Runestone - *Chapters 92 and 93*

Don Coldsmith
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by Don Coldsmith

The land was a little different now. The broad flat food plain along the river had given way to rougher country. Rocky hills and ravines rose in seemingly endless array. The traveling was rougher, but to balance that disadvantage, there were more and better places to hide, or to elude pursuers.

The trail they followed had turned and twisted, branched, and joined others. It was practically impossible to decide which was the main trail, or if such a thing actually existed. All were probably game trails, used since the beginning of time and appropriated for use by whatever humans happened along. This would explain their wandering nature, the seeking for the easiest path in a general direction. Nils thought of an expression from home, “as crooked as a cow path.” For the first time he fully understood it. True, the animals involved were deer and elk rather than the cattle and sheep of his homeland, but the principle was the same. The meandering, the search for the easiest way...not a bad way, really.

The network of these dim trails allowed the fugitives to maintain their general direction. Odin insisted that they maintain their northwesterly course, which would eventually bring them closer to the People. It was not a matter of great discussion. Direction was not particularly important anyway, compared to escape. The northwest direction did, however, take them out of the territory of the Shaved-heads. At least, they thought so. There was no way to know for sure.

Twice they had resorted to the sun-stone to re-establish that direction. When the sky had been overcast and fog lay heavy in the hollows, it was hard to maintain a sense of direction. It was at such times that Nils felt enclosed, entrapped by the trees and rocks around him. He longed for open skies and far horizons, the high seas, with a fast ship under his feet, responding to the wind in her sails.

Increasingly, however, their position seemed to become more hopeless. They had not discussed it, but it was apparent that they could not play cat and mouse in the rocky hills and glens indefinitely. Food was in short supply, and they could not pause for very long because the Shaved-heads dogged at their heels. Several times they had seen the war party behind them, perhaps crossing the bare knob of a hill that they themselves had crossed earlier in the day. It was hard for Nils to estimate distances, because much of the travel now was up and down the hills, rather than across the land.

They were tired, bone-tired, gaunt and drawn, and sometimes it seemed that they could not go on. They would stop to rest, and fall asleep for a few moments from sheer exhaustion. Only the fear of what lay behind would thrust them back on their feet to move on.

Each morning, after a fitful night’s sleep, things seemed a little brighter. Enough so that they kept moving, at least. All of the adults knew, however, that the time was drawing near when they must choose the place to make the last stand. Probably sooner, rather than later, because each day they grew weaker.

The level, grassy valley was pleasant to see. They came upon it from the south, and it stretched for some distance northward. To their right, the valley was bordered by a ridge of hills like those they had been crossing for several days.

“Wait,” said Odin. “Let us consider this.”

“The travel will be easier in the open.” Nils
observed.

“True. But I am thinking, it places us in the open, where we can be seen.”

“We could cross it at night,” Dove said. “There should be good moonlight, too.”

“Maybe,” Odin agreed. “Maybe too good. But the thing is this...how close are those who follow us?”

There was silence for a little while, and then Odin spoke.

“I am made to think we must know. I will go back to see.”

“But—,” Nils protested.

Odin waved down his objection.

“No. You go on, and I will catch up. Stay along the base of these hills to the right, follow them north. See the notch in the ridge, there? Wait for me below that.”

He turned and was gone, and the other three plodded on.

Calling Dove was tired, and she knew that the others were, too. Just ahead of her, Bright Sky followed his father doggedly, step after step. The boy had never complained, though she knew this must be very hard for him. It had been hard for them all.

It was well past noon when White Wolf called a halt. They were near the notch in the ridge, and here they would wait for Odin. Then they could decide whether to head west across the valley, move on northward along the shoulder of the ridge, or try to seek refuge in its rolling hills.

They had not waited long before they saw Odin approaching along their back trail. He was running, and it was apparent that something was urgent. He trotted to where they waited, and stood for a moment, panting from exhaustion.

“They...come...,” he gasped, pointing.

Dove could not see the war party, but knew that it must be as Odin said. Once more, the Shaved-heads had gained on the fugitives. The final battle was ever closer. It was apparent that they could not cross the valley now, even by moonlight. Their pursuers were too near, and they would surely be seen. Likewise, to go north along the base of the hills would be too exposed. They must try to find refuge in the hills.

Odin, who was breathing more easily now,
shifted his pack and started up the slope, following a dim path that angled back southeastward along the shoulder. Dove started to speak about the direction, but realized the situation quickly. The quickest path led that way, and direction had now lost all importance. The problem now was simply to find a place to try to hide. Preferably, one that would be defensible.

"Wait," said Odin suddenly. He turned aside and pattered around among the sassafras brushes.

"What is it?" called Nils.

"Maybe nothing. There is a canyon here."

The big, old trees had practically concealed that fact. Oaks, sycamores, nut trees, and the heavy underbrush effectively hid a deep and narrow cleft and rift in the hillside. The tops of the giant oaks that grew from the floor of the rift were below where they stood.

The trail they followed led over practically solid stone, a dark limestone that seemed to be a major part of the entire ridge. But it would not leave tracks!

"Maybe we can fool them one more time," Odin said.

He held aside a sassafras bush, and motioned the others down the steep face of the canyon wall. Nils led the way, turning to help his son.

It was a very dim trail that led downward. Odin followed Dove and tried to make sure that all traces behind them were hidden. They reached the bottom of the canyon, and Dove heard the murmur of water. She was hot and thirsty, and the sound was pleasant. The whole place was peaceful, sheltered, and quiet, with only a birdsong here and there. She felt protected, somehow, in the shelter of these massive gray walls and the canopy of leaves overhead. Even though it was late in the season, ferns and grasses were still green here in this sheltered place.

Dove looked around and gasped aloud. "Look!"

At the very head of the canyon, a massive ledge of stone lay across the rift, forming a cave. Its ceiling was high enough to stand upright, its floor several paces across. It would give comfort and shelter. The four weary travelers walked into its mouth and dropped their packs on the sandy floor.

"A fire?" asked Dove.

"Maybe later," Odin said. "Let us wait, for now. We can find water, rest, get some sleep, maybe."

There was a seep spring beside the cave, and a rivulet of water told of larger pools below. Dove picked up a waterskin and made her way down to the pool. She noted the rugged walls of the ravine. In many places, great slabs of stone like that which formed the roof of their cave had fallen away from the rim to slide toward the bottom of the rift. She saw one that must be three paces long, nearly as wide, and as thick as a man's arm is long. That one leaned almost upright against the canyon wall.

Her husband approached.

"It is a strange place," he said quietly.

"Yes. Its spirit is good, though."

He nodded, and they stood there looking around them, unsure what to say. In the power of emotion that they felt here, anything that might be said seemed unnecessary.

Dove was unsure whether it was the depth of their own emotion or the powerful spirit of the place itself. But she knew that he felt it, too. It was fitting, she thought, to find such a place, on a day that might be their last. That thought itself seemed rather unimportant, somehow, though she knew it must be faced.

Even so, she was startled when her husband voiced a similar thought.

"This," he said calmly, "is not a bad place to make our last fight."

Dove looked at him sharply. She was thinking of the words of the death song, "today is a good day to die."

And a good place, maybe.

"Maybe they will not find us," she said.

He put his arm around her, and held her close for a moment. "Maybe not."

But they both knew.
It was late afternoon when the war party made its way along the path at the canyon’s rim. Those below sat quietly, listening to the shuffle of feet and the words of conversation that they did not understand. Odin stood below, directly beneath the point where the rocky path led to the bottom. There was a moment when it seemed that the Shaved-heads had missed the trail and had gone on. Then, a one-word exclamation, and complete stillness.

The sassafras bush at the rim of the canyon was pulled cautiously aside, and a face peered down. There was an instant of recognition as the tracker looked into Odin’s eye. Odin’s bow twanged, and Ferret had no time to draw back, even. He toppled forward, tumbling and rolling through rocks and bushes, his limp form coming to rest against the trunk of a hickory halfway down the bluff.

Nils hurried quietly to Odin’s side. Odin turned, a grim smile on his face.

“That,” he said. “would be their tracker.”

By the hammer of Thor, thought Nils, he still thinks we will escape!

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“They will attack in the morning,” Odin said positively.

“There is not time now, before dark. They will search for any other ways down. Probably attack from different directions, if they can.”

It was nearly dark, and the fugitives sat in the mouth of the cave, warming themselves at the fire. There was no reason not to enjoy a fire now. Those who sought them already knew their location and their status. They might as well be comfortable on the last night of their lives.

Even Odin seemed to have abandoned any other hope. The Shaved-heads could keep them in the canyon. It would be possible to survive there for a little while, with water and small game. Sooner or later there would come an arrow from ambush, or a knife in the dark, and the fugitives would be one less, then another.

But neither Odin nor Nils felt that it would be that way. It was not the manner in which the Shaved-heads did things. No, in all likelihood, they had explored the canyon rim quite well before dark. They would have noted any possible paths in or out of its depths, and would plan an attack to overwhelm the fugitives.

“Would they wait a day?” Nils asked.

“Maybe,” Odin answered. “But we must be ready tomorrow morning. If they do not come then, surely the next day.”

Nils nodded, deep in thought. He had been fasting for a day, not entirely of his own choice, but their food supply was nearly nonexistent. He had
saved his share for the child. Now he found that he was past the hunger pangs of an early fast, and into the next phase. That, as he had experienced before, produced a sharpening of all the senses, a bright, crisp clarity of thought. He still saw no way to survive their present situation, but was able to assess it more objectively.

If they were to meet their pursuers in one last battle, let it be so. He could die with a weapon in hand, like a true Viking. His companions, too. Their ways were, after all, not so different. But if a fight to the death is imminent, let it be on our terms, he thought. The idea was quickly expressed.

"Odin, let us attack them!"

"Attack?"

"Of course. This gives an advantage. Not much, but we do not have much."

"That is true. Attack before they are ready."

"Yes! Before dawn, just before—"

"We can slip up and over the rim. They will have campfire, will be sleepy, just getting up! It is good, Wolf."

Not good, thought Nils, but better than waiting to be killed.

They began to prepare themselves, though there was little to do. Their weapons had hardly left their hands for many days. Most of the preparation was emotional and personal. Calling Dove had indicated immediately that she, too, would go over the rim with them. The way she gripped her heavy war club left no room for argument.

"I do not intend to become a trophy for some Shaved-head’s bed," she stated flatly.

She also took Bright Sky aside for a last lesson.

"I can go with you," he pleaded tearfully. "I can help."

"No, no, my son. But listen carefully now. You must stay here in the cave. If we come back for you, it is good. If the Shaved-heads come, your must remember: No matter what you are taught, you are a man of the People. In this your must take pride, and remember our ways. When you can, go home to the People."

There was much about this that he might not understand, but she hoped that he would remember.

Odin was rebraiding his hair, making himself presentable for the crossing-over. Nils knew that Dove, too, would do so. He found himself wondering about what he should do to prepare for this final event.

He wished that he might send a message to his family. Well, they surely thought him dead anyway. They would have long since mourned for him, and recovered from their loss. Years had passed.

Still, he felt that he should leave some evidence of his passing. Maybe, sometime, another Norseman would come this way, and it might be of interest to note that one Nils Thorsson had been here. A bit of carving on a stone, perhaps. That slab down by the stream, maybe. It was so massive that no one could move it, yet smooth and flat on its face. He could stand to work on it, and sometime in the future someone could stand to read it easily.

A tool . . . all that he had was his short sword. Well, its point, finely tempered, would cut the limestone quite well. It would become dulled, but he could resharpen it. By sunrise it would matter little, anyway.

Now, what to carve? His name? Maybe, though pretty long. It should be something, though, to identify him. The colony at Straumfjord had known that he disappeared into the interior. Thorward Erickson, too, had known. If he could establish an approximate date, and a way to guarantee its truth . . . In the clarity of his fasting condition, he now began to realize, the simplest way to convey that the message was genuine would be to make it in the form of a riddle. One that only another Norseman would understand. He could use the old runes, taught by his grandfather. How pleased Grandfather would be.
Nils returned to the idea of a date. The exact date? He would have to guess because Sven's bark-calendar had been lost in the accident with the canoe. He counted days on his fingers. Early November, it must be, the Moon of Madness for the People. This struck him as an ironic joke, and he chuckled aloud. But did it matter?

“What is it, my husband?”

“It would be hard to explain, Dove. I was thinking of my grandfather. Thoughts that would please him.”

“He is probably thinking of you, then.”

“Grandfather is long dead, Dove.”

“Of course. How else could he help you now?”

The hairs prickled on the back of his neck. The People were so straightforward, so understanding. No, not understanding. One can never understand, he had decided. Accepting. Of course, Dove had said, and she was right. He smiled. “Thank you, Grandfather,” he murmured. Then he turned to the others.

“There is a thing I must do,” he explained. “I would leave a message on the stone by the stream.”

The others nodded. “I will stand watch,” Odin said.

Nils approached the stone, stuck his torch in a crevice, and ran his hand over the smooth gray surface, planning the placement of the runic characters. Yes...nine in all, it would take. He placed the sword point on the rock and struck a blow with a hammer stone he had chosen from the stream bed. A chip of limestone flew off, leaving a small linear pit. Another, and another...Each character would be a little taller than the length of a man's finger. Now a careful shaping of each letter in the old alphabet, not in the current one.

Nils could practically feel his grandfather's smiling approval from over his shoulder. In fact, he looked around. There was nothing of his grandfather, but the moon was rising, just past full. He felt a calm, yet at the same time an excitement and exhilaration.

He wondered what the Shaved-heads must be thinking about the clinking metallic sounds that he was making. They would undoubtedly think it a ritual of some sort. In addition, they had been liberally supplied by Odin with the story of the white wolf.

The entire situation now struck him as a great joke, one quite appropriate to the Moon of Madness. He paused in his stonecutting and raised his head to utter a long-drawn quavering wolf howl. That should give the Shaved-heads something to ponder!

Even as he did so, the entire scheme of the thing seemed to fall into place before him. It was still probable that they would all die in the morning. But was that not the entire purpose of the berserker, to go out with honor in a blaze of glory. And was that not also the purpose of the Death Song of the People? It was much the same, except for the frenzy generated in the Norse berserker. Maybe even that, he thought.

As if in answer, there came floating down the ravine the high-pitched, plaintive melody of the Death Song, sung by two voices a little way apart.

“The earth and the sky go on forever....”

Nils raised his head and gave vent to another full-throated wolf howl. He could have sworn that there was an answer from somewhere beyond the next ridge.

“What are they doing?” demanded White Heron of his sentry.

The white of the young man's eyes showed plainly in the moonlight. He was very nervous.

“I do not know, Heron. A ceremony of some sort, maybe. That sound, like striking stones together, has gone on for a long time. I have seen nothing.”

“Huh! They try to make powerful medicine, I suppose.”

The young warrior nodded. It was plain that he would have preferred to be almost anywhere
else this night.

Now a chanting song rose from another place in the canyon.

"How many are there?" the nervous sentry asked, as if to reassure himself.

Heron snorted indignantly. "You know there are only two men, a woman and a child."

"I...I thought...maybe it sounds like more. Could anyone have joined them?"

"No one of this world," Heron snapped, and promptly wished that he had not said it. "Did you want to look over the edge to see?"

"No, no."

There had not been much incentive to stick one's head over the rim after what had befallen Ferret. His body was still lodged halfway down. At least, from what they had been able to determine from a quick look now and then. Now, with the chanting and the howls, no one cared to take much risk.

"This is all a trick," Heron explained. "We will kill them in the morning, and they know this. They have no magic that can stop six warriors."

He thought he saw doubt in the young man's eyes, but decided to drop the thought.

"Blue Dog is across on the other side," Heron informed the sentry. "We do not know if there is a way out there, but we must watch. I do not want these to escape."

"We will attack them at dawn?" asked the nervous sentry.

"Yes, as soon as it is light," answered Heron, turning on his heel.

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It was well before light, however, that Heron rose. He had not slept, and few of the others had. Soon, the sentry from the other side would join them, and they would be ready for the attack.

They had discovered no other satisfactory place to descend, so he planned to have bowmen on the rim to protect the first man or two into the canyon. All knew the general attack plan, and would gather as they rose.

The sounds below had ceased some time ago, and there had been nothing but silence from the canyon. He still wondered about the odd clinking sound that had taken place. It had ceased shortly after the chanting and the wolf howls. Those howls had certainly been disconcerting. A chill crept up his spine at the recollection.

There had been a while after that, when a continuous grinding or scraping sound had issued from the canyon, as if someone was rubbing something very hard against a stone. A bone or a flint, maybe. He could not imagine for what purpose. The ritual medicine of the strange, possibly made, holy man, no doubt.

He still found it hard to think of that one as a serious threat, because of his white hair and blue eyes. Those marked him as old, and probably infirm. True, the skin of the holy man appeared young. The facial fur was white, too, and gave an odd appearance. Well, no matter. If the man was human, he would bleed and die like any other man. If he could actually change to a wolf, so be it. Wolves bled and died, too, did they not?

The moon was still giving quite a bit of light as Heron walked again to the sentry near the path's upper end.

"Anything?" he asked.

"No. Some slight sounds below. Nothing like last night."

"It is good. Are you ready for a fight?"

"Yes," came the answer.

At least the young man showed more confidence than he had earlier. "You can be a bowman here at the top," Heron said softly. "The others are rising. Soon, now!"

Heron turned to go, but caught a glimpse of motion at the sassafras bush that marked the head of the path. Something white, coming up and over the edge, a wolflike creature pulling itself up and over by its front legs. Then it saw him, and rose on
hind legs to rush at him. Something—a weapon? was held in its right paw, and its white skin gleamed in the moonlight. The weapon caught the moon's rays and reflected them like the flash of a silvery minnow in a clear stream. Blue fire seemed to flicker along its edges, and the white wolf-man raised it to strike. Heron knew that he was doomed, even before the horrible screaming howl came from a half-human throat. He could feel the creature's hot breath, and looked for an instant into its hairy face. The yes, wild and frightening—blue eyes.

Behind the wolf creature, other dark forms were pouring over the rim, and he heard the chanting, as he had in the night. All of these things were happening at once, flashing through his senses. There was a sound of running feet from the campfire, the twang of a bowstring, and the sound of a falling body. From the corner of his eye he saw the sentry struck down by one of the dark forms.

Then the weapon in the naked wolf-man's hand descended. There was no pain for a moment, only a numbness that began where his neck joined his left shoulder. He could not raise the arm. The blue eyes glared into his for another moment and the creature leaped high over Heron as he fell, to attack another foe.

Heron's sight was dimming fast. He tried to count...who was left? Anyone? And in his ears, the strange wail of the chanting mingled with another unearthly howl....

It was quiet now, the sun rising blood red behind the trees on the opposite rim of the canyon. Odin surveyed the scene, the dead bodies, and turned again to White Wolf.

That one sat on the ground, slowly coming out of the trancelike state that had occurred before, many years ago. Odin had doubted that they could survive, this time. Truly, the Norseman must have powerful medicine.

"We are not dead?" Nils asked, dazed. "Where is Dove?"

"Dove is safe. She went down to see about her son."

"It is good. The Shaved-heads?"

Odin looked around the area. "Dead, mostly. I am made to think there was a sentry across the canyon, but we did not see him. That is their chief, whom you struck down." He pointed to a still form a few paces away.

"Will they come back?" Nils asked dully.

"There is none to come back, Wolf. The sentry is maybe halfway home and still running. He will warn of your power."

Nils shook his head to clear it, and turned to see Dove climbing over the rim, leading Bright Sky by the hand. She smiled and came to kneel beside him.

"Are you feeling better?"

He nodded. "What now, then?" he asked

Odin shrugged. "Whatever we want. I am made to think, though, that this is a sign. When we go away from the People, bad things happen, no?"

"Say more," Nils requested.

Odin hesitated a moment. "Well...do you want to go back through the country of the Shaved-heads to find our canoe?"

Nils thought about it for a little while, his head now beginning to clear. Somehow, it seemed vastly more important that his family was safe.

"We could start to travel." Odin mused, half to himself, "winter with somebody north of here. Anyone can use two extra hunters, and with your powers, Wolf...Then, on north in the spring."

Nils looked at his wife and son. Somehow, it did not seem so important now to learn where the Ericksons might be this season, or the next, or what might have transpired at Straumsford. Or in Stadt. He placed an arm around the shoulders of Calling Dove as she knelt beside him, and the other around Sky.

"It is good," he said huskily. "Let us start home to the People."

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