

to his right and left, and an arm's length above his head was the quayside. Stray gleams of light from the crowd's torches stabbed down through the narrow gaps between the planks. They were still cheering and jeering, and suddenly Gunnar heard the unmistakable voice of Vigdis. "There he goes!" she screeched.

Gunnar whipped round. Rurik was struggling to keep his head above the water. As Gunnar watched, the big man took one last, desperate gulp of air – and then the sea claimed him, leaving only bubbles and foam.

The crowd gave the biggest cheer so far. Gunnar stared out over the waves, praying that Rurik was swimming towards him below the surface. But he didn't appear and Gunnar began to worry. How long had it taken to cover the distance from the posts to the quayside? Surely Rurik should have made it by now. Perhaps he hadn't cut all the ropes. Perhaps Rurik was already dead...

"Well, that's the end of them," Gunnar heard Ari say. "They're both food for the fishes now, and good riddance."

Come on, Rurik, thought Gunnar, where are you? Suddenly a dark shape rose from the water beside him. It was Rurik, and the big man took a deep breath and squeezed Gunnar's shoulder. Above them people laughed and called out to one another, but it was clear the crowd was leaving. When it seemed that everyone had gone, Gunnar made as if to head for the quayside steps. Rurik held him back.

"Wait," Rurik hissed. There was a sudden flare of light and Gunnar saw that somebody was directly above them. He looked up through the planking – and drew in his breath sharply. Ari was holding a torch out over the water.

Gunnar's heart pounded. What if Ari had guessed what they'd done? But Ari walked away at last, his heavy footsteps echoing in the space beneath the quayside, and Gunnar breathed out. Rurik squeezed his shoulder again, and they made for the steps. Rurik hauled Gunnar up beside him, and they lay there gasping like a pair of dying salmon in the bottom of a fisherman's boat.

After a while Gunnar sensed a light above them and raised his eyes. A dark figure was standing at the top of the steps, a man holding a torch, his face in shadow. Gunnar groaned again, sure Ari had found them.

Elsa Gold-Hair was absolutely positive she hadn't invited them.

But Elsa Gold-Hair decided she was too grown up to make a fuss, so she welcomed everyone inside.

A warm fire burned low in the hearth. Loaves of bread were baking on the griddle set over the hot ashes. There were cushions and wall hangings and lots of carved stools. All the children except Hack and Whack brought

Erik put his hand on his sword and went deeper into the cave. Suddenly he stopped, for he could hear another sound above him. It sounded like a heart beating.

'Who's there?' he cried.

'You must go deeper into the cave,' said a voice ... and it sounded like his father, although he had been dead for many years.

But Erik pulled his helmet more firmly onto his head and went deeper into the cave.

And as he got deeper, the cave grew warmer and he saw a red glow ahead of him. And as he got nearer and nearer he let go of his sword and took off his helmet and he found himself in a small room. It was warm and soft and on the floor had been laid out food and drink and a straw bed. Erik was overcome by a desire to lie down and go to sleep, but something inside him told him to beware.

'Rest yourself,' said his father's voice.

'I cannot,' said Erik, 'for my men are waiting for me to return.'

'Sleep my child,' said his mother's voice.

'I should like to ...' said Erik, and he lay down on the straw bed, but still something inside him told him to beware.

'I seek she who will tell me what I want to know ...' he said, and his eyes were half closing with sleep.

'This is all you need to know,' said a soft voice at his ear, and he turned and saw a young girl beside him whose skin was green as jade. She held up a golden charm on a golden chain, and said, 'Here, wear this around your neck and you will know everything you need to know,' and she lifted it up and Erik looked at her eyes, and still something inside him told him to beware. But he bent his head, and the beautiful green girl placed the chain over his head, and a voice inside him said, 'Stop! Before it's too late,' but the chain was already around his neck and resting on his shoulders.

The green girl gave a cruel laugh, and Erik's mind went suddenly clear like the water in the stream, and he suddenly knew that this was the Enchantress of the Fjord, and that no man ever returns from her embrace and that now he knew all he needed to know. But the chain was round his neck, and he realised that although his mind was clear he could not move a single muscle.