths were made, treaties were signed, and that was that.

It happened later that year that Rago died at Fessos, and he was granted the honour of a royal funeral. In attendance were Rolkwea and Alkeo, the only two of his sixfold children to survive him, the king and her mother, though they stayed well away from one another, and Erlawga the Chancellor. Eslayvo also came, and in his company was Throda, Thrandeo's daughter, who was to be brought into the royal household and betrothed to the king's brother, Olvero.

At the lawmoot in the following year, Eslayvo was admitted to the rede as the Lord of Bealnew, as was Rodholo as the Lord of Oyfnawl, finally fulfilling the king's oath to Karvalo. Her treaties were then fully ratified by the rede, and thus was peace, at last, restored.

LVI

Fate Takes Root

The last turn in this tale will bring us once more to Knale. In the time following Bleygo's murder, he took himself back up to Bradhambelow to gloat. There he found Gesdelo perched atop the mountain, as ever he was, scorning the world that had long since left him behind.

'Oy-oy!' said Knale, 'Gesdelo, sweetie, I have some news, and good news!'

'Begone,' said Gesdelo, 'I care nothing for your news, nor you.'

'No, no! You really ought to hear this, I think.' Knale took out the fragment of Bleygo's claw and cast it at Gesdelo's feet. 'I found someone.'

Gesdelo did not stir.

'Before you get upset,' said Knale, 'you should know that I had no part in it. Bleygo died by another fellow's hands. Mine are quite clean.'

Still, Gesdelo sat unmoving.

'Nothing? Have you forgotten him already?'

At last, Gesdelo bowed his head and said, 'I do not forget.'

'How lovely that must be.'

'There is nothing lovely in this life. It is a curse, the weight of time growing ever heavier upon my mind, the pain of life written inexorably in my memory. Would that I could forget.'

Knale giggled. 'Please. Such is the fate of all we long-lived folk.'

'Not this.' Gesdelo set his glare upon Knale, unyielding, his face grim, his eyes brimming with malice, or sorrow. 'How could you, a prancer, a frolicker, understand my anguish? You cannot, but you will. You will know what I did to my friend, my kinsman. You will suffer as I made him, and as he made me.'

Knale stepped back, but he would not be threatened. 'Try it, magic man. Your power is my power, only lesser.'

At that, Gesdelo managed a slim, withered smile. 'My power is your power indeed.'

Then he picked up his wizardly fingers and put a curse in Knale's flesh. At once, Knale lost control of himself. His elfin body crumpled into his foxen coat,

his skin burning as if his fur were aflame, his blood boiling, his bones searing. That was an agony unlike any he had known before, and he had known many.

Gesdelo caught him by his brush and held him aloft, squealing and writhing.

‘Feel it!’ he said. ‘Feel it all!’

Try as he might, Knale could not wriggle his way out of Gesdelo’s grasp, nor could he free himself from his fox fur.

‘Nor will you,’ said Gesdelo, ‘until I so choose, until you have earned it.’ He threw Knale onto the floor, sat down, and took up Bleygo’s claw, pawing at it. ‘Bring forth their blood. That of the killer, and that of all his kin. Do that, Knale, and I will release you.’

Knale scrambled back onto his feet. Though he had regained control of his body, the pain within had not lessened at all. His head low, he circled Gesdelo, growling, snarling, a fearsome beast, but Gesdelo remained stoic.

‘Put your fangs away,’ he said. ‘You will need no tooth, no claw, for you have done your work, spelt your curse. You need only wait as I have waited. Suffer as I have suffered, and I will release you. Otherwise, an ill fate awaits.’

Then Gesdelo spoke these words:

‘Let he who deals be dealt the worst;
twice-over doomed, twice-over cursed.’

With little choice but to do as Gesdelo bade, Knale left Bradhambelow with all haste, but there was nothing to be gained from that—the years would come no quicker. Even so, come they would, and they soon brought him eastwards to the cemetery near Pearmol, to the mound beneath which lay the remnants of his greatest foe, two years to the day since his death. Beside the burial mound stood a fine young oak, gold-leafed and glimmering, and next to that, a lone woman. That was Ormana. She knelt before the tree, brushed her hand through its leaves, watched the dying light of the sunset flicker across them, and then bowed her head.

‘Thalo,’ she said, ‘how did it come to this? Need it have? I loved you once. I wish I still could. Perhaps I might, had I been stronger, had I the strength to speak. Perhaps, then, you might yet live, and my pains would be all the lesser. But no. The pain I bear is not the pain of your passing, but the pain of your having lived. As the years fall away, I am relieved, free of your grip at last. It is a queer sort of gladness, gladness where there should be grief, and grief where there should be none. How wicked am I to be glad for your death, the death of my dearest friend? What manner of woman have I become? What manner of woman am I? How did it come to this?’

Ormana stayed beside the mound for a little while thereafter, watching the

sunset. Then, as the evening twilight fell upon the land, she arose at last, and out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw a glint amid the nearby trees, as if of gold, and the shuffling of a black shadow. She stopped for a moment, watching, waiting, but she saw nothing more.

‘The wind blows,’ she said, and she went on her way.

Here ends the tale of Thalo Thennelo.



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