Valravn

Tale of a Raven Knight



By

Bjarne Speth Hansen



A part of the Yggdrasil Sagas

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A Valraven is a medieval Danish folk legend, a cursed shapeshifting knight. In heraldics it is a raven with a wolf's head. It is mostly associated with the post-viking medieval era of Danish history, in this story I have brought it back to the very end of the age of vikings.

Battle of Hastings 1066

The battle was over, the screams of the wounded and dying were ringing out in the beginning twilight as a cold fog spread itself over the battlefield. Sigurd Olafsson lay bleeding amongst those who had fallen by the side of King Harold Godwinsson, he felt the life draining from his body but could do nothing. Sigurd had sailed with the great invasion fleet of King Harald Hardrada[1] and suffered defeat in the north; he had stood firm in the battle but was captured by the English. Sigurd had been awaiting his inevitable execution, a fate he had not looked forward to. Though most of his companions were followers of the White Christ, he still held to the true gods, and being executed with his hands bound behind his back led only to the gates of Hel's hall. Relief came with a messenger whose horse almost collapsed as it entered the camp, the Norman Duke, William the Bastard, had landed in the south, and was ravaging and murdering his way through Kent. King Harold had come to the prisoners personally and offered them life for service, any man who swore to him their swords as long as it took to push the Normans back into the sea would be freed, most had taken him up on the offer, Sigurd too. They were given a short time to prepare by picking through the looted weapons and armour from the battlefield, Sigurd had found a well worn sword with a beautiful pattern welded blade, a sturdy english mail armour, shield, helmet and a great daneaxe[2], when the leader of King

[1] King Harald "Hardrada" Sigurdsson of Norway was a famed warrior poet and famously hard ruler, which was also what Hardrada means, Hard Ruler.

[2] A Dane Axe was a up to 1,7 meters long axe, used by the elite warriors of the Norse world, and through Danish influence, also in Anglo-Saxon England.

Harold Godwinson's Huscarls[3] had seen him arm himself in their fashion he was made a King's Huscarl, he had been proud, he had never really liked Hardrada, Sigurd had sailed more out of obligation than a feeling of loyalty or honour, and now he was recognized as one of the mightiest warriors in his new king's service, fate has many twists and turns. The army had marched the next day.

But now he lay dying, his armour split by a mighty swordstroke from one of the knights on horseback that had come for his wounded King Harold, by his side lay the dane axe, its blade caked in Norman blood. He could hear the great mass of scavengers, birds, wolves and humans picking through the dead, sometimes finishing off the wounded. He remembered the face of the Norman who had given him his bane wound, a young arrogant face, with his last strength he cursed the man, a curse bound by his own blood was powerful indeed. As the last breath escaped his lungs a great black raven landed on his chest, and as the light went out of his eyes the raven started to feed.

The raven was ripping through Sigurd’s chest, pushing aside the ripped armour and cracked ribs to get to the heart. Above the battlefield the Valkyries on their spirit horses were searching for the true souls who still held to the old faith, Sigurd's spirit rose up to greet the one he knew had come for him, she was beautiful, fierce and strong, but seemed somewhat faded. She stretched out her hand to him but as he reached out to grab it he felt a sudden tug from behind, the valkyrie caught his eyes with a look of sympathy and pity in hers. The tug became a pull and he felt his soul ripped away from her. He blinked, with real eyelids, he smelled with real nostrils and he tasted his own heart's blood with a real tongue. Blood dripped from his beak as he looked down on what was once his body, broken and bloody he saw his own face contorted in a grimace of hate.

Suddenly aware of a group of humans coming his way, he took to the air and looked down on an elegant and long necked woman falling to her knees near where he had last seen the king, a great wailing cry escaped from her throat, as Edith Swanneck

[3] The Royal Huscarls of late Anglo-Saxon England was a leftover from when King Canute the Great of Denmark, Norway and England was King, they were an elite force of warriors armed with Dane Axes and the best armour.

recognized her beloved husband. Circling the scene from above, the raven that was once Sigurd Olafsson, saw a man breaking from the group and moving to the body that had been Sigurd. He watched as the man stripped armrings and his necklace off, picking up the sword and putting on Sigurd's helmet. Sigurd swooped down towards the man's face and rammed his beak into his left eye, barely escaping a swing of his own sword he took to the sky again. Screaming the man pointed at Sigurd as one of his companions readied an arrow on his bow, with mighty wing strokes Sigurd flew away, the taste of the man's blood mingling with his own in his beak.

Sigurd circled high above the battlefield, watching the group carry off the mutilated body of the king and bury it on the edge of the hill he made his last stand on. The words said over his grave were both christian and to the old gods of Gytha, his Danish mother. Sigurd watched the group disperse and blend into the forest to avoid the Norman scouts on their horses sweeping the battlefield for stragglers. The army of King Harold Godwinsson had been defeated but not truly destroyed and as Sigurd followed the one eyed man who had stolen his armrings, he saw groups of warriors laying low and noblemen trying to gather as many men to them as possible. The forest was alive with men, Sigurd could smell hatred and despair in the wind.
The one eyed man settled in for the night with a small group of warriors not far from a stream, they lit a fire in a hollow created by the roots of a great fallen ash tree, to hide the light and one of the man's companions poured wine from a skin into the eye socket of the man and burned it out with a burning branch, to the man's credit he did not cry out. Sigurd landed on a big rock on the far side of the stream, every fiber of his body was burning with fatigue and pain and as he closed his eyes he slipped from the rock.

Sigurd opened his eyes, the forest was dark with only a little light from the nearby fire slipping through the trees, he was laying on his back and he felt cold and naked. He looked at his hands, and was surprised that they were his own hands, was all that had happened after the battle just a dream. His fingers felt the place where he had taken his bane wound, and found that a thick mass of scar tissue had already formed over his heart. Struggling he crawled to the stream and as he reached out to drink the waters the moon's light cut through the clouds and he could see his face reflected in the surface. He recognized his face, but in the light his red hair and beard looked jet

black and his blue eyes had a weird dark birdlike look to them. He drank long and hard, and washed his face in the stream, he felt invigorated and was able to stand. Sigurd was naked, and he was cold, the smell of the fire was too inviting and drew him in. As he stepped into the light and warmth of the fire he looked around to see the group of warriors sleeping in their travel capes, one was sitting on a stump slumped over snoring, he must have been on guard but had dozed off. The one eyed man was laying at the far edge of the small campsite, Sigurd smelled him more than saw him, he could smell the fear on his sweat, and putrefaction coming from under the bandage covering his eye, Sigurd's sword lay by his side. As the warmth from the fire entered his body, Sigurd moved towards the one eyed man, the firelight caught the silver of his own necklace around the man's neck.

Silently Sigurd slipped through the camp and picked up his sword, the fire light caught the pattern in the blade, somehow he could feel its name, Ravens Beak, though he had never known it before. He saw his armrings on the arm of the one eyed man, and a flash of hatred and vengeance filled the place where his heart once sat. Without thinking he pushed the sword through the throat of the sleeping man, watching blood spurting from his mouth as his eyes opened. The man's eyes showed recognition and fear, so much fear. As he died with a gurgling sound, nearby the guard began stirring and Sigurd turned towards him. The guard screamed a warning filled with dread as he saw the naked Sigurd with a bloody sword standing over a dead campfellow. Sigurd moved faster than he thought possible and his sword flashed, liberating the guard's body from his head. The rest of the warband was now waking and becoming alert, but Sigurd moved like lightning among them and soon only Sigurd was alive.

Breathing hard, Sigurd looked around the camp at the dead and broken corpses of the men he had just killed with no great effort. He was a hardened warrior, strong and fast, but he had never moved this fast, or killed so efficiently without any feeling of remorse. Earlier that day, these men had been on his side, but he no longer knew if he had a side, Sigurd looked down, he was still naked but now covered in blood splatter. He walked back to the stream and used the cold clear water to clean himself, the pink mist of blood carried down stream, leaving no trace. Back at the camp he threw some more wood on the fire and started searching for clothes and armour.

Soon he was kitted out with a dark blue noble man's tunic, a rough cloth gambeson, some good, though heavily patched trousers, and a mail coif, the only piece of metal armour he found. He strapped his sword and scabbard to a heavy leather belt and found a good seax[4] knife with a beautiful golden hilt, he bound a heavy pouch to his belt, there were no shields amongst the men, for Sigurd that could only mean one thing, the cowards had broken and run. Amongst the warrior's remains he found some scraps of food and he sat down by the fire to eat, in the dawning light of the morning, several ravens settled on the corpses strewn about the camp and started feeding.

Sigurd Olafsson felt lost, he had sailed with Hardrada out of duty and a promise of plunder and land, his mother was Danish, but he had no kin left in Denmark, his fathers family was from Norway, but he was the third son of a third son, so even though his great grandfather had been a mighty Hersi[5] and had sailed as a sea king in his youth, no land had been left for him after his eldest brother had taken the farm for himself. He was now in a foreign land, only partly able to speak the language. Now he was no longer Godwinson's man, he was an enemy to the Anglo-Saxons, but he was also an enemy to the Norman invaders, and he spoke even less of their horrible tongue. Behind him the Ravens were feeding silently, the only noise was the crackle of the fire and the ripping of flesh. Deep in thought, Sigurd did not notice the mounted and heavily armed men moving closer. A raven flew up and landed on his shoulder, Sigurd felt the weight but he wasn't alarmed, the raven leaned in and with its beak less than an inch from his ear it spoke to him, no, it wasn't speaking, but he understood it. "*Danger is coming*" Sigurd jumped to his feet but the raven did not move from his shoulder, he was now aware of the sound of horses, it was coming from the east, from the direction of the Normans. He looked around to find a place to hide, he had defeated the warriors of the camp, but they had been sleepy and caught unaware, the men coming now was at best a scouting party, at worst a group of fully armed and armoured knights. He closed his eyes and felt a familiar burning in his body, fatigue took over his body and he collapsed by the fire.

[4] A Seax is either named after, or gave its name to the Saxon People. It was both used in battle and as a large utility knife throughout most of the middle ages.
[5] A Hersi is a rank in Norse society, under Jarl and above a free peasant, normally he would be the chieftain of about one hundred free men and their families and dependents.

Sigurd opened his eyes and took in the scene, the camp was still there, the ravens were still feeding on the bodies of the Saxon warriors he had killed, but moving on the edge of the camp was a bow wielding scout, followed by a group of five fully armed Norman knights. They hadn't seen him yet, and as they moved through the camp and examined the scene of carnage, the ravens took flight and so did Sigurd. They didn't fly far, all of them settled in a large nearby oak tree looking down as the Normans took what was left from the corpses. Sigurd could not understand their words, but he knew the scout was speaking Norman with an English accent, an honourless traitor. Sigurd yelled at the man, but all he heard was a raven, and his cawing set off the other ravens, and soon the sound of angry ravens was deafening. The five Norman knights were looking nervously at the unkindness of ravens, the Normans had once been Norse and maybe something was left of the old belief in Odin's great ravens, because soon they moved away from the camp and mounted their horses, the scout took a little longer and put a heavy coin purse in his pack before moving to his horse. Rage filled Sigurd, he wanted to rend and tear the scout apart, but he was beginning to understand his new reality, a raven heart beat in his breast, but a human soul lived inside him, he knew what that meant, he was cursed, he was a Valravn[6].

The small mounted party left the camp site and the ravens followed, all of them, it were as if they followed Sigurd's lead, he flew close behind the group until the scout turned in his saddle and loosed an arrow that barely missed Sigurd, after that, the flock followed a little more than a bowshot away. Behind them a smell of smoke and burning flesh followed them, the forest was burning, and warriors were still fighting and dying. The battle of Hastings might be over, but the battle for anglo-saxon England was still being fought. The Norman knights and the English scout skirted the battlefield and rode hard for the wooden castle at Hastings, from his high flight, Sigurd saw the destruction that the Norman foe had wrought on the countryside, burned villages, trampled fields and orchards felled for firewood. The Normans' presence was creating an open wound in the green lands of England, his ancestors had raided and ravaged England, but never had they destroyed like this, almost as just for the sake of it. The castle came into view, and the hateful banner the father of

[6] Valravn is old danish and a combination of the words Val(Battle) and Ravn(Raven) meaning “battleraven”.

the white christ had granted the Bastard was waving in the wind, it shone in white and gold but to Sigurd's eyes it was dripping with hate and blood, he felt it like an aura repelling him, stopping him from coming nearer. Sigurd and his unkindness settled in the ruins of the burned out town of Hastings as the party of knights entered through the lower gate of the hastily erected motte and bailey castle, he still wanted to claw out the eyes of the English traitor and rend his flesh with his beak, but the ramparts of the castle were teeming with archers, and he did not want to become dinner for some Norman lord.

He waited as the ravens following him steadily grew in number, he tried to remember the stories he had heard as a boy about the Valravn curse. He knew that there was a fellowship of shieldmaidens[7] named for the Raven, but they did not take the form of a raven as far as he remembered. But when he grew up an old woman who lived at the edge of his village often told stories of magic and monsters to the kids, and a traveling skald had once regaled his fathers hall with tales of meeting a man who became a raven to avenge his murdered wife. He was a raven now, his true body had died on the battlefield, but his soul had taken over a raven so he was cursed soul. He could die, that much was true from the stories, but he was now sure he could not die when he walked as a man, though he was not sure what wounds would do to him.

The chill of early morning was slowly replaced by an unseasonably warm heat as the sun grew higher in the sky, the tens of ravens became a hundred, then near a thousand, all with beaks caked in the dried blood of the dead of Hastings. Though Sigurd had never seen so many ravens in one place, they were eerily silent, watching the gates. With some frequency riders would come and go, alone or in pairs, clearly bringing news to the Norman bastard Duke William, every time a rider passed the ravens, there would be an ear tearing cawing from thousands of throats, startling the horses and the riders, but not one raven took flight when a rider came near. Otherwise it was like a cloud of silence had fallen around the castle, the archers patrolling the parapet rarely made a sound and a clear tension was hanging over the people coming and leaving. As the sun set on the second day after the great battle,

[7] A shieldmaiden was a female warrior, through women's graves found with weapons and clear battle damage on the bones, we know they existed, but maybe not as many as pop culture would have you believe.

the redness of the setting sun didn't seem to go away, the burning forest was lighting up the western horizon. In the failing light of the day, Sigurd spotted a familiar face on the parapet, the English scout moved amongst the archers looking out at the ravens.

With the scout walked a priestly looking man, his hair shaved in the Norman fashion, they looked like they were surveying the great mass of ravens now gathered around the castle. Sigurd once again spread his wings and took flight, determined to get to grips with the scout, but as he neared the parapet he felt a push, as if a heavy wind was fighting against him, though no wind was moving the banners on the castle. No, that wasn't true, the papal banner was unfurled and blowing in a wind that was not there. The papal banner was what held Sigurd back, it must have been blessed with powerful wards. As Sigurd was struggling against the wind the scout readied an arrow on his bow and got ready to loose it at Sigurd. He turned to ride the wind away, but as soon as he turned away from the banner the wind disappeared and he had to dive hard for the ruins to get away from the oncoming arrow. He settled behind a burned out wooden wall and heard the arrow thud into the opposite side, the other ravens were now whirling in the air around the castle, but none coming closer than he had come himself. He saw several ravens fall to the ground, pierced through by arrows, but a yell cut through the noise as the priestly man yelled something in Norman and the arrows stopped flying. From the east the moon's light shone upon the scene as some ravens moved on to again feed on the slain on the field of Hastings, Sigurd felt the same tiredness he had felt before and as his muscles began to burn he knew he was skin changing again.

This time he did not wake up naked and cold, though he had clearly fallen to the ground, he was still wearing the clothes he had found at the campsite, his sword hanging by his side. Maybe it was the darkness surrounding him, but the tunic looked darker, and with a slight metallic sheen, like a raven’s feathers. He didn't truly understand what magic was at play, he knew his body was not his own, he was the raven, deep in the back of his mind he could feel its animal spirit scream to be freed, it was as imprisoned by the curse as him, but it was unable to understand what had happened. Sigurd ran his hands through his beard and hair, he needed to feel human, he wondered if he could get closer to the accursed castle now. He was still

behind the burned out wall when he started moving through the ruins towards the castle, crouched; he slipped from cover to cover as the ravens sat silently, not stirring when he moved past. He reached the edge of the ruins, the Normans had torn down any building able to provide cover for at least a bowshot from the castle walls. By now it was well dark and the moon was behind a gathering cloud cover, in the west the great forest was still burning and the red hue mimicked the setting sun. Sigurd could see guards warming themselves by braisers, but in between he spotted guards looking out on the dark killing field, he noticed one yawning with a mouth full of rotten teeth. He was puzzled, how could he see that, and why did he know that the guard had eaten a fair amount of garlic for dinner, then it hit him, his senses were sharper than they had ever been.

The yawning guard moved towards the closest braiser and Sigurd eyed his chance and moved out into no-mans land, but he got no closer to the walls than when he was flying, worse still he stumbled when the windwall hit him out of nowhere, he froze up and knew he was in danger. His sword scabbard had clanked against a rock and in the silence of night it had sounded like the ringing of a church bell in his ears. The guards stirred, one was rubbing his eyes, he had clearly been asleep on his feet, Sigurd saw they were now scouting out in the darkness. He stood out like a sore thumb and he prayed silently to Ullr[8] and promised him a sacrifice if he would let him stay undetected. To his right something stirred, a large sow and her piglets were moving into the field looking for food, he thanked the gods for the distraction as the guards started loosing arrows in their direction, he turned and hurried for cover as a single arrow flew past him as he dived behind a smashed merchants stall.

So, human or raven, Sigurd could not go near that unholy relic, so nothing for it but to wait for the traitor to leave the safety of the castle. Again he moved through the ruins without making a sound, until he came to a tumbled down halftimbered building where he could settle down for the night. In the darkness he spotted an altar and the ripped edges of a burned tapestry, behind the altar lay a large broken wooden cross, on its back he spotted old runes carved into the coarse grain of the wood, “sanctuary” he read as his fingers traced the runes. This was a house of the white

[8] Norse God of hunting and skiing.

christ, but the runes was of the true gods, he kicked the dirt and dust away from the floorboards and spotted a rune, simply carved, worn down and he doubted he would have spotted it with his old eyes, it was made to look like it was just a scratch, something the christian priests would not notice in their everyday doings. This rune symbolised something hidden, Sigurd grabbed his knife and used it to loosen the board and lifted it away, underneath lay a dusty waxed cloth bundle. As Sigurd lifted the bundle and peeled back the cloth a beautiful helmet of an older design appeared, it had the bespeckled eye protection he had only seen on tapestries when he had visited the great hall of his jarl. The helmet was inlaid with a silver pattern of a great dragon twisted around the great tree Yggdrasil[9], he smiled as he leaned his back against the altar and placed the helmet on his head. Sigurd was hungry and tired, hadn't had any food since the night before and apart from passing out when he skinchanged, he had had no sleep since the morning of the battle at Hastings. He searched his scavenged pouch and found a couple of strips of dried meat, it was tough and stringy, he guessed some sort of venison, he chewed on it for a long time and felt his hunger subside slightly as it went down. By the light of the moon and the far off glow of the burning forest he slumped down and fell into a deep sleep.

Sigurd dreamed of a dark world, gloomy cast in a red glow, sounds of killing and dying coming from below him as he flew over the battle of Hastings. On the top of the hill he saw his king, Harold Godwinson resplendent, armoured and armed like his own Huscarls, commanding the shieldwall to hold as a section of the line broke and pursued a faint retreat of Norman knights. He saw himself amongst the huscarls trying to close the gap as the Normans wheeled around and rode down their disorganised pursuers. The man who had been Sigurd stood in the gap as a group of knights charged in, he split the helmet and face of the first to reach him, his dane axe cleaved through the front leg of the second horse sending it and its rider crashing to the ground. But the shieldwall did not reform around him and the other huscarls, instead it broke and the gap widened. Sigurd saw the man who had been him take the blow that killed him, he saw his body fall to the ground as the young arrogant Norman rode passed him towards Godwinson...

[9] Yggdrasil is the great tree at the center of the norse world, its branches reach into the heavens and its roots reach into each of the nine worlds.

Sigurd woke with a start, it was well past dawn, several ravens were cawing a warning nearby, and he heard voices moving towards him. He looked around trying to discern where they were coming from, to his left he decided, the road and the castle was to his right, and these voices sounded Saxon not Norman. Quickly he got to his feet and moved towards the voices, he heard the creak of a pushcart wheels, and saw a small child gathering metalscraps in a wicker basket, a boy, lanky with the look of one experiencing a growth spurt and waiting for the muscles to catch up with the length of his limbs, came round a scorched wall pushing the cart and several other children moved back and forth offloading their baskets in the cart. Close by a large man moved into view and called the kids to stay near him, he had the well muscled and burned arms of a seasoned blacksmith, he looked around worriedly as he bent over a fallen church door and started to pry of the iron hinges, Sigurd felt no danger from the man and was getting ready to present himself as he heard a child scream in terror. Five Norman knights on foot were running towards the children and cart pushing teen with swords drawn, with little thought Sigurd's sword was in his hand and he was moving to put himself between the knights and the children. The knight's, who had surely thought they were attacking a group of unarmed peasants, were suddenly faced with a shadowy swordwielding warrior. Sigurd heard one utter a prayer or curse, it was hard to know in the rough tongue of the Normans, he could hardly believe that they had once been norsemen like him, three stumbled trying to keep their distance from him. But the last two moved on with raised swords, not towards Sigurd, but the children, he stopped one with a brutal chop to the inside of his right knee and the Norman crumbled to the ground with a yelp of pain. The other one turned to face him as the three others regrouped and fanned out to surround him, the knight’s sword was longer than Sigurd’s by at least a hand, and he was armoured in a horseman's mail and Norman helmet. He should have had every advantage, Sigurd was out armoured and out numbered, but as the knight swung his sword against Sigurd, he moved with his newfound speed and smashed his pommel into the noseguard of the knights helmet, he felt blood spurt from the nose over his hand as the metal bent into his face the knight dropped like a stone. Two of five were down, one out cold and the other trying to staunch the bleeding from his leg.

Sigurd looked around for the other three, two were moving against him from opposite sides, between them he saw the last one holding the child he had first seen,

with a glowed hand clamped firmly over the kid's mouth. It was a young girl, Sigurd realised, though it was hard to see through the grime and soot covering her face, tears of fear made streaks on her cheeks, a burning hatred and anger filled Sigurd's chest, his blood began to boil and he cursed the three men in his native tongue. As he moved against the closest man, the one on his left moved to strike him in his unguarded side, but before Sigurd could react the man crumbled under a rain of blows to his back as the smith used the hinge of the church door to pummel the knight to the ground, the teen boy following close by with a wicked looking seax was finishing of the unconscious knight with deep slash across the throat. Sparks flew as Ravens Beak clashed with Norman steel, the knight was fast, almost inhumanly so, but Sigurd was faster still, and the fight soon finished with an upwards slash to the knight's groin. The last knight ran, he released the young girl, he was outnumbered and had just seen four of his fellow knights fall to a warrior and a rather large father covered in blood and brainmatter. A Norman knight had near to no match on horseback, but on foot, on the broken ground of the ruined town, this was where the warrior of the north was the strongest.

Sigurd moved to follow, but felt a strong hand grasp his left arm, the smith smiled and signalled for him to move away from the castle. The teen boy and the children were stripping the dead knights of anything of value, armour and all. Sigurd wanted to go after the last knight, he would certainly get reinforcements and be back. The smith could clearly see the worry on his face and talked in a mix of Saxon and Norse in an archaic accent, though Sigurd understood quite clearly: *"We are not the only ones out today, even if he gets help we will be long gone before they find us. Come with us and hurry, the cart is heavy and we have long to go before we are truly safe."*

The smith grabbed the handcart as the teen took the young girl on his back and started moving east out of the ruined town, more children gathered around the group, 9 children in all had joined them. The eastern city gate was burned out and a small path was cleared through it, Sigurd and the smith ducked a fallen and charred beam to get through. The eastern farmland was trampled and destroyed, a great camp had stood here days before, many fires had burned and horseshit covered most of the ground, the Norman host of locusts had moved west to plunder and scar the land. As soon as they were out of sight of the the Castle at Hastings, the smith and his

flock seemed to loosen up and the children started to play games, the girl had taken a place on the cart and was sorting through the metal scraps, expertly she sorted pots of copper and iron nails and other bits in separate piles, sometimes not even Sigurd's raven eyes could see the difference. The smith explained: *"The girl can feel the metal, she can even tell you if your coin is pure just from touching them. It's a great boon for a smith to have such a talented ward. Oh.. Yes, these are not mine, I have rescued and adopted these children from both church and Normans. Soon we will be at my home, it is a safe place, guarded by ancient wards, if you don't know where it is you would not find it, even with those ravens helping you.*" The smith gestured to the flock of ravens that was still following Sigurd.

The sun was high in the sky when a copse of trees came into view and the children ran towards it and disappeared between the trees. The smith gestured Sigurd forward, and pushed the cart against what looked to be a solid wall of blackthorn bushes, but the bushes yielded and let them through. Inside the copse Sigurd smelled metalworking, and lots of people, in the middle of a clearing stood a rich smithy, a great hall beside it and small huts dotted around it. Children of all ages greeted them as they passed, a teenage girl dressed as a bride of the White Christ was holding a baby by the door of the smithy. The smith parked the cart and looked to Sigurd, he gestured to the small village and spoke a formal greeting: *"Welcome Traveler, I am Unfirth of the Haestingas, my daughter, Alfflaed, and I invite you to share our roof and partake in our food. In this time of war and devastation we have more than most, so we share it gladly with those who deserve it. These children are our wards, orphans from war or from their kin's superstitions, the trees are our protection, an old magic lies over them and holds those with evil intent at bay. But enough about me and mine, who are you, our brave protector?"*
Sigurd had not spoken a word since meeting the smith, and he was unsure if being a norseman was a good thing here, but then he realised, Unfirth had spoken to him with a mix of Saxon and Norse, they were already aware that he was not Saxon. Sigurd answered: *" I'm Sigurd…. eh… Rafn. I don't believe I have any kin to boast of any more, but I fought for your King at Hastings and saw him fall."*
"Ha, my king, last year we had a different king, tomorrow we will have a new one, maybe a new one the day after, it is always so. But welcome Sigurd Rafn or was it The Raven? Ha. Stay for a while, I wish to reward your service to me, how does a

mailshirt sound? I have some, fresh from the Normans, we just need to wash off the blood and fit it to you, Ha. It will take me a day or two. Alfflaed will show you a place to wash and sleep. Someone will come and gather you for supper, and Sigurd, I have heard stories of your kind, please do not leave the trees as a man, before you are ready to leave for good, we are protected by the wards, but also by the secrecy of this place."
Sigurd settled into a hay mattress in a small hut, freshly washed and smelling of herbal soap, his body was not tired, but his head was beginning to feel like it had been split open by a blow from an axe. The now familiar fatigue overtook him and he knew he would become a raven again as he passed out of consciousness.

As he woke again he spread his wings and looked for an opening to leave the hut from, where the gable of the roof met the wall, a space big enough to let in fresh air conveniently fit him as he jumped through and took to his wings again. Several children smiled and waved at him as he began to circle the village. He settled in a tree and watched the smith work on his mailshirt, he replaced broken rings, and fit it to measure. When he looked satisfied he called for the teen boy who was slumbering in a corner to stoke and bellow the forge as he placed the mail in the hot coals and watched intensely, at some point he saw what he was looking for and grabbed the hot metal with large thongs. He quenched it in a vat of oil that began to boil as the metal submerged, as he removed it Sigurd watched the metal cool with his raven eyes. The smith placed the oil covered mail back in the now cooling forge and scooped some powdered charcoal over it.
The smith looked up at Sigurd, and smiled: *" I knew you would not be able to keep away, ravens are curious creatures after all, your allfather knows that does he not. This process makes the iron harder, and darkens it. I will leave it in the cooling coals overnight, and tomorrow my daughter will sew in a soft leather lining. It will be heavy, but it will protect you better than just that gambeson you're wearing when you walk around. Now the food will be ready shortly, if you can, join us, if not, there are some birdseeds by the stable, HAH."*
But Sigurd couldn't just change, so as the smith and his adopted family gathered in the hall next to the smithy to eat their supper he watched over them, flying to the edge of the trees. Perching on a branch he peered in the direction of Hastings, when he thought of the man who killed him, or even just the treacherous English scout he

felt the raven in the back of his mind stir, the hate and anger left a metallic taste in his mouth. As the sun set on his third day as a raven he began to feel the change coming over him, but this time he pushed it back, he willed it to wait and flew back to the hut and settled on the bed before he passed out.

As Sigurd woke he smelled food and a lit tallow candle on the single table with a small stool stood by the door. A bowl of potage and a big lump of freshly baked hearty brown bread sat on the table, still steaming hot and a candle cast light about the hut, he ate hungrily and left nothing in the bowl, feeling his hunger truly sated for the first time in days. As he finished he heard a silent knock on the door and a soft voice speaking. “If you are awake, my father invites you to share the warmth of our hearth fire!” Alfflead said in Saxon with the same blend of archaic Norse as Unfirth the Smith. Sigurd opened the door and looked at the young woman in the light of the moon and his single candle. She was still clad in the habit of a wife of the white christ as she beckoned him to follow her. As they entered the hall beside the smithy some of the older kids were clearing away tables and benches as several younger kids were sitting on fur pillows listening to the smith telling a story in front of a big fireplace. He was sitting and holding a young baby boy, in a big chair of oak, almost a throne, intricately carved with symbols and creatures Sigurd immediately identified as in the old Swedish style, at some point a cross had been carved on the back but with far less care than the old carvings. Alfflaed bade Sigurd sit on a bench and whispered that the children would soon be going to bed, and true to her words, soon more and more kids slumped over and fell asleep, she and the elder children carried to sleeping children from the hut until only Unfirth and Sigurd was left. Unfirth of the Hastinggas looked at Sigurd as he rocked the baby silently in his arms and whispered *”My daughter will collect my grandson shortly, and then we can talk, you and I!”*
Alfflead lifted the child out of her fathers well muscled arms and gave him a kiss on the check as she left for her bed. The smith got up and dragged another chair over to the fireplace and found a couple of wooden drinking cups and poured them from a big pitcher of and pointed for Sigurd to sit in the big chair as he handed him one. Sigurd drank from the cup and knew even before the liquid hit his lips that it was spiced mead, the taste of uniberry and meadowsweet mixed with honey and made

Sigurd feel homesick. They sat, drinking in silence for what felt like a long time, and when they both had emptied their cups, the smith filled them again.

"So…" Unfirth started. *"I don't mind drinking in silence when I'm drinking alone, but when I'm in company, I talk or they do, and I don't think you will start before more of my mead has loosened your tongue. Hah. So if you don't mind I will tell you a story!"* Sigurd nodded affirmingly and listened as the big man began his story.
"As I told you, I am Unfirth of the Haestingas! My kin used to rule this land, Hasting is named in their honour, when we came here we were nothing more than seafaring raiders, not unlike your kin I bet, our gods was much like yours, we settled here, build our farms and villages, sometimes we fought the locals, sometimes we married them, in time two peoples became one people. We even became Christians and built churches, some of us continued to tell stories of the old ways, we always loved to tell stories, but for most of my people the old gods and ways are lost to myth and mist. The stories I tell my wards are the stories of my people, of honour on the battlefield, of intrigue and betrayal in the halls of power, of how we became the ruler of this land. But I also tell them what I know of the people who came before us, those who lived here and spoke a different language and who left marks all over this land, we honour them by remembering them. Some of my kin call them strangers, Welsh, but I know that we were the strangers here, I see in my wards the faces of the many people who have and still call this island home, we are one people, the dead king Harold was of my people and yours, but that did not make him any less of this land."
Unfirth pause to refill the cups once again. *"The Normans are different I think, they bring hate and even though they claim to be christians like my people, their god seems darker and more bloodthirsty. I have not met one Norman priest who was not a lecherous drunkard and a fiend. There is a church not far from here, the local priest was replaced by Norman monks under Edward the Confessor, they built their monastery on other peoples lands, some of my wards are kin to those who were thrown out. Some years ago, a nunnery joined the monastery, and my daughter felt the calling of the church and wanted to become a nun. She is my only child, and I have always been too indulgent of her whims, so foolish of me, I let her leave. I got letters from her, I can read and write you see, as can she, so whenever she could she wrote to her lonely old dad, no… no I was never lonely, my many*

wards see to that. In her letters she told me that the mother superior did not want them to write in English only in Latin, because she wanted to read the letters before they were sent. But Alfflead noticed that the letters she wrote in Latin never got to me, so she found a young monk who seemed to like her and used him to send me letters in English. When this was discovered she was punished, nothing in the letters was against the church, but they did not like that she told me of the goings-on of the priestly devils. Her son, my grandson is loved here, but he was not sired by love, an old Norman priest forced himself on Alfflead and when it became evident that she was with child he tried to work and starve her to death. A fellow nun helped her escape and she found her way back to me. At first she was ashamed and thought I would love her less if I knew what had happened to her, but I could never love her less than fully. She gave birth to her son here, he is a strong and willful boy and my daughter loves him just as I love her, fully and without conditions. I went to the monastery to inform the priest of his son's birth, and that he had been named in honour of the greatest king who had ruled these lands, Aethelstan. He would not see me, he sent guards to throw me out and threatened to have me excommunicated, that is banned from the church and heaven. I waited, hidden and watched the gates for nine days, I knew him as soon as I saw him leave, Alflead had described him well. He was going to Canterbury it seemed and I followed in the disguise of a pilgrim. The first night his group set camp by the side of the road, and I joined them around their fire, they did not trust me, and set a guard as they slept. The guard was the young monk who I am sure, loved my daughter. He knew who I was and kept a watchful eye in the other direction as I unmanned the cursed priest and turned him into a nun with a burning branch. He made some noise about it but I managed to escape and it's been some days since I have been to church last. Ha. So you understand, I know revenge and I know hate, I also know the curse you carry, and before you ask, I do not fully understand it, but it is formed by hate and lust for revenge, it is a bloody path you tread now. There is only death in your future, because you have already died. If you let it, the animal spirit will take you over, but if you fight it and keep control, the curse is a vehicle for the revenge you seek."

Unfirth the smith had been talking so long that the fire had gone out and only a few tallow candles were casting light on the scene. Sigurd had not spoken a word but listened intensely, both his host and his own culture valued storytelling and this had

been a compelling one. His host signalled that his story had come to an end, he motioned for Sigurd's cup and went to fill it and the pitcher from a barrel, and when he sat down again it was clear that it was now Sigurd's turn to tell a story. Having spoken but a few words since becoming a Valravn, his words now flowed, it felt, without end, as he told his tale. He told of sailing with Hardrada, of fighting in the battle of York and winning glory, of facing of against the army of Godwinson, of how his friend had stood on a bridge and fended of a whole army with his great daneaxe, how he was captured after Hardrada fell, how he felt that this was his story's end. He spoke of how Godwinson had spoken to the captives and promised them life for service, how proud he had been to be named to the king's huscarls even though he had been an enemy merely hours before. As his words formed and the story took form, Sigurd noticed that Alflead was now listening in on the story, still dressed as a nun, but her headdressing was gone and her short hair was gleaming like copper in the light of the candles. She smiled a friendly sympathetic smile when she saw him noticing her, the smile reminded him of the valkyrie that had failed to gather him for the great feast in Valhalla. He continued to tell of all that had happened until he met up with Unfirth, of the burning hatred he felt for the man who killed him and how he felt no purpose and how no heart beat in his chest. Unfirth listened and only paused to fill the cups again, when Sigurd talked about finding the helmet in the church, the smith reached out and took the helmet from him. He turned it over in the light of the dwindling candlelight and traced his fingers along the pattern of the great tree, his fingers lingered on the head of the dragon. *"This is good work, old, very old, there is runework here, subtle, hard to see, the decorations are beautiful. There is some power in this helmet, see here"* Unfirth held the helmet closer to a candle and pointed out two ravens sitting in the branches of Yggdrail. *"Hugin and Munin[10], the ravens of the allfather, maybe you were fated to find this helmet, or maybe we see what we want to see. It is a good helmet, and I believe it will serve you well. Now, go and sleep, tomorrow you will leave here, and continue on your cursed path, gods only know where it will lead you."* The smith clasped Sigurd's arm, handed him the helmet and looked him in the eyes, in the back of Sigurd's head the raven's animal soul screamed and fought for control, Sigurd pushed it back and it silenced.

[10] Hugin and Munin are the two ravens of Odin, their name is translated as "Thought" and "Memory" and whenever Odin sent them to spy on the world, he feared for them, but he feared the loss of Munin most.

After eating a breakfast of cold gruel and a buttered hunk of bread left for him on the table by the door. Sigurd stepped out of the tiny hut, leaving no real trace showing he had even been there. The smiths wards greeted him as he walked towards the sounds of hammers ringing against metal in the forge. There were smiling faces all around him but he felt nothing but an immense sorrow, he was going to leave this place, he knew that he had to. He knew what fate demanded of him, he needed to find the man who killed him, he was driven forward by a feeling of vengeance. Whenever his mind settled on the thought of revenge he could hear the raven screaming in the back of his head, but here, in this sanctuary for lost souls he could quit the raven, it was not silent, just quieter though still there. As the forge came into view, he spotted Unfirth and the teen boy working by an anvil, both swinging a hammer in a perfect rhythm, the redhot steel sang a story. His new mail armour hung from the rafters of the smithy, the light of the morning sun caught the rings, they shone with a bluish black metallic shine, like the feathers of a raven. The song of metal stopped and Unfirth greeted Sigurd as the boy placed the metal back in the fire and started working the bellows. *"Friend, I hope you slept well and are ready for your journey, I have had a message that the Norman duke has moved east, towards Dover, it is far on foot, but shorter as the raven flies as they say. Hah! Let's see if the mail fits so you can be on your way."*

Sigurd stood at the western edge of the trees surrounding the village sanctuary, facing Unfirth and his adopted kin. He had only been amongst them for little over a day, but he felt a kinship with these folks he had not felt since before sailing for England. Sigurd spoke to them.
"Thank you Unfirth of the Haestingas, I will honour your gift of hospitality, I hope to meet you again, if for nothing else to repay you the debt I owe for this mailshirt and the stories you honoured me with!"
Unfirth replied with a smile on his lips. *"Sigurd Rafn, you honoured us with your presence here, and the mail was already repaying a debt, but I too wish to see you again, if not only to hear tales of your journey, but I fear I will never know how your story ends. Go with God is the normal greeting of goodbye in these lands, but you would probably just ask which god, so may the gods favour your journey seems more apt right now! Hah."*

Sigurd walked out the way he had come in, the blackthorn hedges opening to let him through, he knew that if he had turned to look at his hosts the hedges would already have closed and leave no trace of a path. He started his journey walking towards Hastings and was once again joined by ravens, though less than before. Soon he felt the change come over him again, but this time, instead of fighting it and pushing it back he leaned into it and though he did pass out, he felt no loss of time or disorientation when he soon after spread his wings. The change was easier now, he felt more control over the ravens animal spirit, he could not exactly control when, but he could push it back or lean in, maybe with time he would be in full control. For now he let his mighty raven wing lift him high into the air and once again he saw the destruction the Normans brought to the lands of England, the path of their army was clear, villages was devastated and where fields had not already been harvested they burned, though that might have been defiant Saxons depriving the Normans of fodder for their horses. A big army moves slowly, and long before the Bastard was even near London, Sigurd caught up with them. The army looked like it was about to scatter, large raiding bands with one or two nobles in charge broke loose and were raiding, it looked like a wedge being driven through to split a log. In the center of the wedge flew the hateful papal banner, a heavily armoured retinue escorted it and what could only be the Norman Duke himself. With Sigurd's new eyes he could make out the details of the men besides the banner, the Duke stood out, a powerfully built man with a paranoid demeanor, hatred filled Sigurd's heart when he recognized the arrogant young man who rode by the duke's side, it was the man who had killed him. The raven spirit screamed and pressed for him to dive and rend the flesh with his beak and claws, it took all the selfcontrol that Sigurd had left not to give in to it. There was no way he would even get close to the man as long as the cursed banner protected him, and even if he could, attacking a heavily armed man protecting the duke was suicide, so he went to look for the traitor scout.

He spent the whole day looking from group to group of raiders as they tore through the land, the scout was so far nowhere to be found, as the darkness of the night fell over the land, so did a silence as the Norman fiends settled into larger camps with their looted wealth. He spotted the priest from Hastings castle first, he was in a midsize village a good ways from the main army, a group of about a hundred

warriors was making camp in the village. The priest was holding a sermon in torch light outside of a halftimbered and thatchroofed church with several knights kneeling before him. Sigurd smelled death in the air and heard the weeping of a woman from inside the church. A Norman knight exited the church while fixing his breeches and joined his comrades in kneeling before the priest, his bloody knife hanging from his belt and he was smiling a wicked and satisfied smile. Sigurd and the ravens still following him settled in a large ash tree standing close by the church yard, the village was eerily quiet apart from the horses and the preaching, the smell of death and blood grew stronger and it was coming from the church. The priest ended his prayer and stretched out a torch towards the kneeling knights in the front row, as one grabbed it, others got up and took up lit torches as they moved towards the church. The scout was there now, Sigurd recognized him even though he had a hood covering his face in shadow, he closed the double doors leading into the church as several other men at arms barred the doors with a large granite bench. Sigurd had no doubt about what was about to happen, but he doubted there was anything he could do to stop it. As the flames started licking up the walls of the building could smell the burning of hair and flesh, but there were no sounds of distress from the inside. The knights spread out and settled down for the night in the farmhouses that used to belong to the people now burning in the church, the lower ranking soldiers began patrolling the village perimeter and others lay down to sleep in barns and under the ash tree.

Sigurd listened to the crackling of wood burning as the roof collapsed in on the halftimbered building sending sparks flying into the night sky, under him he heard coarse laughter as the soldiers shared stories about their conquests and passed around wineskins. He didn't really understand their language, but he had been on enough campaigns to know what they were saying. He was once again filled with a familiar hatred, there was no honour here, they had slaughtered defenceless people, he wanted to kill them all, but he was wildly outnumbered and even with his new speed and strength he doubted he could stand against their numbers. As the night went on and the wine ran out the now drunken soldiers beneath his tree started to doze off and snoring replaced laughter. Once in a while a tired man would come from guard duty and rouse whoever was next and settle in to sleep themselves, the English scout was amongst them men joining the watch late in the night.

From his branch high in the tree Sigurd saw him move in the perimeter of the church yard, the flames were still high, smelling more like a tallow candle now than a woodfire. Sigurd pushed off from his perch and spread his wings, the updraft from the fire made it possible for him to glide past the church without beating his wings. He landed in some shrubs by a wealthier farmhouse where the light from the fire didn't reach, and he felt the change come over him. He blacked out, but only shortly and this time he woke up on his feet, he was well inside the cordon of guards, but still in danger if he was spotted. It was still dark, the only real light in the village was from the fire, so Sigurd slipped from shadowy spot to shadowy spot while moving in the direction of where he last saw the scout, he found him crouched over under a tree in the graveyard by the church. The scout was sobbing silently with his face buried in both his hands, his back was towards Sigurd and it would be all too easy to end him quickly, but pity stayed his judgement. The scout had carved a cross in the tree, under it was carved what, though Sigurd could only read runes, must have been several names. Sigurd stood silently, stepped away and watched the man weep, his sword in his hand, but the hatred he had felt moments before was dwindling looking at this pitiful creature. The raven's animal spirit screamed for him to kill the man, but Sigurd the man kept control. The ravens that followed him settled in the tree and stared silently at Sigurd and the English scout.

In the distance Sigurd heard the silent twang of a bowstring and the thud of an arrow hitting a soft target, the sound would have been near inaudible if not for his new stronger senses. Under the crackling of boiling fat and popping of bones, Sigurd felt that people other than the Norman guards were moving in the night. The scout turned around while using his sleeve to wipe snot and tears from his face, startling when he locked eyes with Sigurd, his hands grabbing for the langseax that hung by his side, but before he could reach it the tip of Raven's Beak was at his throat. The scout let his hands fall to his sides and looked at Sigurd with a mix of dread and resignation. He spoke, in a whisper, in clear Norse: *"You are the Raven that has been following me aren't you? Are you an angel or a devil? Have you been sent to punish me for my sins? If so, I'm ready to face God's judgement!"*
Sigurd spoke softly: *"You're judged, not by the White Christ, but by your actions against your own people, a traitor to your kin and culture that fights for the destroyers of your land!"*

The scout bowed his head and made the sign of the cross over his chest. *"I have been bound in service to an evil lord, the Norman priest, who held this village and surrounding land under Edward the Confessor, until he was forced out by Harold, the priest took my niece as hostage and forced me with him to Duke Wiliams court. I have hunted and scouted for him ever since we landed back in England, all to keep my brother's family safe from his wrath. I make no excuses, I am a traitor to England and to King Godwinson and my own family, if this is why I die, I will die the last of my kin, for my dear niece died of a fever before the army sailed for Hastings, and my brother and his family burns with the church my kin helped build."*

Again Sigurd the Raven screamed for Sigurd the Man to kill the wretch before him, but he stayed his blade, in the distance he heard a grunt and a thud as a body hit the ground. The night was slowly coming alive with sounds of many men moving, the metallic tang of fresh blood hitting Sigurd's nostrils. A shout of alarm came from behind him as a guard came around the corner of the nearest farmhouse and spotted the scene of Sigurd holding his sword at the throat of the kneeling scout. Sigurd turned to face the guard knowing that he could have killed the Saxon but hadn't and now he gave him the perfect opportunity to kill him. The night came alive with voices as the guards warning was answered, not all voices were Norman though, some were Saxon, and sounds of violence exploded all around the church yard.

As the guard was joined by several more common soldiers and one knight who was still fastening the last straps on his mail armour, the scout joined Sigurd to stand against them. Sigurd readied himself for the fight, they were outnumbered four to one. None of the Normans were carrying bows so they would have to come to him, he looked at the scout, he was standing to his left, stone faced and determined but with streaks of tears running down his cheeks. The scout said: *"I'll stand with you or die to redeem my honour and my soul!"* Every ounce of hatred Sigurd had held for the man was gone, and as the Normans moved forward in the low light of the breaking dawn, he stood with his enemy. The Normans charged them, first the common soldiers with spear and axe, and behind them the knight with his Norman sword, Sigurd sidestepped a spear thrust and sliced through the soldier's neck as the spear buried itself in the trunk of the tree, the next attacker stumbled over something unseen and as the tried to regain his footing Raven's Beak split open his skull. Beside

him the scout had smashed one Norman in the face with a burning torch and disabled another's right arm with a wicked swing from his langeaxs. The burned man stumbled into Sigurd's range and Sigurd kicked him on the side of the knee and was met by a satisfying crunch as the knee buckled in a way it wasn't supposed to. The last three soldiers hesitated as the Norman knight pushed past them and directed a challenge towards Sigurd in broken Norse, *“Face me nithing, and I shall end you in the name of God!”*
Sigurd stepped forward and indicated his acceptance of the single combat challenge, both the scout and the three remaining Normans stepped back from now two duelists. Sigurd looked the Norman in the eyes and said: *”I'm impressed that you still know the language and customs of your ancestors, but I doubt we have time to put down the hazel branches to make the square, so let's just get stuck in!”* As he finished Sigurd launched himself at the knight and even though he moved fast and struck with the force of Mjoelnir, the Norman sidestepped and deflected his sword stroke. Onlookers would have a hard time following what happened next, as Sigurd and the Norman exchanged fierce and fast eye blurring blows, each being unable to penetrate the other’s defence. The knight had the advantage of reach with his longer Norman sword, and managed to catch Sigurd with the tip of the blade just under his helmet’s eye protection. Sigurd stepped back and ran his left hand over the wound, he felt the cut, there was pain but very little blood, the knight crossed himself and smiled as he claimed first blood. Sigurd sensed people moving amongst the houses as the sound of fighting around them started to fade, the three Norman footsoldiers and the scout were keeping their distance and awaiting the outcome of the honour duel.

As the dawning light grew stronger, Sigurd saw the first group of men moving towards the church yard armed with bows and spears, he needed to end the fight fast. Moving forward he feigned a stumble and as the knight tried to take advantage Sigurd’s blade caught him below the short sleeves of his mail on his left arm, cleaving through muscle and bone and leaving the arm hanging in nothing but skin and sinew. The wound brought the Norman to the knee and the fight was all but over when Raven’s Beak finished it with a slash across the neck leaving the knight drowning in his own blood.
During the fight Sigurd had ended up with his back to the three Norman soldiers, and as the Saxon Scout yelled a warning he felt a sudden pain in his right arm as a

poorly aimed axe swing glanced off his mail and broke the bone. He turned and smashed his left fist into the mouth of the soldier, feeling rotten teeth break and blood spurting from the Norman's face, Sigurd saw the soldier's last two companions being cut down by arrows. His sword arm hanging useless by his side, Sigurd drew his seax and jammed the blade into the sternum of the man who had broken his arm, angling it up to find the heart.

As he withdrew his bloody knife from the dead soldier, he looked around at the many faces that now stood around observing him, Saxons all if he was any judge. Sigurd sheathed his knife and bent over to pick up Raven's Beak with his left hand, never taking his eyes off the men surrounding him. Several held their bow ready with arrows nocked, they looked like they were members of several different warbands, but they did not take any action towards Sigurd and the Saxon scout, If they had, Sigurd was not sure there was much he could do, he could fight with his sword in his left hand, but not this many people and not with them holding bows.

His right arm burned with a dull pain and he felt the tiredness in his body that he now recognized as him transforming into the raven. He felt the raven screaming in panic, wanting to escape being cornered, but one thing was clear to Sigurd, with a broken arm he wasn't flying anywhere, and there was no way of knowing how a group of archers would react to someone transforming into a bird right in front of them. So Sigurd pushed the feeling back and the raven grew quieter, but it would not stop screaming in the back of his mind.

Sigurd looked around to see if there was anyone who stood out and might be the leader of the warriors, the Saxon scout was ripping at his left sleeve, trying to remove the symbol of the bastard's army that was sewn there. A warrior stepped towards the scout holding a knife, talking low in saxon looking like he recognised the scout, but instead of attacking he helped him cut off the piece of cloth and the two men clasped hands and hugged, tears again streaming down the face of the scout. The group of warriors parted as a middle aged man in the armour of a Huscarl, though richer and more lavish adorned with decoration than a common solider, pushed his way to the front of the group. This was clearly the leader of this warband, but Sigurd did not recognize him from the company of the Kings Huscarls, nor was he Leofwine or Gyrth, Harold's brothers. He spoke in Saxon, too fast for Sigurd to understand him clearly, but before he could explain he didn't understand, the scout stepped forward and answered the Huscarl who nodded and gestured towards Sigurd. The scout

joined Sigurd in the circle of warriors and spoke in Norse: *”We have not been introduced, my name is Martin, I have asked the lord Edric Cild for the honour of translating for you. He asked your name and where you are from? To whom do you swear? Be careful how you answer, neither of us are out of danger right now!”* Sigurd looked at the lord, he knew of his legend, they called him Edric the Wild, a fierce warrior, who held to honour and rumours had it, not entirely true to the belief in the White Christ. He answered: *”My name is Sigurd Rafn, I sailed across the whaleroad with my King Harald Hardrada, who I was sworn to by duty. To King Harald Godwinson I swore my oath out of honour and love, that was a true and brave king worth serving. But now, I am sworn only to take vengeance on the men who killed…”* Sigurd trailed off, maybe he shouldn't mention that he fell at Hastings, *”Who killed King Godwinson! I have tracked this man, thinking him a Nithing deserving of a dishonourable death, he has proved me wrong by word and action!”* Martin the scout translated and Edric the Wild laughed loudly and looked at a big blond warrior with a big beard, who nodded affirmingly. Sigurd looked at Martin and said: *”It seems you are not the only one who knows Norse here, that man looks like a dane to me!”* Martin answered: *“You're right, so let’s not say anything we don't want the lord Edric to hear!”* He translated their whole conversation and got another nod from the Danish warrior, Edric smiled and said: *”While our friend here makes sure we understand each other, I will make it clear, I have very little trust for strangers right now, but I saw you kill this Norman shit…”* He kicked the corpse of the Norman Knight as for emphasis, and laughed again. *“soo… I hope I can trust you to kill more Normans, then I will take you into my service Sigurd Rafn of Norway.”*

Sigurd answered: *”I will kill Normans, but I can no longer swear to any man, but I will not fight against you or yours that I can swear gladly.”* The raven was screaming again, warning Sigurd of the danger he was in.

“That will be enough then, but what to do with this turncoat you thought nithing, he has fought against me and my kin, you claim him redeemed but that is only in your eyes.” Edric answered, through the Dane this time as Martin's face turned white with fear.

Sigurd spoke: *“He fought like a cornered wolf beside me, and he was sworn to the Norman lord of this village, if the priest is dead, he is no longer bound to the Normans, you are free to take him into your service if you wish.”*

Edric answered: *"The priest is not dead yet, but my men captured him and two of his bastard horseshit knights, but before we leave this place, Martin will be free to swear the oath you suggest. Follow me both!"*

As Sigurd and Martin followed Edric the Wild, his men started stripping the Norman corpses of anything of value. The blond Dane and several other hardened warriors moved in behind them with weapons ready, clearly acting like the lord's Hearth Guard. In the village green more warriors were building a pyre out of wood from the nearby buildings, three bound and naked figures were kneeling with their backs against a low stone wall, they looked beaten and broken, but Sigurd felt no pity for them. *"They burned the people of this place, so we will burn them! I will take Martin into my service when we leave here. I can always use another good fighter, and especially one that can speak both Norman and Norse. But know this Martin, you will still have to earn my trust and that is not an easy task. My cousin Hereward is in Flanders in service to their count. I will send you to him with a message, you know one of my men, he will join you on the trip."* While Edric spoke the blond Dane translated every word, Edric signalled for the prisoners to be placed on the pyre and handed a lit torch to Martin the Scout: *"But the first act in my service is to enact vengeance for your own family, after that we fight to push these Norman curs into the sea."* As Martin lit the dry wood and the fire started catching, Edric looked to Sigurd: *"My dear raven, Yes, I know something of your nature I think, you are hurt, and there few places safe in these lands for a man such as you, find sanctuary, heal and come find me, maybe you can earn my trust too, and we'll find these cunts who killed our king, but learn Saxon for the gods sake, my Danish friend here is quite the berserker[11], he will not be around forever. Hah."* Both Edric and the Dane laughed at the last sentence. Sigurd couldn't help but smile, he understood and respected these warriors, he had been around their kind most of his adult life, even some of his childhood, Edric reminded him of his uncle who had served with Hardrada in Miklagaard.

As they watched the fire grow and consume the three condemned one of the warriors who knew something about setting bones bound up Sigurd's arm and gave him a skin

[11] Berserkers was originally and famously followers Thor, who would go into a battle frenzy and fight either in bear skins "bearshirts", or without shirts "Bareshirts"

of spiced mead, to Sigurd it smelled like uniberry and meadowsweet, just like the mead he had with Unfirth. He asked the man about it, and was confirmed in his suspicion, the man indeed knew Unfirth when pressed he answered through Martin who was still acting as his translator: *"My wife was once his ward, she taught me what I know of healing, but there are true healers with Unfirth, my wife goes to see him at his sanctuary, but I don't know where it is, I have only ever met him at market. If you know where to find him, I would tell you to go there, my wife is going to him to stay safe while we travel to London to elect a new king."*
If Sigurd had not already decided he would go back there to rest and heal, he would have felt the fates pressing him to go. As the warriors started moving towards the north, Sigurd started his journey back west. Edric had offered him one of the Norman horses, a mean looking ill-tempered stallion, but he had rejected the offer. It was better to move unseen and by the backways than by speed, especially since he was in little shape to fight. As the sounds of the warband disappeared in the distance he felt the raven grow stronger, he was exhausted and unable to resist the transformation. This time he felt no loss of conscience, but he felt the pain of his broken wing as he settled in a bush to sleep.

What had taken less than a day to fly took him five days, traveling as man by foot at night and sleeping in bushes and hollow trees as a raven by night. There was little food and almost no people in the wake of the Norman advance, on the second night of his trip the sky in the east was painted red with the light of the town of Dover dying in a great fire. On the third day he came upon a burned out village with a pigsty filled with dead pigs, all shot with arrows and not one slaughtered for meat, the raven ate its fill before settling in to sleep in a tumbled down cottage. Wherever Sigurd traveled the air reeked of burning, blood and death, the Normans were scaring the land with fire and sword. He arrived at Unfirth's sanctuary just before the sun rose on the fifth night, he was feverish and on the edge of exhaustion when he stumbled through the thorny hedges and was greeted by Unfirth and Alfflead, he vaguely remembered being placed on a table in the great hall, and being tied down as Unfirth reset his broken arm under the careful instructions of his daughter, after that he remembered nothing…

End of first part of Valravn, to be continued in "Valravn - The Raven and the Wake"