

Mimir's Well

(Author's note: This is a very early story, but it was really the seed-point for my later writings in Germanic legend, particularly Rhinegold, in which so much of the imagery was structured around the images and names associated with particular runestaves in the Anglo-Saxon and Norse mnemonic poems.)

I get out of the little red rent-a-car at the foot of the hill. It towers above me, woody and forbidding, like a dead giant's barrow overgrown with dark fire-tinged trees against the intense blue sky of early Norwegian autumn. The pale northern sun gleams off the new crimson lacquer of the car as it pulls away, bearing my mother to lunch with her friends in Oslo. The clean air burns cold in my lungs. I walk towards the weathered wooden arrow that shows the beginning of the upward path. A bird's high, mocking twitter drifts out of the trees in front of me, luring me on. The corner of my hiking boot tears down a trefoil leaf, uncovering a late wild strawberry. I crouch, squatting like a caveman to pluck the fruit. It is surprisingly warm in my mouth, sweet and familiar as the nipple to an infant.

The metaphysical bookstore is filled with light, cold winter sun pouring through the huge glass windows that look across the busy city street to Fair Park. Dallas traffic drones faintly through the circling music of KOASIS' New Age programming. Metaphysical T-shirts and mugs share a table with crystals in here; books on Qabala, alchemy and hermetic wisdom rest next to manuals for healing through gemstones and biofeedback, *Megabrain* and the works of Dr. Leary. A giant three-sided glass case dominates the center of the room, displaying spheres of amethyst uplifted by elephants and lions, crystal-tipped wands of silver, and museum reproductions of Egyptian statues. The walls glow with multi-coloured pictures of dragons, roses, and rays of light. I have been in and out of this store, in and out of several stores like this: Constellation, Celebration, Terra Nova, Athanor. I have read the books, can chat intelligently about sun and rising signs, crystals, vibrations, and healing oils.

"Hey, what's happening?" Hank, the proto-rocker who works behind the bookstore's counter asks me. He flips his long, long tangle of brownish-blond curls back, tapping the skull-embossed toe of one black boot on the hard gray carpet. The bookstore's tiger-striped cat stalks his movement for a few paces, then lies down, looking up at him hopefully.

"Oh...not much. The usual three tons of shit from SMU. Standard hassles with mother, father, car, money. Generic young-adult disaffection, brand-name angst, and the obligatory and ubiquitous decline of the Western world. How 'bout you?"

"Just about the same. Got a gig tonight."

"Good deal. Where?"

"Rocker's. It's pretty good, but there's two - yeah, two - metal bands opening for us." And he's off, complaining about these bands using his group for money they couldn't get otherwise, exposure, etc. I listen with one ear, the other turned to the cycling surf-and-wind of KOASIS as I skim mentally over the titles on the shelves.

"Got anything good in?" I ask after a while. Hank rocks back on his boot-heels, his hard country face quiet with thought.

"I don't think any books've come in since you were here last. Few more crystals, a little tourmaline, a little smoky quartz...Yeah, and we've got a new wand and some runes."

"Runes?"

"Viking-type magic. You use them for meditation and divination. They're in that case over there."

Now I see the three rows of wood oblongs behind the polished glass. The plain brown wood seems out of place on the creamy silk among all the shining stones and stained-glass pyramids, like a deep, harsh horn ringing through the light harmony of tinkling bells and soft flutes. The

pieces are carved with dark straight line-shapes that look like letters, might almost be readable if I turned my head and stared out of the corner of my eye. They echo something familiar in the depths of my mind: dwarves, elves, Aragorn son of Arathorn and a broken sword with signs like these glimmering in the sunset light.

"Runes, yeah. Like in Tolkien?"

Hank shrugs. "To tell you the truth, I don't really know. There's a couple of books on them here, though - over there, on the top shelf with the shamanistic stuff."

My fingers touch the smooth glass as if to shatter it and release the half-known shapes from their silence.

"Looks like they're really speaking to you," Hank comments. "Want me to open the case so you can touch them?"

"...Yeah. Yeah, sure."

He unlocks the glass windows. I reach in to brush my fingertips over the runes, the brown wood silky under my touch. The little oblongs click together with a solid disturbing sound, like the first rattling of pebbles in a dark and silent cavern. I pick them up in both hands, pouring them from palm to palm. The wood is warm.

"How much?" I ask.

"Fifty."

"Urk."

"They're handmade from ashwood," Hank says. "There's a card that goes with them."

The card says something about the runes being hand-carved, etc., and greetings to the carver's fellow-traveller on the Óðinnic pathway. The name signed is Hrafn Gundarsson.

"Hrafn?" I say experimentally, picturing a big blond Viking holding each piece in stubby fingers, tongue (perhaps) poking out of the corner of his mouth as he concentrates on the delicate work.

"Hrafn," Hank corrects, pronouncing the *hr* as *kr*. It makes a harsh sound, like the cawing of a raven, and I see a narrow face framed by a dark blue hood, eyes black as charred walls. The image frightens me for a moment, but the runes feel right in my hands, as though I have found something that I'd forgotten losing - something that had slipped down behind a wall, or fallen into the wrong box during a move. I carry them over to the counter.

"What book does *Hrafn* recommend?" I ask lightly. Ever obliging, Hank brings me two, both by one Edred Thorsson. "Come on, these can't be real names."

Hank shrugs. "I don't know."

"Come on. The guy comes in here, you say, 'Hey, Hrafn, how ya doin'?' I mean, get real."

Hank only laughs, as if to say, you're not getting any of Hrafn's secrets out of me. I shove the books and runes across the glass-topped counter at him.

"Okay, okay already, I'll take them. What do you want, my blood?"

"Eighty-three fifty-two, please."

"How 'bout my blood?" I pay him anyway, watching nervously as he bags it all.

"Come back soon," Hank says as I push the glass door aside and walk out to the Parry Avenue traffic, runes clutched firmly in my hand.

The shadows of the great trees fall cold over me, my hiking boots crunching through pine needles. Behind me, the road is still; the path ahead rustles with a breeze passing softly through dead leaves. I follow the stone-marked curve around the side of the hill. The clarity of the air, the sharp amber scents of pine sap and birch, little brown mushrooms growing from the rotting side of a fallen log - all seem to ring with the echo of a note too deep to hear, a ringing that nevertheless runs through my blood. Blackberries trail over the stones, their fruit darkening from red to a rich deep purple. I pluck a few and eat them as I walk. One Thórrn runs deeply into my finger; I shake my hand, spattering a drop of blood onto the path. A bird calls sharply from the

depths of the forest. I think of the *landvættir*, the wights of the land, and wonder if my ancestors once sacrificed to them on this hill.

"I've come back," I say softly. There is no answer. I keep walking, following the long spiral path around and up.

"Óðinn," a man's deep voice says to me out of the howling wind. I start up, my hand grasping the silver-chased hilt of my dagger.

"Easy, easy," Thórkell laughs, holding up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I didn't mean to startle you, all right? I was just saying, you'd sacrificed to Óðinn the last time we went viking, and were you ready to drink another horn to him?"

"Sure." I hold out my mead-horn and Thórkell's wife Audhr brings her pitcher over. The firelight gilds her coiled blond braids, making them golden as when I'd first met her; I know sunlight would touch her hair with the gray stone of age now. Thórkell and Audhr are almost parents to me: after my father died on a raid with Thórkell, they took on the job of teaching me fighting and as much of manners as Audhr could beat into my head. Then I found my wolf-fylgja within me, the madness of berserkerang, and the teaching halted quietly, but they stayed my friends. This is rare enough to make me grateful; I know few other men and no other women who care to spend much time in the chancy company of a wolf-souled berserkr.

"Óðinn!" I cry, holding my horn up and splashing a few drops on the hard-packed earthen floor. Around me men echo the One-Eyed's name or, like Thórkell whose silver Hammer bounces on his wide chest as he raises his arm, declare themselves for the Thunderer. Audhr walks around pouring, and we drink again: Óðinn and Thórr for victory, Njördhr for fair skies and calm seas, Freyr for the good harvest, and once more for the disir and *landvættir* of this place, since we feast in their honour tonight.

The wind makes a noise outside like a cry of cold pain, rattling hail over the roof. A few men sign the Hammer over themselves. The dead walk on nights like this, draugar lifting their brown leathery bodies from their barrows and searching, and the disir have been known to choose their own sacrifices sometimes. We gave them two good cows and a bondsman this year, but a skimpy harvest always makes people nervous.

"And it's all because Ketill forgot to take the dragon off his ship before he got within sight of land," mumbles Ásmundr, a tall, skinny man with an expression like souring milk and a complexion to match. His thoughts are clearly running in the same path as mine. "I hear they've made laws in Iceland to keep that from happening.

"The wiser them, then," Thórkell agrees, wiping mead from his gray-streaked brown beard.

"Look to yourself, Ásmundr," Ketill counters. He tosses his thick blond hair back nervously. "You were the one who said we were still half a day away, all right? So if the *landvættir* are upset it's your fault, not mine."

"Yes, but I was talking about moving by the white-oak breeze. You should have known we'd get there quicker when the wind came up," Ásmundr says selfrighteously, shuffling his skinny arse back to the edge of the bench. Ketill scratches the crooked side of his nose and spits into the straw.

"That white-oak oar is brown from your bumhole," he says, blue eyes hard as shields. He ducks Ásmundr's punch, diving under the table and coming up to wrestle his foe off the bench.

They roll over and over in the straw and dogshit on the floor. Everyone's laughing, cheering them on and making bets. I look into the fire before my wolf-fylgja can begin to snarl within me, trying to shut out the curses and clamour. When the door sounds, soft and hollow, I'm the only one that seems to notice.

I tap Thórkell on the shoulder. He turns to me, face flushed and crooked teeth bared in a laugh.

"What is it, Úlfr?" He shouts his whisper above the roaring of the feasters. Without willing it, I bare my teeth. He's drunk, or he wouldn't have called me Wolf. But I bite down my rage and the bitter aftertaste of hurt.

"Someone's at the door."

Thórkell makes the sign of the Hammer. The dark shadow of fear crosses his blue eyes like a raven's wing.

"I'll answer it if you want," I offer. He shakes his round head and stumps across the floor, wide shoulders set like a stone wall to bar the way.

The knocking sounds again, louder. It seems to me that the timbers of the hall ring with it, the way harpstrings ring at a loud shout.

Thórkell opens the door. Looking over his shoulder, I see a tall figure in a dark, hooded cloak.

"Come in," Thórkell says, the edge of fear sharp as metal shards in his voice. The man crosses the threshold and Thórkell bars the door behind him, his shoulders settling with renewed ease. It's only a drenched beggar wrapped in dark blue tatters. His face is hidden by the shadow of his hood, but the gray in his long beard tells me he's old, and the welcoming peace in my blood says that my fylgja feels no threat from him. Audhr glides over quickly, her sweet, worn face turned up to the stranger as she offers him a horn of mead.

"Well done," he says, draining it in a single draught. His voice is deep and clear, his movement swift. Not so old after all, then. But he ignores the fighting, simply waiting for Audhr to refill his horn and offer him a wooden platter of pork and rye bread before he sits down by the fire. Like an old man, he watches silently as Ketill pounds Ásmundr's head on the floor. I go over to sit next to him, staring into the logs that glow with the red gleam of dragon-gold.

"What is my host's hame and what is your own?" he asks me, almost chanting. A spark of cold light gleams from the depths of his hood, bright as a stone of ice.

"The keeper of this house is Thórkell Ragnarsson, and I am Einarr - Úlfr," I say unwillingly, waiting for him to turn from me. The fire glitters red from his strong teeth. "And you, wanderer? What name are you known by?"

"Tonight I am Grímnir," he answers. The dark opening of the hood turns and he bends down from the bench, tracing three rows of eight figures in the ashes on the hearth. I see them through my fylgja's eyes, lines of light shimmering behind the fire-shadows and dark stones. "Know'st how to write, know'st how to read, know'st how to stain how to understand, know'st how to ask know'st how to offer, know'st how to supplicate know'st how to sacrifice?" he murmurs. The hairs stand on the back of my neck, stirred by an unfelt breeze.

"I wot thou hung on the wind-tossed tree all of nights nine," the words float silently from my mouth. "Well know I, Yggr, where thy eye is hidden in the wondrous well of Mímir."

The dark blue hood rises and falls in a nod of acknowledgement. "Would you know more?"

I nod my head, unable to speak. Grímnir, the Wanderer, points at the straight stave and two upswept branches of the first rune. "*Fehu*," he names it. His voice is deep and soft. The shouting of the other men in the room has dimmed to the distant roar of waves; the wind howls in my ears as if I stood naked on a barren branch of the World-Tree, and the falling icicles outside shatter sharply as the clashing of swords. The shining lines of the runes Grímnir has traced glow against the red-gold fire, their light and Grímnir's dark shape filling my sight. "Might in motion, what is it but fire? The fire of gold, the fire of lust, the fire from Muspellheimr which seethes and burns beneath the surface of all that lives. Master this rune and neither gold nor women's warmth will be far from your hand. Here is Gullveig's enchantment and the flames that burn her; here is Andvari's cursed hoard, Freyja's gift and the Niflungar-bane. Do you know more now, or not?"

His long, gnarled finger moves to the downsloping horns of the next rune. I hear nothing but his voice, see nothing but the runes as he awakens their mysteries in me one by one.

I drip into the Bar of Soap, blinking away the afterimages of the red and pink neon squiggles on the walls. Thunder crashes outside; a sudden gust of wind machine-guns the windowpane with

a shower of heavy raindrops. The skinny bartender, his chequered shirtsleeves rolled back from his wiry biceps, runs a wet hand through his short-cropped brown hair as he rinses out mugs and talks to the heavy-set, balding man on the other side of the bar.

"Yeah, last summer the public health guys were telling everyone, 'Hey, there's this AIDS victim spreading his disease down here. You can't miss 'em, cause they're real thin.' So one comes up to me and says, 'You're one of *them*, aren't you? You look like one of *them*.'"

His friend shakes his heavy head, laughing. "One of *them*, huh? You should've said, 'Well, you look like one of *them* too, whoever *them* is.'"

"Yeah. I can't believe the crap some of these people put out. You know..." He glances down the bar, finally noticing me. "Help you with anything, sir?"

"Bass Ale."

He brings me a bottle and I sit down at a table by the window, dropping my wet book bag into its own puddle on the floor. The beer bottle is cold and slick from condensation and my dripping touch, shining dark brown in the gray light. Lightning flickers. I count the seconds as I dig out my book, *Norse Traditions and Religious Practises*. The windows rattle with the deep booming.

"Thórr. Thórr's hammer Mjöllnir," I murmur experimentally, the words strong and golden as ale in my mouth. Since I bought the runes a month ago, I have felt more and more drawn to the past behind them, as though the voices of my ancestors whispered to me silently within the bones of my skull. I open the book and begin to read, jotting down page numbers and notes here and there.

"Hey," my friend Christine says. She plops damply down on a chair beside me, chains jingling on her black leather jacket. "How's it going, Andrew?"

"It's going. It's going. It's gone. How 'bout you?"

"'You're wet,'" she says accusingly, quoting Rocky Horror.

"'Yes. It's raining,'" I quote back at her.

She shakes her head. Drops of water fly out of her spiky blond hair to spatter the pages of my book - my *library* book.

"Yow! Watchit, Chris, OK? I've had all the water I need today."

"Sorry," she says with no contrition, wiping rain from her face. A stray drop trails down from the soft blond spikelet in front of her ear and around the curve of her jaw. "What're you doing?"

"Wretched research for a wretched paper for wretched SMU." I trail the last word out: Smooooo. She cranes her neck around to look at the book's title. Water drips from the shiny black folds of her jacket onto my notebook, blurring the ink into blue clouds over the letters. "Christiiine..."

"Been a hell of a day," she explains, unapologetically. "Norse gods, huh? I used to read *The Mighty Thor* comic books." We wince and grimace together. "Pretty bad, isn't it?"

"Pretty bad," I agree. "Actually, I'm mainly researching Óðinn."

"Whosis whasis?"

"Óðinn. Odin. Number One god, who discovered the runes by hanging on the World-Tree for nine nights, pierced by his own spear. Patron of poets, kings, and berserkers. Goes around with two wolves and two ravens. Gave up one eye in exchange for a drink from Mimir's well, the well of memory. Brings victory to his chosen heroes, but always betrays them in the end."

"Oh. Okay. I remember him, sort of. How into this stuff are you, anyway?"

"Why?" I ask, suddenly wary.

Christine shrugs, her blue eyes open and guileless. "Hey, some of my best friends are Wiccans and such. I do the crystal thing myself." She hauls a couple of wire-wrapped crystal pendants out of the neck of her jacket. At her gesture of invitation I reach out and touch them carefully.

"Nice pieces," I comment. "They're clear and they've got a really great energy." I know the lines.

"You think?" she says, pleased and a little surprised. "I've been working with them for a while. I got this great book on creative visualization at the metaphysical place next door. What you do,

y'see, is sit down and get real comfortable. Then imagine the thing you want very clearly and surround it with sort of a golden glow. Picture it right next to you, in your hand or whatever, and just kind of concentrate on it being there. Then it's going to show up in your life."

"Have you tried it?"

"Hey, it's great. Last Sunday - you know, I was looking for a job, so I sat down and pictured myself with a paycheck from this place I'd applied to in my hand - and Tuesday they called to tell me I'd been accepted. I mean, is that weird, or what?"

"Weird enough for government work."

Christine cocks her head to one side and gives me kind of a funny look, squinching her nose up as if she were about to sneeze.

"No, that's great," I say hastily. "Congratulations. I'm serious. I'll even buy you an alcoholic congratulation."

"White wine, please."

I get the wine and come back. Picking up my untouched beer, I raise it in salute. As the golden, bubbling stream pours cold down my throat, I see the shoots of grain pricking green from the wet spring earth, the men in rough linen tunics cutting the ripe harvest with bronze scythes and the yeast working in great frothing clay pots. I drink the beer, feeling my great-great-many-times- great-grandfather drinking the same foamy brew from a cow's horn in the dark Norwegian winter a thousand years ago.

"You okay, Andrew?" Christine asks, her blue eyes narrowing with concern.

I swallow hastily, almost choking in frustration as the flash of kinship vanishes into dimness. "I'm fine." I sip again, but the beer carries no memory.

"You just looked a little pale, was all."

The thunder crashes again, closer, with all the sudden breaking violence of Dallas in March. "I don't know. I guess it's the weather or something." I have the sense that something is moving in the dark realm of my unconscious, a hidden sun wheeling towards the day. My book is open on the table, its pages puckering into little dimples where Christine dripped on it.

"The assumption was that, by working the runes into the previously woven fabric of reality, the runemaster could alter or mitigate the effects of the past and shape the future with the assumed force of the past/present continuum of events. This force can only be understood within the peculiar Germanic time sense, which was not divided into past, present, and future, but rather into 'that which is' and 'that which becomes'."

"Excuse me?" says Christine, confused by my brief reading. Her narrow blond brows V into the furrow between them.

"Sorry. Just thinking. Listen, Christine, is it OK if I see you later? I've just remembered something I've got to do."

"School's a bitch, ain't it?" she comments, her face softening under the water-smearred streaks of green punk makeup. "Glad I'm out. Well, take care of yourself."

"You too," I say, gathering my books up and exiting into the thunderstorm. I am drenched and shivering before I reach my car. My teeth chatter all the way home, even with the heater on full blast. A fire burns in my head, my thoughts flickering through eerie red-gold light and shifting shadows as I run up the stairs and flip back and forth through the rune books in my room, stirring the little wooden oblongs around as I search for the magic I want. Magic? I think. But how else can I describe my attempt to rewrite the past and present, to shape the future? And when I stand naked in the middle of my room, Led Zeppelin posters, Star Trek novels, and dirty socks blurring behind the invisibly sparkling haze of dark blue power gathering around me, I can think of no word for what I do but magic.

I trace the shape of each rune in the air with my finger, turning clockwise as I intone their names until I am entirely ringed in a half-seen circle of shining red staves. I breathe deeply, tracing the sign of Thórr's Hammer to ward myself towards the north, east, south, and west, then once above me and once below. Distant thunder murmurs in answer. My unlit room is darkening

rapidly, and the runic circle is almost visible in the twilight gray around me. Now I begin to chant, words welling up from within.

"*Raidho* is the road-rune...Fare I then aright...Back to land of blood- birth...fly swan-path again." I concentrate till I see the sharp R-shape as a red beacon behind my eyelids. The strong, steady rhythm of a swan's wings beats in my rushing blood, the regular thump of a horse's hooves pounding beneath my feet.

"*Mannaz*, man, memory and thought. Kinship's shape in blood and bone! Returned by road-rune, I reach back to thee. Memory, magic, might I claim." I trace two straight lines before me, an X joining them at their tops. My mind races forward, bringing forth the next rune and the next, weaving words and shapes together as if with practised ease.

"*Laguz*, lake, leek of life. Dark waters, I pass ye, and pass again, my sea- steed bridled with rein of runes. I fear not the final, the weird-wrought faring. In darkness deep, wrapped in waters, I waken to shining life. Vision-gold I bring forth, wisdom from wave, the hidden hoard. Othala, ancestors' hall, I seek thee! Bone-hallowed, blood-hallowed land, to thee thy son comes back. My sib, my kin, warriors rune-wise! No power shall break our holy walls, nor keep the son from his hard-sought home!" The last rune settles into golden solidity even as I trace it, clan-enclosure about me. "So mote it be," I finish, bringing my hands together and waiting a moment as the runes sink from my half-sight into the darkness of my room.

Tears and a terrible rage ravage Thórkell's face as he stumbles around the corner of my new-built house, shaking his head when I reach out to support him. His boots rip deep holes in the icy spring mud as he leans against the rough-planked wooden wall.

"I'll kill him," he chokes, heavy fists clenching into great sinewy rocks. "I'll carcarve the blood-eagle...Thórr and Óðinn, I'll break every piece of his body. I'll..." His throat splinters under his anguish like a badly-cut piece of wood and he roars the last cry of a slain bear, falling forward into my arms. I half-carry, half-drag him into my house and sit him on my large dragon-carved chair. Pouring a horn of beer, I trace a mind-rune and a healing-rune on the frothy head before I give it to him.

In a little while Thórkell's bellows-breathing slacks and he can speak again. His brown hair is tinged with ash in the light from the open door and smokehole, his twisted face pale.

"Ketill," he says, his voice bitter and cold. "I came home and found Audhr on the floor, blood on her face and her skirt shredded. When she could speak she told me that Ketill and his two brothers had come in and...and..." His throat closes again and he quickly lifts the horn. I wait until his wounded snarl smooths, until I can see the face of the Thórkell who raised me, plain and homely as a plough.

"Why?" I ask as quietly as I can, as my wolf-fylgja trembles within me.

"We were fighting this morning...well." He glares angrily into the dark dregs of the beer. I hurry to refill the horn, strengthening the runes that hold madness from the mind and heal the wounds within. "I said something...you remember the year after the bad harvest, the winter you started to cast the runes? Well, Ketill's come in from every raid since then with his dragon-prow still up, as if to spite the landvættir and the rest of us. So I said as how if it weren't for his brothers and cousins holding far more than their share of weight in the Thing, he might have been the dísir's guest at their last sacrifice. And so he jumped me - you know he's always been a hot one, and maybe he thought the frost on my head had touched my arms as well."

I look at Thórkell's great shoulders and arms, the solid strength that can still pull an ox to its knees, and shake my head.

"Anyway," he goes on, "we wrestled about, and I got him down with an arm up behind his back. He was spitting something nasty about Audhr, and I thought if he liked filth in his mouth that well, I'd just give him some. I shoved his face into a mound of dog turds - maybe I shouldn't have done that, but Thórr! the things he was saying about my wife."

I breathe deeply, my lips snarling back from teeth suddenly sharp. My fylgja howls in my skull and only Óðinn's second gift to me binds the berserk-fury back. But the runes keep me man-minded and hold my anger back for a moment.

"And you can't hope for much fairness from the Thing," I say bitterly.

Thórkell shakes his heavy head, his beard rippling in a gray-streaked brown wave. "As well ask Ketill's own father for judgement. I swear every second man around here is either part of his family or owes them money." He looks up at me, his face a bearded mask of stony revenge. "Einarr, you know the runes like no man I've ever met. I don't know what touched you that winter, but I've seen you lay battle-fetter and I've seen you heal. I know where the fee for this house came from, and I've a good idea which wives might call their bairns Einarsson if they had the guts. And now I'm asking you - Thórr, I'm begging you - if you have any love for Audhr or me at all, use that power to give us the right judgement we can't get otherwise."

"You want me to carve the runes when the Thing meets again?"

Thórkell grasps me by the arm, powerful, stubby fingers digging into my flesh like oak-roots. "I want you to help me kill Ketill."

It seems to me that I barely touch his hand, but he falls back. The heavy oaken chair rocks, its front legs thumping loudly on the hard dirt floor.

"I'll do it," I say, my strange voice snarling in my ears. "Later. Now go!"

Thórkell hurries out before the fury can overtake me completely, wide shoulders hunched against his driving pain. I slump into the sleeping furs in the corner as the wolf-strength drains from me. It, like all Óðinn's gifts, is costly, even when it barely touches me.

Long shadows are crawling dark through my doorway before I feel ready to go to Thórkell. I dress myself in the red linen tunic and breeches of the rune-worker, wrapping myself in a dark blue cloak against the cutting ice of the early spring winds. The fire in my hearth has gone out; the light in my house is clear, but dim.

The wind blows hard against me when I get outside, a strong northerly blast like the icy arrows of Skadhi, whipping my hood back and my hair and beard up in tangled strands. Golden fire fades to rose and crimson in the west, day-blue darkening across the sky to midnight. The birches lash their pale limbs back and forth in a wild dance across the pathway, flailing at me with slender twigs. I lower my head and push my way through the grove to Thórkell's new-sprouting fields and the dark shape of his house rising behind them.

Thórkell answers my knock with a battle-axe in his hand, lowering it when he sees me. Audhr moves slowly to pour me a horn of mead, careful of the aching wound between her legs. Her face is scoured clean, hair put up and clothes neat, but her eyes are dark with swollen bruises and her skin deeply furrowed. She holds herself calmly, but it is the calm of a beach after the storm, strewn with dead wreckage. I move to embrace her and she steps back, her quiet face suddenly beslimed with loathing and fear. The tears brighten her eyes and prickle behind mine as we see what has happened between us. I wonder if...and surely, Thórkell is her husband, but I know that she can endure his touch no more than mine now. Perhaps she is thinking of the raids we went on together; perhaps it's just that we are men. She gives me the horn, our hands not meeting on its smooth surface.

"Óðinn!" I cry, facing north and spilling a drop into the straw on the floor before I drink. The golden rush of warmth flows directly into my skull, filling me with the dizzying, mad fire of my god's inspiration.

"I'll need a horse, and a stave of yew," I say to Thórkell.

"I'll meet you in front of the house," he answers quietly. He walks out, leaving me alone with Audhr.

"You'll be revenged, foster-mother," I say to her tenderly. Her blue eyes are bright in her ravaged face as she nods. Hastily I turn and go out the door, watching the black shapes of man and horse cross the darkened field from Thórkell's barn.

Together Thórkell and I climb the spiral path up the hill where we make sacrifice. The branches of the heavy trees above us creak and moan together in the wind, stripping budding leaves off against each other. The horse is restive in the windy night, tossing its head to and fro and snorting as if it scented a wolf in the rustling underbrush around the hill's bare crown. The stars are brilliantly clear, the Wain swinging low in the east, but the Moon is cloaked in his own darkness. We turn to the north, past the low stone augur-well where the sacrifices are sometimes drowned. The ploughed earth of the fields beneath us is dark, groves of trees stained a deeper shadow-black. Only the occasional candle-flicker of light shines through the smokeholes of the scattered houses.

"Hel." I speak the Grave-Mother's name softly, but the night seems to blacken around us, an invisible cloud dulling the stars. The horse flings its head back, stamping a sharp hoof into the rocky mud. Thórkell glances sideways at me, uneasily tightening his hold on its reins. Above his wind-swept beard, his face is pale as a lightless moon.

I take the rune-graven knife from my belt and slit the horse's throat. A torrent of dark blood pours out, steaming in the icy wind. The beast drops heavily onto the earth. I lift Thórkell's battle-axe and strike three times, chopping through the spine and thick muscles of the horse's neck until its head falls away from its body.

With a few quick strokes I sharpen the yew stave at both ends, pounding it into the ground with the blunt back of the axehead. Lifting my gory burden in both hands, wet strands of its mane blowing back into my face, I turn towards the flickering from Ketill's roof and impale the horse's head to face him from the stake.

"Hel's dark might rises from hidden roots / Rises to work true right!" I chant, carving the spear-rune, *tiwaz*, into the yew-wood. I feel the unseen dark stream, the power of the Deathwife, ascending from beneath the earth as I dip a finger into the warm blood dripping from the horse's neck and stain the rune with life. On its forehead I cut a triangle of *thurisaz* runes, points facing inward. "Ketill, I throw three thursar at thee. Worthless thy weapons, they strike thee sore." I bind that triangle within another of three straight lines. "Enclosed in ice-runes escape you have none. Worthless wight, Ketill Kolgrímsson, Hel has thee now!"

I strike the horse's head, guiding the Grave-mother's black might up through the stake and the runes, feeling the iron weight of *thurisaz* smiting Ketill, breaking him into shards that freeze into lifeless chips of ice, buried in Hel's dark embrace. "So the work is wrought!" I shout, stepping back as my spell implodes into the night.

Thórkell follows me silently, back down the spiral pathway. We return to our homes without speaking.

I cast the runes in darkness, lit only by the clear stars through the smokehole. The little wooden oblongs clatter together on my earthen floor. I can tell them only by touch. Ketill's weird is as I have written it: *tiwaz* for the justice his deed demanded, *thurisaz* to break him, and *isa*, the ice of death closing around him. Then, as always, I cast to see how I have changed my own weird. *Thurisaz* pricks my finger like a thorn when I recognise it, followed by *raidho*, the rune of faring, and *laguz*, rune of the waters. I know that these three are a warning: having struck, I am soon to fare forth on the sea from which no man returns, into the dark waters of death.

I know that even Óðinn cannot unwrite the runes, once written. But he learned to die and return living from death, greater and wiser. I have the need-rune that overcomes weird; I have the sun-rune, my guide through the waters, magical wheel of my will. I stand to cast the circle around me, outweaving the runes I unwittingly wove for myself.

The ground grows rockier under my feet as I climb higher. Above me, the gold-red wood blocks my vision; below me spread dust-dry fields of yellow wheat stalks, stained dark in places by small groves of trees. I can see no sign of human life past the telephone poles that stretch along the winding black road like a line of empty gallows.

I sit down on a great flat rock, its damp surface cold through my blue jeans. In my backpack are a rye-and-cheese sandwich, a bottle of local beer, and a bottle opener. I am careful to put the bottle cap and plastic sandwich bag back into my knapsack, pouring a few drops of beer onto the ground and leaving a bite of my sandwich at the foot of the rock from the same feeling of respect.

"Andrew Sorensen," I say softly. "My name is Andrew Sorensen."

A large black bird flies to the top of an oak, crying in a harsh, ripping voice as it looks down at me. I toss a bite of bread down the path. It falls out of my sight, behind one of the little stones that mark the pathway's edge. After a few moments, the bird wings heavily down and up again with a brown crumb in its beak. I finish the clear, slightly bitter beer and the solid rye-and-cheese, stand, and begin to walk again.

"Andrew!" my mother's light, nasal voice calls. "Aaaandreeew!"

I groan, turning over in my messy bed. Our air conditioning went out last night and I had to fight the heavy heat of Dallas summer for sleep until three or four in the morning. My sheets and pyjamas are strewn every which way, twisted around my body like clumsy ropes.

"What is it?" I shout back. "What time is it? It's summer. Why can't you let me sleep?" I shutter my eyes against the morning light invading my room through the open window and turn my face defiantly to the wall.

"Fine. Sleep. You don't want to know."

"Know what?"

"I'll tell your father you don't really want to go study your roots after all. It's only Norway, you know. There's no tourist attractions." I hear her feet tripping lightly down the stairs, her fuck-you, see-if-I-care walk.

"...only..." I am out of bed and down the stairs, pulling my pyjama shorts up as I move. Mother stops and looks up at me, hands on hips, shaking back her grayish-blond ponytail.

"Did you say Norway?"

"So you weren't that sleepy after all," she says, satisfied. "Read my lips. Nor-way. Vik-ings. My grandmother. Your father's father. The cold, wet, miserable place in the Northern mists that you've been researching and I've been paying library fines on books about since February. You've heard of it?"

"Aw, Mom..."

"Your father's going to a medical convention there in September, and Dr. Andersson - you remember when he and his wife were working with Dad at the medical school?" I nod eagerly, impatient for her to go on. "Anyway, the Anderssons have very kindly invited us to stay at their house for the week of the convention, and if - I said if - " She pokes me in the chest with a garden- grubby fingernail. "If you can get that week's assignment from your teachers when SMU starts up again, and do them before, I said be-fore we depart this particular vale of tears, you may go with us."

I let out a good wild berserker shriek of joy and go dancing around the living room, head and hands uplifted in victory, until the corner of the coffee table bangs hard into my knee, shooting white lightning up my leg. I bend over, clutching and grimacing.

Mother shakes her head sadly and goes outside. I hear the clicking of her garden shears through the screen door, receding along the walk.

I climb up to my room and sit on my bed, the news settling into my bones. "I'm going home," I say experimentally. It sounds a little funny - strained, perhaps. At that moment an image of a gray fjord beneath the icy blue Northern sky, dark cliffs rising above a narrow, stony beach and white gulls circling and shrieking, overwhelms me with a spear-sharp pang of longing, cold and cutting as the wind and salk spray I can almost feel on my face. "Home," I whisper again, and the familiar word is natural and comfortable as a well-worn wooden chair.

I have wrought the runes well. Ketill died the night I set the nidhing pole, his heart shattering in his chest. My work done, I start the spiral path up the hill to burn the thing I made. A light rain mists down, hissing in my torch's flame. The wet black branches of the trees sigh together, clear gray raindrops hanging on the pale green leaf-buds like berries of glass. The path slips beneath my feet and I almost fall twice in places where it slopes more steeply upward.

I hear the eating crackle of fire and smell the burning meat on the changing wind just before I see the four dark shapes on the bare hilltop. Quickly I try to hide behind the thick trunk of a gnarled oak, but my red breeches and dark blue cloak are no garb for hiding in.

"There he is!" a hoarse voice shouts. My mouth is dry as summer tinder, my palms damp on the wood of my torch - my only weapon, except for my knife.

They rush down towards me, trampling through the wet underbrush. I see in flashes: Ketill's two brothers, their pale-bearded faces twisted into trollish masks of hate; a large black-haired man I don't recognise, battle-axe raised and mouth grim as iron; Ketill's father Kolgrímr, gray and wiry as an old dog-fox, crying, "Surround him! He may be a berserkr, but he's unarmed, and damned if he can stop to curse us now!"

I run, dodging and twisting through the trees, trying desperately to call my wolf-fylgja forth. Suddenly Ketill's brothers are coming up at me, herding me up the hill to where flames leap from the horse's corpse and nidhing-pole against the gray sky, black serpents of greasy smoke rising into the rain. One of the brothers gets close enough to swing his sword at me. I parry with my torch. Part of the flaming top flies off, hissing in the mud and guttering out.

"Óðinn!" I shout, but the god's gift, the madness and strength of the berserkr, has drained from me like mead from a cracked clay pot. Óðinn always betrays his chosen in the end, always betrays, always, the line rings in my head as I fight, my back pressed against the cold wet stone of the well, knife in one hand and dead stick in the other.

The black-haired man's axe leaps lightly in as I parry one of the brothers' swordthrusts. I feel a heavy, numbing blow in my side and think that he has hit me with the handle; but when I look down, my blood is spurting onto the ground from a wound a hand's-width deep. With my last strength I throw my knife - my eyes are too blurred to see if it hits anything - and fling myself over the low lip of the well into the cold water. I sink into darkness, eyes fixed on the golden sun-rune that shall guide me over the great ocean.

The plane's engines thrum steadily as the beating of a great bird's wings, carrying my parents and I east over the dark water. The sky is a soft cloudy mass of dawn blues around us, sky and hidden sea shifting in darker and lighter shadows as we fly out the other side of night and into the Norwegian dawn. I am reading a book called *Sacred Sites and Stones of Norway*, glancing out over the silvery wing occasionally. My mother naps in her back-tilted seat beside me, head thrown back so that her sharp nose juts up, breathing softly through her open mouth. My father is bent over some preliminary notes he is making for his convention lecture on gallstones, forgotten cigarette shedding ashes on the lined yellow paper. His long legs stretch out into the aisle in front of him. Occasionally he pushes black-rimmed glasses back up his nose or slumps forward for a moment of thought with both hands in his short brownish-gray hair. I flip through the book, looking for places near Oslo that I can visit. One name flashes in my eyes like a burst of light: Minnisbrunnar. I turn back, reading, "Fifteen miles north of Oslo stands a tall, bare-topped hill crowned by a low stone well. Local tradition holds that the well was used in heathen sacrificial rites as an augury: if the water accepted the victim's body, the community's needs would be met. The name, Minni's Well, may refer to the traditional legend of a sorcerer who was thrown into the font in ancient times, or it may be a survival from the Old Norse legend of Mimir's Well."

The paragraph sets up a rustling in the dark underbrush of my mind, like the rustling of a wolf hidden in the woods. I shall go there first, I decide.

I come up through the trees to the top of the hill, the spiral ending in low grasses and a cracked slab of rock. The well is mossy with age, a stream of clear water pouring from its broken lip and trailing into its shadow. Mushrooms grow from the damp ground, mottled brown and brilliant white-flecked scarlet. I look up at the deep blue autumn sky that seems to ring with the soundless note of a deep horn. The cool wind flows through my hair and over my body like the rushing water of a great river. I reach down to the water that flows up from the darkness of the well and drink.

It is cold and bright, its taste hinting faintly at peat and ashwood. Tinging energy mounts into my head from the draught, whirling clear glimpses around me. I ride forth from India with a band of warriors, chariot-wheels spinning, drunk on honey and the sacred red mushroom. The dragon coils around the hill, up to the well, serpent-rooted and life-giving. Chanting in the spiral dance, I follow the sun-wheel ever onward, ever westward and up, over sea and stone to the dark Northern lands. The sacrifice spills blood before the oak tree, before the golden mistletoe that opens the door between life and death. After her spring procession, Mother Nerthus receives the strangled king's body into her mossy bog, taking him down under her dark waters. Bronze swords whirl; iron swords clash; one-handed Tyr lifts the spear of victory. I drink the golden mead of poetry from three cauldrons stolen from the Underworld. Shining words drop from my mouth as I lift the aurochs horn to Wodhanaz, Óðinn, lord of madness and mystery. The one-eyed Wanderer traces the runes before me on rock, on ashwood, on the hall's firelit hearth. Might roars up from my roots, up from Hel's kingdom and the serpent-seething cauldron, up to the shining hall I ride towards, passing through the swift-running river, and from which I descend again to the green earth in the middle of darkness and light in the moment of sunrise, the new-born day. Into the well's waters I sink, and up I rise, sun-wheel of my will guiding me over the dark primeval waters. My blood hallows this earth, its power runs through my veins. I stand in the middle of a great tree, its roots stretching down into layers of rock and its branches reaching out into becoming. Dew falls from the leaves to nourish the hidden roots; the trunk grows up straight from them, layer upon layer of living wood shaping the turning and sprouting of the shining limbs and evergreen needle-leaves that drip water back into the well at its foot, every twist and gnarl of its bark the shape of a rune, carven and stained with red life.

Slowly the vision fades, until I see only the shadow of the giant tree shimmering behind the bare, rocky hilltop and the little well. My ancestors seethe and whirl within me as I trace the spiral back down through the early autumn trees, following the track of the dragon back from the water to solid earth.

I hear the car putt-putting down the road before I see its crimson top shining below me. Mother stops as I hurry down the grassy slope at the foot of the hill. I open the door and fold myself into the little gray-upholstered seat. She looks at me with Audhr's summer-blue eyes, lips curved into the mysterious smile of Nerthus' priestess at the procession of the goddess.

"Was it worth the climb?" she asks.

"Yes," I answer, smiling back at her. My head is a little dizzy with the doublesight of the hidden layers shaping her silver-gilt hair, sharp features and blue sweater, and my mother as I know her now. I believe - I hope - I'll get used to seeing like this, one eye gazing on the world before me and the other always looking through memory's well.

(Author's final note, for the curious: not only was the bookstore a real place, but "Hrafn Gundarsson" was the name I used at the time for the jewelry and hand-carved runes I sold there. I changed it to "Kveldulf Gundarsson" later on the grounds that no one could pronounce "Hrafn". Really.)