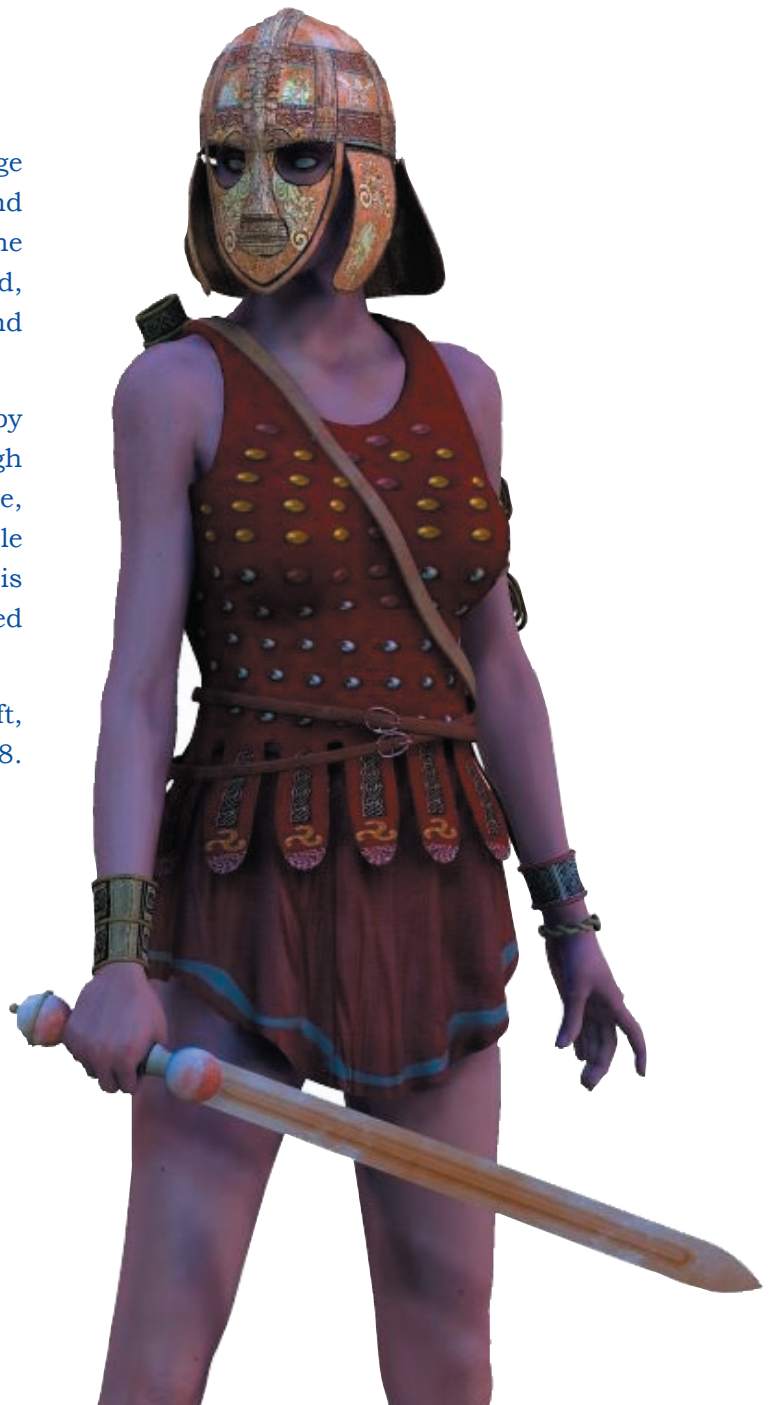


OF A ROPE CEDARBARK

The Far Place stands on the very edge of knowing. It is a realm of storm and stone and loss, upland fortress of the seven winds, an ancient dragon-land, hoarder of secrets, dark, rain-pelted and isolate.

The Far Place is a bleeding land, ruled by animal clan and elemental court. Though human tribes and empires may rise a time, they are fated to crumble before the inexorable power of Storm and Dark. To breathe there is to be changed, to live there is to be moulded and shaped into the image of the land itself.

The Witness of Balin God-Gift,
The Outer Court, Boldhome, 1648.



6 The First Runo: Memories and Other Falsehoods

*To well please a woman 6 bright as bronze burning
6 when Far Point was fought for 6 I have shed blood.*

— *Marginal note.*

Out of the south she came, as mysterious and violent as the blessing winds of Sea Season, and just as beautiful. Out of the south, through gors deep and gallt wide, 'cross ice-shielded streams and shadow-dark valleys. Out of the south, till at last she came to the stead called Lagerwater, home to the Bluefoot Tovtaros, the true Orlanthi folk at the very centre of the world.

Don't laugh you uncut stickpicker! You think it strange for an old man like Braggi to speak of heroes such as she, but I tell you, though neither lhankoring nor skald, my words are sacred, for I was there. I can still see her face in the flames before us, as though it happened but one season past. Hear and understand: *I was there.*

Out of the south she came, twice warned and thrice blessed, this vingan called Cradledaughter, a woman proud and terrible, strange in dress and harsh in voice, rich in laughter and poor in giving praise. Henna-hallowed her hair, spun with knotted copper coins, proclamation to all of the Goddess she served. Shieldless she ranged, with a spear light as Elmal's touch, though it was bound even to the shaft in rune-wrought bronze. At her waist there hung a draw-wand of searing blue iron, pledge gift of the violence she carried like an unborn child.

And she spoke of things we did not understand.

Who she was no one really knew, for she had no kin. Kierston the Lawspeaker first spoke for her, and called her cousin, but Kierston was Amad by birth, and claimed kin in places where even the North Wind would not blow. And honoured though she was, Kierston made her hearth in distant Ironspike, in the cattle-rich lowlands. Ironspike was *not* Lagerwater.

Old Broddi Clapsaddle loved her, and trusted her, but Broddi was humakti, and therefore dead, no longer of the clan. No one should trust the dead in matters of the living, even though Broddi was otherwise much respected, for he was wise for a man — even the women said so — and he bred the finest fighting cuks in all the Far Place. Yet blood is blood only when it flows.

The Women's Circle took her in, and honoured her journey, but that is the way of women; their ways are not the ways of men, and are sometimes strange.

As I remember, it was Orlstein Bluecloud's third year as chieftain of the Tresdarni clan, the year that Conla our tribal king knelt and kissed the golden ring of Harvar Ironfist, betraying every Orlanthi of his tribe. It was the year — though we did not then realise it — that the priestesses of Moon Woman imprisoned the Lord of the Middle Air, the year the free winds ceased to blow.

The Long Dark had been unending, bitter; a season cruel and deadly. The black frost had caught us early, with cattle struck frozen in the fields before we could take them to the byrnes. A sacred bull disappeared

from the chief's own stall, three of our youngest were taken by frostcreepers, and an entire band of bluefoot hunters fell dead on Three Breast Mountain. As I remember, there were dragonewts *everywhere*...

Come FlamaTame, our joy in the Goddess' awakening was tempered by the mourning of our loss, by the dull ache in our swollen stomachs, and by omens foretelling blood-slaked bronze and raging gleed in seasons yet to come.

Then, this woman from the south.

Do not think we dishonoured her, for she was a guest in our stead, and hospitality is Orlanth's first blessing. More than that she was a Red Woman, a vingan, mistress of the kin-blade and maker of warriors and men. We accorded our guest all due honour and deference.

Lagerwater had been without a Stead Daughter since Reydalda Manycalves and her cousins fell in the Righteous Wind, so if Cradledaughter choose, as we grew to know her and to trust her, she might become one blood with the true folk. With patience, and with many giftings, she might take the role of Vinga on the clan ring, and teach the newly-initiated men respect for women and skill with blades, instructing them in both the ways of love and the ways of a warrior in that time they weave a wedding blanket for their brides¹.

But Cradledaughter was a foreigner, and like all foreigners she was impatient and brash.

The vingan was honoured in the great lodge, she received thethane's cup, and a warm place by the fire in the outer hearth. Yet for reasons we could not understand, she wanted more, and she would not respect the traditions of our clan. The ways of Lagerwater are the ways of blood, of family and bloodline and marriage bond, worked out over generations in delicate balance, either in quiet words over a blazing hearth (the women's way), or in honest and bloody violence followed by gifts and oaths of loyalty (the men's way, the better way). As seasons are long, and gifts are many, so the sons of the RidgeLeaper² are patient and slow.

I tell you, she was strange. It wasn't just the way she dressed, for we knew the ways of foreigners. As my name is my strength, even then I had walked the falling path to Ironspike and on to Alda Chur and sacred Wintertop, and some of us had been to distant Herongreen, or even sand-misted Pavis, where the men wear trousers and cohabit with all manner of beasts. Nor was it her looks, though she wore no tribal topknot and I swear her face was bare of tattoos like an untested virgin. It was not even her voice, though she spoke in that atrocious Sartarite way, all sizzle and splutter, sounds sliding past her tongue as a thieving otter midst the high-stream rocks.

No, we thought the woman strange because the Goddess cut for her a cape whose marns we could not recognise as our own. Vingan she was and true, but unlike any Stead Daughter of *our* knowing. She walked a different path. And the visitor held secrets, burdens of which she could not speak.

The yelmalions of the stead distrusted Cradledaughter from the first, for their memories of henna-dyed women were bitter, and unhealed. And she soon lost the ear of the elder warriors, for she was forceful, with little respect for white hair, relying too much on her voice and her wits and her charm. Then the male initiands began to whisper among themselves of this exotic woman whose rune duties included teaching spear play under the sacred oxhide as well as at the practice buttes. The bloodline elders didn't like this, for initiation is a serious and dangerous business. As though it was Cradledaughter's fault the older boys

saw the world through the eye beneath their kilts! Yet as surely as betrayal follows an oath, so was dissent sown upon them all.

Come SalmonTame, Cradledaughter Beyond-the-Blood would visit the warrior's lodge at Elmset. She joined in at the *cuk* fights, something a woman of the stead would never do. She bet and drank and argued with the men as their beloved fighting *cuks* battled with beak and bronze spur. The henna-tressed *vingan* assisted old Broddi with his prize birds, Axe and Bladger, and soon enough mastered the ways of *cuk*pit and of roost. Now such behaviour shocked the women, for they thought themselves above such things. It shocked the men as well, and they told her so, for Cradledaughter bet to *win*, as though the skins and sticklepick she won actually *meant* something. She obtained without honour, without gifting. She simply didn't understand.

As the amber days grew richer and even the snows on Hard Edge retreated to the higher brans, it seemed that a mountain fog fell upon Cradledaughter's spirit, and her once life-rich laughter became forced, and seldom heard.

With Fire Season came the questions. Such strange questions too, and her not even kin. She asked of the dragonewts, their egg cities, and of the cursed ruins of the Youf. She asked also of the forbidden valleys, the animal tribes, the hunters and their high camps in the gors. She asked of the sacred stories, of Odayla and the ancient memories of Orlanth Dragonfriend. And her neither kin nor kayling!

Cradledaughter spoke of things we could not understand. She spoke of past glory of the Sartar high-kings, of Starbrow Kheldon-Queen, of the Far Place united again as part of a free kingdom, our land freed of Lunar butchery. We listened, we tried to answer politely, but the woman was clearly too long on the mountain. We told her, 'We are strong, the gors brings its own freedom.' We said, 'We are Tovtaros, the land herself is our shield.' Did we not have problems enough of our own, what with kinstripe and harvest and Ginijji and the treachery of Conla our sun-swallowed king?

Harvar Ironfist we hated beyond death, but *he* dwelt in distant Alda Chur, and that glass-walled city was halfway to the edge of the world. And as for Sartar, well Sartar was cabbage land, no one had kin worth visiting there. What good ever came from Sartar? As for the Lunars, well they were a strange folk granted, but predictable and weak. They could not touch our uplands, they needed roads, so what concern were they?

This woman had a lot to learn.

And for us, well, Cradledaughter was just too hard to think about. She gave the warriors skulldrums whenever they tried.

Come Earth Season, Cradledaughter's hearth-friends were few. Broddi remained stead-fast of course, and the Women's Circle were supportive though increasingly perplexed. Of the rest, six or eight only, younger male warriors for the most part, drawn to the life and beauty of this stranger, carried into dreaming by the power of her words or the silent longings of their hearts.

In GorsTame, the clan Ring met to discuss this outrageous guest. The elders debated in secret, far from the common hearth, for they knew that public argument would result in a moot, with the thunder of voices and the clanging of spearheads and pots. None wanted this, for Conla our tribal king waited like a hungry haggard, watching for signs of kinstripe, eager for any excuse to intervene. In its wisdom, the Ring decided that Orlstein our chieftain would speak plain words to Cradledaughter. The *vingan* must learn to

accept and respect our ways, to behave properly and to temper her restless impatience. If she could not do this, she must return to her own.

It was too hard for Orlstein, a warrior with a gift for violence but not diplomacy. He did not consider such an action suitably heroic or generous. So, as a good Orlanthi chieftain, he did what any good Orlanthi chieftain would do.

He told his Elmal to deal with it.

6 The Second Runo: A Matter of the Hearth

Now Bhorghil One-Eye was not a particularly evil man, and it's not as though he *wanted* to be petty and officious, or *enjoyed* being a persistent year-round ice wind up the kilt. It's just that he was an elmali, and he was good at what he did.

Orlanthi chieftains embody the Storm, and they strive to practice the Great Virtues. Rune-questers these heroes, reckless in the cattle raid, generous in gifting, bloody in battle, eloquent in the moot, courageous in compassion, ferocious in worship, passionate in praise, resolute in heroquest, tender in courtship, humble in learning from their mistakes. So devoted are they to full breathing and herodome that there never seems time to plan the next sowing or check the sticklepick supply before winter... or even explain to a kin-poor vingan that she has overstayed her welcome.

So they call upon the followers of Elmal, the Cold Sun, loyal god who guards our dearest treasure, shining breastplate of Orlanth Clear Sky. The elmali bloodlines of our tribe serve as Sun Carls and reeves, Defenders of the Stead, Nalda's Thaners, sentries, matchmakers, horse breakers, bee-keepers, protectors of women. While a chieftain blusters and blows, gives gifts, makes treaties, smites Chaos and rushes round the heroplane ensuring the sun will rise tomorrow, it falls to his Sun Carl to attend to the ploughing, the harvest, food storage, fence mending, muck spreading, trollkin crotching... all those necessary, tedious and often unsavoury things beneath a Wind Lord's dignity.

The Sun Carl³ is responsibility for the prosperity of the stead, and it is his sacred duty to bully, bribe or cajole his freedom-loving clansfolk through each five-season span. Lagerwater's Sun Carl that fated season was Maldon Fire-of-Waters, and he had guided us through famine and feast, pestilence and plenty for three hands of years or more. When offended by his bullying, we could cast our thoughts to the next Sacred Time, and smile, and know that vengeance would be ours. For each year Maldon was forced to take the part of Old Man Yelm in the Great Contest, and he got whupped senseless by Orlanth Himself while every adult in the clan looked on. It was a sweet revenge, and justice enough.

Though carved of oak and heartstone, Maldon was in his sunset. Fits of blood-foamed coughing oft erupted from his mouth, and the sunlife of his eyes was faded to a cloudy grey. You didn't need the godi's gift to sense the old man would soon join his god on the palisades of FirstStead. Maldon sensed it too; he had already yielded his more demanding duties to Bhorghil, eldest son and lodge-chosen heir.

Young Bhorghil already held sacred trust as Defender of the Stead and Gatekeeper, and he might soon enough be Sun Carl as well. No one doubted his courage, for the warrior had earned iron, and was well worthy to stand at your right side in the clash of shields. He was also popular with the young women,

despite a face wilder than the northern sky. For you see, the bronze barb of a Princeros arrow had three years earlier embedded itself in Bhorghil's face. It was *still* working its way out.

Bhorghil had his father's disposition, but little of his judgement. His neck, to put it kindly, was not greatly burdened by the weight of his head. Even in a clan not renowned for the wit or insight of its menfolk, Bhorghil was hardly prize calf in the herd.

Didn't our chieftain *know* the sacred stories of Elmal and Vinga? Didn't he remember all the trouble between them, and the stubborn rivalry of their worshippers? Orlstein certainly knew the temper of Bhorghil, and he had fair measure of Cradledaughter as well. He should have *known* what would happen if they spoke with only their pride to guide them.

It did not bode well for the meeting.

Its no secret, this rivalry, this resentment, even if only hero-walkers know the tale entire. For the shadow of kinstrife falls even on FirstStead.

Now it's not that they can't get on well enough when they have to. Vinga saved sore-wounded Elmal at the Hill of Gold, taking his lightning spear to fend off the Enemy. And Elmal taught Vinga to master the Sun Horse, when they quested together to wake long-sleeping Ernalda. But that was all long ago, before even my grandfather's grandfather walked the exile trail from far Bilini. Long seasons beyond counting or song.

Usually though, they quarrel. Bright Elmal knows the position and value of everything, for he upholds the authority and wisdom of tradition. Bold Vinga is reckless and unpredictable, laughing at the pompous, showing scant respect for the giftings of our ancestors, always seeking a better way.

Because Vinga is the Loyal Daughter, she hates the way that Elmal lusts after Ernalda Openthighs whenever the Great King is absent, lurking around the Goddess' chamber with his spear all hard and high. Elmal, for his part, ever the judge of a good filly or a good match, hates the way the henna-tressed Stead Daughter refuses to marry, taking lovers as she chooses but submitting to none.

Epecially not to Elmal. As I've heard it told, the Cold Sun lusts for the daughter just as much as he does the mother, wishing Vinga's marriage-bond to seal and confirm his place at Orlanth's side. Yet the Laughing Daughter flaunts him, riling the Winter Sun to anger and jealousy at every opportunity. Yes, yes, I've heard those whispers about them marrying — well I just don't believe it. It must have been a peace matching, or some clever trick on Vinga's part. If it *is* true, then it must have been dissolved before three fires, and with Elmal gaining neither pillow nor scabbard.

As Defender of the Stead, Elmal will boast — and I'd often heard old Maldon say it as the storm thanes set out against chaos or kin — '*I shall protect the women*'. And Vinga, lounging under the shadow of the palisade with her sword tucked beneath her cloak, well she will laugh, and lock gaze with Elmal's fiery eyes, and dryly proclaim a challenge of her own; '*The women can protect themselves*.'

There is the shameful thing as well.

I've heard it on several tongues, all exiles out of Ralios or the tribes of the southern waste. They claim that among their folk, Vinga is known as the *daughter* of Elmal, with the High King cuckolded by his deceitful thane. A lie! Vinga has the essence of the Storm within her, her rituals *work*, our stories are *true*. The

Loyal Daughter *hates* Elmal, and how could any woman hate her own father? It is shameful, and I will say no more.

But enough of such visions in the embers. Some of you have joined in the Soup-pot Kitchen Quest during Sacred Time. You've *seen* how the Laughing Daughter gets the better of old Cold Coals as he tries to lord it over FirstStead, and you've *seen* how they argue and rage before the entire clan.

Well, when Bhorghil One-Eye came to Cradledaughter's fire, it wasn't Sacred Time, but they argued anyway.

I was there. I remember. We were swapping tales in the Twin Birches lodge — Cradledaughter, Broddi Clapsaddle, myself, Danwyr Can't-be-Moved... and a few forest kin, upland Odaylans come to dry their cloaks and sample the stead crimp.

Bhorghil appeared out of rain-sodden darkness, stark against the doorway of our tiny earth-abode. His greeting was not expansive. '*Out.* All of you, out. Except for *her.*'

I guess he was in a hurry.

Bhorghil hadn't asked permission to enter the lodge of a bloodline not his own, humble and ill-smelling though it was. Perhaps that is why Broddi ignored him completely, cooing softly to his beloved Bladger as he bent forward to feed the *cuk* with honey-soaked bread from his mouth.

Finally seeing the humakti, Bhorghil gasped in shocked recognition. He paused, as a sword stuck in a shield ring. What he had to say was a matter for the living, so the Stead Defender would pretend the old warrior just wasn't there.

Good Broddi gave as he was given.

The rest of us made hasty exit, waiting outside in earth-piercing rain, the drenching marriage rite. The Rich-Wetter was generous that night, but none of us sought shelter. No, we huddled together 'gainst the cold, straining to catch the prating play of sword-tongues within.

Bhorghil began cautiously enough, and by his own reckoning, politely. That, after all, was the way Orlstein had instructed him to act.

It concerned the clan elders, he explained, that such a gifted woman as Cradledaughter was wasting her time in upland, isolated Lagerwater. What were her plans? Did she have some particular purpose here? What of her journey? If she desired to travel north, then the market at Ironspike was a fine place to recruit guides. If she wished to make her hearth, well as an exile she could join the Priderni clan, where her ways might be better understood. And if she wished to enter fully into the life of *our* clan, well she could marry... Bhorghil himself would arrange a good match, and speak for her, and guarantee shelter and protection as though she were his own blood.

Broddi coughed, as though a thoughtbird had nested in his throat.

Cradledaughter listened in silence to Bhorghil's wordgift. Finally, with great seeming calm, the vingan asked if Bhorghil spoke at the command of Orlstein his chief?

Bhorghil said that the truth is a mountain.

Cradledaughter asked if he spoke as messenger for the clan Ring?

Bhorghil said the truth is seen by all across a great distance.

Broddi, who knew a little about truth himself, cooed softly to Bladger, crumpling his nose against the cuk's fire-gold breast.

Cradledaughter, continuing in that same calm and measured tone, asked if Bhorghil's spear was as short as his god's?

Bhorghil *gagged*. He stuttered and stumbled and stammered, turning as pink as the demon moon. This was no way for a Stead Daughter to behave!

The vingan continued, asking if Bhorghil's mountain was not perhaps a molehill, as elmali were not known as being good with distances.

Broddi looked up, chewing honeyed bread 'tween ground down gum-skerries. He ceased his cooing, and asked innocently if Cradledaughter was still talking about Bhorghil's spear?

Cradledaughter tried in vain to disguise her grin as laughter spun from the darkness beyond the lodge.

Bhorghil's well-ploughed face now glowed like a beetroot fresh from harvest.

'What is wrong, noble carl?' soft-fluted the vingan. 'Drooping spirits?'

To the Stead Defender, who knew much of Vinga's magical wiles, those words marked a threat of insult and injury, a threat to his very manhood.

And they fully opened the gate. The Storm Bull called to Bhorghil. Bhorghil ran to meet the spirit halfway cross the *ffrid*, and he opened himself fully to its fury, the raging, battering wind of destruction. His knuckles clenched white 'gainst the gold-wound grip of his blade.

Battle-bright Bhorghil *raged*, shouting with fury enough to awaken children in the far-flung hunting camps of Godi Gallt. He twisted like a kolating in her fits, chopping his arms, pointing, pounding. He told the vingan *exactly* what she would do.

Cradledaughter did not laugh, did not reply. Vinga she was, but carved from a different wood to the Stead Daughters *we* knew. Kheldon Queen carved her, Kallyr carved her true.

Bhorghil spoke of the ways of Storm and Earth, of authority and tradition, of what was good and fair and right. Cradledaughter watched the hearth smoke as it twisted thick about the rafters.

Bhorghil spoke of the *wyrd* befalling those who flaunt the will of the clan. Cradledaughter shot a glance like arrows showering.

Bhorghil spoke of the vingan's disrespect and arrogance, her ignorance, her atrocious way of dress, her manners fit for neither stickpicker nor stead trollkin. Cradledaughter *growled*.

In the corner, Broddi tickled Bladger 'neath his beak, and cooed.

Cradledaughter asked if she had no guest-privilege, no honour price, no right to plead her case before the moot?

Bhorghil, surprised that his plain-speaking message was *still* not getting through, called the woman a beer-plank.

Cradledaughter hurled a heavy whetstone across the lodge.

Bhorghil allowed himself a self-satisfied grin. He pressed the attack, ranting of Kallyr Starbrow, the Kheldon bandit queen, landless, childless and exiled. A death-driven murderess, he declared, goaded by hatred and blind ambition to pursue impossible dreams.

And so the siege wall fell. Cradledaughter *glowered*. The very air rippled, charged with the power of pent-up rage.

Now a battered clay image of Ernalda Earthmother sat upon the hearthstone. As that anger grew, it cleanly cracked in twain, veil to sandal, breasts asunder.

Omen enough. Cradledaughter gave forth the thunder-shout, and leapt.

If anyone in the stead was blessed to sleep through Bhorghil's earlier ranting, they slept no more. With the thunder-shout, rain-battered sentries ran from the palisades. Spirits screamed, cattle bellowed, children bawled, trollkin squealed, and grown men and women came running from the lodges, clubs in hand. When they discovered the mighty hue to be no goat-kin ravagement but only their Defender and the vingan, they joined us in curious circle about the earthlodge entrance.

Both Bhorghil and Cradledaughter were experienced warriors, power full and practiced, dealers of death. Yet their swords remained sheafed, for all the rage and anger. Not even Bhorghil One-Eye dared to bare a blade in the lodge of a humakti, not even if the death master was bent forward by the hearth, clucking to himself, soothing and stroking a nervous cuckbird. No, instead it was a match of wills and godi-magic, full of fists and feet and fury.

I swear to you, the lodge was not the same for seasons afterwards. Not even fat-tailed lambs would eat grass off the roof, and the stead alynx, for all their love of Vinga, shunned it like a vat of sticklepick too long in the sun.

Outside, a growing host waited in anxious though bemused silence, wincing and grimacing at every scream and squeal and hard-hurled obscenity. It was like a cattle yard at crotching time, all bellow and bawl and sharp hard *grunt* of physical pain. Then Broddi Clapsaddle peered out beyond the door drape, calling to Danwyr. Into the firstbeard raider's hands Broddi placed beloved Bladger, and bid the bird be taken quick to warm safe roost. Broddi then returned to the hubris hall, and a third hard voice joined the fist-flailing, tongue-thronging fury.

Silence came suddenly, interrupted once, then silence complete. In the stillness, we heard only murmurings of the rainstream. As one, we drew breath and waited.

With broken nose and bloody ear, Bhorghil Sun Carl emerged stiffly from the lodge, kicking free from the mash-bucket about his ankles. Drawing on whatever remained of his dignity, the Keeper of the Gate threw a yellow carl-cloak about his shoulders, and began solemn march through the mud to his straw.

Then Cradledaughter emerged, her face set calm and white. I say she looked *magnificent*, despite the cow dung strewn across her hair. Glancing to the assembled steadfolk, she gave a fleeting smile, a smile then seldom seen. With the smile came a groan, and the Red Woman bent and clutched her ribs.

Bhorghil Brightson could not resist one final jab. He turned to face the vingan, knowing his lodge-kin were watchful. He bellowed a challenge to the adversary, a call that echoed back from distant valley walls.

'Obedience is *always* an option!'

Cradledaughter grimaced, out of pain or surprise I could not tell. Ever swift, she hard-hurled her reply to the Stead Defender.

'There is *always* another way!'

The stead throng gasped, smiled, then *roared* its approval. It was no moot, but I say the vingan won new friends that night, for all her 'other ways'.

In time, the steadfolk returned to their straw. Cradledaughter re-entered the lodge, taking counsel with Broddi through the remaining hours of darkness. I watched and waited outside alone, rain-soaked and fearful.

I knew there were several paths the Laughing Daughter might yet take. She could appeal to the Women's Circle, or even to the open moot, and so embarrass Orlstein into accepting her as a stead-friend. She could take a marriage match. Or she could formally challenge Bhorghil according to first law, and give him a proper wounding, calling down a curse on Lagerwater for ill-dealing with a guest.

Yet Cradledaughter did what she did. No sooner had the Cold Sun stepped forth from the Doorway of Voria than she rose on silent, stone-soled sandals and made her way to the guarded gateway of our stead. It was that rare sort of morning when the southern sky is clear of cloud cattle, with the terrifying blue of the skydome shining down through gelid air. The Vingan's face was set hard, sorrow in her eyes, anger in the angle of her jaw. She carried naught but simple blanket pack and her strange bronze-bound spear, and the constant companion belted to her side.

Cradledaughter cared not for 'customed courtesy of chieftain's parting gift, nor blessing of wind-rite to speed the wayward guest. She *knew* what she had to do.

Much later, in the sword harvest, when Starbrow's Consort came out of the south, I realised the vingan had been granted a rune gift, the same that cursed her mistress, the Kheldon Queen. Their rune weaving was that whatever they could dream, they must believe it possible, if only their actions be as strong as their dreams. The burden of such a gifting must be terrible indeed.

And Cradledaughter was leaving. Whatever it was that called her to the north was calling still. Running to catch her, in fumbled anxiety I announced I would walk beside her as companion and guide. Because of my name, I'd been forced many times to tramp the northern ways, even to the dark-bound banks of the Cholanti. I well-knew the paths and the dangers they might bring.

Cradledaughter paused, a look of genuine surprise crossing her face. She smiled at me in that superior, knowing way that women do, and shook her head: a simple refusal.

Making sacrifice at the rough-hewn boundary ward, she whispered quietly to the spirits of her journey. To me she gave no word.

I blustered, tears suddenly hot on my cheek, desperate to break the silent wall between us. 'You'll have to kill him, of course', I stammered. 'They might have to bar you from clan feasts after that, but it can't be helped. It would be a service to our rune.'

She turned to face me then, and finally gave answer. Her words shamed me, and for a moment I thought it was Broddi's counsel that she spoke. But no, it was Vinga speaking. It was Cradledaughter.

'Acceptance is always hard come-by for the Red Headed Daughters.' She set her eyes northwards, to the blue-grey cloudbursts above Skyfall, to the rain-cloaked dragon hills, the eternal gors. 'A rune-truth that,

much tested. Bhorghil did as his path demanded. He is a warrior, loyal to the clan, and we will have sore need of such when the hill beacons call the great hosting.'

Her hand twisted round the pommel of her blade, pale skin on beaten gold. 'If the elmali has learned from this night...' she paused, knuckles white, clenching at the sax hilt, '...then so have I. And if he occasionally needs his skull split to let some Air in...', the smile returned, briefly, '... such are the ways of men. But you my friend, you must wait with patience, and cultivate your power and your sword arm. Be ever watchful. The call is upon us all.'

I met her eyes then, warm and gentle, but also watching from a great distance. I nodded and stepped back, chastened, beginning at last to understand.

Glancing back to the outer palisade, I saw that Orstein watched us from the birch-spiked wall, impassive in his cape of cloudy grey. It seemed he understood the sacred stories better than I. Cradledaughter had planted a seed, and it would grow among us, though its harvest would be bloody and bitter.

So it was that thrice-warned, thrice-blessed Cradledaughter left Lagerwater alone. She faced the northern sky, where the storm clouds tumble and boil around the heaven-gash of Skyfall. Northwards she journeyed, seeking the forbidden heartlands of the Youf, through gors deep and gallt wide, 'cross ice-shielded streams and shadow-dark valleys. She lost her way of course, yet in doing so found something very precious, and began another journey, one that lead to herodum and infamy and the making of a kingdom.

But *that* is another tale.

Found appended to a bound collection of tribute receipts, part of *The High King's Knowing*, Alda Chur 1657. Attributed to Braggi Afraid-of-the-Dark, a Tovtaros thane. Spirits of knowing indicate that the original document was later altered and appended by a second hand.

Endnotes

1. See the 'Loyal Daughter' article by Jane Williams, Ian Thomson and John Hughes in *Tales of the Reaching Moon* 20 for an explanation of these customs. The article is also available on the Questlines website at <<http://mythologic.info/questlines/vinga.html>>.
2. Taros RidgeLeaper is founder of the tribes, an Elmalian hero from Bilini who led the first settlers into Far Point after the Inhuman Occupation. That journey of the Far Walkers, their vision of the False Sun and the kinstrike that followed is told in the 'TarosKarla' in *Questlines I* and on the Questlines Website at <<http://mythologic.info/questlines/taroskarla.html>>.
3. A Sun Carl responsible for stead prosperity may also be called a reeve or harst. In more settled Heortling lands (where clan-based, fortress steads are unnecessary), Orlanthi reeves worship Harst, the Storm Reeve of First Stead, who stored up all manner of grains that his clan might survive the Lesser Darkness. In such places, a stead is often referred to as 'hearth and harstings'. In the uplands of the Far Place however, the cult of Elmal gradually expanded to include all aspects of stead survival, and Harst has become a minor mythological figure, often confused with Elmal himself.