

WOLFSANGEL

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an imprint of **Prometheus Books**
Amherst, NY

Published 2011 by Pyr®, an imprint of Prometheus Books

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15 14 13 12 11 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lachlan, M. D., 1964–

Wolfsangel / by M. D. Lachlan.

p. cm.

First published: London : Gollancz, an imprint of Orion Publishing Group, 2010.

ISBN 978–1–61614–357–2 (pbk.)

1. Werewolves—Fiction. I. Title.

PR6052.A7263W65 2011

823¹.914—dc22

2010047322

Printed in the United States of America

To my son, James

*Prince you cannot
talk about me
like that,
scolding a
noble man.
For you ate
a wolf's treat,
shedding your brother's
blood, often
you sucked on wounds
with a cold snout,
creeping to
dead bodies,
being hated by all.*

FIRST POEM OF HELGI HUNDINGSBANI
THE POETIC EDDA

If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being—and who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

ALEKSANDR SOLZHENITSYN

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to my wife, Claire, for all her support during the writing of this book and her correct prediction of its eventual shape. Also to Emily Turner for, as usual, her informed and intelligent comments on the text. Likewise to Anno for the monumental task of reading the huge first draft. Thanks to my dad for, among other things, the early introduction to science fiction and fantasy.

WHITE WOLF

Varrin gripped the shaft of his spear and scanned the dark horizon, fighting for balance as the waves rocked the little longship. There, he was sure, was the river his lord had described, a broad mouth between two headlands, one like a dragon's back, the other like a stretching dog. It fitted well enough, he thought, if you looked at it with half an eye.

"Lord Authun, king, I think this is it."

The man sitting in his cloak with his back to the prow awoke. His long white hair seemed almost to shine under the bright lantern of the half-moon. He stood slowly, his limbs stiff with inaction and the cold. He turned his attention to the shore.

"Yes," he said, "this is as was revealed."

Varrin, a giant of a man a head and a half taller than the king, touched the amulet he wore at his neck at the mention of prophecy. "We wait until dawn and then try the river, lord?"

Authun shook his head.

"Now," he said. "Odin is with us."

Varrin nodded. Normally he would have regarded it as very unwise to negotiate an unknown river in the dark. With his king at his side, anything felt possible. Authun was a Volsung, a direct descendant of the gods and was a vessel for their powers.

The tide was slow but with the boat, and the crew were well rested from the favourable wind that had carried them for a couple of days and eager to get to the oars. Everything was going well, and no wonder with the king on board. His magic, Varrin felt sure, had blessed their journey.

The men bent their backs pulling through the waves, propelling themselves at speed towards the river. The ship was more stable under oar than under sail and its sudden steadiness seemed to reflect the purpose Varrin felt as he heaved the boat through the surf. They were going into a fight, no question, and Varrin was ready.

Ten warriors crewed the ship, only ten including the king, but Varrin felt no uncertainty, nor scarcely any nervousness. He was with his lord, King

Authun, victor of innumerable battles, slayer of the giant Geat, Gyrd the Mighty. If Authun thought ten men were enough for their task then ten men were enough. It was a trick of the gods that such a man had not produced an heir. The rumour was that Authun was of the line of Odin, the chief of the gods. That battle-fond poet felt threatened by his fierce descendant and had cursed Authun to sire only female children. He could not risk him producing an even mightier son.

Varrin shivered when he thought of the consequences if Authun did not father a boy. He would have to name an heir, with all the trouble and bloodshed that would cause. Only Authun's name held the factions of his kingdom together. Without it, there would be slaughter and then their enemies would pounce. He glanced at the king and smiled to himself. He wouldn't put it past him to live forever.

Varrin looked into the black hills and wondered why they had come to that land. It was more than just to plunder, it seemed, because their ship had slipped away from a quiet beach a day up the coast from their hall, no kinsmen to bid them farewell, no feasting before they left. Only the war gear, the bright heads of the axes, a shield decorated with a painted wolf's head, another with a raven, spoke of their mission. The images bore a clear message to their enemies: "We will make a feast for these creatures."

They rushed upon the river's mouth but slowed as the water became more shallow. They did not stop for soundings; Authun just made his way to the prow of the ship and leaned out over the water, directing the rudderman. Varrin smirked to the man at the oar opposite as the ship slid into the river like a knife into a sheath. The other oarsman, a young man of seventeen or so who had never travelled with Authun before, grinned back. "You were right—he is incredible," his expression said. They were proud of their king.

The flood tide took them up the river. The channel became perilous and narrow, split into the land between sharp cliffs and hard boulders, but the king found the course. An hour inland with the dark tight about them, their only light a pale slice of moon high in the sky, the push of the current began to fade and the rowing got harder. In front of them a sandbank loomed mid-stream and Authun signalled for the boat to beach upon it. The small ship was designed for just such a landing and grounded with a slight judder.

Authun turned to his men and spoke their names in turn.

"Vigi, Eyvind, Egil, Hella, Kol, Vott, Grani, Arngeir. We are kinsmen and sworn brothers. There can be no lies between us. None of you shall return from this journey. Only Varrin will come back with me to the coast to steer

the ship. By the time the sun rises you will all be feasting with your forefathers in the halls of Odin or Freya.”

The men largely received the news of their impending deaths without expression. They were warriors, raised with the certainty of death in battle. A couple smiled, pleased that they would die at their king’s side.

“I would die with my kinsmen,” said Varrin.

“Your time will come soon enough,” said Authun.

He looked at Varrin, the nearest he had to a friend. The giant would be needed to get the boat back into the river and to help him with whatever perils they faced back down the whale road to their home. After that he would let him die.

“I have no responsibility to tell you why you must die, other than it is my will that you should. But know that they will sing tales of your deeds until the world ends. We are here to take a magic child, one who will secure the future of our people forever and one who will be my heir.”

“What of the child your wife carries?” said Varrin.

“There is no child,” said Authun. “It is a deception of the mountain witches.”

The men drew in breath. Authun was a good king, fair and generous, a giver of rings. He had never even killed a slave in drunkenness, as kings were wont to do. This was shocking news, though. The men despised liars and this was very near to a lie. Also, it bore the mark of magic, and women’s magic at that.

The warriors shifted in their seats. Death did not scare them; they found it as companionable as a dog. But the mountain witches terrified them. Only the king, half a god himself, could speak to the witches and even he had to be wary. Their advice had proved true in the past but the sacrifices they demanded were terrible and always the same—children: boys for servants, girls to continue their strange traditions.

“The child is a captive in the village here, taken from the sorcerers of the far west,” said Authun. “He is a son of the gods and will lead us to greatness. These farmers do not yet realise what they have. We will part them from it before they do. The village is defended only by farmers but there are warriors not two hours’ ride away.”

He looked out into the dark. Somewhere in the distance the sky was taking on a soft pink glow.

“Their beacons are lit,” he said. “We can expect opposition. We will find the child with a priest of their god. The building is marked like this, as their

holy places are.” He made a cross with his fingers. “Follow me as we fight to their temple, then we cut our way back to the boat. By that time the tide will have turned and I will leave you to your glory. You will be heroes and your fame will be everlasting. The village is five bends of the river away. Prepare.”

The men nodded and went quietly to their work. Spears were unstrapped from the rear of the ship, helmets and thick tunics taken from barrels, war axes unpacked and tied to their backs. Varrin and Egil had the honour of dressing the king, helping him into his precious mail hauberk—a byrnie, as the men called it—and placing the golden wolf helm, symbol of his family, onto his head. The helmet was the best that could be made, open at the face save for shining cheek guards that made it look as if a giant wolf was swallowing Authun’s head from the rear. From a distance, in the splendid helmet, his eyes blackened with soot, the king would appear as a terrifying wolf-headed man. The warriors placed rings on the king’s arms, tied a golden belt at his waist, and took off his sea cloak and put on one of golden thread.

Varrin passed the king his shield with its snarling wolf’s head. Then it was time to take out the sword, the only one on the boat, in its white-jewelled scabbard. As Varrin took it from its storage barrel, it caught the moonlight. It was a sword unlike any other. The Norse blades were short and straight, useful for hacking close up in conjunction with a shield. This sword though was long and thin with a pronounced curve to it. It was stronger than any straight sword and, though lighter, had cut through enemy weapons many times. Authun had bought it for a fortune from a southern merchant who said it came from “beyond the dawn”—by which Authun had supposed he meant the east. Wherever it came from, Authun knew it was enchanted, forged—as the merchant said—by magical smiths in the legendary kingdoms of the sands. The merchant had named it Shamsir, and Authun had kept the name as it seemed to contain the stir of the desert winds, or at least how he imagined they would sound. His men called it the Moonsword.

The king was ready. In his war gear he looked terrible and splendid, a god. In fact, compared to his kinsmen, Authun had little taste for ornamentation. The display was for a reason—to inspire awe in his foes. Varrin looked at the king. The West Men would need their courage, he thought. Before long the others were ready too. Authun filled their drinking horns himself.

“To the endless feasts in the halls of the slain,” said Hella.

“To the endless feasts in the halls of the slain,” replied the rest of the men, under their breath in case the enemy should be nearby. They all drank a deep draught, and then another. The horns were refilled and refilled as the

boat was prodded by oar from the sandbank and got under way again, rounding the bends towards their prey. As Authun had noted, they had been seen. The West Men were no fools and kept watch on the mouths of the rivers. Already, even before the village came into view, they could see the flickering lights of its warning beacons filling the sky. They would have to be quick, to strike before a body of men could be mustered to face them. No matter, they were used to that.

The final bend was taken and Varrin had the impression of a village already being sacked. The beacons were blazing all along the beach and up a hill. The fires revealed what Varrin considered a very large settlement of twenty houses leading up to a building with a cross on its roof. Well, at least they knew where it was.

The West Men had been clever. The beach was backed by cut staves on top of a cliff the height of a man. There was only one entrance to the settlement from the river, a gap you would struggle to fit a cart through. It would have been easy to defend had the defenders been proper warriors. Even from the boat in the flickering firelight Varrin could see by the way the men held their spears and shields that they were more used to tilling fields than fighting. There were gaps in their shield wall and a couple of spears pointed at the moon. They would have been better advised to direct their tips to the invaders, because the moon wasn't going to cut off their heads.

The king was the first off the boat, splashing into the knee-deep water and walking up the beach at the pace of a man carrying a basket of mussels rather than a warrior facing his enemy. The troop followed him, three behind, then four in a shield wedge. Two remained on the boat to guard it.

Twenty yards from the enemy, Authun stopped and his men began to rattle their weapons on their shields, to bay and howl like beasts. Those who still had drink finished it and cast the horns aside. Four horns a man, enough to be courageous, not enough to be clumsy. Authun stepped forward, unsheathing the Moonsword, the torchlight turning its metal to fire. His helm too seemed to burn, the jewels of the wolf's eyes sparkling out a bloodlust.

The king lifted his sword high and screamed, "I am Authun the Wolf, king of the sword-Horda, sacker of the five towns, son of Odin, lord of battle! No man has ever faced me and lived. See the plunder I have taken!"

He waved the sword again, its blade bright in the light of the moon and the fire. The torches caught the jewels on the wolf's eyes, turned the rings on the king's arms to burning snakes, and made the scabbard of his sword dance like fire itself. His cloak seemed alive with sparks and even his mouth, the

teeth inlaid with tiny red sapphires, seemed to burn. Only the space where his eyes should have been seemed dead, dead and pitiless.

To the West Men, Authun seemed a strange, glittering eyeless alien, and they knew there was only one place you obtained wealth like that. In battles, and plenty of them.

The enemy understood only a word or two of what the king said but were cowed by the force of his delivery. It could have been a spell and, even if it wasn't, the meaning of his message was clear: prepare to die. Imagination blended with fear and, to some of the West Men, it seemed that the king really did have the head of a wolf, that his wolf banner, held high by Vott, did snarl and snap in the breeze. A couple of boys fell away and ran. Three men at the rear melted off to go back to their wives and children and get them away. From somewhere a bowman, his aim made unreliable by fear, landed arrows into the sand ten paces away from Authun's feet. The king didn't move. The arrows had dropped quite softly, meaning the bow was at the limit of its range and, even if the archer improved his shooting, Authun thought himself well covered on that side by his helmet and shield. His impassive posture terrified the West Men. A spearman in the front rank ran, dropping his shield, and the others, paralysed by the sight of the sparkling, fearful king, did not move to close the gap. The raiders charged.

The farmers were not quick enough to flee, but their instinct, to step back and lift their spears under the onslaught, was fatal. The king, transformed from the cold old man who had sat in the boat, knocked two men down with his shield charge. A third, who had dropped his spear in fright, had his leg taken off at the knee by a flash of the Moonsword. Varrin and Egil, in the raiders' second rank, struck at two more with their spears. The men deflected the blows but the fight had left them and they fled. Fear is catching. Two heartbeats after the king had felled his first opponent, the West Men ran for it. Only one man had been cut down but panic had set in.

"To the temple, before the warriors arrive," shouted Authun. Varrin quickly killed the fallen man with his knife and then swiped off his head with a couple of blows from his axe. He put the head on his spear and held it up as a warning to any others that might try their luck.

The Norsemen drove on up the hill in their wedge formation. As they went they cut down two beacons and flung them onto the roofs of houses. This wasn't wanton destruction. The more confusion and fear they could create the better. Ideally the villagers would flee and hamper the progress of any of their lord's men who were rushing to meet the invaders. Authun knew

that success depended on getting to the child before significant resistance could be mustered. West Men nobles were a different proposition to farmers. They were raised as warriors from their earliest years and he didn't want to have to cut his way through such men to get what he wanted.

Up the hill they rushed. Here and there farmers armed with clubs and spears would stand taunting them for a few breaths, screaming defiance, but they would always run before the raiders came through them.

"You promised us death, lord!" shouted Eyvind. "These cowards will keep me waiting forever to begin my feasting!"

"You will be drunk with your father and his father before the night is out!" shouted Authun.

The church—though the Norsemen didn't know it by that name—was a squat wooden building like the rest in the village, and a solid one. Authun tried the door. It was shut fast. He nodded to the roof. Sigur and Egil crouched, their hands improvising a stirrup. Young Eyvind ran at the side of the building and the two bigger men thrust him up onto the thatch. In three bounds he was at the smoke vent, his formidable axe free from its strap.

"Kill no children!" shouted the king.

Eyvind disappeared from view through the hole at the apex of the roof. Ten heartbeats later the door was open and the other raiders were inside.

Authun looked around, his eyes almost blind from the transition between the blazing village and the dark of the church. He could see virtually nothing until Varrin came in with a brand.

It was a large windowless space with the hearth that had allowed them access in the centre and an altar at the back. Behind the altar cowered two of the enemy holy men, trying to make magic by gesturing from their foreheads to their chests. One was clutching one of their precious books inlaid with jewels.

"Find the boy," said Authun. "He will be here—it is foreseen."

Varrin made a quick circuit of the room with his torch but found nothing. The only people in there were the cowering priests, who seemed determined to die like children rather than face their enemies as men.

"He has to be here somewhere," said Authun. "Burn the place and see who comes out." He'd hoped to avoid this simply because it would take too long.

Varrin walked to where the thatch met the wall. As he applied his brand there was the sound from above of a child crying. Authun looked up. Hanging from the rafters was a basket secured by a rope tied to a post.

"Get it down," said Authun.

The rope was untied and the basket was lowered to the floor.

Authun looked inside the basket, expecting to see the destiny of his race. He was unprepared for what was within. There, pressed together, were two naked baby boys, each with a wisp of dark hair exactly as in the vision of the witches. But he had only seen one boy. This was something the king had not counted on. The boys were clearly twins—small, dark, and wiry, almost identical. Which one was he supposed to take? Would it matter to the prophecy's fulfillment if he was to take both? Still, Authun was a leader and knew that any decision is better than none.

"Take them both," he said.

Authun killed the holy men and took their book. He didn't have time to prise the gems out of it right there so he tucked it under his shield arm. Then he had his second surprise. Close up, he could see the altar was just a table covered with a sheet. Authun lifted the cloth. He thought he heard a noise from inside, though he could see nothing without a light.

"Varrin," said the king, gesturing for the big man to come forward. He did and passed the king the brand. Authun peered beneath the table. Shrinking away from him was a small woman. The king had seen her race before on raids. She was a Celt, from the furthest reaches of the West Men's country. She was beautiful, pale, and dark. He pulled her to her feet. Even though he wasn't seeking slaves she would command a reasonable price, he thought, after he had tried the goods himself. But as she stood up, he took a step back. Only the left side of her face was pretty; the right had been burned terribly, and an awful scar ran from her brow to her chin. Authun, veteran of so many battles, was taken aback by her eye. It was terribly swollen with a pinprick pupil just visible in the torchlight, the rest bloodred where it should have been white. It seemed to bore straight into him.

He dropped her arm—she was valueless. He then registered her alarm as she saw the basket with the children in it. She wailed and dived towards Varrin. Authun in an instant realised—she was the children's mother.

"Catch her." Authun's command had no explanation, as orders in battle do not. The huge Varrin dropped his left arm and lifted her off her feet to pin her squirming at his side.

It hadn't occurred to Authun how he would feed two newborns on the three-week voyage back, and he almost laughed as he saw how nearly his plans had come to failure from such an oversight. The fates had dropped the woman into his lap.

"With us," said Authun, striding outside. The church was already burning but he pitched the torch onto the roof for good measure.

Varrin shouldered the basket, the children crying and the tiny woman under his other arm still struggling. The raiders set off down the hill. The West Men were finally sorting out their defence and had managed to find some more skillful bowmen. Arrows flew past the Norsemen, one even glancing off Kol's helmet as they retreated down the slope. They quickly moved their shields to their backs as they ran. Making the boat would be the most perilous part, as they had to cross the open beach. Authun had an answer to that.

"Kol, Eyvind," he said, "harry our pursuers. Hide here and when they pass attack them from the rear. Take the bowmen first."

Both men discarded their spears and took out their axes. Then they were gone, inside a house to set their ambush. Against the burning church, Authun picked up a different pattern of movement. A rider. The lord's bodyguard were arriving—trained fighters. Authun had heard traders call these men by many names—gesith, thegns, and even, like his own retainers, housecarls. Authun was not a sentimental man and knew they were every bit as good as his own warriors. There couldn't be many assembled so quickly but, squinting through the smoke and firelight, he could see at least three horses now. When more arrived, they would dismount to attack. The weapon of fear would be useless against them. It would be spear against spear, with the mob at the thegns' backs. He had no time to waste.

"The ship! The ship!"

The remaining six raiders ran through the village. Authun left four to lie in wait in the shadows of the last houses before the beach and shouted to the two on the ship to come up and defend the gap in the staves. Only he and Varrin pressed on, his kinsman carrying the basket, the king now driving the mother.

On the hill Eyvind and Kol died bravely. Kol split a bowman's skull with his axe from behind with his first blow and knocked a thegn unconscious through his helmet with his second. His third strike cleft a bowman from shoulder to chest. He never made a fourth—two spearmen came at his flank and struck him in the head and belly. He fell to the ground and a farmer cut off his head with a hand scythe. Eyvind broke a bowman's arm with a poor stroke from his battleaxe. He made up for his slack work with his second blow, taking a spearman's jaw clean off and managing to continue the arc of his axe so it embedded itself in another's arm. Four thegns were on him then with axes, and though he landed a solid blow on the shoulder of one warrior it was at too great a cost. The axe jammed momentarily in the man's collarbone, and another West Man had a free swipe at Eyvind's arm. Eyvind saw

his right hand come off at the wrist. He tried to draw his knife with his remaining hand but the enemy were too quick for him. An axe split his temple, another bit into his neck, a third sank into his thigh—the blows were rapid, tight as a drumroll. Eyvind was dead but he and Kol had done their job, and the West Men moved more warily through the remaining houses—until they saw the pair guarding the entrance to the beach. Brimming with their success in taking down two of the raiders, the farmers were deaf to the commands of the warriors to hold their position until archers could be brought to bear on the Norsemen. There was a scream from the villagers as they rushed the men at the gap. Stabbing wildly with their spears or slashing with their knives, they were no match for the discipline of Arngeir and Vigi, whose spears hardly seemed to move, yet two opponents were down. Then two more. The West Men screamed and jabbered and rattled their weapons but the raiders kept their movements tight, the economy of their thrusts taking a heavy toll.

The five thegns cursed but felt duty bound to go to the aid of the peasants. Any one of them would have cut down a farmer for as much as a misplaced word, but faced with invaders it was their duty to defend the men who put food on their lord's table. As they rushed in, the courage of the farmers broke and they ran out. The four raiders who had been hiding burst into this confusion. In the maelstrom of flailing limbs and weapons one thegn was felled by a peasant who mistook him for a raider. West Men stumbled and slipped and blocked their comrades' blows as the Norsemen's axes bit and spears stabbed. Some of the farmers managed to get away, but the warriors, beset on both sides, stood and died.

Authun swung the basket with the boys in it onto the longship and Varrin heaved their mother after them. The big man ached to join the fight. He had his orders but still held himself a coward for minding children while his kinsmen fought for their lives. Varrin looked at the woman. She had one of the boys out of the basket and was comforting him. As he watched, a feeling of disquiet came over him. It was as if the woods around the village had begun to seethe. Somehow he could sense the forest coming alive, that the foxes, the birds, and above all the wolves had caught the scent of slaughter on the breeze and were hurrying to the feast. From deep in the trees he heard their howling, the dissonant call of welcome for the dead. He turned back towards the village, itching to go to his kinsmen's aid. From somewhere above him, even over the din of battle, he heard a call, a sound, he thought, like the sky cracking. He glanced up to see a pair of ravens circling.

“My lord!” he said. “An omen. Odin is with us—he sends his intelligencers. Our men have carried the day, they will make the ship.” His voice was full of admiration. What other leader could hack a victory from such unpromising odds?

Authun looked at him. “They will enter legend here.”

“Leave them?”

“Leave them.”

Varrin was stunned but he did as he was told, helping the king shove the boat out into the river. The two men leaped aboard.

On the river beach their kinsmen leaned on their axes. Hella bore a deep cut on his cheek, Arngeir a wound on his chest that stained his tunic red, but otherwise they were in good fighting shape.

“He’s going,” said Grani.

“He has said we must die,” said Vigi. “It’s foreseen.”

“Varrin and the king are no poets,” said Arngeir.

“They will tell the tale to a poet,” said Vigi. “The words will fit our glory.”

Down the grassy hill behind the houses horsemen were pouring. It was nearly an hour since the lord had seen the village beacons and he and his bodyguard had ridden hard. There were around twenty of them, at least two armoured in byrnies, four carrying swords, the rest spears and axes. The thegns had come, and in numbers.

“They can begin work on our saga very shortly, I think,” said Arngeir.

“We will be remembered forever,” said Vigi.

A bowshot away from the raiders, the peasants had cut through the staves and five horses jumped down the small cliff onto the beach. The Norsemen’s advantage from holding the gap was gone and now they had enemies on two sides.

King Authun hailed his men from the ship. “You have played your part in the destiny of the world. You die as heroes.”

The raiders saluted him with their axes as three horsemen dismounted and drew their weapons. Two stayed in the saddle, charging into the river after the departing boat. One tried to jump onboard but lost his seat and crashed into the water; the other was forced to pull up by Authun’s flashing sword.

Caught by the turning tide, the boat rounded a bend and the beach drifted out of sight. Then the king and Varrin heard the sound of the thegns’ charge.

“There will be many widows in this country tonight,” said Authun.

“And eight more in our own,” said Varrin.

The king lowered his head. Before the end of the journey, he knew, there would be nine. Still, the fate of his entire race was in his hands. When he returned his wife would fall into a coma and the false pregnancy the witches had laid upon her would end. When she awoke she would have a son, the magic child, the *wyrd* child who would lead his people to conquer the earth. Authun would have a poet sing of the death of his warriors and then he could go into his next battle ready to die. He would face his kinsmen in Odin's halls and they would know he had done the right thing. He had secured the futures of all their descendants. All he had to do was work out which child he needed to present to his wife.

Authun turned his attention to the boys in the basket. Their mother was bending over them, fussing. He wanted to look at them again but couldn't bring himself to pull her away. There would be time enough to examine them, he thought.

He sat back in the boat and took off his *byrnie* as Varrin steered out to sea on the outgoing tide. Which child? The witches would know; they had always known so far. The witch queen would cast her magic and the true heir would be revealed. How much would that cost him? He took out the priests' book and began to pick apart the jewels and precious metal with his knife. He had that and two ornate candlesticks. Would that be enough? The witch had an insatiable appetite for gold.

Authun was not just a fighter; a successful king needs to be a politician too. His whole experience and upbringing as a man, a king, and a warrior, however, made it impossible for him to recognise his blind spot. He considered only how to fight, persuade, cajole, and manage men. He might be skilled and subtle in his schemes, practised at bending others to his will—but so were the women of the mountain.