



ONE MEN'S WORK

GUNNAR WAS DOWN by the sheep pens when he heard the rhythmic thumping of hoofbeats and the jingle of harness and weapons sounding distantly through the crisp autumn air. He frowned and looked up, along the track that led from the steading's gate

he was wearing a tunic and leggings and leather boots. Mother wore a green gown and a silver necklace, and she smiled too.

"I swear you could smell my stew from the other side of the mountains," she said.

"Riders in the forest," Gunnar said breathlessly. "Heading this way."

Father stood up, his smile gone. Mother's face clouded over.

"How many?" said Father, his voice steady, eyes fixed on his son's.

"Hard to say," Gunnar answered. "Six, maybe seven at the most."

"Who could it be?" said Mother, her hand on her husband's arm.

"We'll know when they get here," said Father. "It's probably nothing, but we'd better make sure there's a proper welcome, just in case. Ranulf! Arnor!" he shouted. Two men appeared from the shadows. "Get your hunting spears, and tell the others to do the same. Gunnar, fetch my sword."

Gunnar ran to his parents' curtained-off chamber

to the dark forest, then turned and ran to the longhouse.

His parents were sitting together on a bench by the hearth, smoke from the fire rising to the hole in the thatch. A pot hung above the flames, and the smells of woodsmoke and stew wrapped themselves round him like the furs he slept beneath at night. They were laughing, and Mother was ladling stew into bowls.

Everybody said Gunnar and his father were as alike as two ears of corn, although Gunnar couldn't see it. They both had shaggy brown hair, but Father's hair and beard were flecked with grey. They both had hazel eyes, but Gunnar's were darker. And they both had strong features and broad shoulders, but Father was tall, and even at fifteen summers Gunnar was still half a head shorter. Mother's hair was golden, and Father said her eyes were the colour of the sea, changing from blue to green to grey according to the light, or her mood.

"Ah, here's our boy, just in time for supper as usual," said Father, grinning at him. Like Gunnar,

and raised the lid of the chest that stood at the end of their bed. It contained many things – clothes and furs, the best bowls and goblets. But lying on top was the sword Father had used as a young Viking, and in Miklagard as a soldier of the Greek Emperor's guard. It was in a wooden scabbard lined inside with sheep's fleece, the oily wool keeping the metal free from rust. An ivory hilt bound with age-darkened leather was topped off by a round pommel inlaid with gold and silver. The blade had a shallow groove running from hilt to tip, and was razor-sharp on both edges.

Now Gunnar lifted sword and scabbard from the chest, partially pulled the blade free, and held it up so the glow from the hearth could fall on it. Faint lines twisted and writhed in the metal, almost as if the sword were alive and the red firelight brought back memories of the day it had been born in some ancient forge's heat. Runes were carved on the blade, a cluster of spiky letters that spelled the sword's name – DEATH-BRINGER.

Retrieval

- 1) What was mother wearing ?
- 2) What was carved on the blade of the sword ?

Words in context

- 3) Find and copy the word which shows Gunnar has been running.
- 4) What does 'Mother's face clouded over' mean ?

Inference

- 5) Why does Gunnar frown when he hears the sound of hoofbeats ?
- 6) Why does Mother put her hand on her husband's arm ?