

# The Dragon Ship



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# Chapter One

The wind snapped in the rectangular sail of the long-ship and sea water streamed down it the sail was plain and red in colour and depicted on it was a design of Odin's two wolves Geri and Freki. Leif Gunnarr watched it flap and fill with the storm's powerful wind as he bent his back to the tiller trying to keep the ship on its course. Of course, the long-ship was clinker built and well capable of weathering any winter storms that the crew might come across. His ship really was a damn fine craft it was graceful, long and narrow and the shallow draft of its hull was designed for speed, but not only this it allowed it to navigate in waters of only a meter deep. Also the ship could be beached quite easily and its light weight meant that it could be carried by the crew overland in places where a river was not deep enough to allow them passage and then placed back in the water when it was safe to do so. He looked towards the prow where the dragon's head adorned it his ship was a double ended craft with both a symmetrical bow and stern this allowed it to be rowed in any direction. This and the Beitass which was a spar that was fixed to the sail and allowed the ship to sail against the wind. As he battled the elements with the sea spray stinging his eyes he looked down the length of the ship and saw the crew sitting on their rowing benches which ran nearly the entire length of the ship trying to shelter from the howling sea. Odin's Breath as the ship was known was a Busse which was the largest class of long-ship and his carried thirty two rowers and another thirty warriors on this expedition. There had been six ships on this expedition to start with but now Odin's Breath was by itself the others having been lost in the storm including his brother Gardar's ship.

The purpose of the expedition had been to find a fabled new land beyond the vast ice packs towards the west which it was believed was a land fit for Viking hero's with lush pastures and good soil for growing food and grazing animals. Leif and the rest were to seek this land out and colonise it sending ships back to King Ragnar and letting him know if it was safe to send out more colonists and families. Leif had not seen his own wife Freyja for more than a month now and he was already missing her shapely body and lying warm and snug with her in their large bed covered in furs. Still he must keep his eyes on what was going on as the ship bucked and rolled in the high seas that were now beginning to turn mountainous. Others might be afraid but not Leif like the rest of his crew he had been a born sailor and the sea was his world as well as his livelihood it would take something more than this blow to shock them. He watched as Svart walked back towards him he took in the huge frame of his friend and second in command and marvelled at the balance and poise of such a big man. Eventually leaning into the wind Svart made it and saluted him he stood now on the other side of the tiller and shouted in Leif's ear. "By Odin's balls this is a nice piece of

weather that Thor is accompanying our efforts with but still it is bracing no doubt about that.” Leif smiled and he was glad to have such a man as this with him on the expedition as he shouted his answer back. “Yes just a little blow still I can’t say that I wouldn’t rather swap it for a roll in my bed with Freyja I can almost feel her body now.”

Svart spat into the wind and watched it carry behind the ship before he burst out laughing. “Why chain yourself to one woman when there are so many that like a little pleasure all the time and there is plenty enough of me to share round.” It was Leif’s turn to laugh now at his old friend. “I have seen you spread yourself round old friend but for me now there is only Freyja and the children that is what I want.” Svart looked as his best friend hauled on the tiller his arm muscles tensing like knotted rope he knew that Leif was probably the best sailor in the whole of their community and his fortune had smiled since they first teamed up together. He shouted again. “Well I suppose if you had to tie yourself to one woman then there is none better than Freyja I mean she is beautiful and what a figure.” Leif butted in. “Thank you friend but I know that better than you or at least I should.” Svart laughed and shouted. “Sorry old friend but you are right and I was only paying her the finest compliment you know what I am like.” Leif smiled and felt the current under the tiller shift a bit he pushed the tiller to match it. Then he turned his head saying. “How are the men faring I’m hoping that this storm will blow itself out in a day or so?” Svart shook his head. “Oh you know the odd grumble here and there but they all know that they are sailing with the best so they are content.” They held on tight as Odin’s Breath climbed another huge wave and then glided down its other side and shook the water off like a homeless cur.

The Dragon Ship sailed on and the storm did not abate in fact it got worst if such a thing could happen now in the dawns light the size of the waves could be clearly seen and they frightened a lot of the crew. But still the ship sailed on and Leif although a little worried now knew that they could probably ride it out but maybe the dark god Loki had other plans for them. They crested another wave and Leif could see that on the other side the sea looked amazingly calm like the fiord on a summer’s day he was a bit puzzled by this. The men cheered as the ship reached this peaceful oasis in the middle of the storm but Svart came back to the tiller his face a mask of taught disbelief. He reached Leif and pointed. “Have you ever seen anything like this before because I haven’t it is not natural old friend?” Leif looked at him shaking his head. “No you are right I have never seen the sea change its mood so fast and in such a short distance there is something not quite right here.” The rest of the crew were beginning to sense this and an utter quite had descended on the ship there was no howling wind now and the men were getting quite nervous. Leif shouted for lookouts at the bow and on both sides of the ship and he even posted one to watch over the ships rear. He handed the tiller over to an old timer called Ragnvald who took the tiller but shook his head Leif asked. “Have you ever seen anything like this in your time old man?” Ragnvald looked at him and shivered. “Never this is evil at work and

you can bet that the trickster Loki is behind it.” Then he spat and turned round three times when he said this Leif nodded his head maybe the old man was right for this surely was no doing of this world.

There seemed to be no breath of wind and the sail hung as limp as an old mans prick after a tumble with his wife. Leif made his way towards the dragon headed prow of the ship then turned to look at his crew and there familiar faces. He spoke to them. “Well my sea wolves I don’t know exactly what is happening or what we have got mixed up in but I want the rowers to get our their oars and let’s start rowing.” There was a bit of grumbling but Svart soon stopped this as he told them. “If we don’t start rowing we will be stuck here for ever and we will never enter Valhalla do you want to live forever or shall we perhaps continue this adventure?” The oars were unshipped and then pushed through the oar ports and dipped into the sea Leif gave the command and the men bent their backs and pulled on the oars as the ship began to cut through the water. The oars dipped and raised as the ship began to build up speed and a good crew of rowers like these would reach speeds of five or six knots. Leif and Svart returned to the rear of the ship to stand beside the tiller Leif spoke to Ragnvald. “What do you reckon old man can you feel the current I must look over the side for more clues keep a sharp lookout for the sun breaking through?” Leif looked over the side to see if he could spot any anomalies in the water that would give them some idea of what course they were on but he spotted nothing. He looked into the sky and had to admit that it looked strange a kind of steel grey with no sun or clouds in fact no weather conditions what so ever. Ragnvald spat over the side. “I don’t like this at all Leif I cannot feel any current or any pull on the tiller I have never sailed in any waters that are as dead as these seem to be.” Leif nodded but said nothing going over his thoughts and trying to work out what was happening but nothing could explain the strange weather conditions.

Time moved on and though the men rowed hard and the oarsmen were changed the ship didn’t seem to be making much headway then just as Leif was going to take stock of the situation something happened. Out in front and to the left of the ship all of a sudden a dark smudge appeared on the horizon as Leif and the crew watched it came towards them. Now once again they could hear noise faint at first but then gradually building as they listened they could make out it was the sound of thunder but not like any they had heard before. Watching intently the crew had stopped rowing and the ship was dead in the water they saw giant streaks of lightning streak down and seem to smite the sea causing it to bubble. A lot of the crew were afraid now and there were shouts that they were being punished by the god Thor although they could not think why. Leif was having none of this and he told the crew to arm themselves he could not think why but he just knew that something was going to happen. The crew shipped their oars and got their weapons and protection together taking their round wooden shields from off the ships rail where they had been hung. Leif called for his armour and Hored one of the youngest of the warrior’s brought it to him piece by piece.

First Leif put on his undershirt of padded cloth and then his mail shirt which covered his body and half way down his arms and legs. Then he strapped on his sword belt with his famous sword which was called body cutter. This was a beautiful piece of craftsmanship; it was a double-edged blade that measured about 90cm and it was pattern welded for strength. It had its name inscribed on the blade and the hilt was elaborately decorated. It sat tightly in the leather-bound wooden scabbard. He then placed his helmet on his head, he pulled it down so that the spectacle guard covered his eyes, protecting both these and his nose with a kind of mask. Hanging down the back was a mail aventail which protected his neck. Next he picked up his shield which was made from linden, which gave it lightness and unlike oak it would not split. The wooden fibres would stop a blade from cutting too deep unless a great deal of force was used. It was painted and decorated with elaborate scenes on the front and round the boss. Leif stood looking every inch the warrior leader which he indeed was. He strode down the deck speaking to his men as they made ready: spear men, archers and axmen as well as swordsmen. Then near the front getting himself ready was Raknar who was a berserker, a fearsome warrior who painted his face and dressed in wolf-skins. He carried two battle axes. He would go into battle in a kind of trance and fight in a frenzy, his only purpose to kill the enemy even when wounded he would continue fighting. The state they fought in was called berserker-gang and it was supposed to give them the strength and power of a bear. But it was best to stay out of their way when in the berserker-gang state as they lost all reason and would kill friend and enemy alike without knowing or caring.

Leif stood watching the dark sky and lightning come closer and closer. Svart stood close beside him dressed in his mail and helmet and holding his shield and sword. At about 200 meters they could see a ripple effect in the water and what looked like scaly humps breaking the surface. Then a large head with red eyes appeared and a mouth that gaped open and had huge fangs in it. Some of the crew moaned and some swore it was Jörmungandr who was a sea serpent that coiled around Midgard which is the earth in Norse mythology. Leif knew it wasn't that but it was some kind of monster and it certainly looked like a sea serpent although not big enough to span the realm. He shouted at his men. "Be still and get ready to fight. This is only a monster of the sea and as such we will kill it or we will put up such a fight that should we perish then surely the Valkarie's will take us to Valhalla." The men cheered their courage up now and the promise of Valhalla beckoning them for a Norse warrior could not hope for more than to give his life and sit feasting with Odin in Asgard. As the serpent came on the men started banging their weapons against their shields, drumming and summoning their courage with one last resounding clash of thunder the serpent reached the ship.

Leif shouted. "Watch for it men and get ready to kill it when it shows itself. Strike and strike hard and send it back to the evil place it has come from." All of a sudden coils from the serpent's body began to wind themselves round the ship. It

was Svart's turn to shout now. "Attack the thing you axmen bite deep into its flesh with your blades if it get's a proper grip on the ship we are lost." Even as he spoke the coils were tightening and they could hear the planking of the ship groan from the pressure. Svart grabbed an axe and began to strike a part of the beast's body the other axmen ran forward and attacked other parts of the coils soon blood was pouring from the beast's body. Then over the dragon headed prow the serpents head appeared and started to attack its massive fangs doing great damage to some of the more unlucky of the men. The head pressed the men back down the deck and Leif was about to lead a charge against it when Raknar the berserker ran towards the beast howling he was in a frenzy and hacked at the head with both his axes. The beast had never come across anything like this the attack was unrelenting even though Raknar had been raked with its fangs and blood poured from the wounds down his body still he fought on. The men watched as the serpent tried to withdraw but the berserker would not let it with superhuman strength Raknar fought on and the beast bellowed in pain. Then unmindful of the danger Raknar charged right up to its head the beast lunged and gripped his body with its fangs holding him firm in the grip. But Raknar brought first one then two axes crashing down into the beasts head burying them so deep that the heads could not be seen the beast opened its mouth in agony and Raknar slipped to the deck. Blood and grey matter spurted from the huge cuts in its skull and coated both Raknar and the deck in their slime the head reared up one last time and then was dragged back to the sea by the creature's weight. The coils the men had been hacking at did the same releasing the ship and falling back into the sea the weight of the creature dragging its stricken body down into the depths.

The men cheered and Leif went forward to look at Raknar and see how he had fared he looked a mess and Leif told some men to strip his furs and bathe his wounds as well as those of the rest of the wounded. It was as he feared they had not come off unscathed in the fight some of the planking was no longer secure and would have to be mended. He decided to hold a war council with the rest of the men but first the wounded and dead must be taken care of then they would decide what to do. Leif went to see the wounded but was surprised when Svein who was good with battle wounds said to him. "There are no wounded to see Leif all are dead and gone to Valhalla I hope for they died brave but agonizing deaths." He looked at the men laid out on the deck and saw that even the berserker Raknar was amongst them and he never thought that Raknar could die in battle. He asked. "What happened here surely there are some wounded I mean the ones that received only scratches they must still be alive?" Svein shook his head as he replied. "No even the ones with hardly a wound are dead; the beast rot Loki's eyes must have had poison in its fangs so powerful that even a graze from them would be fatal." Leif looked on amazed that this could happen for he had never heard of a beast on land or sea that used a poison like this. He was devastated that he had led his men into something as deadly as this when it was his job to try to keep them safe. Ragnvald came up to him saying. "You cannot blame yourself Leif no one could have done better and no man can defy

the gods we must decide what to do, what is done is done let us save what we can." He knew that this was sound advice but it still rested heavy with him that he could not have avoided this encounter.

They could not keep the dead on board and so their lifeless bodies were lowered into the water and disappeared below the surface as though in a dream. Raknar was the last of the twenty who had died to be lowered in. He had been redressed in his berserker furs but the crew had gasped at the faces of the dead which had swollen and become black no doubt an effect of the poison. After the ceremony Leif gathered the remaining crewmembers and spoke to them. "We must tend to the ship it must be repaired or there is no way we can carry on with the voyage in the condition that we are in." There was muttering from the crew and Svart shouted. "Speak up don't be afraid let us know which piece of whale shit wants to argue with us?" Olafur a man who had not been that long with the crew stood he was a tall fair man he bowed his head. "No one can argue with what you have done Leif or your seamanship or even the need to repair the vessel but it is madness to continue on a voyage that can no longer be achieved." He sat back down as Svart growled in his direction Leif held him back. "How many others here agree with Olafur show your hands?" About ten hands reluctantly went up all of them new men and all looking towards Svart and then averting their eyes. Leif's top lip curled and he spat back. "So be it there is no place on a voyage like this for women this is man's work remember that next time you want to go a Viking. We will repair the ship and leave you on land there the rest of us will carry on with the task we were given and by Odin's blood we will succeed." There were cheers from the rest of the crew who looked on these others with suspicion and quite a lot of hostility. Leif turned to Svart. "I don't want any of those lot touched we are better off without them and it is not going to be so pretty a spot where we leave them." Svart laughed and nodded knowing that the only place they could put in for repairs was Greenland though it was far from green being covered in ice.

The sky was clear again as Leif set his crew to rowing and bailing there was still some way to go and they were not out of the woods yet. About six hours later a strong wind blew up and the sail was raised and it cracked out as the wind filled it Leif went aft to take the tiller. They were now sailing where ice floated in huge sheets and magnificent heights sculptured by the wind into fantastic sculptures. Leif knew that they must be careful because even the smallest of these floes could hole the ship and sink it if they collided. The sail had been furled as there was hardly a drop of wind here at the moment and the ice floes drifted by at a sedate pace on the currents that pushed through this place. He was headed for the coast of Greenland too a small settlement that had been founded not too many years ago that's if it was still there for this place was inhospitable. Although there were small pieces of land near the coast where scrub vegetation grew this was a poor land and in the soil hardly anything grew instead the people lived like the Skatterlings the local natives. Living off seal meat and fish and trying desperately to hold on to their dismal pieces of land but every

season more and more gave up and headed for other places or back from where they had come. Though there was little land left now in the homelands the population had increased and things were very hard that is why King Ragnar had set up the expedition.

Two days later the coast was spotted and Leif handed over the tiller to Ragnvald and made his way forward he told the lookout to keep a sharp eye out. For sometimes in these waters the mighty whales congregated and although they were quite timid if one rose underneath the ship it would be a disaster. The crew now set to with a will the oars raising and dipping in unison as the ship pushed through the calm lake like water bringing them closer to the shore. Leif knew that his men could already almost taste the feast that would be prepared for heroes such as they were it no wonder the ship sped onward like it had wings. Even so Leif could not help thinking that his men were deceiving themselves they might get fed but he was sure the fare would be very bland even so maybe the mead would have been imported and that was something to be cheerful about. As the ship closed on the shore he could see the settlement beginning to take shape the huts and the large hall Svart joined him he laughed. "I can almost taste the food and drink now old friend and I am sure I can smell the women who will not be able to resist a hero like me." Leif shook his head and smiled. "No I'm sure they won't after all you will no doubt tell them of all your brave deeds and exploits." He looked back towards the settlement but something disturbed him and his face set like stone Svart seeing this look on his face asked. "What's wrong Leif have you seen something amiss?" His eyes strained looking towards the shore but it was not what he had seen but rather what he hadn't seen that was puzzling him and he pointed. "Look over there I mean where are the people by now the horns should have been sounding a welcome and they should have been lining the shore waiting for us to land. But there is no one and I haven't even heard a dog barking or for that matter any other sound coming from the settlement."

He turned to his friend. "Tell the men to arm themselves because there is something that does not feel quite right about this place let us be ready for anything." Svart set off down the ship instructing the men to arm themselves as once more Leif donned his mail and picked up his arms ready for any situation that might occur when they landed. As the ship moved forward, a mist began to descend over the area although they could now see the sheltered bay of the settlement quite clearly. The mist now enveloped them but there was something odd it did not smell quite right nor was it like any mist they had seen before. They neared the shore and Leif told his rowers to ease off their stroke as the ship glided into the small jetty that had been built by the settlers. The oars were stacked away and Leif and the rest apart from a small party that was going to stay with the ship for security leapt onto shore and began to fan out. Leif shouted out a greeting but all was silence in the settlement he motioned the men forward telling them to search the place for any sign of life. Svart turned to him. "I don't like this old friend there is not even a stray dog moving or yapping in the place something is defiantly wrong here." Leif nodded. "Your right and I will tell you



something else I don't like this mist there is something odd about it like it is not natural by Odin's beard keep a tight grip on your weapons."

They walked forward towards the great hall that was at the top of the settlements street as they walked it was plain to see the signs of everyday life fires still burned sending up smoke and goods and work tools laid where they had fallen. Svart asked. "Do you think that the Skaterlings have done this wiped the whole settlement out?" Leif considered shaking his helmeted head. "No I don't think so, they would not have left the tools and goods about that we have seen and they would not have taken the bodies something else has happened here." Leif looked at his men who had searched the huts so far up the street they shook their heads bewildered so far they had found no sign of anything living either man woman child or animal. The search went on and Leif and his group had now reached the great hall which was built out of solid timbers and decorated and carved he ordered his men to open the large doors of the hall which they did. Entering he told them to light torches the better to see in any corners if anyone was hiding there out of fear or mischief. The long tables had been set for a meal Leif felt a haunch of reindeer meat and although cold it couldn't have been cooked to long ago his eyes skimmed the hall but he was baffled as to what could have happened. They walked out of the hall and met with the rest of the search parties who had finished combing the village all with the same result there was no one to be found. He ordered some of the men back to the ship to start making repairs others he sent further afield to carry on the search for the settlers in case any had escaped what had happened here.

He turned to Svart. "Come we will pay a visit to the native village and see what they have to say about this and if they have seen any of our people." Svart nodded and gathered some of the warriors to accompany them they set off across the tundra heading for the native village that was further along the coast. As they walked Leif kept a keen eye out for trouble or attack and he could tell that his men were edgy even the stalwart Svart looked a little less sure than usual. He noticed as they went along that there was no sign of wild life in the area not even a bird in the sky and still the strange mist hovered with them as they walked. As they approached the native village Leif signaled for his men to spread out in a line in this formation they could then form a shield wall should trouble arise. On the outer edge of the village they could see that it was the same as the settlement quiet as the grave with neither human nor animal inhabitants making their presence known. Walking on they noticed that everything was in place pots boiling on fires and fishing nets and spears laid ready for use as though their owners would appear and pick them up at any minute. Leif instructed the men to search the village which they proceeded to do going from animal skin tent to tent but it was all to no avail and neither the natives or their dogs could be found. Svart came up to Leif and scratched his head. "I don't like this one bit we can find no trace of anyone in this village and all the Skaterlings belongings have been left behind." Leif nodded. "Yes I can see that but also their boats are still beached on shore and surely they would have taken them if they

had harmed our people.” He ordered everyone back to the settlement and he could hear the mutterings that the god Loki must have had a hand in this and as much as it annoyed him he began to think that maybe the men were right.

On reaching the settlement again it was decided that they should have a meal and then get some sleep and in the morning the search would be widened to cover more of the area. Leif made sure that guards had been posted and then retired but he made sure that all his men slept with their weapons close at hand and that no one had gotten drunk but for once he didn't need to worry about this. He noticed that his men were keyed up and more than a little worried during the meal he had heard references to monsters as well as the gods causing what had happened here. He sighed as he shut his eyes as a picture of Freyja entered his thoughts and he went to sleep dreaming of her ripe figure and how much he missed being in his large bed and feeling her naked beside him. The next morning dawned and Leif went outside the unusual fog and mist had disappeared and the funny odour had gone with it. They breakfasted and then leaving men behind to repair the ship he split the rest up into small parties and set them about searching a larger area outside the settlement. Setting out to the North Leif led his men into the bleak hinterland he couldn't believe that the settlers would head this way but then again he could think of nothing else that made sense. The wind now blew and they wrapped their cloaks more tightly around themselves as the bitter cold bit into the flesh of their faces and hands. Leif thought this was surely a place that Odin had cast on one side as of no worth to either gods or men it was surely a place where Loki would hold his council.

With a hundred things running through his mind Leif was brought out of his reverie by a shout one of his men Hróaldr had found something in front where some large rocks jutted from the barren landscape. He rushed forward as Hróaldr shouted. “There is a man here Leif sheltered just behind this rock it is one of the settlers.” Leif hurried forward and joined up with his men who were looking down at the poor unfortunate who looked at them with horror in his eyes. Just at that moment he raised his arm and pointed and an ear shattering scream burst from his mouth rising in pitch and then tailing off to a moan. His men stepped back many of them making the sign against the evil ones as they did so meanwhile the man had slumped back against the rock and now watched from what seemed like vacant eyes. Leif ordered his men to build a litter from their shields and spears the man was lifted on he made no move to oppose this they then covered him in a cloak and carried him back to the settlement. They made him comfortable in one of the huts and Leif appointed a guard to watch over him as the other search parties returned. That night he spoke to his senior warriors in the great hall and it was agreed that the sooner they could talk to the survivor the sooner they would know what had happened here. Leif sent Oddleif the healer to tend to the man with instructions that he was to be told immediately that the man showed any sign of coming to or regaining his senses. In the meantime the first priority was to mend the ship and make it ready for sea again so that in the event of a crisis they could sail away from this cursed place.

In the store hut of the settlement they had found enough planks that had been rived (split) from large old oak trees and transported here. These replaced the broken planking in the hull and were fixed with rivets and roves then waterproof caulking was used between the planks to make them watertight creating a strong and supple repair. The men worked hard as though their lives depended upon it which in a way it probably did this being their only escape from this place. Leif was informed that the ship was seaworthy again and had been refloated and they could leave as soon as supplies were loaded. He gave the order to load the ship but knew they could not go anywhere until they had spoken to the man and solved the mystery of what had happened here. His men knew this also but that did not stop them loading with undue haste the quicker to leave this place as soon as they could. It was two days later when Oddleif the healer rushed in to see him and said. "The man is slightly recovered but it would be best if you saw him now as it will not belong until he is called to Valhalla his strength is about done."

Leif left the hall and went with the healer to the hut where the man lay on a bed covered with furs Leif sat beside the bed. "I need to know what happened here I am Leif the strong and I have put into your settlement for repairs after battling a sea monster." The man just looked at him Leif continued. "I sail under orders from King Ragnar but that is of no importance at the minute you must tell us what happened to the settlers." The man licked his lips just as Svart butted in. "Was it the Skaterlings that did this to you and the rest?" Leif glared at him but noticed the man shook his head and so he asked. "If it was not the natives who did this then who was it and what happened?" The man began to talk in a croaky voice and his grey face turned towards Leif. "My name is Gunnar and I am the last of the settlers or at least that is what I believe but maybe you have found some more of us?" Leif shook his head and the man sighed wetting his lips with his tongue. "Then truly Odin has forsaken us and I have lost my wife and children as well." The man turned away grief written on his haggard face Leif wished that he could leave the man to his sorrow but he knew that he could not and that there were too many questions to answer and only this pathetic wreck knew the truth of these. Again Svart lent over the bed chivvying the pathetic creature. "Come on man pull yourself together because I tell you that by Thor's hammer we will find out what has happened here and where the people are?" This time Leif did not stop his second in command from badgering the settler knowing that the fate of everyone rested with the knowledge that this man had in his head.

The man sighed again and turned back towards them. "It started two days ago in the morning people were going about their normal business when a strange fog began to creep over the settlement." Leif nodded encouraging the man to continue which he did saying. "At first we took no notice of it because we are used to such things here often thick mists and fog come in off the ice floes and across the sea and cover the settlement for a day or more before they disappear." He asked for a drink of water which he was given after a sip Leif said.

"We have seen some of this fog but tell me Gunnar what happened next?" Gunnar shook his head. "As I said this was no ordinary fog it had a strange odor to it and as you looked into it you got the feeling that phantom shapes lurked inside it. The head man sent for the soothsayer but when the men went to fetch her they found her dead with a look of absolute terror on her face." He stopped again remembering this and a shiver wracked his body he pulled himself together again. "There was a meeting called at the great hall and everyone attended and I don't mind saying that we were frightened and scared by the soothsayer's death. The warriors decided that some enemy must be using the fog as cover to attack us maybe even the Skaterlings but we had never any trouble with them before." Leif looked at the man and agreed. "We thought of that but when we searched their village we found it to be like the settlement abandoned where did they go?"

Gunnar held up his hand. "I will get to that part soon, meanwhile it was decided that everyone should arm themselves and that the warriors should make a defensive ring round the settlement." The ships were also prepared for sea in case we needed to get away from whoever was waiting in the fog to attack us." He sighed and continued. "During the night we could constantly hear the most awful noises coming from inside the fog and our men ran around like headless chickens trying to understand what was going on." Svart raised the drinking cup up to his lips again and he took another sip of water nodding his thanks Gunnar reclined back and went on with his tale. "The next morning another meeting was held it was decided that we would send a party to the Skaterlings village to see if they had any idea what was going on." Before he could say anymore one of the warriors entered the hut and whispered in Leif's ear he ordered Svart to stay with the man and left the hut. He walked with the guard to the edge of the settlement where it faced the interior as he looked he could see what the guard meant when he told him in the hut. The mist was now a thick fog but it seemed to be standing still a few yards away it reminded Leif not of fog but of a curtain with clearer defined edges and the smell from it was now very clear. He had never smelled anything like it before it was like rotten eggs and hot metal like in a forge and there was other smells with it that he had never encountered before.

He told his men to keep a sharp eye out and to let him know immediately should the fog move in any way or change shape. Then he went back to the hut and relayed what he had just seen to Svart the man on the bed looked on in terror as Leif told how the fog had thickened and stopped at the edge of the settlement. He now turned as he saw the effect this news had on the man. "What is it Gunnar what do you remember?" Gunnar trembled. "That is what happened when we sent the party to see the Skaterlings the fog had gotten very thick when the men set off. Maybe it was an omen from Odin for we never saw the warriors again." He paused a tear in his eye. "It was decided that we would take our ships and load everyone on board and flee to another colony until the fog went and everyone started to get ready it was decided that we should leave in the morning and guards were set round the settlement." He coughed and wiped spittle from his lips. "However it was no use the ships were ready but during the night we

heard a tremendous crashing and our ships were reduced to kindling. Some of the men said they had seen huge grey monsters that must have been sent by Loki himself to torment us.”

Svart asked. “What do you mean old man when you say grey monsters do you mean sea serpents is that what attacked your ships?” Gunnar looked at him with pity in his eyes the sort of pity you reserve for a fool. “These things were not serpents they were massive and they smashed and sunk our ships in a few minutes and we could see there wake in the water when they had gone.” Leif was astounded by this tale and he asked Gunnar. “What happened then because with your ships gone you had no means of escape?” He looked Leif in the eyes. “Again another meeting was held and it was decided that we would head inland towards the village of the Skaterlings and so everyone was rounded up and the warriors guarded the flanks of the column as we set off.” He coughed a wracking cough and then it seemed to ease. “The fog had gotten much thicker as we set off and the smell which had only been a slight whiff was now really pungent as we entered it people started coughing and retching.” Leif nodded his head. “Yes that is what it is like now, but please continue your tale.” Gunnar sighed. “We had not gotten all that far into the fog when I hurt my ankle and had to sit down for a minute I could still hear the rest of my friends as they carried on. Then I heard screams and shouts oaths and shrieking lamentations which stopped dead I limped forward to the spot they had come from but there was no one there they had simply disappeared.” Svart laughed a look of incredulity on his face. “Come old man a whole settlement and its warriors don’t simply disappear into thin air there must have at least been bodies?”

Gunnar stared at him like he had two heads. “Say what you like but that is what happened I spent the next few hours looking for them but I found no trace of them not even an animal everything was gone. I went as far as the Skaterlings village which was empty and deserted and that is when I decided it was time to hide for who knew what kind of evil was abroad.” Tears now coursed down his face which had crumpled like an old sack. “I hid in those rocks keeping an eye on the settlement just in case these demons came back for me and that is where you found me. I am no coward but these creatures are not of this world and if the smell in the fog is getting stronger like heated metal then you must go or your ship will end up like ours mashed at the bottom of the sea.” Again Svart laughed. “We do not fear these creatures you speak of we have already fought off a giant sea serpent on our way here so these things of yours will not bother us.” Gunnar looked at him with dignity written on his brow. “Then you are a fool and you and your men will die like my friends for you don’t seem to understand that you cannot fight what you cannot see.” Svart howled at this insult and went to grab the man bounding over to the bed. Leif grabbed his arm and hurled him back saying. “Enough Gunnar is right we must get out of here and just pray to Odin that we are not too late do you understand.” Svart looked at his friend and knew if he was this worried then it was serious still he could not help but say. “You pray to Odin myself I will take Thor and hope he is listening meanwhile I will get the

men ready and we will board the ship.” Leif nodded. Good and send two men to carry Gunnar here on board he will not be left alone here again.”

The loading of the long ship had taken time and dusk was now setting in and the fog had gotten thicker making it hard to see anything Leif came up to where Gunnar lay in the prow covered with furs he had a shelter of hides to protect him from the worse of the weather Gunnar beckoned him. Leif knelt beside the old man who looked even more grey and afraid than he had before the watery eyes squinted at Leif and as the man beckoned him closer. “Listen to me we must get going now this minute can you not taste the smell of the fog now it’s choking and it means that the demons who took my family and friends is very close now.” Leif tried to reassure Gunnar that they would be away very soon now but he himself could now taste the foul metallic stench from the fog it was enough to make you retch. He stood in the prow and shouted to one of his men Eric long beard. “Hey Eric get everyone on board you can find and tell Svart to bring in the search parties we must be on our way.” The warrior acknowledged his leaders order with a wave of the hand setting off for the settlement Leif watched him go then reassuring Gunnar again he headed for the stern.

He started to get the crew who where already on board ready for a quick departure making sure the provisions that had been found were stored right and that the oars were ready for the rowers when everyone was on board. As he turned he heard shouts from the shore and turned to see Svart and the other warriors running towards the ship from the settlement. Calling for more warriors and snatching up his sword Leif headed for the gangplank to throw a protective shield out for his men as they now pounded there way towards him. He could now hear Svart shouting and he understood what he was saying. “Get back on board for the love of Odin before we are all taken by Loki and risk our chance of entering Valhalla.” Leif shouted to his warriors and they quickly boarded followed shortly after by Svart who was still trying to regain his breath as the warriors who had just boarded milled about. Leif cried. “Man your oars and cast off remember where there is no discipline there is no honor now stop running around like headless chickens and start acting like warriors.” This last rebuke he yelled at his men and immediately they settled down sat on their benches and took up the oars with straining muscles they began to pull away from the dock and settlement leaving them in their wake.

Leif turned to Svart. “What happened back there you look bashful as a milk maid old friend?” Svart smiled bashfully. “By Thor’s hammer Leif may you gut me with a sword if the old fellow wasn’t right, now I believe everything he has to say?” Leif nodded towards the hide tent. “You mean Gunnar I take it?” Svart spat on the deck and wiped his mouth. “Yes, Erik had found me and we set off to recover the search parties who should have all been in the settlement but one group had wandered outside of it.” Leif’s face darkened like thunder as he commanded him to tell him. “Which group?” Svart knew that an explosion of temper was imminent by his friend. “It was Arni the fist but you need not punish

him or his three men for they are no more they were seized by the demons and disappeared before our eyes. Leif looked at him in disbelief but Svart held up his hand. "I know but it is true I swear it on my hope of entering Valhalla that is what happened as silly as it sounds." Leif was more than a little stunned. "You had better tell me exactly what happened so we can think this out but let us put some distance between ourselves and this place first." Svart nodded and Leif shouted the order to row at full speed out of the bay and into the open sea the rowers picked up their pace and the long ship carved through the water of the bay smoothly and sleekly.

Once they had reached the open sea the crew began to show signs of relaxing but Leif could tell that they had been badly shaken and knew that he must get to the bottom of what had happened. Using his knowledge of the currents and sighting of whale pods Leif navigated the long ship to another island that was close by and here in the shelter of a bay he anchored the ship and set his watches. The men who were not on watch he told to get something to eat and have a sleep he wanted them fresh for a plan he had in mind. But before that could happen he needed to find out from Svart exactly what had happened to the three man group who had disappeared back at the settlement. So he signalled to Svart to follow him up to the prow where he knew they wouldn't be overheard by the rest of his men. As he went forward a sense of darkness crept into his soul and he made the hex sign against evil hoping that the feeling of hopelessness would cease to invade his senses. He stared out on the inhospitable land of the island and thought it was maybe this that was causing his black mood but he knew that it was not there was something more terrible than a stark forbidding landscape. Svart appeared at his side and waited a few moments until Leif said. "So tell me what happened to Arni the fists search party because it is not like you to be intimidated by anything human?"

Svart smiled as he looked at his friend but he looked worried. "No there is nothing human which scares me but what Erik and I saw was not human and take it from me not of our realm." Leif shook his head not knowing what to believe he signalled Svart to carry on. "We had followed their path and we saw them just ahead of us I shouted and Arni turned and waved at us, again I shouted a warning about the fog and the party stopped in their tracks." It was Svart's turn to shake his head now as he remembered he looked again at Leif his lip curled in a kind of snarl. "Before we could move a muscle the fog seemed to creep forward like enemy raiders and we saw Arni's party swallowed up by it then the smell hit us making us wretch." Leif asked the question. "Was it the same smell as before?" Svart nodded. "Yes but about a hundred times stronger the smell nearly knocked us flat and then the fog disappeared like it had never been we went forward but there was no sign of our search party. Arni and the others had vanished completely but not a blade of grass had been disturbed and I will tell you our warriors would have put up a hell of a fight against something they could see." Leif acknowledged what his friend had said knowing that this was the truth his men would have fought like wildcats and blood would have been spilled all

over the ground, again he wondered if this was Loki at work or maybe some other demon. Although this seemed a reasonable explanation something pricked at the back of his mind and he thought back to what Gunnar had said about the settlements ships, he definitely needed to know more.

He clapped Svart on the shoulder. "Well my friend whether it be ghosts or a demon we must find out what happened at the settlement and try to put it to rights that is our duty, remember there are no sagas told about coward's only heroes." Svart nodded but the look on his face said he didn't think that they could do anything about it even with the best fighters in the north. Leif laughed although this was not as hearty as it usually was but he carried on saying. "Haraldr iron hand will be here by tomorrow with his ship we will send him back to the king with Gunnar and they can tell him what has happened here and to keep everyone else away until we get to the bottom of this mystery." Svart could see the sense in this but still he wished that it was Haraldr and his men that were staying to confront whatever was at the settlement. Then he chided himself by Odin's beard he was acting like a small child frightened by the trolls and dark, by Thor's hammer even a serving maid would have more fighting spirit than him. He shook himself and felt the rage begin to build in his breast and he thought look out whatever you are because we are coming to get you, and you may rest assured that you won't like it. Leif gathered his crew around him and explained to them what was what, he told them about Haraldr and how he would carry a message back to the king. He also informed them that tomorrow night they would be going back to the settlement to sort out whatever was going on there he praised them for their fighting skills and assured them that they had no reason to fear anything. Hadn't they fought sea monsters and serpents always wining and defeating the creatures so why should they be afraid of a little mist he told them that all would be sorted tomorrow?

The following morning the dragon ship of Haraldr iron hand swept into the bay and coasted to a stop besides Leif's ship the two boats were lashed together and Haraldr stepped across. He enveloped Leif in his great arms and then he stood back looking into his eyes and saying. "What seems to be the problem old friend I thought you would be far across the ocean by now I did not expect to see you here? In fact if it was not for my lookout we would have sailed on to the settlement are you in some trouble?" Leif was glad that his mentor was here and he proceeded to tell him all that had happened since the voyage began. Haraldr whistled as the story finished. "By Odin's beard you have been through much my friend would it not be better if I stayed with you and added my men to yours when you go back to the settlement. Leif shook his head. "No the best you can do is sail back and inform the King as to what is happening we will send the survivor Gunnar back with you. We will hold out and fight whatever is at the settlement until the king turns up with more men and we can finally beat whatever this thing is." Haraldr looked a little sceptical he had known Leif all his life and had been kinsman to his father he knew that his men were the finest fighters the king had but even so what he had heard disturbed him.



Never the less he knew Leif to be right and that only the king had the manpower to overcome whatever had happened at the settlement and so he hugged Leif. "Very well then I will set off now and we will row like the furies to reach the king and turn round again to help you. Listen old friend you must be careful from what you have told me this seems to be the work of Loki and if it is then it is not for mortals to mess with we must leave it to the heroes of Valhalla." Leif nodded and grasped Haraldr's arm as he offered it. Gunnar was transferred to the other long ship and then it was time for it to set sail. Haraldr stepped back onto his own ship he took his leave of these brave men but wondered all the same if he would ever see them again and he uttered a silent prayer to the gods that he would. His ship cast off and the oarsmen took up the stroke powering them silently away out of the bay he looked back and raised his arm in salute and heard a cheer come on the wind from Odin's Breath. He shouted at his men to raise the sail the sooner he could get back to the king the better and also the more chance Leif and his men would have to survive they cleared the headland and the wind drove them forward towards home.

In the late afternoon Leif gave the order to leave the safety of the bay and to sail back to the settlement his rowers muscles welled as they put their backs into propelling the ship on its uncertain course to meet whatever had decimated the land to the north. Once on the open sea the sail was set and Odin's Breath danced over the wave caps eager to have the wind hurling it forward and to deliver the men to their fate it was almost as if the gods wanted it as well such was the speed of the ship. It was turning dark as they neared the settlement and Leif ordered his crew to don their mail shirts and have their weapons handy. As they closed further in to the shore the fog came down so quickly that it was almost impossible to believe. One moment the night air was clear as glass the next they could hardly see anything in front of them. Leif shouted. "Light some torches and put two men on lookout at the bow, reef the sail and take up the oars and everyone watch out." This was done and the ship glided over the water the torches made little difference and then once again the terrible stench came from the fog. The men started coughing and Leif and Svart had to settle them as they rowed father into the mouth of the bay that led to the settlement a cry sounded from the men at the bow. Leif heard one shout. "Back water for the love of Freya we must stop the ship or we are all doomed." He screamed then in terror and as the rowers pushed back on their oars to stop the ship a large dark object appeared right in front of them.

There was more noise now from the men as they saw what was in front of them it seemed to be like the huge side of an iceberg massive although it seemed dark in colour. Svart shouted for the archers to loose fire arrows against it and some brave souls rushed forward and threw spears at the monster. Svart shouted. "What is it?" "Can it be a gigantic whale that has got lost or another sea monster?" Leif could understand why he thought this because as the thing went by very close it seemed to be grey in colour and it shone wetly in the light from

the torches. As the arrows and spears struck the thing everyone watched as they bounced off without seeming to make a sound and then they dropped harmlessly into the water. Svart looked at Leif. "What is that things hide made out of we haven't even scratched it and what monster could travel at that kind of speed?" The fog was much thicker now and the creature or whatever it was had disappeared into its dank dark folds Leif let out a sigh of relief although he could not shake off a feeling of dread. He turned to Svart. "By Odin's beard I don't know what it was but let us hope it has gone." Just as he said this A lookout shouted out an alarm all Leif could make out was the sea heaving and boiling and then the tempest hit them.

The ship heaved as wave after wave hit them the white tips of them glowing in the torch light and then Odin's Breath heeled right over on its side and men were thrown out into the boiling sea. Leif found himself in the water surrounded by screams and oaths and then he was bodily sucked under and he struggled to right himself as he turned over and over in the maelstrom. Eventually he managed to get his bearings and swim back to the surface his head broke the water and he stared at his ship which had managed somehow to right itself. He could hear men calling out and he swam for the ship pulling himself up on a trailing rope that was dangling in the water. Once on board he could see a few more survivors who had made it back in one piece and he now shouted orders at them to help as many of the crew as they could get on board. He was happy to see so many climb back on board but he was much happier when he heard Svart cursing and swearing and then he saw him. Svart said. "By Freya's girdle I thought we had all been on our way to Valhalla my friend I am just glad that we have postponed that heroic journey for a while but what in Thor's name just happened? Leif shook his head. "I don't know but I would bet that it was something to do with the creature or whatever it was, but never mind that now let's see how many men we have left.

In a short time more survivors had reached the ship and had been helped on board but it was clear that some of the crew had been lost. Leif gathered his band of warriors about him. "We must get to shore and try to find out what is happening here?" There was some muttering from his men but he continued. "I know that what has just happened has been somewhat of a trial but we have faced bigger foes than whatever that was." One of the crewmen called Geirmunor spoke up. "No by Ragnar's beard we haven't Leif whatever that beast was it was protected as if by mail not one of our spears or arrows even touched it." A lot of the other men now murmured their agreement with what he said, and turned talking and bewailing their fate to each other. Svart shouted. "Listen to me you old women what is wrong with you do you want to live forever or would you rather feast and be happy in Valhalla?" Some of the men now looked down at the deck shamed by his outburst but Geirmunor was not to be cowed. "It is not about going to Valhalla but which dark god sent the creature to attack us, and if we meet it or more of its kind will we end up in some kind of dark evil place to wander there for all eternity."

Again the men grumbled and bemoaned their fate Leif knew that he must stop this before it got out of hand so he nodded. "Some of what Geirmunor says is true but are we to turn tail like some kind of cowardly hound and forget that we are warriors?" The men looked at him and shouted and cheered what he had just said so he carried on. "I don't know what we might meet back at or outside the settlement but we must try to find out what is going on I for one am certain that if I die with my sword in my hand then I will join the hero's in Valhalla and that is all that matters." The men cheered and laughed clapping each other on the back Leif knew that he had won them over for the time being but he also knew that he must get them ashore and into their fighting formation as soon as possible. With this in mind he ordered the men to take up what oars they had and to row for the shore and their date with whatever evil monsters waited for them. As the ship carved through the water towards the settlement landing Svart came up to him. "Well old friend you did it again the men are all with you all though for a while I thought that maybe you had lost your charm in the water." Leif smiled and shook his head. "Maybe but at least we are now going to find out what lies in wait for us on the land and by Odin's breath I will put an end to the evil creature no matter what it is." Svart nodded. "I hope you are right or we will all be dining in Valhalla shortly. Mind you even Geirmunor is smiling and seems to have found his balls again let's just hope they don't run for cover again."

The crew pulled back on their oars as the ship neared the landing stage and it shimmied into place coming to rest with a small thud against the piles. Leif ordered everyone to assemble ashore and they all grabbed their arms and disembarked running down the landing stage and forming up on the beach to one side. He shouted for them to form a shield wall and this was quickly achieved this was the formation that the Vikings always used and it would be thrown forward with incredible force against the enemy. Though in this case no enemy was in sight just the strange metallic aroma that seemed to linger after the fog had dispersed. Leif ordered his men to light torches and then to form up in a V formation he took the point and they began to move forward through the dark settlement torches held high and casting long shadows that looked threatening. Ears cocked for the slightest sound they made their way slowly to the outer perimeter of the settlement here in the open the shield wall was formed again with Leif at the centre.

Svart who was stood next to him peered into the torch lit gloom and murmured. "By Thor's Hammer it's as black as tar out there as dark as the infernal ones asshole. I will tell you old friend I do not like this at all things are not right and I think we should wait while daylight before we do anything else." Leif looked at him and frowned if Svart was shitting his pants how must the rest of the crew be feeling, although he had already decided not to move forward until light gave them a better prospective of the terrain. He shouted. "Alright lads back to the great hall we will wait there for daybreak I want guards set at four points and each sentry will have an archer with him in case of trouble." They fell back to the

great hall each man peering into the darkness with their imaginations running wild and their own terrors manifesting in icy fingers playing up and down their spines. As they entered the hall a collective sigh of relief could be heard and the thick beam was placed in its holders barring the main doors. The watch was set and the rest slumped to the floor gathering their cloaks about them settling down while they tried to sleep.

Leif had no such luxury and walked round chatting to the sentries and archers trying to put them at their ease and take their minds off what might be waiting outside. He had just walked over to the fire that had been lit when a terrifying scream shattered the calm of the night and there was panic in the hall with men grabbing for their weapons and staring round wide eyed for foes or demons. Svart shot a look towards Leif who merely shrugged his shoulders he had no idea who or what had made the ear shattering scream but it was not in the hall with them. He could hear some of his men praying to Odin to keep them safe himself he put his trust in the sword in his hand and his ability to use it against any foe. They waited ears cocked and weapons at the ready in case any onslaught was raised against them but nothing happened the dark impenetrable night had reverted to the silence of the grave again. Leif looked out and judged there to be about two hours to first light which if he was truthful could not come quick enough. He hoped with the light his men would be more like their old selves and he also swore that he would track this thing down and show it no mercy in the final battle.

The new sentries took their watch but no one was trying to sleep now instead his men sat in tight huddles talking quietly less something should overhear them and always casting glances around the whole hall. It seemed to take forever till the first lighting came to the outside the grey light of dawn changing the darkness and shadows. Things began to take shape buildings came into view and the walls and outside ditches of the huts took on a ghostly quality in the gray dawn. Once the men had eaten he ordered them to make ready for the fighting he knew must come when they challenged whatever was out there. They set to sharpening the swords knives axes and spears mail was checked and with helmets donned finally they took up their shields. Looking a lot more like the warriors that he knew Leif led them outside once there he had them shout a battle cry to Odin and then they marched out of the village in the same V formation as during the night.

Dew formed on their helmets, mail and shields and dripped from their weapons blades once again on the outskirts of the village they opened up into the shield wall and then moved forward. A few hundred yards further on and Leif stopped them he signalled two of his best hunters and sent them forward as scouts. They would warn his main party by signalling on their hunting horns should they come across trouble and the main body would rush to their aid. He had instructed them to make for the Skaterlings village he wanted to see if the strange happenings occurred there as well as at the settlement now that they

where both deserted. His men moved forward cautiously scanning the terrain for any sign of an enemy they had just come up to a bend in the track they were following when a hunting horn sounded. Leif shouted. "Quickly men our friends are in trouble, let us find them fast and show no mercy to whoever has attacked them if that is the case."

The warriors ran forward with Svart and Leif in the lead as they rounded the corner of the track they could see about thirty yards in front of them a thick bank of fog. Laying half in and half out of the fog was one of the hunters a man by the name of Hjort of the other hunter there was no sign. They ran forward and then the smell hit them again the same one as in the settlement and last night rotten eggs and hot steel. A lot of the warriors stopped and glanced about fearfully Leif shouted at them and berated them for cowards but they were rooted to the spot and would not go forward. Leif Svart and a warrior called Vignir went up to the very wall of fog the smell here was overwhelming and they were all retching in disgust. Svart and Leif grabbed hold of Hjort's arms and dragged him towards safety his eyes rolled pitilessly and strange mewling sounds came from his throat. As they pulled they looked at how far they had left to clear the fog but stopped disbelief showing in their faces as only the top half of Hjort's body was still intact as it cleared the fog. There was a ragged mess with intestines trailing but of his legs and bottom half there was no sign Vignir lost the food he had consumed earlier on in one violent spasm as he bent double and voided his gut.

Svart whose face had turned white shouted. "What do we do Leif?" Before he could answer Hjort shook in their grasp tried to say something but only sighed before blood gushed from his mouth choking him. He went limp and Leif knew he would be on his way to Valhalla and may Odin look after a brave man. They laid him on the damp grass and Leif covered what was left of him with his cloak now he could answer Svart but he really didn't know what to say. He never got the chance to form a reply as Vignir who had been a great friend of Hjort's shook his sword and shield at the heavens and charged into the fog determined to avenge his friend's death. Leif shouted but it was too late he looked at Svart who shook his head Leif pointed at the fog with his sword and reluctantly Svart nodded they moved slowly forward. A scream came from the fog stopping them in their tracks and as they looked on in horror Vignir came running out of the fog he fell to the floor got up and ran on. He ran past them not seeing them falling and getting up but always running away until he got to the main body of men. Leif shouted. "Stop him before he kills himself". This goaded some of the men into action and Vignir was brought down and pined to the grass but as Leif and Svart walked back to that place the men holding him recoiled in horror and stepped back shaking and pointing.

Leif came up to them and Svart shouted. "By Tyr's hand you cowards will taste my steel in a moment if you do not pull up your skirts and start acting like men instead of lily white milk maids." He and Leif knelt beside Vignir who was now babbling incoherently looking at the man they nearly recoiled themselves as

they saw his eyes which were the colour of silver coins with no irises or pupils. Vignir was totally blind Leif shook him. "Listen old friend I need to know what you saw before all this happened to you." He lent closer but all he could gather were the ravings of a mad man who talked of monsters in the fog coming to him sent by the goddess Hel. He made little sense and Leif ordered some men to carry him back to the ship and make him comfortable as possible and to also keep an eye on him. He turned to the warriors that were left and shouted. "Men we can sit here on our arses for the next hour or so or we can go back to the settlement. But let me tell you whatever is out here has just killed two of our comrades and sent mad a third are we going to let this happen?" The men shuffled their feet in the grass as he went on. "I say we go after this beast or whatever otherwise we might as well go home and sit with the children and women because we will be no better than them. I will also assure you that we will no longer be warriors either so who is with me who will come with me with the promise of being born to Valhalla by Freya the queen of the Valkyries and to sit feasting with Odin and the gods forever more." A great cheer went up from the men who banged their weapons against their shields in appreciation of this man who was a special leader and who they had all known for years.

They lined up in the shield wall and set off towards the wall of fog shouting battle cries and banging their shields with their weapons working themselves into a frenzy and ready for the fight. On the line moved and the fog came closer to meet them as though it were alive and hell bent on enveloping them for its own dastardly purpose. Leif believed that he could feel the evil radiating from it and like he had seen before the edges of the fog did not trail as normal but were straight as though they had been cut with some kind of tool. He shouted to his men. "Courage lads keep the wall straight and your shields locked watch each other and attack anything that moves no matter what even if it is the dark one himself playing tricks." The two forces came together the fog wrapping itself round them as though it was trying to swallow them whole and dissolve their bodies into its grey wet wholeness. It was not clear whether the shield wall was pushing forward into the fog or if it was the fog that was flowing over the warriors in its own movement.

Leif wanted to shout some advice and comfort to his men but here inside the fog it was surreal it was so quite that you could hear your own thoughts. It was also colder than anything he had ever known mind numbingly and also soul draining. He was having to fight hard just to hold his weapons as the biting cold froze his marrow and tried to turn his blood to ice he could see Svart beside him struggling and the man on his other side had dropped his axe and was bravely trying to keep his shield up. As for the other men he could see no one past these two so he worried how they were faring and he knew in his mind that they would cease to be a coherent fighting force very soon. Again he tried to shout at his men that they should retreat out of the fog but he knew that they would not hear him.

All of a sudden the man on his right fell to the ground and remained motionless even Svart had now dropped his shield and was clutching his sword as he sank to his knees. Leif was at a loss and then he heard sounds that froze his blood worse than the cold of the fog the smell of rotten eggs and burning steel was unbelievable. Then screeching sounds came a thousand times louder than when two sword blades scraped each other there were other sounds that he had never heard before as well. Certain though that whatever it was must be from the gods because as the sound surrounded them now his head felt like it would burst. The sound continued alternating between the steel scraping sound and some high pitched noise and then something happened that felt like the very air around them had been buffeted and was now being flapped around them. Leif had little strength left now and could not seem to shake off whatever power was sapping his strength. He too let his shield fall but held onto his sword jabbing it into the ground and leaning on it as he sank to his knees no longer able to stay upright. The sound now was like it must have been in Weiland who was the smith of the god's workshop and without a doubt Leif knew that shortly he and his men would be in Valhalla.

He felt something grab his arm and as he looked saw it was Svart his friend trying to steady him and at least stay on his knees he saw him shake his head. The look of absolute fear and downright hopelessness on his face as well as the look of frustration and lethargy took him by surprise though he thought this was probably exactly how he looked. He tried to smile but now the sound had changed again it was sounded like the wind in a gigantic storm but it was no wind he knew. He pondered was this the sound of the Valkeries coming to escort them to Valhalla if it was then he knew no fear like it but then he stopped and knew it must be true. For as he looked at Svart's hand on his arm it began to disappear before his eyes not only this his arm started to lose its form it seemed to shimmer like a lake and then it to began to disappear. This must be their bodies being prepared for the journey though he had always found the bodies of his comrades on the battlefield.

Still he thought soon he would be feasting with Odin and the rest of the gods he wanted to shout to Svart that it would be all right but he didn't have the energy. His spirit was sagging and he guessed so was his friends as he looked at him staring straight ahead into the fog but it could not be long now as more and more of their bodies disappeared. Then ahead in the fog he saw creatures moving towards them surely he thought these ghastly looking things could not be the beautiful flaxen haired Valkeries. He could never believe that these things had been sent by Odin they were hideous with square eyes and protruding noses with round mouths there skin was dead smooth and black. Surely these creatures were from the dark regions, devils sent to prey on them, their clothing was strange as well it seemed to be all in one piece. Leif thought it must be skin although it was like no skin he had seen before on any creature judging by the color of it these must be forest devils. For it seemed to be green and black with

some tan thrown in streaked over their skin he could not think what these creatures were doing here.

He could see them gesturing to each other and one pointed some kind of long funny looking stick at them but the other one motioned him and he put the staff or whatever it was down. The ground seemed to shimmer in front of them and they began to back away the noise had reached such a pitch now that he thought he would be deaf as well as taken by death. The creatures disappeared before his eyes and the noise seemed to wind down the fog disappeared and the awful stench stopped as well. To Leif it was like being born again strength again flooded through his veins and he could now see the rest of his men arise from where they had fallen and stand staring at each other amazed. He stood up as did Svart and they clasped arms Svart asked. "Did you see those creatures or is my head addled?" Leif nodded. "Yes but don't ask me what kind of forest sprites they were I have never seen anything like it." They checked the men but none of them had seen the creatures in fact most of them had succumbed to the noise and smell just after entering the fog.

He turned to Svart. "I think we should keep this to ourselves old friend otherwise we might be considered mad." Svart nodded his head but before he could reply one of the men from the ship ran up to them he stopped in front of Leif and said. "Haraldr has returned and wishes to see you urgently." Leif nodded and ordered his men back to the settlement they walked back in silence each with his own thoughts and many pondering what had happened. They walked through the settlement and out to the beach where Haraldr stood with some of his men. They greeted each other and Leif asked. "Are you ready to help us find out what is going on here?" Haraldr grimaced. "Sorry old friend but all this spirit and monster chasing must wait while later King Ragnar summons you back to his presence." Leif shook his head. "But there is something very important happening here and we need to find out what it is." Haraldr raised his hand to stop him. "Leif this is a summons from Ragnar himself whatever he wants you for is more important than this thing here just remember that." Leif knew that he was right for Ragnar to have summoned him back something must have happened that was very serious.

He looked at his mentor. "Very well then we will return home with you as Ragnar commands." Haraldr nodded. "Good I want to be gone as soon as possible I heard you had some trouble and lost some men I will give you replacements." It was Leif's turn to nod now and he shouted to his men to return to the ship he noticed that they went more than willingly. He stood on the deck of Odin's Breath as they followed Haraldr's ships out into the bay he looked back at the settlement as it receded with each stroke of the oars. Svart came up to him and said. "Well old friend we head for home and I can tell our heroes tales to all the flaxen haired beauties in Ragnar's great hall and you will be able to lie with Freyja and make more little Leif's." Leif smiled at this banter from his friend. "It will be good to lie with my woman again that is true and I look forward to it avidly



and I will count the days till we reach home.” He paused. “I will tell you one thing though Svart we have not finished with this place by Odin’s beard we must come back and find out what is going on here you know that.” Svart walked away shaking his head as Leif again looked back towards the land and could have sworn he saw something shimmering past where the settlement lay. A shiver ran down his spine but he knew that his destiny was to meet those creatures and the fog again and this time he meant to win.