

# Heroes of the Valley

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# Heroes of the Valley

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*For Jill and John, with love*

## MAIN CHARACTERS

### SVEIN'S HOUSE

Arkel	<i>Arbiter of the House</i>
Astrid	<i>Lawgiver of the House</i>
Leif	<i>Their elder son</i>
Gudny	<i>Their daughter</i>
Halli	<i>Their younger son</i>
Brodir	<i>Arkel's brother</i>
Katla	<i>Halli's nurse</i>

### HAKON'S HOUSE

Hord	<i>Arbiter of the House</i>
Olaf	<i>His brother</i>
Ragnar	<i>Hord's son</i>

### ARNE'S HOUSE

Ulfar	<i>Arbiter and Lawgiver of the House</i>
Aud	<i>His daughter</i>



MAP  
of the  
**VALLEY**  
Showing the Twelve Houses of the Heroes

LISTEN THEN, and I'll tell you again of the Battle of the Rock. But none of your usual wriggling, or I'll stop before I've begun.

In those early years after the settlers came, the Trows infested the whole valley from Riversmouth to High Stones. After dark, not a home, not a byre, not a stable was safe from them. Their tunnels honeycombed the fields and went under the farmers' doors. Each night saw cows taken from the pastures and sheep from off the slopes. Men walking late were snatched under within sight of home. Women and babies were dragged from their beds; in the morning, their blankets were found half-buried in the earth. No one knew where the Trows' holes might open next, or what might be done.

To begin with the people of each House paved their farms with heavy granite slabs - hall, stable, yards and all - so that the Trows could not break through, and they circled the buildings with high stone walls, and posted guards upon them. This improved matters. But at night the fingers of the Trows could still be heard tap-tap-tapping below the floorstones, searching for weaknesses. It was not a pleasant situation.

Now, for some years Svein had been in his prime, the greatest hero of the valley. He had slain many Trows in single combat, as well as ridding the roads of outlaws, wolves and other menaces. But not everyone had his prowess and he thought it was time to do something about the problem once and for all.

So he called the other heroes together one day in midsummer. All twelve met on a meadow midway along the valley, near where Eirik's House is now, and to begin with there was much bristling of beards and flexing of shoulders, and every hand was on its sword-hilt.

But Svein said, 'Friends, it's no secret we've had our differences in the past. My leg is scarred, Ketil, where your spear-point struck, and I fancy your backside still aches where I shot that arrow. But today I propose a truce. These Trows are getting out of hand. I suggest we stand together and drive them from the valley. What about it?'

As you'd expect, the others coughed and hummed and looked in every direction but at Svein. At last Egil stepped forward. 'Svein,' said he, 'your words are like an arrow-bolt in my heart. I'll stand with you.' And one by one, motivated perhaps by shame as much as by bravery, the others did likewise.

Then Thord said, 'That's all very well, but what's in it for us?'

Svein said, 'If we vow to protect the valley, it henceforth belongs to us for ever more. How's that sound?'

The others said that would do very nicely.

Then Orm said, 'Where shall we make our stand?'

'I know the very place,' said Svein, and he led the way to where a great rock rose from the meadow, tilted on its side in the wet earth. Heaven knows how it got there; it's half again as big as a farmhouse, as if a piece of the cliffs above the valley had been snapped off by a giant and tossed into the field for fun. This stone lies aslant so that it rises like a ramp from the field. The lower portion is covered in grass and moss, but the higher parts are bare. A coppice of pine trees grows about it, and one or two trees are even balanced on the rock itself. It was the Wedge then, but they call it Battle Rock now. Gatherings at Eirik's House are held there. You'll see it one day.



Svein then said, 'Friends, let our next action, which summons the Trows, also bond us, so that we protect each other as best we can.'

Then they drew their swords and each one cut another's forearm, so that their blood dripped upon the earth at the base of the great stone. The sun was just going down.

'That's good timing,' Svein said. 'Now we wait.'

The men stood there, side by side along the rock's base, staring out across the fields.

It so happened that the stone walls around the Houses had been very successful at keeping the Trows out, so that famine gnawed in their bellies and made them desperate for the meat of men. When they smelled the spilled blood in the earth, they came hastening from far away. But to begin with the men heard nothing.

After a while Svein said, 'These Trows are getting sluggish. We'll catch our death of cold standing here all night.'

And Rurik said, 'The women will have drunk the kegs dry by the time we get home. This weighs on my mind.'

And Gisli said, 'This field of yours, Eirik, is really very bumpy. We should do you a favour and till it for you, once we've killed the Trows.'

Just then they heard a faint, persistent noise, a scratchy sort of hum. It came from underground and all around them.

'That's good,' Svein said. 'I was getting bored.'

While they had been waiting, the moon had come out over Styr's Widow (which is the mountain with the hump peak you can see from Gudny's window), and it shone its light full on the ground. And all across the field they could see the nettles and tussocks shaking as the Trows passed beneath them, tearing through the soil. Soon every inch of ground on that great field was settling and shifting back and forth as if it were water. But the men had their boots on solid rock and stood steady, though they did move back a pace.

Then Gisli said, 'That's one job we don't have to do, after all. Eirik's field is going to be nicely tilled before the night's over.'

But that was one comment too many for Gisli. Just as he spoke, the ground at his feet exploded with a shower of earth and a Trow rose out, grabbed him by the neck with its long thin hands, and pulled him down onto his knees in the mud of the field. Then it bit his throat out. Gisli was so surprised he didn't say anything.

With this, the moon went behind a cloud and the men were blinded.

They took another step back in the darkness, holding their swords in front of them, and listening to Gisli's body thrashing on the ground. A minute went by.

And all at once the sound of digging rose from a hum to a mutter to a roar, and all along the base of the tilted rock the Trows burst forth, spattering the men with soil and reaching with their clasping fingers. Svein and the rest stepped back again, a little way up the rock, for they knew that Trows are weakened when they no longer touch the earth. And soon they heard the claws clicking on the stone.

Then - blinded as they were - they swung their swords mightily and had the satisfaction of hearing several heads go bouncing down upon the rock. But as the dead Trows fell, new ones erupted from the churned muck of the field, and

still more came pressing behind them, snapping their teeth and stretching out their thin, thin arms.

Little by little the line drew back up the slope, fighting all the way. The sides of that rock are steep and cliff-like, yet the Trows clambered up them even so. The hero Gest, who was standing at one end of the line, stepped too close to the edge; the Trows grasped his ankle and pulled him off, down into the boiling horde. He wasn't seen again.

By now the remaining ten were weary, and most of them were wounded. They had retreated almost to the top of the rock, above where the pine trees grow, and they knew that somewhere close behind was a precipice dropping to the field. But still the Trows pressed at them, teeth snapping, claws slashing, crooning with hunger.

'Now,' Svein said, 'it would be pleasant to have a little light, if only so we could wake up and fight properly. I've been dozing all this time, and the rest has done me good.'

Even as he spoke, the moon came out at last from behind the clouds and shone harshly on the scene. It did so as if in answer to Svein's words, which is why, to this day, we of his line all wear clothes of silver and black.

And in that first flash of moonlight, all was revealed: the great rock rising, its slope choked black with the bodies of the Trows; the field itself, a waste of pits and holes through which the enemy still came; the summit of the rock, not ten paces from the precipice, where ten bloodied men still held their ground.

'Friends,' Svein said then, 'it is midsummer. The night will not last for ever.'

And with that, all ten gave a great cry and redoubled their efforts joyfully, and not one of them took another step back towards the edge of that cliff.

Dawn came; the sea. And with the light, the people of the nearby House, who had lain awake all night trembling in their beds, unlocked the gates and ventured into the fields. It was silent now.

They picked their way across the field, among the pits and holes, and when they got to the base of the rock they found the Trows' bodies piled there like chaff.

Then they looked up and seemed to see twelve men standing high above them on the rock, though the dawn rays shone so strongly along the valley that it was hard to be sure. So they climbed up eagerly, only to find, right at the very top, ten dead men lying slumped together in a line, their eyes unseeing, their hands still warm upon their swords.

So! That is the story, and the truth of it. Since that day no living Trow has dared enter the valley, though still they watch us hungrily from above.

Now pass me that beer and let me drink. My throat is parched.

1



# 1

SVEIN WAS A BABY when he came to the valley with the settlers. They'd been so long in the mountains, the sun and snow had burned their faces black. When they came down at last among the sweet green forests, they stopped to rest in a quiet glade. Baby Svein sat in the grass and looked about him. What did he see? Sky, trees, his parents sleeping. Also a great black serpent, winding from behind a log, fangs drawn back to strike his mother's throat. What did he do? He reached out his little hands and caught the snake by its tail. When his parents woke they saw Svein grinning at them, a throttled serpent hanging like rope between his fists.

Svein's father said: 'This portent's clear. Our son shall be a hero. When he's old enough, he shall have my sword and silver belt, and with them he shall never lose a battle.'

Svein's mother said: 'The valley will belong to him. Let's build our farm here. It's a place of luck for us.'

So it was. The other settlers spread about the valley, but our House, first and greatest, was built right here.

HALLI SVEINSSON WAS born shortly after noon one midwinter's day, when snow clouds hung low over Svein's House and the skirts of the hills could not be seen. In the very hour of his birth the drifts piled so high against the old Trow walls that a portion of them collapsed. Some people said this was a portent of great good in the boy, others of great evil; the man whose pigs the wall crushed had no opinion either way, but wanted recompense from the child's parents. He sought arbitration on the matter at the Gathering the following year, but the case was thrown out as unproven.

When he was older, Halli's nurse, Katla, drew his attention to the date of his arrival in the world. She clucked and whistled through her nose at the sinister implications. 'It is a

dangerous day, midwinter,' she said as she tucked him tight into his cot. 'Brats born then have an affinity with dark and secret things, with witchcraft and the promptings of the moon. You must be careful not to listen to this side of your nature, else it will lead without fail to your death and the destruction of your loved ones. Aside from that, dear Halli, there is nothing to worry about. Sleep well.'

Despite the raging snowstorm, Halli's father took the blood and bits from the midwife as soon as the cord was cut, and set out up the hill. After a climb that left him frostbitten in three fingers, he reached the cairns and threw the gift beyond the stones for the Trows to feed on. It was considered that they must have liked what they ate because from the first the baby drank lustily at the breast. He grew fat and thrived, and the black creep did not touch him all that winter. He was the first of Astrid's children to live since Gudny's birth three years before, and this was a matter for great rejoicing among the people of the House.

In the spring Halli's parents held a feast to celebrate the latest in Svein's line. The cradle was set out upon the dais in the hall and the people shuffled past to pay their respects. Arnkel and Astrid sat together on the Law Seats and accepted the birth-gifts, the offerings of skins, cloth, carved toys and pickled vegetables, while little Gudny stood stiff and silent at her mother's side, her blonde hair immaculately braided into a dragon's tail. Halli's older brother Leif, heir to the House and all its lands, ignored the proceedings; he played with the dogs under the table, fighting with them for scraps.

Cradle-side comment was loudly complimentary, but at the corners of the hall, where Eyjolf and the servants had stacked the beer kegs, and the lantern smoke coiled thickly, opinions were less sure.

'The baby is a peculiar-looking creature.'

'There is nothing of his mother in him.'

‘More to the point, nothing of his *father*. I see more of his uncle there.’

‘A Trow is more likely! Astrid cannot abide Brodir; that’s no secret.’

‘Well, the boy has life in him, all the same. Listen to him cry!’

As Halli grew, his distinctiveness did not diminish. His father, black-maned Arnkel, was broad in shoulder and sinewy in limb, a tall, commanding presence in the hall and fields. His mother, Astrid, had fair tresses and the pinkish skin of her kin down-valley; she too was tall and slender, with a beauty strange and disquieting among the dark-haired people of Svein’s House. Leif and Gudny mirrored their parents in miniature: both were considered slim, graceful and easy on the eye.

By contrast, Halli was from the first short in leg and broad in back, a cumbersome stump of a boy, with hands like ham joints and a low, swinging gait. His skin was swarthy even by the standards of men bred among the mountains. With a small snubbed nose, a defiant, protruding chin and wide-spaced eyes alive with curiosity, he glared out at the world from under an unruly mess of thick black hair.

His father would sit the infant Halli on his lap at meal times and study him fondly, while chubby fingers explored the wiry bristle-comb of his beard and tugged it till the tears came. ‘The boy is strong, Astrid,’ he gasped. ‘And mettlesome. Did Eyjolf tell you he caught him toddling in the stables? Right between Hrafn’s hooves he went, and began to tweak his tail!’

‘And where was Katla while our child risked death? Oh, I shall pull her silly hair for negligence.’

‘Do not chide her. She is growing short of breath and is easily bewildered. Gudny can help guard her brother – eh, Gudny?’ He ruffled his daughter’s hair, making her flinch and scowl up from her needlework.

‘Not me. He went prying in my room and ate my cloudberry. Get Leif to do it.’

But Leif was out in the moat meadow, throwing stones at birds.

In those early years the demands of hall and House kept Astrid and Arnkel from active involvement with Halli’s daily welfare. Instead it fell to Katla, his ancient, white-haired, bark-skinned crone of a nurse to tend to his needs, just as she had tended Leif and Gudny’s, and before them their father’s also. Katla was stiff and bent as a gallows, a shuffling hedge-witch whose appearance sent the girls of Svein’s House squealing to their doors. But her almond eyes were bright and her knowledge gushed unceasingly. Halli loved her without restraint.

In the mornings she brought the warm tub to Halli’s room by candlelight and, after washing him, wrestled him into his tunic and leggings, combed his hair and led him to the hall for breakfast. Then she sat nearby, head nodding in the sunlight, while he played with wood shards on the rushes of the floor. Most days she dozed; most days Halli would promptly lever himself up and totter off to explore the private rooms behind the hall, or venture out into the yard, where the echo of Grim’s anvil mingled with the whirring of the weavers’ fooms, and he could watch the men working far off on the hill. From Svein’s House it was possible to see the ridges on both sides of the valley, and the little dark uneven stubs that ran continuously along the tops. They reminded Halli of Katla’s teeth. Behind the cairns, hazy with distance even on a clear day, were the mountains, white-crested, flanks dropping precipitously out of view.

Often Halli lost himself down the lanes and side alleys of the House, strolling happily with the dogs among the workshops, cottages, sties and stables until hunger drove him back at last to Katla’s anxious embrace. In the evening they ate apart from his family in the kitchen of the hall, a

comfortable place full of hot, savoursome vapours, broad benches and pitted tables, with the glow of the fire reflecting in a hundred hanging pots and dishes.

There Katla would talk and Halli would listen.

‘Without question,’ she would say, ‘your features come from your father’s side. You are the image of his uncle Onund, who farmed High Crag when I was a girl.’

This was an unknowable gulf of time. Some people claimed Katla was more than sixty years old.

‘Uncle Onund . . .’ Halli repeated. ‘Was he very handsome, Katla?’

‘He was the ugliest of men, and had a difficult temperament to boot. By day he was amenable enough, and indeed something of a weakling, as you yourself may be. But after dark he gained greatly in strength, and was liable to ferocious rages in which he tossed men through windows and snapped benches in his hall.’

This awoke Halli’s interest. ‘Where did this magical strength come from?’

‘Most probably drink. In the end an aggrieved tenant smothered him in his sleep, and it is a measure of the dislike with which Onund was held that the Council merely fined his killer six sheep and a hen. Indeed, the fellow ended by marrying the widow.’

‘I do not think I am like my great-uncle Onund, Katla.’

‘Well, you certainly do not have his height. Ah! See how your face corrugates sensually when you frown! You are Onund to the life. It is clear enough to look at you that you are prone to evil just as he was. You must guard against his darker impulses. But in the meantime you must eat those sprouts.’

It did not take Halli long to discover that, Onund possibly excepted, his lineage was a matter of importance to everyone at Svein’s House. This was welcome to a degree, since every door was open to him: he could wander at will



past the sour-smelling vats of Unn the tanner and lie beneath the drying racks, looking up at the skins flapping against the sky; he could stand in the hot blackness of Grim's forge, watching the sparks dance like demons beneath the crashing hammer; he could sit with the women washing clothes in the stream below the walls and listen to their talk of lawsuits, marriages and other Houses far away down-valley by the sea. There were some fifty persons at the farm; by the age of four Halli knew the names of all, together with most of their secrets and peculiarities. This valuable information came more readily to him than to the other children of the House.

On the other hand his status resulted in much unwanted attention. As Arnkel's second son, his life was valuable: should Leif succumb to creep or marsh fever, Halli would be heir. It meant that he was frequently prevented from carrying out important activities at the most inconvenient moment. Vigilant bystanders plucked him from the Trow wall as he began to navigate its teetering brink; they stopped him sailing the goose pond on an upturned trough with a pitchfork for an oar; most often they pulled him away from older, bigger boys just as they came to blows.

In such cases he was brought before his mother, where she sat sewing and reciting genealogies with Gudny in the hall.

'*Why* this time, Halli?'

'Brusi insulted me, Mother. I wished to fight him.'

A sigh. 'How precisely did he insult you?'

'I do not wish to say. It doesn't bear repeating.'

'*Halli . . .*' This was spoken in a deeper, more dangerous voice.

'If you must know, he called me a fat-thighed marsh imp; I overheard him as he spoke with Ingirid! Why are you laughing, Gudny?'

'It's just that Brusi's description is so delightfully apt, little Halli. It amuses me.'

‘Halli,’ his mother said patiently, ‘Brusi is twice your age and size. Admittedly his wit is wearisome, but still, you must ignore it. Why? Because if you fight, he’d hammer you into the ground like a short, squat tent peg, which would not be appropriate for a son of Svein.’

‘But how else am I to protect my honour, Mother? Or of those close to me? What about when Brusi calls Gudny a thin-lipped, preening little sow? Must I sit back and ignore this matter too?’

Gudny emitted an incoherent noise and put down her stitching. ‘Brusi said *that?*’

‘Not yet. But it is surely only a matter of time.’

‘Mother!’

‘Halli, do not be insolent. You have no need to protect your honour with violent acts. Look to the wall!’ She pointed up into the shadows above the Law Seats, where Svein’s weapons hung muffled in the dust of years. ‘The days are long past when men made fools of themselves for honour. You must set an example as Arnkel’s son! What if something should happen to Leif? You would become Arbiter yourself, as – as what number in direct line from our Founder, Gudny?’

‘Eighteenth,’ Gudny said instantly. She looked smug. Halli made a face at her.

‘Good girl. As eighteenth in line, after Arnkel and Thorir and Flosi and the others going back in time, all of whom were great men. In your father’s case he is so still. Don’t you aspire to be like your father, Halli?’

Halli shrugged. ‘I’m sure he digs excellent beet fields, and turns manure with a deft technique. In truth his example does not over-thrill me. I prefer—’ He stopped.

Gudny glanced up slyly from her work. ‘A man like Uncle Brodir. Isn’t that so, Halli?’

Blood came to the face of Halli’s mother then. She banged her fist upon the table. ‘That’s enough! Gudny, not a word

more! Halli, be gone! If you are troublesome again I shall have your father beat you.'

Halli and Gudny had learned early that mentioning their uncle Brodir was a reliable method of upsetting their mother deeply. She, who as Lawgiver dealt imperturbably in the hall with the rankest murderers and thieves, found the very name distasteful and hard to stomach. At some level her brother-in-law offended her, though she never spoke the reason.

For Halli, this curious power only added to Brodir's allure, a fascination that had begun in early childhood with his uncle's beard. Alone of all the men of Svein's House, Brodir did not shape the hair upon his face. Halli's father, for instance, in a ritual of great solemnity, regularly stood above a hot tub, staring through the steam at a polished reflective disc, methodically shaving his cheekbones and his lower neck, before trimming the rest with a small bone-handled knife. His moustache was carefully curled, his beard kept to the length of the first knuckle on his forefinger. His example as Arbiter was followed by the other men of the House, save Kugi the sty-boy, who though a man was hairless on his chin - and Brodir. Brodir never touched his beard at all. It bloomed out like a gorse thicket, a nest for crows, an ivy entanglement strangling a tree. Halli was entranced by it.

'Shaping a beard is a down-valley tradition,' Brodir advised him. 'In these parts it has long been thought unmanly.'

'But everyone apart from you does it.'

'Oh well, *they* follow your father, and *he* is influenced by dear Astrid, who comes from Erlend's House, down among the Loops, where people's hair is so light-rooted it often blows off in the sea winds. It makes little difference if *they* clip and preen.'

Beard aside, Brodir was unlike Halli's father in so many ways it was hard to imagine they had blood kinship at all. Where Arnkel was big-boned, Brodir was slight (though inclined to an ale-paunch around the belly), with a somewhat pudgy, ill-formed face ('Onund's stock again' was Katla's verdict). Arnkel radiated a ponderous authority, but Brodir had none whatsoever and seemed the happier for it. Despite being a second son, he had never taken possession of one of the smaller farms dotted among the lands of Svein's House. It was said that in his youth he had travelled far along the valley; now he remained at the old hall, working in the fields among the men, and drinking with them after dark. Most evenings he was consequently raucous, humorous and abrasive. Occasionally he absented himself on his horse, Brawler, and disappeared for days, returning wild-eyed with stories of what he'd seen.

And it was the stories that Halli loved him for above all.

On summer evenings, while Brodir was sober, and the westerling sun still warmed the bench outside the hall, they sat together looking up towards the southern ridge and talked. Then Halli heard of the rich lands of the Loops, where the river was languorous, and the cows and farmers both grew fat; he heard of the estuary beyond, where the Houses were built on great stone levees so that during the floods of spring they seemed to float upon the water, chimneys gently smoking, like scattered boats or islands. He heard too of the higher tributaries, where the valley petered out among places of waterfall and tumbled stone, where grass gave over to slate and no animals lived except the chits and chaffinches.

But always Brodir returned at last to the greatest of the Twelve Houses - Svein's; to its leaders, the Arbiters and Lawgivers, to their feuds and love affairs and the positions of their cairns upon the hill. And above all, he told of Svein himself, of his countless startling adventures, of his escapades upon the moors when it was still permitted to go

there, and of the great Battle of the Rock, when he and the lesser heroes held out against the Trows and drove them from the valley to the heights.

‘See his cairn up there?’ Brodir would say, pointing with his cup. ‘Well, it’s more like a mound now, I suppose, with all the grass upon it. All the heroes were buried like that, up on the ridge above their Houses. Know how they positioned him inside?’

‘No, Uncle.’

‘Sitting on a stone seat, facing towards the moors, with his sword upright in his hand. Know why?’

‘To scare the Trows.’

‘Yes, and keep them scared. It’s worked too.’

‘Are there cairns *all* along the valley? Not just here?’

‘From Riversmouth to High Stones, both sides. We all follow the heroes and reinforce the boundary like good children. There are as many piles of stones above the valley as there are leaves on a summer tree, and each pile sits atop a forgotten son or daughter of a House.’

‘I will one day be like Svein,’ Halli said stoutly, ‘and do great deeds that are long remembered. Though I do not much want to end up on the hill.’

Brodir sat back on the bench. ‘You will find such deeds are difficult now. Where are the swords? Under the cairns or rusting on the walls! We are none of us allowed to be like Svein any more . . .’ He took a long draught of ale. ‘Save perhaps in our early deaths. All us Sveinssons die young. But no doubt your mother has told you this.’

‘She has not.’

‘Oh, and she a great one for the histories! So she did not tell you of my elder brother Leif – what happened to him?’

‘No.’

‘Ah . . .’ He looked contemplatively at his cup.

‘*Uncle . . .*’

‘Eaten by wolves up-valley, aged sixteen.’ Brodir pulled at his nose and sniffed. ‘It had been a hard winter for the

wolves, and proved harder still for Leif. The attack happened on Gestsson land, but the pack had come down from the Trow moors, so our family could not prove negligence . . . So it goes. Then there was Bjorn in the previous generation . . .'

'Wolves?'

'Bear. A single swipe while picking cloudberry up by Skafti's boulder. Mind you, that was better than *his* father, Flosi, your great-grandfather. A sad demise.'

'How, Uncle? How?'

'Bee sting. Swelled to the most appalling size . . . Not one for the ballads, if truth be known . . . Cheer up, boy! Do not fear - these are unusual deaths.'

'I am glad to hear it.'

'Yes, most of us die of overindulgence.' He raised his cup and tapped it. 'Too much of this. We're fated that way.'

Halli swung his legs back and forth beneath the bench. 'Not me, Uncle.'

'Your grandfather Thorir said exactly that. But he died even so - at your parents' wedding as a matter of fact.'

'Of drink?'

'In a way. He fell down the well while hunting for the pisshouse. Well, it is a gloomy outlook. I think I will go to the keg for another draught to cheer me. But you, my boy, should go to bed.'

For Halli in his early youth, bedtime was the most intimate moment of the day, when he could mull on events and what he had learned. He lay beneath his woollen blanket, staring up at the window at the end of the cot, through which the stars shone cold over the dark slabs of the mountains, and listened to the hum of voices from the hall, where his parents conducted the evening arbitrations. When Katla came in to snuff the light, he would question her on whatever was on his mind.

'Tell me of the Trows, Katla.'

The room would be dark, save for the flickering candle on the shelf. Each wrinkle in the nurse's face stood out like a furrow on a winter field; she was a carving from some black-grained wood. Her words drifted in and out of his sleep-fogged mind.

'Ah, the Trows . . . Their faces are dark as the mud under stones . . . They smell of graves and they hide from the sun . . . They wait inside the hill for an unwary soul to stray too high upon its slopes. Then they will *spring!* Set one foot beyond those cairns, Halli, and they will rise up and pull you screaming into the earth . . . Well, I expect you are growing cosy now. I shall blow the candle out . . . What was that, boy?'

'Have you ever seen a Trow, Katla?'

'No, thank Svein!'

'Oh . . . Is there anything wicked you *have* seen?'

'Never! At my age I consider it a miracle and a blessing to have been so spared. But note that my safety does not stem from good fortune alone. No, I have always carried strong charms on my person to ward off evil of all kinds. I scatter flowers on the cairns of my parents every spring; I leave offerings by the weeping willows to placate the wheer-folk. In addition, I avoid apple trees at noon, keep my eyes averted from the pointing shadows of the cairns, and never, ever relieve myself near a stream or berry bush for fear of offending its fairy resident. So you can see for yourself it is as much good sense and preparedness as anything. And if you wish to live long, you will follow my example. Not another word, dear Halli! This candle must go out.'

It is not to be thought that Halli was a retiring, unassuming child; indeed, from the first, he was unusually confident and overbearing. But he knew when to be silent. Day on day, year on year, he listened quietly to the tales of Svein's House. And every night, as certainly as if played out upon his mother's loom, the threads of each story were woven into his life and dreams.



## 2

SVEIN'S QUALITIES WERE EVIDENT from the first. As a child he was stronger than any man, capable of breaking a bullock's neck in an arm-lock. He was proud and passionate too, and, if his temper got the better of him, very hard to manage. Once he threw an insolent servant over a haystack; after that, when the anger was on him, he went out hunting Trows. When he was no older than you, he carried one of their claws home in his thigh after a fight out in the fields. The Trow had dragged him so deep into the earth that his armpits were filled with mud, but Svein caught hold of a tree root and held on all night till the sun rose over the Snag. Then the Trow's power was sapped and Svein broke free. He found the claw in his leg when he got home. 'I was lucky,' he said. 'That was a young one, not at full strength.'

No, I don't know where the claw is now. Don't ask so many questions.

AT FOURTEEN HALLI remained short, broad and bandy in the leg. Though only two years from full manhood, he was little over half the height of his brother Leif, while his head reached Gudny's shoulders only when he stood on tiptoe.

However, he had the luck of good health. He remained untouched by black creep, sow's fever, dank mottle or any of the dozen other maladies that were endemic to the upper valley. This hardiness was aligned to a certain vitality of spirit, which manifested itself in every thought and action, and which chafed at the daily restrictions of the House.

Most of Svein's people were taciturn and patient, weathered inside and out by exposure to the mountain seasons. For them the long, slow rhythms of farm and field held sway; they tended the animals, grew crops and practised their crafts just as their parents had done. Despite their status, Arnkel and Astrid made no exception for



themselves or their children and threw themselves into every chore, but it was noticed by all that Halli had little interest in following their example.

‘Anyone see Halli today?’ Arnkel growled as the men gathered in the yard, hot and straw-strewn, for their day’s-end ale. ‘He did not work my field.’

‘Nor mine,’ Leif said. ‘He should have been helping the women rake hay.’

Bolli the bread-maker came waddling across the flagstones. ‘I’ll tell you exactly where he was! Back here, stealing my oatcakes!’

‘You caught him at it?’

‘I as good as saw him! As I laboured at my oven, I heard a horrid screeching outside my door. I hurried out to find a cat tied by the tail to the door latch; it took me much effort to work the string loose. When I returned inside, what did I see? A hook on the end of a pole retreating through my window, with five fine cakes impaled upon its point! I ran to the window – but too late! The villain was gone.’

Arnkel scowled. ‘You’re sure this was Halli?’

‘Who else would it be?’

A murmur of weary agreement rose amongst the men. ‘All year it has been like this!’ Grim the smith said. ‘A series of jokes and thefts and escapades at the expense of others! He contrives one after the other with the speed of one possessed.’

Unn the tanner nodded. ‘My goat stolen and tethered up beside the crags! Do you recall it? He said he wished to lure a wolf!’

‘What about those snares he left in the orchard?’ Leif said. ‘Allegedly so that he could “catch an imp”. Who did he catch instead? Me! My ankles throb even now!’

‘Remember those thistles wedged inside the privy?’

‘My leggings hung upon the flagpole!’

‘No punishment seems to bother him. He is impervious to threats!’

Arnkel's brother Brodir had been listening in silence. Now he put down his cup and wiped his hand across his ragged beard. 'You take it all too seriously,' he said. 'Where is the harm in any of this? The boy is imaginative and bored, that's all. He wants adventure - a little stimulation.'

'Oh, stimulation I can help him with,' Arnkel said. 'Someone find Halli and bring him to me.'

Despite repeated beatings, complaints about Halli's behaviour continued through the summer. In desperation Arnkel put his son in the daily care of Eyjolf, head servant of the House.

One evening, when Katla was pulling the nightshirt over Halli's head, he was summoned into the hall. His father, who had just finished the day's arbitrations, sat in his Law Seat, his horse-strap in his hand. Halli blinked at it, and then at Eyjolf grinning beside the dais.

'Halli,' Arnkel said slowly, 'Eyjolf seeks arbitration on your behaviour today.'

Halli stared bleakly about him. The hall was empty; golden light drifted through the western window and glinted on the hero's treasures. The fire had not been lit and the air was growing chill. The Seat next to his father's was empty.

'Shouldn't Mother be here, if it's an arbitration?'

Arnkel's face darkened. 'I feel sure I can make this judgement without her help. No detailed knowledge of the Law will be necessary to comprehend your deeds. So then, Eyjolf - make your charge.'

The head servant was almost as old as Katla. Stooped, cadaverous and of somewhat sour disposition, he looked on Halli without affection. 'Great Arnkel, as you requested I have been putting Halli to good constructive work, mainly in the latrines, the middens and the tanning vats. For three days he has been giving me the run-around, vexing me with impudence. At last, today, as I took him to muck out the stables, he gave me the slip and ran into the servants'

quarters. As I followed, a set of booby traps waylaid me. I was tripped by a concealed wire, spread-eagled by butter on the flagstones, frightened by a makeshift ghost hidden round a corner, and finally, when I tottered into my own small room, soundly drenched by a bucket of slops balanced on the open door. I was forced to duck my head repeatedly in the horse trough, to the amusement of people in the yard. Then, when I looked up, what did I see? Halli smirking down at me from atop the roof of Grim's forge! He claimed to be watching the ridge for signs of Trows.'

As he pronounced the final word, Eyjolf made a complex series of careful signs. Halli, who had been listening with a show of unconcern, took a sudden interest.

'What are you doing, old Eyjolf? Does every entrance to your body have to be protected when you talk of Trows?'

'Insolent child! I am stoppering myself against their unclean power. Be silent! Arnkel, it took me an age to get him down from that roof. He might have fallen and broken his neck, which would have been a shame for you, if not for me. These are the facts, and the truth of it. I request arbitration and a thrashing for Halli.'

Arnkel spoke in the deep tones he used as Arbiter. 'Halli,' he said, 'this is a grim catalogue. It sorrows me that you should display, in such short order, wanton disrespect to a valued servant, disregard for your own safety, and blithe irreverence to the supernatural dangers that surround us. Do you have anything to say?'

Halli nodded. 'Father, I draw attention to Eyjolf's misconduct. He has neglected to mention that he gave his solemn word not to report any of this to you. In return for his oath I climbed down from the roof promptly and spent the whole day mucking out the stables.'

Halli's father scratched at his beard. 'Maybe, but that does not negate your crimes.'

'Those are easily answered,' Halli said. 'As to my own well-being, I was in no danger. I am as spry as a goat, as

you have often observed. I made no damage to the fabric of Grim's roof. My interest in the Trows is born from a desire to more fully comprehend the dangers that beset us and is not in the least irreverent. As for my disrespect to Eyjolf, it appears well-founded, since he is an oath-breaker and should be strung up by the heels from the flag-mast in the yard.'

At this Eyjolf made a shrill interjection, but Halli's father shushed him.

Arnel tapped the horse-strap with his fingers and stared at his son. 'Halli, your argument is tenuous, but since it hinges on a question of personal honour I feel I have to pause. Above all things we must maintain the honour of ourselves and of our House, and this extends to bargains made between men. Eyjolf, did you in fact agree to keep quiet about events today?'

The old man huffed and blew and sucked in his cheeks but had to admit it was so.

'Then in all conscience I cannot beat Halli in this instance.'

'Thank you, Father! Will Eyjolf be punished for his lack of faith?'

'His disappointment in your acquittal will suffice. See how his face sags. Wait! Do not leave so readily. I have said I will not punish you, but I have not yet finished.'

Halli paused on his way to the door. 'Oh?'

'It is clear that you are bored of your tasks here,' Arnel said. 'Very well, I have another for you. The near flock needs moving to the high pastures above the House for the last few weeks of summer. Do you know the spot? It is a lonely place, close to the boundary where the Trows walk at night. There is danger of wolves too, even this season. To protect the flock a shepherd must be quick-witted and nimble, brave and enterprising . . . But you rejoice in such qualities, do you not?' Arnel smiled thinly at his son. 'Who knows? Perhaps you will at last see a Trow.'

Halli hesitated, then shrugged as if the matter were of no consequence. 'Shall I be back for the Gathering?'

'I will send someone for you in good time. Not another word! You may go.'

The high pasture was little more than an hour's walk from Svein's House if a certain winding track were used to scale the ridge, but its location felt considerably more remote. It was a place of boulders, clefts and deep blue shadow, where the only sounds were the breeze and birdsong. The sheep wandered near and far, growing fat on grass and sedge. Halli found a ruined stone hut on a grass spur in the centre of the pasture; he camped there, eating cloudberry, drinking ewe's milk and taking water from a spring. Every few days a boy brought up cheese, bread, fruits and meat. Otherwise he was alone.

Not for anything would Halli have admitted to his father any nervousness at the prospect of his solitude, but that nervousness existed, for the line of cairns loomed close upon the skyline.

Across the top end of the pasture a stone wall had been built, straddling the contour of the hill. It was there to prevent the sheep straying close to the summit of the ridge, where the cairns were. It was there to prevent people straying too. Halli stood at the wall often, gazing up towards the tooth-shaped stacks of stone that were just visible on the hump of the hill. Some were tall and thin, some broad, others sloughed or crooked. Each one hid the body of an ancestor; all were there to help Svein guard the boundary against the wicked Trows. Even in full sunlight they remained dark, a sombre, watchful presence; on grey days their proximity cast a pall on Halli's mood. In late afternoons, he was careful lest their long low shadows should touch him and he was Trow-stricken.

Each night he lay in the hut's black silence, nostrils filled with the smell of earth and the sour wool of his blanket, and

imagined the Trows shuffling on the moors above, straining against the boundary, hungry for his flesh . . . At such times the boundary seemed scant protection. He whispered thanks to the ancestors for their vigilance and hid his head until sleep came.

If Halli's nights were troublesome, the days were pleasant and eased the frustrations of his heart. For the first time that he could remember he was free to do as he saw fit. No one gave him orders; no one beat him. His parents' disapproving eyes were far away. He was not required to carry out dull jobs in House or field.

Instead, he lay in the grass and dreamed great deeds – those that Svein had accomplished in the distant past, and those that *he* one day intended to perform.

While the sheep grazed peaceably, Halli would survey the scene below, following the brown-green slabs of Svein's fields as they fell towards the valley's central fold, where he had never been. Here, he knew, the great road ran beside the river, away east to the cataracts and beyond. On the opposite side of the river, the wooded slopes rose steeply. These belonged to Rurik's House. He could see smoke from its chimneys sometimes, hanging over distant trees. Rurik's ridge, like Svein's, was topped with cairns; beyond hung the grey slopes and white crests of the mountains, part of the great unbroken wall that swung round north, west and south, hemming in the valley.

Long ago, great Svein had explored all this. Sword in hand, he had journeyed up and down the valley from High Stones to the sea, fighting Trows, killing outlaws, gaining renown . . . Each morning Halli would gaze towards the rising sun, to the jagged silhouette of the Snag, the granite spur that hid the lower valley. One day he too would go that way – below the Snag, down through the gorge, in search of adventure – just as Svein had done.

In the meantime, he had some sheep to tend to.