

MATT LARKIN



THE  
MIST OF THE  
NIFLUNGAR



THE RAGNARÖK PROPHECY  
BOOK TWO

# THE MIST OF THE NIFLUNGAR

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**The Mist of the Niflungar**  
***The Ragnarök Prophecy Book 2***

MATT LARKIN

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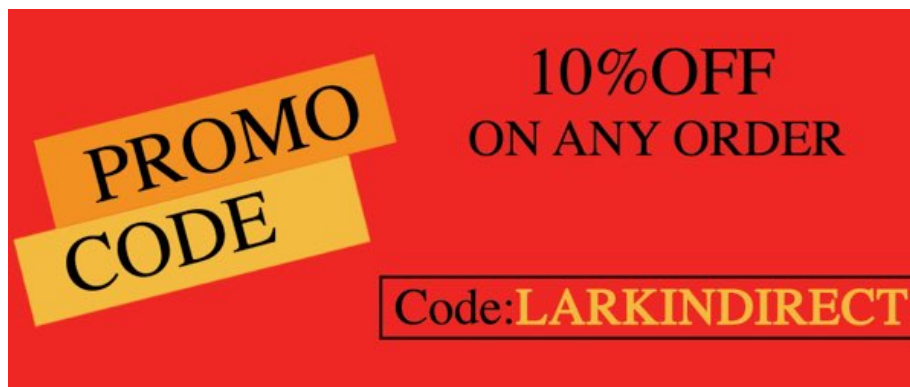
## AUTHOR'S NOTE

In 2014 I published *The Apples of Idunn*, a novella retelling Norse mythology, inspired largely by the *Gylfaginning* (“Deluding of Gylfi”) in *The Prose Edda*. It was popular and fun to work on, and in 2017 I expanded it into a full length book, the first in the nine-book *Gods of the Ragnarok Era* series. While working on that, I also wrote tie-in books like *Runeblade Saga* and *Darkness Forged*. Some time after finishing it, I wished I had presented the entire thing as a single saga rather than separating it, and that idea rolled around for me for a while. While working on *Tapestry of Fate*, I found a structure that would allow me to combine these works, but it required a rewrite. And if I was going to rewrite, I was going to do it right, using everything I had learnt in the following years, and incorporating other Norse stories I had wanted to tell but had not yet gotten around to.

I began another round of extensive research. Since I was living as a digital nomad, I was, for the first time, able to visit Scandinavia and study there first hand, which provided something that reading all the books in the world on the subject could not. The series you before you is thus the culmination of all these years of work, research, and planning.



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## THE WHISPER

*It starts with a whisper, a haunting intimation of a World askew. That we are, in the end, caught in a death spiral, time nearly played out, whilst entropy tugs ever harder upon the Wheel of Fate.*

*Looking now into the dying embers, we at last apprehend Truth, and in it the revelation that the vaunted tales of old were not what we thought ... And neither, in fact, were we.*

*For if we have lived before, might not all we've dreamt be but our souls' memories of Worlds become dust ...*

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## PROLOGUE

790 Age of Man

*T*wilight crept upon the sea, the Mist thickening with each moment, hungry for the soul of a Man too stubborn to come ashore. At either end of Grimr's fishing boat, torches guttered, struggling to hold back the treacherous vapours. Icy waters, rough, as if bestirred by something in the depths, lapped against the sides, sloshing over Grimr's sealskin boots as he hauled in yet another empty net. His father, Ketil the Trout, was king of Hálgoland in all but name, and Grimr would be damned if he was going to let this famine take his people.

Maybe he'd just plain be damned. Others, they daren't venture so far from the ice sheet that bridged the numerous islands in northern Nidallevir. Here, the wild was thick with landvaettir and the Mist billowed like dragons' breath. Serpents slept in the deeps, men said. Inland, beneath the soaring peaks, dwelt the dvergar whom all the lords of Nidavellir paid tribute in plunder, in thralls. In game and fish, even if it left too little for the people living on Hrafnista or in surrounding Hálgoland. Starving, Father said, was still better than what the dvergar would do if unappeased.

Dark clouds rumbled on the horizon. With a huff, Grimr hurled the useless net aside. The sunlight died, and the moon soon silvered the Mist.

*He felt it watching him, felt it wroth over his temerity in venturing here. Bah! As if he so wished to live, after losing his betrothed.*

*Something clattered against the hull, and Grimr started, cast about until he saw the chunk of ice floating off. He'd thought himself well clear of the bergs. Was that a piece of the shelf, broken? More ice stones hammered the boat, became a drumming hail. What in the Gates of Hel was happening? Grimr peered into the Mist, couldn't make out much, save perhaps the hint of something watching him where no mortal thing could lurk.*

*He heard it ere he saw it: the crunching sound of the sea freezing beneath the Mist, reaching for him like frozen hands from beyond the world. A new ice shelf grew up around him, closing in. As if asking whether he really sought to embrace Hel and join her in her icy domain.*

*Then he knew he did not. With no time to unfurl sails, Grimr seized the oars and came about, rowing for shore for all he was worth. He was a strong man, so strong some claimed he had jötunn blood in his veins, and he could row so fast his boat would seem to skim along the surface of the water like a swooping seabird. Even so, the rapidly spreading ice shelf was drawing closer. The Mist wanted him now, was determined to have him, to drag him screaming to its dire queen.*

*Grimr grunted, heaved against the oars until his arms burned, until his lungs seemed to freeze in his chest. Until the boat smacked against the opposite shelf. Grabbing his bow and axe, Grimr vaulted the side and landed on the ice, came up in a roll. The Mist surged over his boat, crystals forming along the hull, seeping up the torch poles, even, to tease the dying flames. Grimr broke into a run, made for the cliff. His boots skidded, he slipped, cracked a knee on the ground, sending a jolt shooting through his spine. Like a solid wave, the Mist rose behind him. No man had ever called Grimr craven. No, but dread rose in him then, clenched around his heart and turned his bowels watery. He was up, running, a mad dash away.*

*Without flame, he couldn't see anything, could scarce make out his hand before his face. He was breathing in Mist, could go Mist-mad from it, he knew, yet he could not stop to light a torch. Should have made offerings to the vaettir. He had angered the spirits of this place, defiling it with his presence and doing naught to propitiate them. Only, he'd had no spare goat to spill its blood and had not wanted to kill a thrall to feed the rest of his clan.*

*The Mist thinned as he reached the cliff. Above, a dozen feet up, he could see a recess, a cave, perhaps, where he might find shelter and strike up a fire. His axe wasn't for climbing, but that little stopped him from hacking into the cliff, trying to carve handholds. Then he was scrambling up that wall, making for the darkness within ...*



GRIMR WOKE, heart drumming as it had back then, cold sweat drenching him as had the seaspray. Beside him, Lophoena was already awake. His wife did not ask what he'd dreamt. She stared at him, as dour as he felt. Maybe it was the hazy light from the fire pit, but her eyes looked red.

"You've slain trolls," she said. Well, maybe she knew well enough of what he recalled, of where he'd regained her, once he broke the sorceress Grimhild's curse upon her. "What need to fear a berserk?"

Grimr wiped his face, scratched the shaggy patch of fur on his cheek. "Sörkvir is a Dögling prince." And Grimr would not be shooting him with magic arrows crafted in the dark of Pohjola, tempting though it was. The berserk had challenged him to a holmgang, and Grimr's honour bade him fight fair. He didn't know whether he could win, but he was not about to back down and sure as Hel's own arse was not giving up his daughter to that beast.

“There’s hours, yet, ere sunrise,” Lophthoena said. So eager for delays. So was he, but his daughter could not afford such.

Grimr lurched from the bed shelf and donned trousers, a tunic, a fur cloak. He’d come back for his war-garb. “Have her readied,” he told his wife. “I’ll see her off before I go.”

“And if you win—”

“When I win,” he said, hoping his voice showed confidence he did not feel, “then she’ll foster a few years with a close friend ’til she’s of proper marrying age.” He’d never have married his daughter to a berserk—savages were as much beast as Man—but even less so at fucking twelve winters old, and damn Sörkvir for forcing such an issue.

He stretched cold muscles, tight from the nightmare, then washed his face. Finally, he donned his war-garb, the habergeon, and above that the hauberk. His sword over his shoulder, his axe at his hip. A time, he looked at his bow, at his magic arrows, taken by Father, long back, from the witches of Pohjola. It would be so easy to end this with a single shot ... Maybe no one would blame him, even. No one, save himself.

Time came too soon, and he found Lophthoena and the children in the harbour. Hrafnista was an island, joined to the mainland by the ice shelf. The harbour, such as it was, stretched some distance out over the sea, though no one knew where the ice shelf began for certain. It seemed to be growing, though, for the poles driven into the ice in his grandfather’s time were now too far inland to use, and Father had extended the harbour.

Brynhild knelt beside her brother Orvar, who refused to let go of his sister’s leg. The boy had not yet five winters behind him and probably had little idea what was happening. No idea, save a Mist-mad berserk had come to take his sister, and now his father had to fight a holmgang. And either way, because of the berserk, Brynhild was being sent to Hlymdalir, gone from them. Brynhild rose and met Grimr’s gaze, not a tear in her eyes, and a

sword—mostlike too heavy for her—draped over her shoulder. “When I return, I will be a shieldmaiden even Freyja will look upon with awe.”

“Aye,” Grimr said and knew Heimir would make that of her, for they were friends of old, even with him being of the Dani tribe and not a proper Haleygr.

“Don’t go,” Orvar pleaded, still tugging at his sister’s skirts, until Lophthoena had no choice but to sweep the boy up in her arms. Once, a völva had prophesied the boy would die by his own horse, of all things. Sometimes, Grimr thought his whole family was cursed. His wife, both his children, all still suffering the wrath of Grimhild, who’d tried to usurp Agder, and cursed Lophthoena as a troll. Grimr had broken the curse, driven the sorceress out, cast her into the sea, and dared hope Rán had taken her soul. But then, who knew, with a Niflung?

“I’ve no choice,” Brynhild said, her voice betraying the terror beneath her bravado. She could have gone to her kin in Agder, to King Harald, her grandfather. But Agder lay close enough to lands claimed by the Döglinar that Sörkvir would know of it, and it would bring trouble there which the kingdom little needed. Hlymdalir was far.

Grimr muffed Orvar’s hair, then kissed Brynhild on the brow. “Make the Haleygar proud. The blood of Ketil Trout runs through your veins, girl.”

“Aye, Father.”

With that, Grimr climbed into his own boat and took up his oars. The island of his holmgang awaited him. Whether victory or the sword-sleep lay before him, perhaps only Freyr knew, but either way, the Haleygar did not shirk honour. So, in the darkness ere dawn, to the sound of the crackling flames of his torch poles and the slap of oar on sea, Grimr took up a song of glory.



## PART I

---

*Trolls, trolls, trolls, the children sing.*

*Trolls, trolls, trolls, the maidens scream.*

*When the Elders' blood grows thick with brume,*

*When the hunger comes to wake in you,*

*Trolls, trolls, trolls all the hills do weep,*

*Trolls, trolls, trolls and the woods shall creep.*

*— Sviar children's song*

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**STARKAD**

25 Age of the Æsir

Yngvi had constructed a sea-steed that could handle long days and nights at sea, yet still, they sailed the coast. Each night, they made camp upon land. It suited them all well enough, Starkad included. At night, the Mist thickened, and Men preferred the radiant flame of a bonfire to the small comfort of shipboard torches. By day, they passed the kingdoms of Svjarland through the Gandvík Sea, skirting betwixt Skane and Sjaelland, and now were already moving into the Morimarus.

Starkad had heard the sea here earned its name for the dead waters giving rise to unnatural stillness on the surface. That stillness was an illusion though. The depths hid unfathomable secrets, dangers not even Starkad deluded himself into thinking he understood. There were clans of saealfar, some in service to the dire queen Rán, who ruled the ocean alongside her husband Ægir. There were great serpents hidden in the depths, said to rise only in the most wrathful of storms. And worse, older benthic creatures slumbering, waiting to wake and consume the World. The Kraken, skalds called one such monster. And a sick part of Starkad longed to look

upon the monstrosity lurking beneath these dead waters ... to see it with his eyes.

Still, monsters of the deep concerned Starkad less than what ancient evils laired upon the islands of Reidgotaland. True, in the past decades, a strong kingdom had risen and begun uniting many of the islands. Some said the king, Healfdene, had done so bearing a runeblade, of all things. But Healfdene was dead, and his son Hrothgar seemed not a fraction of the king the great man had been. But Healfdene's faltering kingdom did not concern Starkad. The Niflungar, last of the Old Kingdoms, had awakened, stirred by the changing of the World. For all Starkad knew, Odin had woken the ancient powers, whether intentionally or by blunder as the so-called god so oft stumbled blindly in the dark. They laired upon Samsey, not far from Sjaelland, and though the ship had passed them by, still he felt uneasy. 'Twas Niflung Art which had, in the end, cost Starkad his mother.

At the ship's bow, staring into Mist of uncanny thickness, Starkad did not suppose it mattered how they had awoken. Only that they had, and that now, the Mist seemed intent upon his ship. It blinded them, obscured their course. They oft could not make out the sun in the day or the stars at night. Mist pursued them, chasing after their vessel like a pack of wolves, waiting for a moment of weakness.

Starkad spit into those dead waters. What was worse, the unknown horrors of the deep or the terror he knew too well lurking on the land all around them? With a grunt, he turned away and threaded his way toward the stern, where Orvar sat, head in his hand. They had grown becalmed as soon as they passed out of the Gandvík, a day ago, but so far, the men had not complained. Working the oars tired them, no doubt, but it also distracted them. They did not know what Starkad knew, did not know *what* was amiss here. But they would feel it, the slight foulness in the air, the chill on their skin that never passed.

Starkad knelt beside Orvar and placed a hand on the back of his head, whispering so none of the others might overhear. “We cannot make land here.”

Orvar looked up, eyes wary. “I have never seen these sorcerers you so fear, Starkad, though I have witnessed wonders enough.”

Starkad tightened his grip. “I have faced down a jötunn, Orvar. I have fought trolls, draugar, and a great many Men. And still I would not willingly fight these Niflungar. They are perilous and treacherous, and I have a strong sense they are aware of us, following us even. Have you noticed the silent Mist, ever chasing us? If we make land on these shores, I do not think we will ever leave them.”

“There”—Orvar pointed—“lies the northern promontory of Norreyyske, where you’ll find naught save fishing villages, and aye, perhaps a pirate cover. Many times have I sailed here and never have had trouble with aught save storms and Men.”

Starkad released Orvar but did not back away. “I ask you to trust me now. Push on, as hard the crew can take it.”

“The men will take it amiss.”

“Better unhappy upon the whale-road than unhappy waiting at the Gates of Hel.”

Orvar rolled his eyes, then pushed Starkad away. He rose. “Men—we will not camp on shore this night. We push onward, rowing in shifts until we sight the north-eastern shores of Ostergotland. Then we rest, follow the coast up and along Agder in Nidavellir, and outward.”

As Orvar had predicted, a collective grumble ran through the crew.

“What the cock-beetle, man?” Ivar the Loud shouted. “You won’t camp at Reidgotaland, but you’re willing to do so at Nidavellir? And pay tribute to the stone-cocked dvergar, I reckon? Mayhap trade one of us off as a thrall to the little rock-fucking bastards, too!”

Orvar jerked the man up from his oars and cuffed him on the side of the head. “You know me better than that, I hope. I’d not give the dvergar so much as a hair off my arse. We’ll land in the wilds, do some hunting, and be gone with the dawn.” Which was well, as Starkad did not look for welcome in Agder, after what he’d done to Vikar.

Ivar shoved Orvar away and sat sullenly at his oars. “Look now,” Orvar said, turning about to address the full crew. “Nidavellir is the last place we can stop ere trying for the Faeroerne islands. And from there, we sail into unknown waters. None of us favour angering the dvergar, but we need to get supplies whilst we can. We don’t know how many days—or moons—we may be on the whale-road ere we find this Thule. And every single one of you knew well the danger of this voyage ere you first sat your arse on your sea trunk. So man the damned oars and let us push on as best we may.”

Starkad tapped Bragi Bluefoot on the shoulder, then took his place at the oars. The steady work would keep his mind from growing too busy. Leastwise, once his body tired. Now though, all he could think was *why*? Why would the Niflungar care about them or their mission to Thule? They were a people ruled by the Raven Lord, King Gjúki. The birds acted as his spies across the North Realms, ferrying whispers and secrets back. Perhaps they told the sorcerer king of this quest. But that did not explain why the Niflungar would bother to interfere.

They knew what really lay on Thule, for certain. Perhaps they wanted to stop Men from claiming it. Or ... they wanted to stop Odin’s allies from attaining those treasures. The Ás king had made enemies of the ancient people, and now King Odin and King Gjúki seemed to be playing tafl on a grand scale, moving pieces in a slow game to control the North Realms. Perhaps all of Midgard. And Starkad did not like the thought of being a pawn.



**DAYS GONE: ODIN**

799 Age of Man

A shelf of ice rimmed the shore of the Morimarusa, stretching perhaps a quarter mile out. That sea wrapt around Reidgotaland where it joined with the Gandvík Sea. Some said the ice grew so thick you could, at times, walk from Reidgotaland to Sviarland. Reidgotalanders around the sea took fishing boats out beyond that, some hunting fish and sharks. Out here, the Mist never seemed to part. Every boat Odin could see had a torch pole mounted to both ends in a feeble effort to keep the perilous vapours at bay. Odin had watched these people long enough to realise they spoke a dialect of the North Realm tongue but understanding them proved a challenge. Besides, there were few enough in any event. More ravens haunted this town than people, though Odin saw and heard ghosts, drifting in the fringes, bemoaning their urds. He patted Sleipnir's neck. "How are we going to cross?" Perhaps he could barter for a boat. Even if the locals didn't understand his words, they might understand an offer of value. Perhaps Odin's arm ring, or ...

Sleipnir started off again, down toward the icy shelf.

“Whoa,” Odin said. “You crack that ice, and we’ll be taking a cold swim.”

The horse paid him no heed, holding a steady gait right toward the water. Odin pulled back on the horse’s mane, but Sleipnir just jerked his head forward and kept on. Then the horse trod onto the water itself. His hooves hit the sea like solid ground. Odin let his grip slacken, too shocked to even try to control his mount. The moment he did, Sleipnir took off at a gallop.

Odin clutched the horse’s neck. “Gods above!” He should have learnt by now not to underestimate this animal.

Sleipnir charged across the Morimarus, waves lapping at his many heels. The Mist out here grew so thick Odin couldn’t see past Sleipnir’s snout. “I hope you know where you’re going,” he mumbled. The horse snorted. They charged out, far past all fishing boats and beyond. A few shouts rose as he went by, fishermen no doubt fearing spirits out in the Mist over the sea. Perhaps he’d give rise to a new legend here.



ODIN HAD no way to judge distance, but he guessed a quarter hour’s ride and he heard hooves on solid ground again. The island of Samsey. At last. The path Sleipnir trod inclined upward, and soon Odin passed high enough that the Mist thinned, revealing a treacherous route winding along a rocky mountainside. Beyond, through the Mist, stood the outline of a castle stretching far up into the sky. As they neared, the sound of rushing water began to fill his ears. No vegetation grew on this mountain, though moss had sprung up on some of the rocks. When Odin drew closer to the castle, he at last caught a glimpse of the water; it fell in a steady unfrozen stream that ran from the base of the castle in a cascade that pitched over the mountainside, emptying into a Mist-veiled inlet below.

“What kind of madmen would live in such a place?” he asked. Predictably, Sleipnir gave no answer. Odin kicked the horse forward toward a bridge crossing the stream. Halfway across he paused. No soldiers guarded the gates ahead, which stood open but hardly inviting. No men walked the crumbling battlements above, though an unkindness of ravens watched his approach. Where were the Niflungar themselves? Had they fled this place? Odin heard the whispers of ghosts, drifting about the fringes.

The Mist congregated into an almost solid mass at the castle’s threshold, cutting off any vision of what might lie beyond. This Mist was born of Niflheim, all Men knew that. It carried the whispers of the dead and gave rise to the draugar. But never had Odin heard of it forming a wall like that. A fell sorcery lay about this place, as if Hel herself lurked within. A fool he’d been to come here, and twice a fool for agreeing to the ghost’s quest in the first place. He’d leapt at any chance to save his brother, never considering she might send him on such a perilous errand, never—in the throes of his desperation—considering her curse might cost him more than he could bear to pay. But then, any price was worth it to save his brother.

Almost of their own accord, his fingers drifted to stroke the runes carved along Gungnir. At last his fist tightened around the shaft, and he climbed from Sleipnir’s back, drawing strength from the dragon spear. He had no choice—Vé depended on him, and Odin would be his brother’s salvation. He would fulfil his oath to the Odling ghost, and she would halt Vé’s ... transformation. Whatever darkness lay beyond, he had tasted the fruit of Yggdrasil. He had slain a jötunn. He, a Man become god, would fear no sorcery.

“I am Odin Borrson!” he bellowed into the Mist. Above, ravens cawed in answer. Odin pushed forward until his fingers brushed the cloud. It had no more substance than any other vapour, but frost iced his hand as he drew it back. “I am a lord of the Æsir! I come for audience with the king of the Niflungar.” His voice echoed off the high cliffs and the castle walls,

disappearing too soon, as if swallowed by the Mist. And then the fog in the threshold parted, forming a vague corridor into the courtyard.

Odin swallowed. Despite his bravado, such a display little reassured him. Though, of course, there was no turning back. He pressed inward, and the path ahead turned. If he strayed from it, he'd find himself in a wall of blinding Mist, and mostlike wind up walking right into an icy well for his trouble. He glanced behind: the Mist had enclosed the way he'd come—even now it continued to fold back to its original shape, driving him forward. A simple gesture to show where the power here lay? Or a deliberate course to force him into a trap.

Either way, he had no real choice. Gungnir levelled before him, he pressed onward, watching each step, training his ears for any sign of his surroundings. He'd sworn he heard whispers coming from the Mist itself, but he could make out no words. 'Twas no language he knew—or perhaps it was several he didn't, a cacophony of souls bemoaning their urd, though he saw no ghosts here. A shadow passed through the Mist to his side. He spun, spear brandished toward the sight, but it was gone, vanished so quickly he could have imagined it. Or perhaps the Niflungar enjoyed playing with his mind. But then there was the other possibility. The glimpse of visions he'd inherited from his union with Frigg seemed to show him the Otherworld that lay beyond the eyes of Men. Could it be, then, that he saw no illusions planted in his mind by others but a reality they would have tried to conceal from him?

In either case, Odin had had enough of these games. He knelt, snow crunching beneath his knees, and shut his eyes. Fear had never been his problem. Heidr would mostlike have said the opposite, in truth. She would have been wrong, of course. Odin felt fear the same as other Men. But he knew it for what it was—a challenge to separate the weak from the strong. The weak would back down, broken by their nature, whilst the strong rose

above themselves. His brothers needed Odin. All of the Æsir needed him. So he let the fear go.

A völva could train for years to harness her gifts. Odin didn't have years right now. But if he could see beyond this world ... He waited until his heart had slowed, slow as a man sitting around the fire with his friends. Then he opened his eyes, careful to keep them relaxed. He needn't fear the Mist. He needn't even see it. Slowly, the World around him dimmed, fading into a haze, and with it, the Mist. The world shifted into a muddle of grey and ultramarine hues, and he beheld the tenebrous landscape beyond the sight of Men, that frightful reality that lurked forever just beside all that was known. It was desolate, but not empty, for within drifted spectres: some were shades, drifting on the currents of the Mist, seeming as lost as he had been not a moment prior, and Odin wondered how he had not seen them before. But other shadows, they moved with intent, their shapes more defined, like his. One paused right beside him, bending over to inspect Odin's kneeling form. Odin rose and looked straight into the shadow's eyes. The figure froze, then glanced side to side and even behind itself, wondering what Odin was looking at—they had no idea Odin could see them. These sorcerers were too clever for their own good.

At last, through the parting Mist, Odin espied the main gate and strode purposefully toward it. The whispers around him intensified as he ignored the winding path the sorcerers had set for him through the Mist. Frost gathered on his sleeves and cloak. To a mortal, breathing in such thick vapours could be hazardous. Odin, however, was no mere mortal. He was, he suspected, naught like what these sorcerers would expect.

He flung open the doors to the keep. Shadowy forms jumped at his entrance, a woman dropping a platter with a shriek. She ran, dashing toward a spiralling staircase. Other shadows moved about the hall, edging around him. These must be the Niflungar—men and women of this land. Odin shut his eyes again, willing away the Otherworldly sight. When he opened his



eyes, still the World seemed hazy, colourless and out of focus. He could tell the Mist had not seeped inside, but he couldn't get his eyes to return to normal. Whatever had allowed him to look fully into the shadows beyond the Mortal Realm had occluded his world in the process, as though he now perceived it through stifling fog. Again he shook himself, the World cast in shadows. A sudden weight settled on his chest. Had he been too hasty in turning to this Otherworldly sight? He could not well save his brother if his vision was so obscured. Too, he knew from experience, whilst he peered into the world of ghosts, they could reach him, touch him, harm him, as Fjörgyn Radmundsdotter had striven to do.

A raven cawed behind him, then soared right over his shoulder, so close a beat of its wings brushed his cheek. The apparitions of men and women in the hall parted for the bird as though accustomed to it, making way for its flight. The animal alighted on the shoulder of a man who stood at the end of the hall. He turned to the bird for a moment ere drifting toward Odin, wisps of shadowy matter seeming to trail behind him. The figure's eyes gleamed, the only distinct feature in a maddening umbral blur that seemed to bleed off into the background. The man had more substance than the ghosts, but less than the common servants who fled at his approach.

Odin planted the butt of his spear in the ground and stood firm. He would offer no threat, but nor would he grant honours to a man who treated his guests to mazes and mysteries. A proper king would introduce himself, not hide behind the Mist.

When the man at last neared, he paused and spoke. "Your Sight troubles you, Odin of the Æsir." His voice was thick, as though he were tasting the words for the first time, his accent strange and unplaceable. "Of course, once you open the door, 'tis never truly shut. You may choose not to look to the Spectral Realm, but you will always know more waits just beyond the edge of vision."

"Who are you?"

“I am Gjúki Raknison, King of the Niflungar, High Priest of Niflheim, known to some as the Raven Lord.”

“How’d you fasten that name?” Odin asked dryly.

“You are yet nascent in your powers, young lord, but not without potential.”

“What potential?”

“The potential for greatness, of course. The chance to take this Realm and make it ours. The power to shape our destinies and those of the common folk beneath us. And I have watched you, Odin. I know your heart longs for that power. You will be content only when the World kneels at your feet. That, I can give to you. Come.” With that, Gjúki turned and started down the hall.

Odin’s grip on Gungnir tightened. When the World knelt at his feet? Odin had no such lofty dreams. Idunn had forced kingship upon him, and he would claim it, if only to save Vé. He could not, however, deny Gjúki’s majesty. Still, Odin was little accustomed to being summoned like a thrall. Gjúki did not wait for him, however, disappearing around the corner. With a grunt Odin started after the Niflung king, more disturbed by his words than he’d have liked. The man spoke of kingship like tyranny, just as Loki had warned. Was that the power Odin sought? And could he accept such a gift, should it come from these sorcerers? These people seemed to hold control over the Mist. Men and women alike, clearly wielding seidr. They were more than just völvur; they were true sorcerers as Loki had said, ones who had delved into the powers of Niflheim more deeply than any should, and yet ... and yet they showed no fear. Men like Gjúki could rule Midgard if they so chose. Or rather, Odin could, had he such powers. And Gjúki offered them freely?

The king led him through a great hall lined with thousands of candles. Another raven came to alight on the king’s right shoulder, whilst the one perched on his left took flight. Scouting ahead? Did this sorcerer truly speak

to the birds? The so-called Raven Lord had as many secrets as Loki. The man spoke of the Otherworld as if he knew it. Völvur told tales of such, but they spoke in whispers, hinting at Realms unknowable to mortals. But Odin was no longer mortal, and, he suspected, neither was Gjúki Raknison.

At the end of the great hall, the Niflung king paused. A rune-carved altar stood on a raised dais. Gjúki spoke without turning to face him. “The winds carry word of you far, young lord. A mortal man who slew Ymir. No mean feat, even for one of us.” He held up a hand, and the archway beyond the altar trembled. Dust jetted from cracks in the wall, stinging Odin’s eyes. Then the stones sank into the floor, revealing another hall beyond. Odin swallowed. How powerful were these sorcerers? Could they match the seidr of the Vanir? “Come,” Gjúki said again. “I will show you to your chambers.”

“My chambers?”

“My ravens have watched you for some time now. More than long enough to prepare for your arrival.” If this man thought to keep him prisoner, he would find himself swiftly disabused of such. Odin followed, eyes darting down every side passage. All the people of the keep watched him as he passed, though none seemed intent on threatening him. But then, they were mere shadows to him. It was hard to tell which ones were alive and which were shades trapped in this fell place, much less judge their intent.

Odin followed Gjúki up seemingly endless flights of stairs. His superhuman stamina let him take all those flights without becoming winded, but then, neither did Gjúki breathe heavily. The stairs wound around in a spiral, carrying him up a tower until, at last, they reached the highest landing. The king strode toward an iron-banded door on one side, but Odin drifted over to the window. Below ran the stream he’d seen earlier, jutting around rocks in a violent torrent ere pitching over the cliff. Now that

he could see through the Mist he could make out where it hit the Morimarus far below.

Odin turned from the window, trying to look the Raven Lord in the eye. But the man remained a shadowy form, his facial features blurred. “What do you wish of me?”

“The only thing that matters. Power.”

Odin chuckled. These *sorcerers* wanted his power? What could he teach them? He shook his head and took a step toward Gjúki. He had come here for the Singasteinn, and he aimed to take it, whatever power it might hold. The Raven Lord was alone now. If the king didn’t have the amulet on him, he’d at least know where it was. Whatever these people might teach him, Odin had given his oath to the Odling ghost. He would live and die by that oath. And that would fix everything; it had to.

Ere Odin could even ask, Gjúki opened the door, revealing the lush chamber beyond. A four-post bed dominated the centre of the semi-circular room. A dresser, wash basin, side rooms—this was no prison tower but rather a chamber for an honoured guest. A woman stood by the window but turned when the door opened.

“My daughter is quite an adept at the Sight. She can help you regain your normal vision. When you have rested, we will speak of the future.” He turned to the woman. “Odin forced part of his mind into the Spectral Realm and—unless I err—has yet to be able to shut out the visions that now haunt him.”

With a quirked smile, the woman stalked toward Odin. Transfixed, Odin watched her, then jumped at the sound of the door shutting behind him. This king trusted Odin with his daughter. Moments ago Odin had intended to overpower Gjúki and take the amulet by force. His neck heated. These people might have deserved better than he’d intended to give them.

The woman pulled off gloves and tossed them aside, then placed her shockingly warm hands on Odin’s cheeks. She stood nearly as tall as he did.

She leant in closer, so close he could feel her breath on his face. Still, her eyes were naught but shadows. “Let it go,” she whispered. “The mortal world has much to offer.”

“Who are you?”

“Guðrún Gjúkisdóttir.” She pressed a goblet into his hands. “Drink, my lord. Find yourself.”

A draught of mead to relax away the Sight? Odin would gladly take it. He downed the liquid fast, gasping as it burnt his throat. Ere he could catch his breath, Guðrún pulled him to her and pressed her lips against his, ignoring his half-hearted protests. She was soft, unhardened by the bitter chill. Odin started to pull away. However he and Frigg had parted, Odin was a married man. He should ... Guðrún wrapt her arms around his shoulders and drew him closer. All thought fled his mind as Guðrún massaged his lips. He shut his eyes, lost in the sensation.

Guðrún shoved him. Odin stumbled backward, falling onto the plush bed. The Mortal Realm shot back into focus as he opened his eyes. After so long gazing at shadows, the colours seemed almost too vibrant, and he blinked at the sight. Guðrún was dressed in an embroidered blue dress and a cloak lined with thick fur. Long flaxen hair flowed over her shoulders, escaping past a large golden headband wrought with intricate patterns. And around her neck hung a pearl set within gold encasement, the jewel seeming to shimmer with its own faint light.

“Yes,” she said. “The Singasteinn. Well do I know what *she* wants of you. But I can give you so much more; I can break the curse that *vaettr* placed on your soul. I can give you *everything*.”

Odin tried to speak, but a lump formed in his throat. Dimly, he realised he had dropped Gungnir when she kissed him. Guðrún released the clasp on her cloak and it fell away. With two fingers she pulled at the laces of her bodice, exposing her breasts. Her nipples stood erect in the chill air, bright pink against her pale skin. “I’m a married man,” Odin stammered.

“Married to a völvu? You hold yourself tied to a woman whose powers are as a child’s compared to mine, and you dare to imagine she might give you a shadow of what I can offer?” Guðrún’s voice dropped, becoming huskier, almost hypnotic. It seemed to echo in his mind until he could hear naught else. “She cannot satisfy your lusts as I can. You hunger for flesh, for knowledge, for power ... I offer all the secrets of the World. You, with such potential, I can train as necromancer, as wizard, as ... *sorcerer*.” The Niflung princess straddled him on the bed, forcing him backward.

Odin’s arms trembled. This was wrong. Part of him insisted it was, but that part could scarce be heard over the all-consuming volume of her regal voice. A fire built in his loins, apt to devour him alive unless he sated it.

“Take what you want,” Guðrún whispered in his ear. “Take it all. Forever.”

Odin grabbed her shoulders so tightly she cried out, and he rolled atop the princess. Some other thought had been in his mind. Something on the tip of his tongue—he couldn’t remember. The fire kept building until he roared like a beast. He snatched two sides of her bodice and ripped the dress in half. The gods had made her for him. And he could not deny them.



ODIN SHOT AWAKE, gasping for air as though he’d been drowning. The winds were chilly against his bare skin. A glance around told him the previous night had been no dream. Guðrún Gjúkisdóttir lay sprawled naked across the bed, a glorious goddess. Splinters of the dresser littered the floor. They had smashed it when ... Gods, how many times had he taken this woman? The bed, the wall, against the window ...

Her voice seemed to coil inside his mind, as though demanding he come and ravish her sleeping form once again, and already his body began to rise to the challenge. Only a slight hesitation held him back. Wasn’t there some

other woman in his life? He tried to picture another face, but all that he found were the wisps of a half-remembered dream.

Some force pulled him closer to Gudrún, her scent growing heady with the nearness, until he could not stop himself. And why should he? She giggled and jerked awake as he buried his face between her breasts. He felt his kisses grow so fevered he thought he would faint, then flung her legs apart so he could enter her. Any sense of time fled him.



WHEN NEXT HE looked out the window, the sun had set again, the sky turned violet and grim above churning eddies of Mist. In the moonlight, this ice-encrusted castle felt even more removed from the World of Men, a bastion of Old Kingdoms yet enduring. An uneasiness settled over him, like something he was forgetting tingling the edge of his mind. “This place is steeped in sorcery,” he said when Gudrún put a hand on his shoulder. “Like something time forgot.”

“Not entirely inaccurate,” she said. “Long did my people slumber, tended by thralls whilst we bided our strength against a changing of the times. What do you know of sorcery? Of the Realms beyond Midgard?”

Not enough, that he could say for certain. When he turned to her, she was fully dressed, as was he, though he didn’t remember donning clothes. A fog seemed to have settled over his mind. Hunger, perhaps. “I could use something to eat,” he mumbled.

Gudrún pressed a goblet into his hands. Odin drank the burning liquid once again, then sank back onto the bed. At the edge of his vision, those shadows had drawn up again, trying to creep into the room through cracks in reality. “There are ghosts in here.”

“Shades are everywhere, Odin.” She held out a hand and pulled him back to his feet.



He was so tired. He wanted only to feast, to fuck, to sleep. What had he been doing that had left him so exhausted? The thought seemed to flit through his fingers. Instead he followed her out among the halls. Other Niflungar greeted him by name, nodded at them. He knew them, he realised. He'd spoken to some over the night meal, met others out in the courtyard. He knew them, but most of their names escaped his grasp. His memories seemed sunken in a bog, moiled together, occluded by the ever important, endless present.

The little Niflung, no more than ten winters, that was Gudrún's brother Gunnar Gjúkison. Always running about with a sword, training, testing himself. Hadn't he asked to spar with Odin once? Odin had refused him.

"Gunnar wants to become a master like his big brother," Gudrún said.

"Big brother?"

"Guthorm. He's away with ... our mother. Not one of Father's heirs, so he avoids Castle Niflung most times. Come." She led him further down halls that blurred, obscuring thought and time as in a dream. All of life had become a dream. "You have awakened to the Sight, Odin, and with it, you see and feel things others cannot. You see past the Veil into the other side, the shadow of this Realm where eidolons dwell when they watch us. We call this shadow the Spectral Realm, or Penumbra. Beyond it lies the Roil, and beyond that the Spirit Realm."

"So I ... I'll always see these shadows now?"

"You'll always know they are there, for you have beheld a glimpse of Truth, of Ontos. The Sight is more than one thing—those strong in it can pierce the veil of time, forward, backward, gazing upon the strands and fetters of urd. Some hear the dead, some can look through the Veil as you have done. I suppose, were I to try to definite the Sight, I would term it a psychic sensitivity that allows one to perceive fragments of Truth beyond the facade most take as reality. Some acquire this perception through traumas that bring them so nigh to death their soul escapes their body a

moment, whilst others seem to have a latent ability quiescent within them until awoken. Either way, the greatest of the völvur—or shamans or wizards—they will have some aspect of this psychic awareness. Sorcerers are those who rise beyond such humble standards as mere völvur, no longer imploring favours from spirits, but rather commanding them.”

Gudrún led Odin farther into the castle, to a wall that folded in upon itself at her approach, revealing an opening. It led to a long hall, and he followed her down it, eyes latched onto her arse. Would anyone dare speak against them if he took his lover right here in this secret passage? No. None would dare challenge Odin Borrson. Lord of the Æsir. Prince of the Niflungar.

He grabbed both of her arse cheeks and pushed her against the wall. She chuckled as he lifted the back of her dress. “I’ve something to show you.”

“Show me,” he demanded.

Instead, she spun around in his arms and pushed him backward. “Say you love me.”

“I ... I ... love you.”

At that she kissed him, then pulled away far too soon. “Midgard is but one of many worlds, Odin. A small, weak world compared to the many domains of the Otherworld. Tell me of Niflheim.”

They’d had this conversation ere now, hadn’t they? The words came to his mouth as if by rote, and he knew them. “The land of Mist, of cold. The world of the dead, ruled by Queen Hel. There is none greater. From Niflheim comes the power of sorcery, the power to unmake the Realms of Man.”

“Yes.” She smiled. At that she grabbed his hand and pulled him forward until they paused before an iron-banded door. Inside, a man shrieked in pain. The sound ran through Odin like a wash of icy water, the haze in his mind clearing a moment. And then Gudrún’s lips were on his again, her breath mingling with his, returning the peace.

She then opened the door, revealing a scene of horror beyond. An obsidian altar marked with strange runes rested at the head of the room. Gjúki, the Raven Lord, stood before it, ravens on each shoulder. But it was the naked man strung above the altar who held Odin's eyes. Wound-sweat dribbled down numerous cuts along his abdomen, the stains all but invisible on the black stone beneath.

"What is this?"

"Sorcery," she said. "Sorcery is the most dramatic form of the Art, the greater arcana. Sorcery calls forth the power of spirits, enjoining them or bending them to our will. And what greater spirit could there be than almighty Hel?"

"There is none greater," Odin said.

"Yes. So now is your chance to practice it. Kill him—offer him to Hel and complete the ritual."

Odin's stomach lurched at the thought. Even as his hand drifted toward the victim. Bile scorched his throat. Something was wrong. Who was this man? He shook himself. Sorcery called up power from vaettir. It ate away at body and soul, by its nature and by its cost. Why would he want to harm this innocent man? No, no, this was wrong. Odin opened his mouth, trying to find words to explain to his love she had taken a wrong course.

Gjúki slapped the altar. "He is not ready."

Gudrún spun Odin around and kissed him again. She drew him from the room by his hand. "He will be," she called over her shoulder. Odin followed as she led him back toward their bedchamber. Fear threatened to drown his lust until he found himself disgusted by the reaction of his body, unable to keep himself from rising again at her call.

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## THE VÖLSUNGS

### 25 Age of the Æsir

They had taken a long road to Dalar. Other men went by dogsled, but dogs could sometimes sense varulfur, and Sigmund could ill afford to risk such. Thus, they had run as wolves themselves, stealing clothes when they entered the kingdom. Dalar, like mighty Uppsalir, was led by scions of the Ynglings, who claimed descent from Freyr. But where Uppsalir had been torn asunder by political turmoil and the recurring assassination and usurping of the throne, Dalar had represented a pillar of stability in all the land. Gylfi had ruled fairly and—more importantly—without interruption for decades. For his funeral, Men had come from the farthest reaches of Midgard. Some claimed that even mighty Thor drank inside the hall. Part of Sigmund wanted to peek inside, to try to catch a glimpse of Odinson, and yet, he would not chance it. In the open, someone might recognise him as the son of Völsung, even after all these years. He did not want Wolfsblood to know he yet lived—not until the moment he was ready to strike the wretch down.

Instead, Sigmund drifted among the outskirts, watched the great fires rise, and kept to darkness. In truth, it had been long since he'd been around so many Men at once, and he preferred his solitude.

*Run.* The wolf needed to run and be free. And kill.

The familiar scent announced Fitela's presence, even over the congesting smoke of so many fires. The young man drifted closer until he could whisper in Sigmund's ear. "Jarl Olof will meet with you."

Sigmund nodded. Good. He motioned for Fitela to lead the way, then followed the boy back to the far side of the town. The men from Njarar had opted not to stay within the Dalar hall, rather claiming shelter with a lesser jarl for this ceremony. Perhaps Gylfi's old hall lacked accommodation for so many well-wishers. Either way, it worked in Sigmund's favour since it allowed him far more privacy with the visiting jarl of Njarar.

The Dalaric jarl's hall was thick with smoke and sweat and strong mead, the mingled scents almost enough to overwhelm Sigmund's lupine senses. Men were eating, boasting, a pair wrestling. In the back, his varulf ears heard someone fucking. Gods, too many people in one place. Sigmund grimaced, trying to focus on Jarl Olof Sharpsighted, who sat with his wife off to one side.

Fitela led him toward the jarl in a roundabout route, drifting around the hall without obvious purpose and pausing to exchange a few words or accept the drinking horn or share in the boasting. Sigmund's nephew had retained a knack for such events Sigmund seemed to have lost. At last they settled down beside the jarl, who looked Sigmund over a long moment. "I saw you once," he said at last. "Young and prideful and nigh to unstoppable with that runeblade in your hand." Olof cleared his throat. "Ere I was jarl, of course, in the days when I fought as a mercenary."

Tale claimed Olof had once fought for King Vikar of Agder, a famed raider. After the fall of Agder, the mercenary had resurfaced and claimed a place as a jarl under Nidud Otwinson of Njarar.

Sigmund grunted. Well enough, if the man recognised him, it solved the issue of proving his first claim. “Ever I long for the days fighting beside my father. Such days were stolen from me.”

Olof beckoned to a servant who brought over a plate of steaming boar. The jarl picked at it ere waving for Sigmund and Fitela to do the same. “The tale reached us, of course, of Völsung’s death. A great many tales, I should say, different versions to explain why Wolfsblood would turn on his in-laws. But none of the Völsungs lived, or so we all thought, and thus the king’s claims were accepted. And now I come to learn you have been here all along. Why did you not come to seek an ally sooner?”

Sigmund pulled at the greasy meat, tore off a great hunk, and took a bite ere answering. “Who was I to trust after one king of Svjarland had so misused myself and my kin?”

“Gylfi, perhaps, for one,” Olof said. “A man of honour, respected by all the kings in Svjarland.”

“And murdered by varulfur,” Fitela said. Sigmund bit his tongue. The words were true enough, though Fitela left out that he and Sigmund were the damned varulfur guilty of that crime. Now they became liars as well as murderers.

“So I have heard.”

“And then?” Fitela asked. “What of Wolfsblood’s claims to have suppressed all varulfur in his lands? Clearly he has lied. Either those varulfur serve him, or he knew of them and claimed to have made his roads safe anyway. Either way, a man could lay blame for Gylfi’s death at his feet.”

“Indeed.” Olof let the remaining pork fall from his hand, then wiped his fingers on his trousers. “One could blame him. Is that why you are here? To finally seek redress for crimes done long ago?”

“Now we know what Wolfsblood thinks even of his fellow kings of Svjarland,” Fitela said.

“Gylfi was favoured by Odin,” Olof’s wife added. “Surely his death, unavenged, will anger the gods.”

“What would you have me do? March all the way to Wolfsblood’s hall? A prolonged war would leave Njarar at risk itself. We are not so strong as others.”

Sigmund shook his head. No. No, having Olof Sharpsighted kill Wolfsblood was not enough. Vengeance was his to claim. “You need not besiege his hall. Simply lead a large raid into his lands. It will force him to send many of his warriors to confront you.”

“To what end?”

“Do you not raid in summer regardless? Instead of sailing to Kvenland or Reidgotaland or anywhere else, prey on those close to home. And whilst Wolfsblood’s men engage your own, he will have fewer at his hall. So when I go to face him, he will have no one to hide behind.”

Olof snorted. “The two of you? And if he refuses you your challenge? This plan is like to end in both of you dead—but at least we will hear one last tale of Völsung valour.”

“Then you agree?” Sigmund asked.

“Aye ...” Olof leant back in his chair. “So be it. Come summer, every able man who serves me shall raid into Skane. The rest falls on your shoulders, prince.”

Sigmund pushed away from the table and rose. “No one else must know I live—not yet.” When Olof nodded, Sigmund beckoned Fitela to follow him from the hall. They had preparations to make. Besides which, he was already more than sick of the stench of humanity and the push of people so close together. He could not leave this place too soon.



NAUGHT COULD BE ALLOWED to interfere with Sigmund's vengeance. He would go to Wolfsblood's hall and call out the king, force him to fight, to die for his crimes. If Olof Sharpsighted remained true to his word—and Sigmund thought he would, given his reputation—Wolfsblood's main force would be occupied come summer. Ere that happened, all else needed to be in place. Because Wolfsblood had other allies. Forces lurking in the marsh, hidden from sight, even as Sigmund and Fitela had become expert at hiding from them. And should this varulf pack somehow catch wind of their master's distress and come to his aid, Sigmund's battle might turn against him. That left but a single recourse—the remaining varulfur must die.

Thus did he follow their trail, sniffing after them, beyond the marsh and onto the solid ground of the wood. They roamed far, true, and Fitela had already caught a straggler separated from his brethren. The man had lived long enough to reveal the size of his pack—a mere six wolves remained. Six varulfur left in these woods, and Sigmund would be ready.

*Hunt. Stalk. Kill.* The woods were not large enough for two packs.

The trail led down a steep hill and into a valley. Within that valley lay a cave where their prey no doubt slept away the daylight hours. Sigmund crouched above it, unable to make out much in the darkness within. The cave itself descended steeply into another hillside. Large rocks piled around the edge meant only one man at a time could slip inside. More importantly, it meant they could only escape one at a time as well.

And that led to an idea.



IT WAS LATE when Fitela returned, laden with a cask of lamp oil. Soon, the wolves would wake. Perhaps waiting another day would be prudent at this point, but every night they lingered so close to the wolves' den increased their chance of discovery. Besides, Sigmund had wearied of waiting.



The last time he'd fought any of Wolfsblood's pack he tried to offer them a fair fight. Instead, they stalked him in darkness, using stealth and trickery. This time he would not offer a fair fight. Crouched low to the ground, the cask tucked awkwardly in his arms, he snuck close to the entrance. The steep slope would serve well for this. Sigmund glanced at Fitela, and the boy nodded. So, here it was. His heart was pounding. So loud that varulf hearing might actually catch it, or at least it felt that way. *Do it. Do it! Hunt. Kill.* The wolf inside felt apt to burst from beneath his skin at the thought of it.

Sigmund popped open the cask and tipped it over, sending oil pouring down into the cave. He rose and backed away. Then Fitela tossed a torch into the vicious flow dribbling over the rocks. Flames erupted along the path, spreading wildly down into the cave and lighting it like some perverse vision of Muspelheim. Flame and smoke and horror.

Sigmund drew his sword while Fitela nocked an arrow to his bow. The howls erupted an instant later. Wails of pain and fury and terror. A singed, naked man came stumbling out, flailing as he tried to climb free of the conflagration. Fitela's arrow caught him dead between the eyes. The man pitched backward, knocking over another trying to escape. A third man crawled over their burning bodies, coughing and slapping at flames ignited in his hair. Sigmund swung. The man tried to fall back but too slowly. The sword opened him from groin to shoulder, spilling his gut rope over the ground. Not even a varulf would heal from that. Sigmund kicked the dying man, sending him sprawling back into the flames—and his pack.

Even as he did so, a naked woman leapt over all of them and collided with him. She slammed Sigmund onto the ground, and his sword clattered from his grasp. One of Fitela's arrows sprouted from her shoulder. She batted it away, snapping off most of the shaft without slowing. Blows rained down on Sigmund's face as the woman snarled and growled. Again and again she punched him with blows powerful enough to leave his whole

World blurry. Her fist cracked his nose. Everything went red. She hefted him up by his throat. Lifted him off the ground with one hand, staring murderous daggers at him.

Breathless, Sigmund caught what remained of the arrow shaft in her shoulder, and he twisted as he yanked it loose. The varulf howled in pain and dropped him. Gasping, barely able to see, Sigmund thrust the arrowhead up into her belly. The woman doubled over in agony. Another arrow flew over her shoulder.

Sigmund couldn't see who Fitela was shooting at. Didn't matter right now. He had to trust his nephew.

Still fighting for breath, he snatched up his fallen sword and rose, swiping it across the woman's face. The blade shattered skull and splattered brain and left her dead ere she hit the ground. Sigmund blinked, rubbing blood from his eyes with his forearm. Someone was crawling from the blaze, skin black as char, cracked, and bleeding. Hair all burnt away. The half-dead varulf reached a hand toward Sigmund. The gesture seemed so weak he couldn't be sure if it was meant as a plea for mercy or an accusation. The former, probably. His response would have been the same in either case. With an overhead chop, he cleft down into the man's skull.

"Are you injured?" Fitela asked as Sigmund backed away from the carnage.

He shook himself. A broken nose at least. Maybe a broken jaw. Given his varulf nature, those would heal in a day, two at the most. He opened his mouth to answer, then thought better of it as blinding pain sent him wobbling. Yes. Definitely broken. Instead, he shook his head. Breathing hurt too, between his nose and his mouth both being so damaged. And he wouldn't be eating aught in the next day—which actually might slow his healing, gods damn it.

They waited until the fires had dwindled, and then Fitela went to check. "Six corpses," he said on his return. "So we are done here?"

Aye. Now they had but to wait for summer, and all would be settled. All, at long last, avenged.

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**DAYS GONE: TYR**

799 Age of Man

S houting from beyond the smithy. Angry cries, grunts of effort. Damn it. Tyr raced around the building. Three of Hadding's men surrounded Vili, fists raised. Another lay in the snow. Blood pouring from his broken nose and split lip. Damned berserk.

"What in Njörd's name is this!" he demanded.

One of Hadding's people leapt on Vili's back, wrapt an arm around his neck. Vili lunged backward, slamming the man into a post of the smithy. Force of it cracked the post—damn nigh split it in half. Another man stepped in, swinging. The wet thump of his fist against Vili's jaw.

The berserk turned to face his attacker. Grinning. Fucking grinning. Bears don't look fast. But they can be. Berserkir too. Vili had the man by the throat, hefted off the ground ere anyone else had moved. The Hasding man's eyes bulged. He clawed uselessly at Vili's grip.

Tyr wasn't a berserk, but the apple made him strong. He seized Vili's wrist and shoulder and shoved the man. Borr's son released his victim. Spun on Tyr.

“Enough!” Tyr bellowed. Vili glowered. “These are our hosts.”

“Poor fucking hosts.” Vili spat. “We’re not wanted here. Let’s be gone, and Hel take these trollfuckers.”

Would that they could. Odin had ordered them to remain here, hold Halfhaugr. Even against its ruler. Angry shouts agreeing they ought to be quit of this place. At this rate, the whole town would rise against them. Tyr scowled at the gathering crowd. “Everyone, calm down. Go back to work.”

They didn’t. More of the town arrived with each passing moment. Watching, simmering. Ready to boil over. Tyr’s hand drifted toward the sword on his back. Not the way it ought to go.

Vili grinning again. Fucking imbecile. Cracking his knuckles.

Wodan warriors had begun to form a crowd on the other side. A few had drawn blades, axes. Blood would run these streets. And then the Hadding crowd began to part. Making way for someone, a woman, bearing sword and shield. Tyr had seen her a few times in the past moon. Orlun, wife to one of Hadding’s thegns. A shieldmaiden, clearly one these people respected a great deal.

Orlun planted her sword in the ground—mushy snow and mud now. Looked from Tyr to Vili and back, barely acknowledging the rest of the crowd. “Jarl Hadding has grown displeased with this alliance.” Small wonder, given Odin had betrayed him, denied him the damned apple and then run off. Orlun locked Tyr’s gaze. Understanding. Warning. “The jarl believes it is time for the Wodan clan to return to Eskgard or wherever else suits you.” Shouts of agreement from the crowd. Anger was rising fast, but they deferred to her.

Vili spat.

Tyr cracked his neck, barely stopping himself from scowling at the man. Fool berserk wanted a war. “It suits us to remain here. Until our jarl returns.”

Some of Hadding's warriors began to beat weapons against their shields. Odin's raven-feeders immediately started doing the same. Damn it. "I'll fight you," Tyr said.

"What?"

Some of the Wodanar laughed. Tyr ignored them. "A duel. I win, we stay. You win, we go."

Olrún glanced at her people, and at the Wodanar. Glowered. Yes, she was aging. Past her prime. And he'd given her an unworthy challenge, damn him. She had no chance, and they both knew it. So why had he said such a thing? Hel, this scheming for Odin's throne was wearing him down. It was the kind of thing he'd have said long ago, as champion to Hymir. As a jötunn's bloody sword arm.

The shieldmaiden sighed, wrapt her hand around the sword. Now he'd have to fight her. Not to the death. He'd try to spare her, best he could. Hel take him for this.

The girl, Sigyn, raced to Olrún's side. Put her hand on her shoulder. Whispered in her ear. Too late for warnings. Too late. Blood boiled in both crowds. Boiling blood led to blood staining the snows. Olrún said something back. The women argued a moment. Then the shieldmaiden looked to her people. "All of you, disperse. Hadding's daughter commands it!"

At her sharp tone, the warriors faltered. Angry murmurs about a bastard child. About Mist-madness or alf possession.

Tyr looked to his people. "In Odin's name"—he pointed away—"get gone. We shall not strike the first blow against our hosts."

Vili grumbled. Looked apt to challenge him. Instead, the berserk spun, walked over one of the men he had felled as he left. Ground the poor bastard into the snow.

As both crowds began to disperse, Sigyn strode forward and grabbed Tyr's arm. Dragged him away from the smithy and toward another house.

Same house where Olrun stood out front.

“What’s going on here?” he demanded.

“Come inside, please.” The woman pulled him inside, then settled down on one of the bed shelves. “I cannot believe Odin would marry my sister only to invite war with our people.”

Odin did a lot of things Tyr couldn’t believe. Unsure what to say, he watched the girl.

She tapped a finger against her lip. “You asked me what’s going on. I was fostered with Agilaz and Olrun. But Jarl Hadding is my father, and I can try to speak with him and with Frigg, try to persuade Father against this course. War avails no one.”

“The losers least of all.”

“If you intended to take Halfhaugr by force, I think you would have done it already.” She leant forward now. “Why did Odin ride off to Reidgotaland? What does he hope to gain in the north?”

“Odin keeps his own counsel.” A half-truth made one nigh as bad as a liar. What was he becoming? “You share a bed with his blood brother. Why not ask the foreigner about Odin’s mind?”

Sigyn neither flinched nor denied sleeping with Loki. Smiled even. “Was that supposed to distract me from my question? Or do you not even know the answer?” Sigyn tapped her lip again. “It’s no matter. Whilst he is away, you seem to want to prevent bloodshed, aye?” Tyr folded his arms in answer. “The Hasdingi stand on edge because of the Godwulfs.”

“Well I know,” he admitted. Tribe ruled by varulfur was apt to bring chaos. Tyr’s spy among them should have reported back to the Athra. But from here, Tyr had no idea if that had happened.

“We sent my foster brother among them, in marriage, hoping to secure peace. Only now we learn the jarl there conspires with the king of Njarar to seize some or all of Aujum. Perhaps this makes Jarl Alci a common enemy.”

“He’s your uncle.”

She shrugged. “Sometimes the kin who chose you matters more than blood.”

Tyr did not even know who his blood relatives were. Some had whispered Hymir had spawned him on a mortal woman. Tyr refused to believe, save in his darkest moments. “What would you have me do?”

“You’re Odin’s champion. Were you to aid the Hasdingi in this issue, it would go far toward smoothing over the injury Odin did here. The people know only that Odin angered Father and Frigg both and then fled, but you and I know about the apples. My father is going to die because Odin would not part with one. If that happens as matters stand now, Frigg will mostlike divorce him in her grief.”

He grunted. Such a divorce would cost Odin any support among the Hasdingi. Maybe cost him the throne. “So you want me to go to Alci.”

She shook her head. “I don’t think Jarl Alci wants to hear of peace now, drunk as he is on dreams of glory. No, find Hermod—my foster brother—and Agilaz. They are among the Godwulfs now. To have peace, the Godwulfs must have a new jarl. And you are known among all the clans as a champion of Borr. They cannot turn you away.”

To murder a jarl. Tyr groaned. “Your father approves of this?”

“My father would not act against the bonds of brotherhood, but Alci leaves us with little choice now. Do this, Tyr, stop Alci. And I will stay here and do all I can to maintain the alliance between our peoples. My father and sister both are ill disposed to the Wodanar at the moment, but I can sway their minds. But you must save ...”

“Save?”

She shook her head. “Save us all.”

More schemes. Plots. A warrior ought to meet threats with a sword in hand. A song in his heart. Instead, to make a king, Tyr worked in shadows and lies. Betrayals. He’d ask Idunn, but he knew what she’d say. Odin must become king. And it sounded like that meant Alci must fall.





THE WHOLE of the Godwulf camp rustled. Bristling with the energy. Tyr knew it when battle drew nigh. They were eager, almost ready to move. To march on Halfhaugr. Tyr had come here to stop a war. And found war underway without him.

But Alci Gundericson had not turned him away either. Had even allowed him to call on Agilaz, who stayed with Alci's thegn Høenir. No one had truly welcomed him. Not Agilaz, thegn to a jarl whom Odin had alienated. Not Høenir or his daughter Syn, a shieldmaiden awaiting the return of her husband. And perhaps least of all Hallr. The bastard stared at him with open distrust. Hallr, traitor to his jarl, oathbreaker. Man ought to hang from a tree instead of sit around a fire pit with them. Talking of treason and murder. Maybe they all ought to hang, Tyr included.

"Hadding will never surrender Halfhaugr," Agilaz said.

Syn scoffed. "Doubt Alci expects him to. He sent Hermod as a pretence."

"Means war is inevitable," Tyr said.

Hallr shook his head. "Not if we kill Alci. I've been sending messages back to Jarl Annar Ótmarson. He will agree to strike, give us a distraction."

Tyr scowled. "So you'd rather start a war with the Athra." With Odin's cousin, who already supported Odin.

"Just long enough to give me the chance to end Alci."

Tyr spat. "You want to assassinate your lord."

Hallr just shrugged. "Only way to become jarl."

Tyr barely resisted the urge to seize the man. "Other than a proper challenge."

"No one beats Alci in a fair fight."

Then none of these people *deserved* to be jarl. "So I'll challenge him."

Hœnir sighed and rubbed his temples. “We all know your prowess, Tyr, but you have no claim to leadership in this clan. Only a thegn or karl of the Godwulfs can become the next jarl.”

Syn rose with a huff. “And what of you, Father?”

“I’m too old to take down Alci, even by surprise.” And probably too honourable to try. Hœnir would make a damned sight better choice than Hallr. But he was just a Man. As a varulf, at least Hallr had a chance.

“Very true,” the traitor said. “It has to be me. And as soon as your husband returns, dear Syn, Alci will order the march on Halfhaugr. Assuming he even waits that long. We all know Hadding will tell his brother to go to Hel. So, if we want to do this, I need to send word to the Athra. Now. They must attack ere the chance is lost.”

This is what he had been reduced to. In all his years of service of Hymir, Tyr had never plotted assassination. He had done murder more oft than he cared to remember. Had pillaged and razed and raped his way across Aujum and Bjarmaland, all for his erstwhile lord. But he had not schemed. Not as he now did for Odin. For a throne the man did not truly want.

Tyr growled, drawing stares from the others. Let them look. Let the fucking traitor look upon Tyr. Who, by agreeing to this, became no better himself. Tyr. Champion of a jötunn. Champion of Borr. Champion of Odin. Assassin. Plotter. Schemer ... Wretch.

Was Borr’s legacy worth so much? Borr had saved Tyr from the darkness. And to honour the man, Tyr descended back into that mire. Covered himself in muck, so he could hold Borr’s son up above it all.

He spat. “Just get it done.”



HERMOD HAD RETURNED. The Godwulfs marched to war. Marched, or rather rushed forward. A horde of Men and varulfur. Slaving for blood, ready for

a slaughter. The Athra attacked from upwind, raining arrows upon the Godwulfs. Daylight attack. They had to win ere the sun set or the Godwulfs would tear them to pieces.

Sword in hand, Tyr watched the unfolding carnage. Alci had arrested Agilaz and Hermod, but Tyr was neutral. Or so the jarl thought. Perhaps Alci Gundericson had hoped Agilaz would resist and give him an excuse to murder the man. The thegn had not, forcing Alci to hold him for trial at the Thing. If Alci took Halfhaugr, he'd mostlike execute Agilaz, maybe Hermod as well.

Tyr couldn't let that happen, but they had a plan. So he stood by. Let men die on both sides. Waiting for his moment. Waiting to give Hallr a moment.

Blood and screams. Guts and shit spilled on the snow. All so much like his days under Hymir. Carnage a jötunn would have loved. All a reminder of the man Borr had saved him from becoming. But urd was cruel, drew a man back, no matter how hard he fled.

Alci bodily flung one man into another. Grabbed a spear and impaled them both. Still strong, even in human form.

And Hallr did not strike. Drew closer to Alci, aye, but did not strike. Looked to Tyr, looked to Alci's nearby champions. A pair of varulfur nigh as tall as Vili. Big bastards, possessed of a vicious streak long as a mountain. One of those champions hewed through an Athra shieldmaiden's skull with an axe.

Tyr hefted his shield. Only one choice then. Forward. Roaring, he charged into the fray, right at the champion who'd slain the woman. The man balked, as if not sure of Tyr's intention. Raised sword and war cry ought to have made it plain. Tyr feinted left, then swung low. The varulf got his shield down an instant ere Tyr would have claimed his kneecap. Tyr jerked out of the way of that axe, swung again. Chips and splinters broke off the shield.

The varulf hesitated. Didn't expect a human to match his speed, his strength. Tyr whipped his shield forward, shoved it into the man. The varulf pitched backward a step. Tyr caught him with an upswing of the blade. Shattered his chin, tore through his nose. Showered himself in blood.

The other champion bellowed, charging Tyr as his brother fell. Tyr spared Alci a glance. The jarl had felled a half dozen warriors on his own. Men, shieldmaidens, their corpses decorated his feet. He laughed, awash in blood. Grimacing, Tyr met the charging champion, rushed forward. Man leapt in the air, intent on bearing him down with sheer weight, momentum. Tyr rolled under him, twisted around. Launched himself forward and smashed his shield into the varulf's face. Bastard fell, dazed.

Tyr dropped down on him knees first, drove his blade through the man's throat. A geyser of hot blood sprayed in his eyes. He jerked his sword free. Turned to Alci once more. Another warrior rushed Tyr. He blocked a blow on his shield, whipped his sword around. It sheared through the man's face. Jarl Alci shrieked at him, mindless with rage. Batting aside Athra warriors like they were made of straw. So. Tyr would kill him after all. Maybe he had no claim to jarldom of the Godwulfs. He would still end this varulf, here, now.

Alci tossed aside his shield to pick up an axe. Sword and axe together. Very aggressive. Dangerous. Tyr gave ground as Alci launched a wild flurry of attacks at him. The axe embedded in Tyr's shield. Alci jerked it back, splintering the shield in the process. Tyr swung his sword, but Alci's move threw him off balance. The jarl easily parried. Turned to riposte. Tyr twisted, tried to dodge, but the blade bit his shoulder, scraped off his hauberk. Tyr fell to one knee from the impact.

He flung the tattered remains of his shield at Alci's face. The varulf batted it away with his axe, but it gave Tyr a breath. Time to rise, fall back.

"Greatest warrior of the Æsir?" Alci spat. "I'm glad you betrayed us. Gives me an excuse to crush your legend."

“You die today.”

Alci chuckled. Advanced, sword out front, axe high. Ready to strike. Hallr caught Tyr’s eye. Readied a spear. Tyr shook his head. Alci was his now. Urd had brought him here. The Norns willed this fight, and they would not be denied.

Alci charged again. Tyr parried aside the sword. The axe whooshed by his face, almost took off his nose. He swung, scored a nick on Alci’s sword arm. The man barely seemed to notice. Again he swung, again Tyr parried. Then Hallr’s spear burst through his lord’s chest. The traitor hefted Alci up, into the air. Planted the butt of the spear in the snow. His jarl flailed, dying, blood dribbling over his lip, staining his beard.

The traitor nodded at Tyr. He bent to pick up Alci’s sword and raised it in the air, ready to declare himself jarl of the Godwulfs. They had done it. Tyr growled. And he swept his sword up in an arc that lopped Hallr’s head right off his shoulders. The body tumbled down like a doll. Tyr spat on the corpse as it stained the snow crimson.



HÆNIR STOOD AMONGST HIS PEOPLE, arms held high. Many fires burnt, ward flames and pyres alike. Pyres for the Godwulf jarl. For half his thegns. Some few other thegns yet lived, might have challenged Hœnir’s claim to the jarldom. Might have.

Hermod strode to his father-in-law’s side. “Jarl Hœnir, on behalf of my father, thegn to Hadding Gundericson, I offer you the support and friendship of the Hasding clan.” The old man clasped his son-in-law’s arm, then nodded at Agilaz, who stood apart from the Godwulf people.

A few more days, and Halfhaugr would have fallen under siege from these people. Now they offered friendship. What else could they do? They

needed a friend among the Godwulfs. With Alci dead, Hermod's marriage might actually mean something. But Odin needed these people as well.

Tyr looked to Annar Ótmarson, nodded, and they both strode forward. "On behalf of Jarl Odin of the Wodanar, I offer my support," Tyr said.

Annar stood beside him. "And as jarl of the Athra, I offer mine."

A message. A warning to any of Alci's former thegns: three other clans now stood behind Hœnir, and woe to the man who sought to challenge him. Might let the old man hold his place. Hermod would help him, of course. And because of Tyr, they would both owe Odin. Because Tyr had embraced assassination. Betrayal. Murder.

He strode away from the fires, out into the night. Some would celebrate. Some would mourn. Tyr had the stomach for neither. Was this truly what Borr would have wished? Back in Halfhaugr, Idunn waited, urging Odin to become king of the Æsir. To guide them all to a better future. Like this? Through blood and treachery? Men became no better than jötunnar.

Someone chased after him, footfalls crunching the snow as he ran. Hermod drew up short as Tyr turned, glowering. "Your wife must be pleased."

Hermod nodded. "She just became daughter of the jarl."

"And we murdered a great many men to make that happen."

"Neither of us has to like this road, Tyr. But we did what proved needful, what men like Alci and Hallr forced upon us. Neither one of them deserved to rule."

Did Odin? The eldest son, the heir of Borr. Tyr cracked his neck and groaned. For Odin, Tyr had become a monster once more. For the son of Borr, he had cast aside the honour and teachings of Borr. Tyr advanced on Hermod until he stood close enough to feel the man's breath. "Very soon, Odin will call for the Althing. He will seek kingship of all the clans."

"My sister thought as much. First king since Vingethor ..."

Sigyn was too clever. Much like her lover. “You and your father-in-law will support his claim.” Tyr’s fist clenched, daring the man to deny it.

But Hermod did not deny it. He bowed his head. “You saved us all from war. Odin may count on us.”

At last, something turning his way. “Ride back to Halfhaugr with me. Tell Odin yourself. And convince your godsdamned sister to agree. She has the ear of Frigg and Hadding.” Tyr raised a finger in warning. “It is best for all.” Hermod murmured something under his breath. “What?”

“I hope you’re right.”

By all the gods, so did Tyr.

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## THE DÖGLINAR

### 25 Age of the Æsir

*T*he towering mountain peaks scratched at the sky above, rising almost straight out of the sea and disappearing into the Mist. Hervor had seen mountains, aye, but these were like something from another world. And indeed, Nidavellir was the famed land of the dvergar who lived beneath these mountains, demanding tribute in treasure and thralls. Oh, and all lands paid that tribute. Her grandfather paid—every five years, he sent a ship to these shores, laden down with captured booty and women and boys.

Once, Hervor had gone on a raid to claim the tribute. The woman had pleaded with her, back ere she'd taken to disguising herself as a man, pleaded that Hervor would spare her from becoming thrall to perverse vaettir. A time, Hervor had looked at the woman, even imagined herself bound and sent to Nidavellir thus. Had considered—could she have?—releasing the woman. Leastwise, until Gunther Uffeson had seen something in Hervor. “Better to serve up a few than let the fjallalfar come and claim whatever they will,” he'd said. No one argued that point. People called fjallalfar as dvergar, as if such a term might allow them to forget the



mountain alfar were vaettir. Hervor rubbed the iron pommel of her seax in warding. Urd was cruel. Vaettir were crueller still.

The crew sat huddled around a bonfire in the valley of wooded foothills beneath those mountains. Mostly evergreens sprouted here, and game was no doubt light, though Orvar and the Axe had gone out hunting, bidding everyone else remain at camp and keep quiet. The scant fire barely illuminated beyond a few feet into the woods, the darkness leaving Hervor on edge. And with winter having set in, nights would only grow longer. This was a fell place, ill suited for Mankind and best left to the dvergar. Unfortunately, their quest would take them farther still abroad from the lands of Men. And unless she acted soon, she'd be stuck with these fools for a long haul.

Bragi Bluefoot, self-styled skald, was wagging his tongue again, this time carrying on about tales of Healfdene the Mighty. "See, stories tell, he had the blade from his sister, the princess. And with it, he held back the Mist and conquered Sjaelland, even parts of Jutland, until all men feared to stand before him in the spear-din."

Rolf Quicktongue snorted. "Me, I could stand to hear a bit more about this Dani princess. I may have known one or two of those in my time."

The biggest of their companions—oddly named Tiny—folded his arms. "I heard you raped and murdered the woman."

"I ... I did no such thing! Why this," Rolf said, patting the golden armband, "was a gift and promise of her eternal love."

Tiny glowered. "So why did you not marry the woman then and live as a prince?" King Gylfi had sent Tiny along as his emissary on the trek; a towering mountain of an emissary, perhaps to keep the rest of them reminded of Gylfi's interests in this quest. Since Tiny didn't actually work for the Ynglings, Hervor had no real quarrel with him, but he was like to prove a problem when she did finally strike against Arrow's Point.

“Well,” Rolf said, drawing out the word long enough to grate on Hervor’s nerves, “alas she was pledged to another and could not break that bond. In recompense, she gave me this armband.”

Hervor sneered. “You just said she gave it to you for love.”

“Right. Loving recompense.”

“Full of trollshit,” Hervor mumbled under her breath. Ivar the Loud, sitting beside her, bust out laughing.

“What?” Rolf said. “What did he say?”

“He said,” Ivar offered, “that you’re full of beetle-cocking trollshit, Quicktongue.”

Rolf scowled, then rose, stomping toward Hervor. “I’ve had just about enough out of a *boy* who hasn’t even fastened a trollfucking name to himself yet. What do you think? Trollshit ... should we call him Hervard Trollshitter? Hervard Shitsniffer? Or maybe ... Hervard Nostones?”

That the last was actually accurate had no bearing. You couldn’t take that kind of talk from your crew. If you did, you were like to wind up with a blade in your gut when it came time to divide up the booty. Hervor would know; she’d done her share of knifing, when knifing proved needful. She rose, hand going to Tyrfing’s hilt. Already, the runeblade seemed to be purring to her. Seeking blood. Needing to still a heartbeat. All she had to do was draw the blade and ... and she would not be able to sheath it without killing this sorry excuse for a person.

“Sit down, both of you!” Starkad Eightarms snapped. “We have enough trouble in these lands without bickering over a godsdamned woman none of the rest of us have even met. What Quicktongue did with the bitch is between him and her father, and no other.”

“Right,” Rolf said. “Naturally, that’s why he gave me this armband. As proof there were no—”

Hervor’s hand twitched. That Starkad was right made it no better. She dearly wanted to end Rolf, and not just because of some Reidgotaland

princess that may or may not have existed. He was a colossal arse, and she'd be doing the World a favour. This was not the place, though, and certainly not the time. Instead, she forced a smile and sank back down to the fire. "How about a different tale, Bluefoot?"

"Aye, of course," Bragi agreed, plainly eager to keep the peace. "Any requests?"

"Hmm," Hervor said. "The legend of Arrow's Point, I think." Starkad groaned at that.

"Oh, ho, ho," Bragi said. "A good one. Apt, I suppose, and you being so young you'd not have heard about our illustrious companion." Bragi settled back onto his haunches and snapped his fingers, at which Starkad passed him a skin of mead. The skald took a long swig ere passing it on. "It began with a prophecy, you see. A völva foretold he would die by his horse, near the same place he was born.

"Now Arrow's Point, being a brave man, he didn't fear the sword-sleep, but wasn't keen on dying to a horse, so he slew the beast and buried it deep. Then he set out, eager to leave his homeland behind. His father—that was Grim Shaggy-Cheeks, a legend himself—granted him a fine bow and gave him seven magic arrows—"

"Nine," Starkad said. "'Tis always nine ... the number has ... significance." How did Starkad know that, Hervor wondered? Was he Arrow's Point?

"Eh?" Bragi scratched his beard. "Nine, then. Nine magic arrows. One he used to kill a jötunn, earning him the name Arrow's Point. Who knows how many he has left now? Not many, I'd wager, given all the other tales about him."

Hervor fixed Starkad with a heavy glare, though he wasn't looking at her. In fact, he had his eyes closed. "What tales?" Hervor asked.

"Oh, Odin's beard. Roaming and raiding into Bjarmaland where he helped defend Holmgard. Some say he even went to Jötunheim, though I

find that hard to credit. Then there was the fight with the berserkir of Bolmsö.”

Aye ... “Tell me about that,” she said.

“A dozen berserkir, if you can believe that. A dozen of them, faced down by two men. Only one man left Samsey that day. No one else alive witnessed the battle, but it must have been glorious. Shame to have missed that.” Indeed.

“Lot of men went to Valhöll that day,” Tiny said. “Not sure I’d have liked to have seen it all, though.” Aye, a lot of men died. Hervor’s father. Her uncles. They hadn’t seen Valhöll, though, not bound in those crypts, cursed by Arrow’s Point.

Finally, she lay down beside the fire. And she ran her fingers over the golden hilt of Tyrting.



HERVOR POUNDED a tent stake into the frozen ground at their next camp—their last ere making for open sea and the Faeroerne Islands—grunting and panting with the effort of it. Nearby, Bragi Bluefoot was humming whilst tying off ropes. The skald rarely fell silent. It seemed if he had naught to say, he’d fill the air with songs or poems. Failing that, he sometimes made clucking noises with his tongue. Hervor paused a moment, wiped her brow, and caught her breath. She looked to Bragi. “You don’t like the quiet?”

“Hmm? Oh!” Bragi chuckled. “Oh, not so much, I suppose. In the woods, time things get all quiet is like to be when a predator is about, stalking you.”

“Huh.” Hervor slammed the stake down with a mallet again. “And you think humming is like to make the wolves vanish, then?”

“Aye, ’tis its own kind of magic, now.”

“What magic?”

Bragi chuckled. “Self-delusion.”

Hervor smiled. Despite herself, it was hard not to at the skald’s foolery. She hoped her vengeance would allow her to spare the man. On the voyage thus far, she’d been careful. Asking questions but not too often. Naught that would give away who she was or her true purpose on this quest. Bragi had proved the most useful, of course. His love of talk meant he needed little prompting to carry on, telling tales of not only his adventures but of the rest of the crew. Most everyone on this expedition had fastened a name to themselves, and that meant they all had tales.

Murdering bastards, every one of them. But then, such was the life of a raider, Hervor’s included, and for all that, she liked ... some few of these men, and would not have wished harm upon them all.

Orvar and Starkad were the most famed, of course, wanderers and mercenaries who had—according to Bragi—travelled the whole of the North Realms and beyond. But the others had stories, too. The way the skald told it, the Axe had fought in more wars than any man alive. He’d hired out with Healfdene in the final conquests of Reidgotaland. He’d fought for Siggeir Wolfsblood in border struggles against Njarar, and again, when the king sacked Rijnland. Hel, there was even tale of him raiding Kvenland in a failed attempt to claim some beautiful wife from the frozen wastes there.

Of Tiny, Bragi knew less, but still, the man had fought great battles on behalf of Gylfi. By now, the Dalar king had all but ceased his wars, but not so many years ago, he’d roamed far and wide, spreading faith in the Æsir by word or sword point. Apparently, Tiny had been a thegn to him even back then, if a young one, and had put to the sword more than one village that refused to turn from the Vanir. Hervor remembered tale of a few such holdouts being razed when she was a small girl. She remembered thinking when she was grown, she’d do such work as well, striking down those who refused to honour Odin’s name.

Ivar the Loud had run as a bandit in a crew not unlike one Hervor had once joined, and Hel alone knew how much blood lay on his hands. But for a few miles difference in territory, Hervor might have worked at his side.

And of Rolf Quicktongue, the tales were as black as pitch, though he would have cast himself as a hero in every single one.

In the end, Hervor was pretty certain she knew who Arrow's Point was. Not Starkad, as she had first thought, but Orvar-Oddr, the Nidavelliran who fit Bragi's tale of the so-called hero. A crowded ship had offered her no chance to strike down the man without detection. But once the ship reached Thule and the crew went in search of bounty, well ... During such times, men spread out far. An opportunity would come, and sooner rather than later. When it did, Hervor would be ready. As would Tyrfing.

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**DAYS GONE: SIGYN**

799 Age of Man

*T*he runes in lower Halfhaugr swam before Sigyn's eyes, taking on new shapes, unravelling in a clarity she had never dared imagine. Hand to her temple, she panted, desperate to stop the motion of a roiling World become nebulous. But the World had not changed, she had. Whether from the apple or her hallucinatory experience with Loki, something inside her had shifted, had opened to view reality in new light, as with the parting of Mist. She swept her hair back from her face.

And how had that all occurred? She'd had her pleasure of men sure enough and might have even called it a spiritual experience. This time, though, had reached a whole new magnitude of transcendence, had prompted visions in her, perhaps not unlike those her sister experienced. But how? Had the apple made Sigyn a völvá as well? So oft Sigyn had doubted the tales, the stories, the many beliefs Men held about the Otherworld. How could they possibly know what went on in places they could not see or touch? She saw something now.

She shoved the table aside once again, clearing away any obstruction to these runes. Apples of immortality, seidr, visions, the Otherworld—if such things existed, then perhaps, too, the dverggar had come from the Otherworld, perhaps they did indeed carve a prophecy on these walls. Words no one else among the Æsir read or understood. If so, it then fell to Sigyn to unravel the secrets lost to Mankind. She brushed dust from the wall. The end times. She had seen it before, but now it seemed to sing in her mind, the voice of the stone booming like a herald of darkness. The runes, taken as a whole, rather than one at a time, began to paint a clearer picture in her mind's eye, an unfolding play in the shadows while she stood transfixed, letting her present surroundings fall away.

*THE FETTER SHALL BURST | the ravener run free,  
Much do I know | more can I see,  
The Doom of gods, the mighty war.*

*BROTHER WILL SHALL FIGHT brother | each to fell,  
Whilst sisters' sons | break kinship bonds.*

*THE EARTH FALTERS | the righteous fail,  
Axe time, sword time | with sundered shields,  
Wind time, wolf time | ere the World falls;  
Never shall Men | each other spare.*

*THE SOUND of a horn | the call of Fate,  
In Ragnarök | Destroyer wakes.*



SIGYN'S HEART slammed against her ribs. The words seemed to echo all around her from the unending shadows. The crash of iron, her legs sinking in a sea of blood. She slipped to her knees, hands splashing down in the blood. She raised them to her face, staring in horror, unable to get the scream past her throat. Stretching into infinity spread row upon endless row of corpses, now waking, grim and merciless, marching under the heel of the Queen of Mist. Hel was coming for Sigyn, coming to feast upon her soul.

Tears tumbled down her cheeks. Blood seeped betwixt her fingers. She trembled, shook, freezing from the inside out. Was Hel the Destroyer? Was she to break free of Niflheim and end Midgard?

"Sigyn?" A voice, far away. "Sigyn!" Strong arms encircled her, jerked her to her feet. She shuddered, shut her eyes, blinked. Agilaz held her in his arms, tight grip on her biceps. Concern on his usually emotionless face.

"Papa?"

He pulled her close into an embrace. She almost never called him that. He had never claimed to be her father, nor encouraged her to think of him as such. But sometimes, in the darkest nights, a girl wanted her parents. Cast out by those who had birthed her, she would draw solace from those who chose her. They understood, especially Orlun. "What happened to you?"

"I ..." Sigyn glanced at the runes, then quickly turned away, lest their embedded story consume her mind once again. "I fear for the future."

"As do I. Word has come through our new allies. King Otwin Nidudson of Njarar sides with the Godwulfs, or at least with Jarl Alci."

Sigyn stilled herself with a slow breath. "Otwin. The same king to whom Father owes debts of old?"

Agilaz nodded. "Otwin was Nidud's right hand in Aujum during the war. He drove Hadding and the others into it, hence why we name it the

Njarar War. His father may have been the cruelest king the North Realms have ever known.” A pause. “He tortured my brother, Sigyn, forced him to service as a thrall.” Agilaz had a brother? She opened her mouth to ask, but he waved it away. “I do not speak of him. All I can say is I fear for Otwin’s allies almost as much as for his enemies.”

“Hermod. Hermod is with the Godwulfs.”

“Indeed. And I must ride for the Godwulf lands with all haste.”

“I’ll come with you.”

Agilaz shook his head and fixed her with a stern gaze. “Your presence might make things worse. Stay here and keep an eye on our Wodan guests. Already your father grows agitated that Odin fled without keeping his promise.”

“Odin did not actually promise to give Father an apple.”

“Perhaps not, and we cannot trust men who rely on clever words to avoid keeping faith.” He put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. “Sigyn, you and Olrun, you must work to keep this new alliance from fracturing. We cannot afford war with the Wodanar. Stay close to them and, if they plot against us, make sure Hadding knows of it.”

Sigyn sighed but nodded. Keeping an eye on the Wodanar was not difficult. Finding a way to help Hermod, that was a problem. But she would think of something. She had to.



LOKI HAD an inexplicable love of high places. That and fires. Oft when Sigyn sought him out, she found him either staring into a flame or perched atop a building, a rock, or some other precarious place. Actually, she rather loved that about him. This time, he stood at the cusp of the spiked wall surrounding Halfhaugr, staring out north so intently she’d have almost thought he could see something she couldn’t. And yet, Sigyn could see

farther and clearer than ever in the days since he had given her the apple. What else would the apple do to her? Would she gain abilities like stories claimed Freyja or Idunn had? Would her other senses enhance to match her vision?

Her lover didn't turn at her approach, but his posture loosened almost imperceptibly. How did he know it was her? One more mystery she'd have to unravel. And now she had all the time in the World to do so. Everything about him was a puzzle. Strange, mismatched tattoos covered his arms, obviously from more than one foreign culture. He knew things no man should know. And he had this way about him ... Was, perhaps, a wizard or shaman? Among the Æsir, *seidr* was forbidden to men—for it unmanned them, or so *völvur* held—and practitioners were shunned. Yet such men existed, nonetheless.

“He's been gone too long,” Loki said at last.

Odin. After the fight Odin had had with Frigg, part of Sigyn expected him to never return. Indeed, part of her *hoped* he would not. Already the Wodan jarl had brought such upheaval to her life, and though grateful for the bounties he had endowed her with through Loki, she feared the greater changes he portended. Perhaps that was selfish—after all, if not for Odin, she would not have become an immortal, nor found someone to share this new life with. But then, after what she had seen beneath the fortress, Sigyn could not shake the sense of Urd closing in around her, slithering like an unseen serpent ready to encompass all the World. Fate would torture them all, ere the end, she feared. Instead of answering, she slipped her arms around Loki's waist and tucked her chin over his shoulder. “What do you see out there?”

Through her embrace, she felt him swallow hard ere answering. “The future. Always, it impends.”

Sigyn struggled not to wince, for Loki had nigh given voice to her innermost dread. Did he too fear the spectre of Urd? The apples seemed to

affect each of them differently. Was it possible Loki now suffered the visions as Frigg had? If so, it seemed to confirm Sigyn's suspicion of him as some sort of seidr-man. "What is the future?"

"He is."

"Then why didn't you go with him?"

"You know the answer," he said, looking back to the wilds. Sigyn suspected she did. Loki seemed inclined to see himself as a teacher to his blood brother, though he looked little older than Odin. He obviously wanted Odin to learn some things on his own. Agilaz had oft said a lesson learnt for oneself was worth ten lectures. Did Loki then send Odin off alone on this sojourn as a means of preparing him for something grander still? If so, the lessons seemed cruel and lonely. But then, maybe all the strongest lessons were like that. "I have to go after him."

Sigyn sighed. Somehow she'd known it would end with that. "I'll come with you."

"Would that you could, but I need to travel swiftly, and I can best do that alone. I cannot allow Odin to fall into the shadows nor succumb to the Mist, however alluring their beckoning might seem."

She squeezed him tighter, savouring his warmth. "You'd better come back to me."

"Naught in all the worlds would bar me from you for long."

At that, he slipped from her arms, kissed her forehead, and leapt over the wall. Sigyn leant forward to gaze at where he had landed, crouched in the snow nigh fifteen feet below. Damn. Could she do that? Would the apple prevent injury if she tried such a foolhardy manoeuvre? Part of her wanted to try it, to feel the rush. Still, enough people in the village thought her mad already.

A chill wind swept over her as Loki disappeared off into the Mist.



SIGYN'S FATHER had forestalled his decision to cast out the Wodanar at her behest, though his patience waned. As did his life. The ever-creeping Mist-thickness clouded his lungs and his eyes whilst Frigg and Fulla fretted over him like the invalid he was fast becoming. And Sigyn had no more words of comfort for her sister.

She sat upon the low stone wall surrounding Agilaz's house in Halfhaugr, staring out at naught and somehow still seeing more than ever she had, her eyes and ears grown keen. Footsteps crunched snow as someone made his way around the corner of another house. Shortsnout rounded the bend and took off at a trot when he saw her, drawing a smile from her even as the hound leapt about below her knees. A moment later, Hermod slogged forward, burdened with a heavy pack and Njörd knew what other weight.

Sigyn leapt from the wall and raced over to her foster brother, pausing just long enough to cuddle the hound. "What are you doing here? Where is Agilaz?"

"Father remained at the Godwulfs to keep an eye on things." Hermod embraced her, then held her by the arms.

He still held her like a brother, and yet, somehow, that no longer hurt. She was happy to see him well, but ... things had changed. Or maybe she had never really loved him as once she had thought. Maybe she'd convinced herself that any mutual affection betwixt her and a man who accepted her must represent a romantic connection, and, in so doing, had failed to acknowledge the value of other bonds. Because being loved as a sister did matter, after all, and not every woman had that. Loki had opened her eyes even as his apple had enhanced them.

"I feared for your safety," she said.

"I know it. I met your friend Tyr on the road and sent him on to meet Father."

Sigyn guided him back toward the house. Orlun had gone out wandering the town in an unstated but obvious hope her mere presence would induce calm and prevent another altercation between the clans. The longer the strife went on with the Godwulfs, though, the more likely her hope would prove futile. The Wodanar had not ignited the first fires of the Hasding anger, but their presence fanned those flames.

Hermod dropped his pack inside and slouched down, warming his hands by the fire. "I cannot tarry long. My wife awaits my return."

"I didn't think to see you here at all."

"Alci Gundericson sent me, Sigyn. He thought, given my connection between the clans, I would prove the perfect emissary."

"Emissary to what end?" she asked. Hermod glowered at the flames as though he could avoid whatever he intended to say. And he need not say it, for his coming could only portend a single end. Sigyn sucked air through her teeth and shut her eyes. "He sent you here to demand his brother surrender Halfhaugr to him. He's coming to take our home."

Hermod's wary gaze offered all the answer she'd need.

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**STARKAD**

25 Age of the Æsir

A bitter wind swept across the whale-road as their ship drew nigh to the Faeroerne Islands. Starkad was the first over the side of the ship, boots skidding on the ice sheet they had drawn up alongside. These treacherous sheets encircled the Faeroernes, joining many of the isles, for the islands were north of the snow line, and the snows that drenched this place never melted. Legend claimed on the coldest winters, one could walk from the northern isles of Lochlainn to these shores, but Starkad remained dubious.

Either way, they had reached the edge of Midgard, and here but few Men endured, clustered in whaling villages. They remained forever desperate for the oil to burn to hold at bay the Mist, and thus keep living, a little longer. You could almost feel the *vaettir*, hidden just out of sight, watching Mankind trespass upon their domain. It all left his heart racing, pulse pounding. It left him *alive* as he trod toward the mountainous isles beyond the ice shelf. Thin falls pitched over towering cliffs that looked to have been scooped out by some giant spoon. Through the thick brume, the

summit was no more than a shadow, but he imagined scaling those bluffs, just for the thrill of it.

“We spend one day here,” Orvar shouted. “Then we make sail north.”

Of course, they needed to push hard. The winter solstice drew nigh, and the dead of winter brought fell storms apt to capsize even the largest of ships. They needed to make Thule ere that, and no man knew how far this mythic island lay. Which, of course, suited Starkad well.

On the lower shore, where the land melded with the ice sheet, sat a small village. Most of the island rose up steeply to the plateau, but, so far as he knew, no one dwelt up there, too far from the sea. The islands were too frozen for foliage or animal life, and he wondered why anyone would choose to linger here. But then, perhaps he knew, for here, upon the fringes of Midgard, there were no kings nor jarls, no one striving to raid—for the locals had almost naught—and a Man could live on his own terms, harsh though the land might prove. Torch in hand, Starkad made his way into the village. On his arrival, the locals watched him with wary eyes. Mostlike, these people saw strangers only once every few years, if that. In their isolation, they’d mistrust anyone not known, perhaps even suspect them of being vaettir. That Men survived here meant, he had to assume, they made sacrifices to whatever alfar or landvaettir lurked in the wilds. Which was not to say they would hope for a vaettr walking into town.

Starkad paused before an old man in the centre of the village, leaning on a walking stick and watching. An elder. “You speak the North tongue?”

“Aye.” The man’s word came out slow, slurred like it tasted funny on his tongue. The North tongue was spoken throughout the North Realms, but dialects varied. Bragi Bluefoot had once claimed the tongue came down to them from the Old Kingdoms, but it changed over time. People changed it.

“We want to trade,” Starkad said. He pulled a pouch from his belt and dumped a handful of Miklagardian silver coins into his hand. “We need food, fresh water, mead, wood for fires, whale oil ...”



The old man shambled closer, then leant in to examine the coins. He picked up one between two fingers, rubbed it, and shrugged. “Very ... shiny.”

Starkad nodded. “Aye. Melt them into jewellery, store them for trade, bounce them off your arse for all I care, but silver is silver. You understand what we need?”

The elder nodded, then barked something to a nearby boy, speaking a barely intelligible dialect. The boy scampered off, apparently to fetch all Starkad had asked for. With a nod, Starkad dropped the coins into the man’s hand. It wasn’t like these villagers would try to steal from them—the men on the ship would clearly take whatever they wanted if that happened. Hel, that seemed to be happening now. Rolf was leaning in on some fisherman, the man backed against his house. Rolf was barely looking at the man though, instead, leering at someone inside the house. A wife, a daughter, who knew? Starkad frowned and shook his head. He’d known too many men like Quicktongue.

Feet shuffled up behind him as he watched and Starkad turned. Afzal struggled, arms awkwardly wrapt around an empty water barrel. Beside him, the Axe more easily carried one that had, until recently, housed Nidavelliran mead, sadly now run dry.

The older veteran took in the sight of Rolf and shook his head. “Bastard starts in with the locals, and we’re not like to find pleasant shelter here again.” Starkad nodded at that, then the Axe dropped the barrel at his feet. “Should I remind Quicktongue?”

“Do that,” Starkad agreed.

The Axe grunted, then trotted off to berate Quicktongue. Like as not, it would do little good. But if the Axe wanted to try ...

“Master?” Afzal asked.

Starkad grabbed the barrel from the young man. “Give me that.” He carried it back to the village centre and deposited it by the locals, Afzal

shadowing behind him. “Fill it with water,” Starkad said to a villager.

“Have you been here ere now, Master?” Afzal asked.

Starkad shook his head. “I had always planned to, ’tis a famed land, the edge of the World of Men, but until now ...” Well, there had been no reason to come. Naught lay out here save the tail of Jörmungandr, or so skalds claimed. Odin, it seemed, knew otherwise, as so oft the Ás king did.

Afzal cleared his throat. “We will stay here tonight?”

“Aye.”

“Then I will arrange a place with some locals for us.”

“You’re a good friend.”

“Yes, Master. You deserve a full night’s sleep for once.”

Starkad snorted. He wasn’t certain he’d had a full night’s sleep in years. Not since Ogn. No, longer. Not since Vikar died. Or maybe he could lay his troubles at the feet of the Æsir, of Odin, of Tyr. Or more like than not, he ought to most blame himself.

“Afzal,” Starkad called after the Serk.

“Yes, Master?”

“Stop calling me that.” Starkad scratched his beard. “You ... look to your rest. Tomorrow we sail beyond the edge of this world, and even I know not what we shall find.”

Afzal blanched. Funny, Starkad had meant the words to garner excitement. It was easy to forget few other men saw things his way.



THEY WERE TOO long at sea, too long in the bitter cold, and now on the cusp of winter. Starkad was certain their course remained true. The islanders had called them Mist-mad for sailing farther north.

To the north, they said, lay only the endless sea enclosed by the tail of Jörmungandr, the great World Serpent. But Gylfi claimed Odin told him

otherwise, that the Ás king had blessed this voyage. Starkad's trust in Odin had limits—severe limits, truth be told. Word of Odin's so-called miracles had spread across the North Realms in the past two decades. Where the Vanir had taken no hand in the World of Men, Odin wandered—in disguise, true—but he walked among men. He offered advice, sometimes even wove sorceries to aid men in their endeavours. And he wormed his way into Starkad's dreams.

The Æsir had brought strong harvests, even cured the sick. Odin's son Thor had slain trolls to preserve towns. Most of the crew believed with their whole hearts in the new gods. But then, they had not been there at the beginning. As a boy, Starkad had marched with Odin across Midgard, had seen him cast down the Vanir and claim godhood. Whether true or not, the man was indeed a mighty king. Besides, Starkad owed the Ás, mislike the debt though he might.

The ocean went on and on, and the days grew perilously short—a few hours of light and then darkness would fall again, as it had now. The iridescent ghost lights filled the sky again, and Men imagined alfar up there, at play. One saw such things at the northernmost reaches of Nidavellir. When wandering Kvenland, Starkad had heard those lights were born from molten flame, beaten on anvils by the dvergjar. Some of the crew claimed it was a sign from Thor or Odin, guiding their passage. Telling them to remain true to their course. Of course, those lights had existed long ere Thor was born, Starkad knew.

“Such a wonder,” Afzal murmured behind Starkad.

Starkad nodded. “The further reaches of the world hold many.”

“And are they enough to replace the comforts you always leave behind?”

Starkad snorted. The Serk thought far too oft of marriage and children, as if it were the purpose of life. And yet, Afzal refused to leave Starkad's

side and claim such things for himself, saying he must repay the debt he owed.

“Look! Look!” Ivar shouted ere Starkad could form an answer.

On the horizon, rising out of the Mist, great peaks of ice, mountains. Half the crew leapt up, straining their eyes to gaze land at long last. To see hope. Or the beginning of their true mission.



OUT HERE, even the Mist was not so thick. The ghost lights seemed the palest blue fires, dancing as the ship neared the frozen shore. They dared not run aground, nor did anyone seem eager to leap into the freezing sea. So they dragged the rowboat forward and ferried over to the shore in small groups. The ice shelf around Thule reached further out even than the ones around the Faeroernes, so it would be a fair trek to be on solid land. First, though, they needed to row to the shelf. Orvar insisted on being in the first group, and Starkad went with him.

“Still no sun,” Afzal complained from the back of the boat. Starkad heaved at the oars without responding. The others, Tiny, Ivar, and Hervard, all stared transfixed at the island. They wondered, he knew, what dangers and glories they’d find on Thule. But then, danger was but one more tale to add to his legend. And when it was done ... he’d be off to the next and the next again. Such was Starkad’s urd.

The rowboat scraped ice. A half dozen seals barked and scrambled away at their approach, diving into the freezing waters. Orvar tested the ice with one foot ere putting his full weight on the sheet. He nodded at the others. “Tiny,” Orvar said. “Take the boat back and ferry the others. Trade off until everyone is ashore.”

Orvar strode forward, taking the lead. The island was large enough a man could not easily judge its full extent, least of all with the Mist. At the

isle's heart rose towering mountains, everything coated in millennia of rime. In the valleys, he saw hints of shrunken evergreens, too stubborn to surrender to the cold.

"How the fuck are we supposed to build a camp without wood to burn?" Ivar complained. It was a good question, if an obvious one. Ivar had earned the name "the Loud" for obvious questions, among other things.

"We'll have to fell one of those trees," Orvar said as he headed toward one of those evergreens.

"You want to haul wood from all the way—"

"I want to have fire, Loud. And you're coming with me."

"Travel to the ends of Midgard so I can be a fucking lumberjack." Ivar patted the axe at his side. "It's for chopping necks, you know." Orvar shrugged, and they started off.

"Help set the camp," Starkad told Afzal, then followed Orvar and Ivar.

They all walked in silence for a short time. Ivar seemed awestruck by the ice-covered landscape and unexplored peaks. "Remind you of any place?" Orvar asked.

"Aye," Loud said. "The north of Nidavellir and the cock-beetling dvergar mountains."

"Mmm hmm. Not sure that's a coincidence, either."

"Wait, what?" Ivar stumbled. "Are you saying there's cock-beetling dvergar on this island? 'Twas supposed to be uninhabited! Uninhabited means no cock-stomping dvergar!"

Starkad snorted at the comment, though it lacked any real humour. Orvar and Ivar had both come from Nidavellir, under the ever-present yoke of dverg masters. But whilst Orvar had been the son of a great man, Ivar had been a common raider in service to the dvergar. He'd raided and pillaged across the North Realms until one such expedition in Sviarland went bad and left the rest of his crew dead. And then he'd turned bandit on his own, up until Yngvi had asked Orvar to put an end to him. Instead of

killing his countryman, Orvar had recruited him. Ivar was loud. Ivar was an imbecile. Ivar was also good at cleaving things in half with his axe, a pursuit he seemed to like quite well, and which earned him a measure—however small—of respect.

“I see a beetle-cocked dverg, I’m gonna chop it in half!”

Orvar grunted, waving his torch to dispel the Mist. “The dverg or his cock?”

Ivar grunted, then worked his tongue over his teeth. “Both of ‘em.”

That drew a snort from Orvar and an actual laugh from Starkad. After a chuckle, Starkad shook his head. “I don’t think dvergar still live here.”

Ivar glanced back at him. “Then what, man? Can we claim their gold? Gods above. If I could bring my girl dverg gold ...” Orvar should never have brought it up. He may have shared kinship with Ivar, but men called him Ivar the Loud for a reason. Best not tell the man aught they didn’t want everyone from here to Miklagard knowing.

Starkad frowned. “All I can say is, Odin didn’t send us to this island looking for farmland under the permafrost. There is something here, something of value, and we will take it.”

“I *like* taking things.” Another reason Ivar was an ideal raider.



*MEN DIED; they fell in droves. As was his gift, his blessing, perhaps his curse. They screamed, erupted in fountains of blood. They fell to his swords; they fell to his words. They fell to his urd. A friend, a brother, becalmed and desperate. Looking at him.*

*Starkad groaned, tried not to see it. Not again. He just wanted to sleep, he just wanted ...*

*Vikar. His little brother, hanging from a tree, body twisting, writhing in the windless night. Eyes bulging. Tongue lolling to the side.*

*And they called Starkad a criminal, a kinslayer.*

Starkad moaned, rolled over on the icy ground. The crackling bonfire nearby provided the only warmth. He pushed himself up, blinking against the firelight. It was always like this, night to every night. More fool him, trying to sleep without being dead drunk.

Groaning, he rose and strapped his swords over his shoulders. His sword, and Vikar's, too, his perennial reminder of his first, greatest crime. There was another, smaller fire down by the shore. Starkad wandered down there. Bragi Bluefoot sat, staring out over the waves. The ocean was rough, much rougher than the dead waters of the Morimarus, churned as though by the heaving of Jörmungandr. Starkad lowered himself down by the old skald, who passed him a skin of mead without him even having to ask.

"Not so much left," Bragi said. Starkad took a deep swig and passed it back without answer. "You may have to learn to sleep without it."

Starkad grunted. 'Twas not that he could not sleep without drink. 'Twas that he did not *want* to sleep without it. The mind played tricks, twisting fear and memory upon themselves until a man was left with naught but painful truths and nowhere to run from them. He had committed a great many crimes in his life, and perhaps there would be more still to come. His fame in the North Realms only barely outpaced his infamy, and one day, he would mostlike find himself chased from all civilised lands. But his dreams cared naught for fame.

Starkad rubbed his face. "You never told me how your name got fastened to you."

Bragi laughed. "Gods, boy, don't you know that?"

"Do not call me boy. I've seen more than forty winters now."

"And still I have you beat. Oh, 'twas a cold winter earned me that name, I tell you. Otwin Nidudson was young, but already king of Njarar then, back where I was raised. There was still fighting with the Ás clans, back ere we knew gods walked among them. Fighting on a frozen lake and damn my

luck but I stepped on a crack and shoved my foot through. Got it stuck halfway up to my knee and I swear to Odin I couldn't pull the damned thing loose. So there I was, thrusting with my spear and trying to keep barbarians from cleaving in my head whilst my foot is stuck in freezing water." Bragi took another swig from the skin ere returning it to Starkad. "So I figured I was good as dead anyway, and I start mocking the Æsir. Never was too wise, you know."

Starkad forced himself to chuckle, though thinking of Bragi's situation held little humour despite the skald's smile. Much less knowing what Starkad knew of the Æsir.

"So I got this Ás berserk so mad he seized me by the shoulders and yanked me right out of the ice, planning to throttle me with his bare hands. Then I put my spear right through his neck. Hehe. Should have seen it, Eightarms. So yeah, the battle over, the völva comes to treat me. My whole foot is blue with frostbite, and I'm shaking with deathchill. She got me warm, saved my life. Lost a few toes, though. But Hel, I got a name fastened to me, even if it wouldn't have been my first choice."

Starkad drained the last of the mead. Bragi was right enough. He would have to sleep without the comfort of it soon. This place had no people to trade with, and certainly no bees where he could harvest honey. "So." Starkad pointed to the slumbering form of their largest member. "Tell me about this Tiny. Who is he really?"

Bragi snorted. "Claims to be from the Wægmundings, a Sviar clan. Says they call him Tiny because he's the smallest member of his family, the runt, if you can imagine that." Given the man was nigh to a foot taller than anyone else on this quest, Starkad found it hard to believe. "Maybe he's got jötunn blood," Bragi said.

"Not a laughing matter," Starkad said, glum, for if Tyr had jötunn blood, so too did Starkad. And those of jötunn blood, Tyr had warned him, didn't



just go Mist-mad, no. The Mist could bring out the Elder blood in them, make trolls of them. Leastwise, Tyr claimed to have seen it happen, once.

“Who’s laughing?” Bragi snorted, then vainly tried to squeeze one more drop out of the skin. “This island is colder than the Gates of Hel. It stays night twenty hours a day, and we’re supposed to pass the winter here. And we’re running out of mead. Not much to laugh about.” Despite his words, he continued to snort.

“Drunk old man.”

Bragi thumped Starkad on the chest with one finger. “People don’t mind a drunk old man. What they hate is a useless old man. Not me. I’m not gonna wither away and die in my bed. When I go out, it’ll be with a blade in my hand, a full belly, and empty stones. And hopefully drunk.”

Starkad grinned. “This island has no food, no drink, and no women.”

“Then I’m not gonna die here, am I, boy?”

“Don’t call me *boy*.”

Bragi winked and stretched, then stared at the glowing sky for a time. “You know why we’re really here, don’t you?” Starkad said naught. Orvar and he had agreed to conceal the truth until absolutely necessary. Truth like that could make men rash, greedy or fearful, or both. Rash men made poor choices. Starkad would know. “Uh huh,” Bragi said. “So Odin, King of the Gods, sends us beyond the ends of Midgard to establish a colony ... just to see if we can. Spread the word to the ... local rocks.” Bragi waved his hand at a pod of seals laying on rocks down the beach. “Get him some new worshippers, maybe. Does he answer prayers of fish?”

“Seals aren’t fish.”

“And I don’t have molluscs between my ears, boy.”

“We wouldn’t be able to trust you to make this a fine tale if you did.”

Bragi snorted again. “Have it your way, then. Truth always comes out in the end, though. Nowhere to run from it in a place like this.”

Starkad opened his mouth to reply. The brief scream of a man in agony cut him off.

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**DAYS GONE: ODIN**

799 Age of Man

When they spoke of the Art, as Guðrún Gjúkisdóttir termed seidr, they did so in nigh total darkness that frayed Odin's nerves and invited in the sibilant whispers of the vengeful dead. Shades were so thick on this isle that Odin could all but choke on their invisible rage. He and Guðrún sat huddled in a windowless room below Castle Niflung, the only light sputtering from a dwindling candle on the floor betwixt them. Odin's legs ached from sitting with them folded beneath him for hours. Bare chested, he shivered in the cold. Not even the apples of Yggdrasil completely blocked out such chills. Or maybe it was not the cold alone that froze him this night, try as he might to block the sensation of being watched, of being hated.

"Tell me," Guðrún said.

Odin cleared his throat. "Beyond the Spectral Realm, beyond the Roil, lies the Spirit Realm, whence hail the alfar, an Elder Race, timeless beings of thought and power."

"And?"

“And malice. They are not friends to Mankind.” That ire settled upon his shoulders now like heavy mail dragging him under a river.

“But,” she said, “they can be bargained with, cajoled, or dominated, whence comes the power of a sorcerer.”

He could not swallow. Hearing this over and over did not make him inclined to want to bond such a vaettr to his flesh and soul. Gudrún knew more of the vaettir than he’d have ever thought a mortal could—or should. She had bound more than one to her flesh, making a pact with beings she knew were powerful and hateful beyond mortal ken. And yet, even she admitted her knowledge was but the surface of a sea of the unknown, of beings ancient long ere the rise of the Old Kingdoms, even ere the coming of the Mist. With the Sight, they could see into the Spectral Realm, true, but not into what lay beyond it. What they knew of those worlds came from hints and intimations of the vaettir themselves. And the vaettir lied. Seething in timeless enmity, they manipulated, used, and possessed mortals foolish enough to cross their path.

And now Gudrún wanted him to call one forth, pull it through the Veil and let the formless, hostile entity into his flesh, an act his people would have named the epitome of ergi. Through a pact with a servant of Hel—there is none greater—he might come closer to his goddess and, indeed, gain some measure of mastery over her domain. The Niflung sorcerers thus controlled Mist and cold, used it to conceal themselves, to spy, to kill. To wield influence far beyond that allotted to Mankind. A man’s soul would shriek from it, at least until it withered into a useless remnant. Such was the price for the godlike power of true sorcerers.

Gudrún had painted a complex symbol on Odin’s chest. She called it a glyph, though it looked to him much like völvu runes, only more intricate in design. Other such designs decorated this room, forming a circle of arcane symbols designed to ward against the vaettir she wanted to evoke. “Are you quite certain this is wise?” he asked.

The princess sighed and shook her head. “Wisdom factors little into powers from beyond the Mortal Realm. Every use of the Art comes with risk—every time you pierce the Veil, you might lose yourself. Even after you bind an eidolon and gain its power, using that power gives over more and more of yourself to the spirit. The wise sorcerer uses the Art as the last resort, not the first. It is, however, better to *have* a last resort to call upon in desperate extremes.” She placed a reassuring hand on his wrist. “Now. Do you remember the words?”

Words of a bargain, a pact to make with the unknown, spoken in language that meant naught to him—Supernal, Gudrún called it—and everything to vaettir. He would call out names of fell vaettir. To name a thing was to evoke it. Even common men knew that much or thought they did. Still they invoked the name of Hel in feeble curses, not realising the goddess—there is none greater—might actually catch it. She was not always listening, but she might be, and only a fool would invite the eye of the Queen of Mist to fall upon him. His breath came in rapid, irregular pants. He pressed his palms together. Steady. He could do this. Hel commanded it. He must become like the Niflungar. He would gain their power, and then he might lead them in the spear-din, help them reclaim their rightful place as rulers of—

The door crashed open, and a man strode in. He bore a sword at his side, though he placed no hand on it. With a single glance, he took in everything.

Gudrún rose. “This is an evocation chamber, Brother. You know better than to barge in like that.”

“No incanting—you had not started.”

The princess frowned. “I take it Grimhild has returned.”

“Mother will see you. Both of you.”

She looked to Odin, working her jaw with some unknown emotion. Brother. Her elder brother, then, Guthorm. The man’s resemblance to

Gudrún was undeniable. Flaxen hair just like hers was bound at the nape of his neck, and they had the same pale blue eyes. Gudrún avoided speaking of her mother. She feared the woman. So what, now, would Queen Grimhild want of Odin?



THEY MET the queen in a throne room Odin had not realised Castle Niflung even had. Two thrones sat in the back of a long, Mist-shrouded hall, though Gjúki Raknison's remained empty. Grimhild, however, looked like part of hers. It shimmered, like black ice, multi-spined spikes jutting from the back of it. The armrests looked like onyx, carved in the shape of skulls, and the queen wore a skull mask—though too large to be a Man-skull. A troll's, perhaps. Guthorm stood off to the side, but otherwise, the queen had no guards. A woman possessed of extreme confidence, at least within her castle.

Gudrún, on the other hand, stood rigid at Odin's side, so stiff she seemed apt to shatter. Her only movement the slow grinding of her teeth. Odin meant to pat her on the shoulder, reassure her, but somehow found himself held fast in place whilst Grimhild silently inspected him.

After a prolonged pause, the queen leant forward, hands on the armrests. Those skulls had ruby eyes, gleaming. "Has he become one of us?"

"He ... would have. We were in the process of evocation when you returned."

"Long as you've had, and that is all you have achieved?" Grimhild cocked her head ever so slightly. "A disappointment, I'm afraid." Gudrún managed to grow even stiffer in posture.

"You speak harshly to your kin," Odin said.

"Odin," Gudrún whispered through gritted teeth.

The queen rose, looking at him once more. As she stood, she pulled off the mask, revealing a smooth face beneath. She looked but a few winters older than her daughter, a woman in her prime and so radiant in beauty he could not look away from her eyes. The sorceress queen drifted toward him as if floating on the Mist, at once motions of fluid grace and immeasurable sensuality. He knew he stood there, eyes and mouth wide, but he could not move. Not as she drifted ever closer. Not as she stroked a finger along the line of his jaw.

“You will love me.” Her voice sounded off, echoing against his skull in low, pulsing tones.

“I ... I ...” His hands shook. He loved Gudrún, not this woman.

“You will love me and serve me until the end of your days. And beyond ...” It came out as a whisper that rang inside his head with the force of a peal of thunder. Of a lightning strike.

Odin gasped, struggling to breathe. He loved her, the beautiful queen. He loved ... Gudrún ... his princess whom he ... He shook himself. “I ... I ...”

Married? Was he not married already? To Gudrún? No. No he had married someone else. He groaned, backed away, clutching his head. So many voices ringing out, pounding against his temples. Laying claim to him.

*Love me.*

*Serve me.*

*Love me.*

*Serve me.*

*Love me.*

“Your Art is interfering with the brew I gave him.”

“Fool child. Were your sway half so strong as you think, you would have had naught to fear.”

Odin had fallen to his knees. Where was he? Who was speaking? He needed to rise, to do ... something. What had he come here to do?

“My Art has done well enough thus far. Odin is mine. Must you truly claim everything?”

“Daughter. You—”

“Please. Let me do this. Let me have *this* one damned thing for myself.”

Silence lingered a moment. Odin struggled to rise, to shake himself free.

“I must ride for Hunaland soon. Dear Völsung needs my attention. When I return, you had best have swayed him fully. Fail in this, and you will regret it, Daughter. You will force me to take more than a barbarian man from you.”

Odin staggered to his feet. “M-my wife ...?”

Gudrún seized his cheeks and kissed him hard, with such hot passion all thought fled from his mind. “Come,” she said at last. “You must be thirsty. Let us have some mead.”

Mead. Yes. He needed mead to clear his head.



GUDRÚN LAY IN THEIR BED, asleep, naked beside Odin. He stroked her hair. Was this love? This was what he'd been missing with his wife. Odin shook himself. Wife? Where had that thought come from? He wasn't married. He was meant for Gudrún alone. He should marry *her*. This day he'd ask her father for her hand. The Raven Lord was powerful, a true king. Except ... except ... Hadn't there been something wrong with him?

He'd been praying ... to Hel—there was none greater. A sourness rose in Odin's gut. He needed mead. He reached for the goblet that always sat by their bed. It felt cold to his touch, chilled. He wanted to drink. But somehow, the thought of that burning liquid just made his stomach turn again. He shook his head and rose, trying to make no sound as he pulled on



his trousers. Hel—there was none greater—there was something about her. Something he needed to remember. She was queen of the underworld. She'd brought the Mist of Niflheim. She'd given their power to the Niflungar, allies of Odin's people. And the Mist ... Hel, none greater, had brought them ... five thousand years ago ... Idunn's grandparents had fought her. Why would they fight Hel? The woman, Idunn, haunted his vision. Was she not an ally to his people? She'd given him Gungnir, the spear that had rested in the corner of his room for ... moons. How long had he been here?

Odin shook himself, then turned back to Gudrún Gjúkisdóttir. She'd taught him so many things. Secrets of the World, though he had trouble focusing on them. He could see into the Spectral Realm at will.

Something was wrong. He'd come here to find the Singasteinn ... because he'd promised the ghost. The ghost who had cursed Odin, who had ... Vé! Son of a troll-fucking whore! Odin spun, his fists clenching at his side, taking in the woman in his bed.

No. Not his bed. His wife lay alone in his bed. This was the sorceress's room. And it wasn't love. 'Twas seidr! Gudrún had enchanted him. He'd heard völvur could do such things, so how much easier for a true sorceress? The mead ... a love philtre? The conniving bitch had seduced him with flesh and foul seidr drawn from Hel. But ... her words were clearly the truth. She could give him everything. The Niflungar and the Æsir together might well rule Midgard. Was that what Gjúki Raknison intended? Was that reason enough for him to throw his daughter in Odin's path? The sorcerer might have sought more than this frozen kingdom at the edge of Midgard. And Odin could give it to him—together, they could take everything, conquer all the North Realms and beyond.

Odin shook his head again. Whatever they intended mattered naught. They'd bespelled him, used him. Perhaps Gudrún *could* break the curse the ghost had placed on Odin, but that was not enough, for Odin would live for

eternity knowing he had broken his oath and sacrificed his honour. And Vé, gods! Vé! Odin would save his brother without relying on such people. How easily he forgot Heidr's lessons. Gudrún's help would have had a price, too. Everything did. He'd almost let himself fall for her. And for what? An enchantress who had worked her seidr on him. A people who worshipped Hel herself. *Hel—there was none ... No!* Gods above and below, Hel had *done* this to the World. She was a queen of nightmares, an enemy to Mankind. His enemy! He clutched his head. The sorceress's seidr beat at his temples, demanding he return to her bed. To deny it felt like ripping his skin off. Odin had to be gone from this place ere his mind fell under Gudrún's spells once more.

He donned his tunic and stood over Gudrún. She still wore the Singasteinn as well as her golden headband. And to look on her there, barely stirring in the depths of some dream ... was it more than lust? He could spend eternity by this woman's side, his heart sped at the thought. He could do it, but for the price of his honour. And his brother's soul. Or maybe 'twas her Art, still working at his mind, trying to draw him back. He barely stifled his groan. Maybe the apple had given him resistance to her powers. Maybe any mortal would have been helpless in her thrall. Or maybe even the brief respite from her philtre had been enough to clear his thoughts. But by Hel, did he want this woman. And for that, he loathed her almost as much as he did himself. Odin clenched his teeth. He had to return that amulet. Not much time remained, of that he was certain. The Odling ghost would lay her curse upon him if he did not move from here.

Gingerly he unclasped the amulet from Gudrún's neck, careful not to wake her. Despite himself, he planted a light kiss on her forehead. "I'm sorry." Odin hated this bitch. And loved her. Perhaps he'd never untangle the truth of his heart, the truth of whether his feelings were real or the results of her power ... Every moment he stayed increased the temptation to crawl back into that bed. He knelt to retrieve his spear—for moons he'd let

his ancestral weapon lie on the floor, as if it were naught but common iron. What shame he'd brought to it. And to his father, perhaps languishing in despair at the failure of his son.

Shaking his head, Odin slipped out of the room. Back on the landing, he slid the door closed and backed into a man waiting there. "My lord?" the man asked. "Was there something you needed?"

"I, uh ... some food. I'm famished." If the man had been waiting in the hall, he'd no doubt heard all that had gone on the night prior—all the nights ere this—and couldn't help but believe that.

The Niflung, a man dressed finely and armed with a seax at his side, nodded at first. Then his eyes drifted to the amulet clutched in Odin's left hand. "Very good, my lord. I'll just check with her ladyship to see what I should arrange."

"She's sleeping. You don't want to wake her."

The man took a step toward the door. "I'm afraid I—"

Odin slammed his fist into the man's gut. Ere the servant could even double over, Odin grabbed him and wrapt his hand around the poor bastard's mouth and nose. The servant flailed, clawing at Odin's arm with his nails. Odin just tightened his grip, drawing the man down to the floor. A few heartbeats and those struggles lessened until the man slumped into unconsciousness.

Odin shook his head. There would be more thralls down there. Guards, sorcerers ... and Gjúki. Odin would never make it past all of them were they intent on stopping him. And if they tried, he'd be forced to kill them. Maybe a lot of them. These people didn't deserve his slaughter. Despite the seduction and seidr, they had done naught to physically harm him. He could not repay their hospitality with violence any more than he could remain and break his oath to the ghost or abandon his brother.

"Odin?" Gudrún called from behind the door.

He could go back in there. Stay ... Lose himself forever. And gods, would he have wanted that. Instead he turned to the window. Eight storeys down, and then icy rapids. But he was immortal. Maybe he could survive such a fall. And it might be the only way to avoid killing these people. Odin started for the window when Guðrún's door opened.

"What are you doing?" she demanded. "Stop." Her voice dropped in pitch. "Stop!" It echoed in his mind. He should listen to her. Remain. Be the man she needed ... He flung himself out the window ere he could think more. Icy wind stripped away whatever words Guðrún shouted after him. The air tugged at his clothes and stole his breath. And then he plunged into the river.

A shock like a bolt of lightning shot through his body. All thought fled, and he barely held on to the amulet and his spear. The current slammed him against a rock. Breath exploded from his lungs, and his vision blurred. *Don't let go. Do not let go.*

He could lose neither Gungnir nor the Singasteinn. Another rock slapped him in the shoulder. Then he was falling again. He sucked in another lungful of air as he pitched over the waterfall, finding himself with just enough time to realise it was a fuck of a lot taller than he'd thought.

The Morimarusá slammed into him like solid rock. He sank beneath the waves, mind swirling and unable to focus. His legs were surely broken, though it should have hurt more. The cold was too much. He was going to drown. The thought cut through his rapidly numbing mind and body. His immortality would mean naught when he was drawn beneath the sea, caught in the net of Rán. Perhaps he would rise as a draug, hatred fuelling him with a desire to consume those he once loved.

His legs wouldn't work. He swam toward the shore, his strokes clumsy and growing slower. For a moment he managed to get his head above water, sucking in a single breath ere he sank again. This was how it would end ...

Something bit his shoulder, jerked him toward the land. A rough tongue grazed over his eyes. Odin gagged, sputtering up water. Sleipnir stood above him, scuffing the icy ground with his hooves. The horse had pulled him from the sea? That was impossible. No horse could do such a thing. But Sleipnir was so much more than just a horse. Where had the horse been? Hiding from the Niflungar?

He tried to speak, to offer thanks, but his throat only rasped. Sleipnir knelt beside him, insisting he mount. Aye, they'd be coming for him. In the sky above, a raven circled once ere flying back toward the castle. Gjúki Raknison's little spies.

A gasp of pain escaped him as he pulled himself onto Sleipnir's back. His legs were broken. He was certain now. And that should have hurt more than this. His body trembled. Could an immortal die of deathchill? If so, he surely would. He'd seen the toughest warriors in the World brought low by the cold, especially when wet. They would lose fingers, toes—lives.

Sleipnir took off, running across the sea the moment Odin had managed to mount. Odin slipped the amulet around his neck and tucked Gungnir across his lap. He needed sleep. He needed to rest.

Rest ... Except a man dying of the cold had to stay awake. Odin bit his tongue, trying to focus his thoughts and remain alert. Sleipnir's ride across the sea had become a dream. He'd lost any sense of time, but whenever he looked up, he saw a raven above. Following.

Gjúki would know. The Niflung king would know Odin's every move. A sickness welled in the pit of Odin's stomach. Gods, he had made a terrible enemy, hadn't he? In trying to hold to his honour, he'd no doubt deeply offended Gjúki's.

Mist swelled up before Sleipnir, taking the shape of a serpentine head. A dragon. Sleipnir jerked violently to the side, changing directions to avoid the apparition. Brine splashed up under his hooves, further soaking Odin.

Fire! Fire would keep the Mist away and let Odin warm himself. If he wasn't dead yet, he should heal. The apple had made him that way, at least. He suspected he'd recover from aught that didn't kill him. The thought left him both slightly comforted, as Sleipnir sped toward the shore, and unsettled.

A wall of Mist seemed to harden ahead of them, cutting off passage to the shore. Sleipnir leapt into the sky, soaring over the wall, and kept running. He was fast, maybe faster than the damned ravens. But the speed only served to further chill Odin to the bone.

"Fire," he mumbled to the horse. Whilst it was unlikely the animal could start a fire, if he could understand Odin's need for it, maybe he could find a place. Sleipnir snorted and galloped toward the village they'd passed through on the way here. The people there, even if they couldn't understand him, would surely see a man in need and offer hospitality. But they scattered like the wind as Sleipnir approached. One man rushed inside a house, slamming the door. A monstrous horse might have some disadvantages, too.

"Please," Odin croaked. "Fire." No one answered.

Sleipnir trotted up to a hut with a smoking chimney. Odin grunted. The horse was right, as usual. He needed warmth to survive, and if it frightened these people, they would have to live with that. Sleipnir kicked the door. When no one opened it, the horse kicked it again, this time hard enough to make the frame shudder.

Odin climbed off the horse, then slumped to the ground. A fresh agony shot through his legs the moment he put pressure on them. Maybe that was a good sign.

"Please. Help me." The words meant naught. If the people inside heard his tone, though, it might move them.

At last a man opened the door and stared down at him. The foreigner had blond hair past his shoulders, a thick beard, and a long moustache. He

looked upon Odin's bedraggled form with a hint of wary sympathy in his eyes. Odin pantomimed rubbing his hands together and warming them on a fire.

The man eyed the horse with fear, then Sleipnir backed away. Odin patted his leg to indicate it was broken. When Sleipnir had edged out of sight, the foreigner helped Odin up, supporting Odin's weight on his shoulder. The hut was small, and a woman, plump with child, already sat by the fire, another little girl clinging to her skirts. Both backed away as the husband deposited Odin on the floor by the fire. The man opened a trunk and pulled from it a dry cloak. He tossed it at Odin, then spoke to his family, who scampered into a room divided from this one by a fur curtain.

"Change my clothes?" Odin nodded and pulled his wet garments off. They clung to him like a second skin, sealing in the chill. His teeth chattered. The man was shorter than Odin, so the trousers and tunic he offered fit much too snugly. But they were far better than Odin's freezing garb. The man called out for his wife, and she came and hung the wet clothes on a rod before the fire.

Odin shut his eyes, soaking in the delicious warmth of the hearth. Just a short respite. A reprieve ere the fury of the Raven Lord sought him out and sought to strangle him for his temerity. Gjúki would send Odin's soul screaming down to Hel that the goddess might draw out his suffering for eternity. A punishment for rejecting the all-powerful Queen of Death.

Odin had left behind foes more powerful than any people he had heretofore encountered. And they would hunt him. Soon.



THE NEXT THING ODIN KNEW, the villager shook him awake. The smell of hot, fishy soup wafted through the house. Of course, this man was probably a fisherman. He pressed a bowl of soup into Odin's hands.

“Njörd bless you,” Odin said. Despite the scorching heat, Odin began to gulp the soup like he would a mug of mead. Its warmth filled his throat and settled his stomach. The man said something in his foreign tongue and motioned for Odin to slow down. “Aye ...” He was right. Take it too fast, and it would just come back up, not tasting nearly as good the second time. Slowly, he sipped the soup, letting it warm his insides. These people had saved his life; one day he’d find a way to repay that.

A dog barked outside, joined by another, and another. Soon, shouts followed. Odin knew the sound of abject terror when he heard it. For a moment, the man turned toward the commotion. When he looked back to Odin, his face had blanched. A lump formed in Odin’s gut. The Niflungar had come for him. What had he brought down on these people?

“I’m sorry,” he said, handing the man the bowl. The fisherman knocked the bowl aside and shouted, pointing at the door. “Aye. I’m going. Sleipnir!” Odin grabbed Gungnir and stumbled to his feet. Throbbing pain ran through his legs, but they had already begun to mend. Walking was torment, but at least possible. He wobbled his way to the door, but he hadn’t even reached it ere the horse kicked the damned thing in.

If he stayed here, he’d bring Gjúki’s wrath down on this village. “We ride,” Odin said, and pulled himself atop his mount. Outside, the Mist had thickened, engulfing whole houses like an incoming tide. Whimpers ushered from some dwellings, screams from others. These innocent fishermen suffering on account of Odin. And he had almost let himself join the Niflungar. No. These Hel-cursed sorcerers had surrendered their humanity, embracing Niflheim and its dark queen Hel in its place. If he could, Odin would stay and fight, protect this village. His eyes met those of a raven perched atop a nearby building. Gjúki’s scout.

Even were Odin at full strength, he could not fight an army of Men, much less one of sorcerers. The best thing he could do for these people was to be gone from their midst. And thanks to the ravens, at least Gjúki would



*know* he was gone. “Take us home,” he said to Sleipnir, never taking his eyes from the raven.

The horse trotted away from the house, then galloped over the hill. Mist swirled after them, trying to box them in. Sleipnir turned with the agility of a snow rabbit, charging down another path.

Odin had made himself a powerful enemy. But then, so had Gjúki. One day the Raven Lord would pay for what he had wrought here, this, Odin swore.



SLEIPNIR RACED THROUGH THE WILDS, the wind tugging at Odin’s hair. Perhaps a day they rode, leagues passing as Odin drifted in and out of consciousness, his body struggling to heal from the damage he’d inflicted upon it. Maybe he ought to have fought his way out. Killed as many of them as he could have. Or was that the spear’s rage filling his mind? The dragon blood that forged it did seem to incite violence.

They must have passed out of Reidgotaland and into Hunaland, but still, many days’ ride remained between him and Aujum. When he could endure no more, he begged Sleipnir to stop. The horse led him to a vale, sheltered from the winds by cliffs that rose up on three sides. He dismounted and slumped against a rock. The pain in his legs had faded to a dull ache. It couldn’t have been even two days. Two days to recover from broken legs.

Idunn had made Odin something inhuman. He had strength and stamina beyond mortal Man, ability to heal from injuries far more swiftly. And now he had awakened his Sight, as Gudrún called it, that part of himself he had so long sought to deny. Odin swallowed hard and shut his eyes. His quest for power, his mission to do as Idunn had asked, was transforming him. He’d wanted to honour his father. Now, Odin was becoming a being his

father would scarce recognise. Like unto a vaettr, like unto a god. Aye, but he'd have given it all up if it meant saving his brother.

Odin had to fulfil his oath to the Odling ghost, and then he'd attend to his oath to Idunn.

But given what power had done to the Niflungar, what it had made them, would that become his urd as well? Would he one day ride through a village and torment the common people to achieve his aim? He'd thought he wanted Men to fear him. He'd thought that alone might let him face his quest. But that fear, too, would have its price.

He shut his eyes. The ravens would find him soon. Gjúki might well chase him all the way back to Aujum. Odin would return the Singasteinn to the Odling ghost, break the curse on Vé. Then he would deal with Gjúki. Ere that, he must claim what rest he could.

Dreams—or perhaps visions—haunted his mind. Odin was bombarded by sights of the Spectral Realm and shades that populated it. Ghosts of the slain, unable to escape to final rest. 'Twas a world filled with the restless dead, like Midgard, a world taken over by the Mist of Niflheim. And he had nigh let himself be drawn in by its power.

He jolted awake at a hand on his shoulder. He snatched Gungnir and shoved the man away ere recognising Loki. Odin coughed, clearing his throat. “Should have known Sleipnir wouldn't let anyone else sneak up on me.”

“You've been hard to find.”

“Brother, I ...” How could he even begin to explain to Loki the things that had happened of late? If anyone could understand, it would be his blood brother. And yet, so much had changed. Most of all, Odin himself. He had so many doubts.

“We must make haste back,” Loki said. “I have an ill feeling for our people.”

## INTERLUDE: THE NIFLUNGAR

799 Age of Man

Castle Niflung lay on the fringes of Midgard, wedged on an island separating the Morimarus from the Gandvík Sea. This island, Samsey, had become their hidden sanctum, where the greater part of the Niflungar had slept away the ages. After the Niflungar were driven out of the mainland by the now-fallen kingdom of the Lofdar, they had come here, and this place had long since served as the last refuge of the greatest descendants of Halfdan the Old. If Gudrún's parents—Gjúki and Grimhild—had not lived through these events themselves, they must have at least firsthand accounts of it from *their* parents. They had used the Art to sustain their mortal forms long beyond the time allotted to Mankind, using secret knowledge thus far denied to her. At just past twenty-five winters, she had aged about as much as she cared to. Grimhild could have passed for her—slightly—older sister. The queen's most treasured spells were housed in a grimoire said to be written by the hand of Hel herself—there was none greater. Hel, Queen of Niflheim and mistress of the Art. And through those spells, Grimhild had somehow maintained her youth down through the centuries.

In Guðrún's bed, the Ás man stirred, rolling over ere collapsing on his stomach like a sea lion on a rock. Guðrún smirked. The philtre had worked more than well to enthrall him. His will was weak enough she might have even drawn him to her bed *without* need of alchemical assistance, but her father had bade her leave naught to chance. Had insisted, mostlike, *through* Grimhild's orders. Though her father Gjúki was the king of the Niflungar, Grimhild was Hel's high priestess and claimed to hear the voice of the goddess in her dreams. Anyone who questioned that claim tended to disappear, probably into the Pit, Grimhild's nigh-bottomless dungeon beneath the castle. Or worse ... The queen's unnatural longevity must derive from feasting on the souls of her victims, much as a vaettr fed upon its host or even upon other entities from beyond the Mortal Realm. The secret to that would lie in the grimoire, but Guðrún had never been able to lay a hand on the tome. It never went far from the queen and not even her father was allowed to touch it. Only the queen's vile servants could—the Bone Guard, Grimhild's former enemies in life, damned to eternal servitude in death and acting as a reminder of the urd of any who dared stand against the queen.

As now, when Grimhild had taken the Bone Guard and sailed for Skane, intent on securing her puppet there. Siggeir Wolfsblood, he called himself, and Grimhild had resolved to see him take the throne from the Skjöldung line that had long held that bastion in Svjarland. Her mother wanted allies in all lands. Grimhild had sworn not to repeat the mistakes of her predecessors to the throne—as if it were her bloodline and not Father's descended from Naefil. But so long had the vicious queen ruled the Niflungar, perhaps even Father had become one of her innumerable puppets. She had built an army of pawns spread across the face of Midgard, moving only a few pieces at a time, ever waiting for an endgame that would ensure that, when the Niflungar returned, no one would be able to stand against them. Their waking had come slowly at first, but now they moved

with greater surety. And the Vanir did naught. They no longer watched Midgard nor cared for the urd of Man.

Maybe that was why Guðrún's father had tasked her to seduce and train Odin. To create another pawn, a would-be king among one of the barbarian peoples left in Midgard. Not that the task was odious. He was handsome and an apt lover. Moreover, his body surged with Pneuma that coursed into Guðrún every time he climaxed. She felt stronger, vibrant, her life force fortified by Odin's. Given enough of such power, she might even one day challenge the queen.

All things in time.

Wool cloak slung tight around her shoulders, Guðrún slipped from her room. Father would be in his study. Such intuitions were inherent blessings of the Sight. Oh, she was not given much for prescient dreams or visions of the past, as some blessed with the Sight were. But instincts, intuitions, those she excelled at. That and communing with spirits. Ghosts flittered at the edge of her vision even now, though she ignored them. To acknowledge their existence was to invite their ire or pleas, and Guðrún had time for neither. Instead, she stalked the halls, making her way down to her father's study in the basements deep under the castle—though not half so deep as the Pit. A circle of candles lit the room. All servants of Hel disdained fire, but not even a Niflung sorcerer could read in the dark. As always, countless musty tomes and scrolls cluttered the shelves ringing the chamber, and a bowl of water sat on the table.

Not for drinking. Water had numerous other uses—it was liminal, fluid both literally and spiritually, and thus served as an excellent medium for focusing the Art. The Odlingar, one of the Old Kingdoms which had stood against the Niflungar and fallen for it, had been famed workers of hydromancy, and the Niflungar had only a fraction of their aptitude at such. Still, water could achieve some few things to which cryomancy was less suited, though the two had enough in common for cryomancers to make use

of water. Her father didn't look at the bowl now, though. He watched her, head cocked to the side as he listened to whatever secrets the raven on his shoulder whispered in his ear. The ravens proved more effective spies than the spirits Gudrún or even Grimhild used for seeking information. Less costly now, though Father had hinted he had once paid a great price for such servants.

All sorcery came with a price. You drew power from the Otherworld, and the Otherworld took back from you tenfold. The mere thought awakened spirits writhing beneath her skin, clamouring at the back of her mind, always eager to take from her. They would take her body, mind, and soul, given the chance. Such was the urd of all sorcerers who lived long enough.

"Your mother will return within the moon."

Gudrún leant over the table, demanding her father meet her gaze. "The Ás is somewhat more than human, is he not?" Father looked to his raven as if the damned bird would answer the question, then finally raised an eyebrow at Gudrún. The one thing he had always demanded from his daughter was intelligence. Unlike Grimhild, who demanded *everything*, oft more than could be borne. "What are his secrets?"

"Are you not equipped to pry such things loose from him?"

Gudrún scowled at him. Obviously she could get the man to tell her all he knew. "I doubt the man has any inclination of Grimhild's purpose for him." The queen wanted Gudrún to make him a pawn, because in her mind, Gudrún was *her* pawn. All pieces in the grand game she played. A tafl board on a scope encompassing all Midgard, maybe even beyond.

"Your *mother* has her instructions from Hel herself—there is none greater."

"There is none greater." Why would Hel want Odin? What care had the great goddess for a mortal man, a barbarian lord?

Her father stroked the raven's head and leant back in his chair. "A Vanr came to him. Brought him a gift."

A Vanr. From time to time, a few of those self-proclaimed gods still wandered the World, but most had not left Vanaheim in nigh unto a thousand years. Any gift they brought would be laced with double-edged purpose, and ... in Hel's name! Odin's Pneuma. Every time he climaxed inside her it was like standing under a waterfall. "An apple of Yggdrasil?"

Given such power, no wonder Gudrún felt so invigorated. And had Grimhild been here, no doubt the queen would have seduced Odin. Perhaps she still intended to. That thought left an unexpected sourness in Gudrún's stomach. She was not going to share the man with *anyone*, much less the queen. If Grimhild thought to claim this pawn for herself, she was in for a shock. Gudrún had lost so much because of the woman. She was not going to surrender Odin. He was hers.



MORE THAN A MOON had passed since Odin had come to her, and they now had fallen into an easy rapport. He had not yet managed to evoke or bind any spirit, but he would. He would learn the Art and become a sorcerer of Hel, as Grimhild had commanded. He needed only a bit more time.

They walked through a garden of ice sculptures in the central courtyard. Gudrún did not know whence these statues had come, for they had rested here her whole life, but she knew what some few of them represented: the nine sons of Halfdan the Old, the progenitors of the Old Kingdoms. He drifted along beside her, a man half dreaming and so eager to escape his life she needed fewer and fewer of her potions to keep him here. Without a sense of time, he murmured about all the things he would do, how he would become King of the Æsir, how he would stop his brother Vé from transforming into a troll. The former, perhaps, he could have done, and made a better life for his people. The latter ... no. Probably not even this Odling ghost could stop the changes the Mist wrought in Odin's brother.

Such a transformation meant they carried jötunn blood, and the curse of that blood was unbreakable.

Gudrún's two younger brothers sparred through the garden. Hogne leapt upon the fountain's lip, flipped around, teasing their youngest sibling to chase after him. Gunnar did so with admirable gusto, never showing the barest hint of fatigue. Ten winters. Soon, the boy would be inducted into the mysteries of the Art and, if he survived, would lose what remained of his childhood. She drew to a stop, watching as her little brother laughed, running, playing, though he'd have called it training. She could no more save him from his urd than Odin could save his brother. Oh, but she could dream of it, as Odin dreamt.

"You love them."

She turned to Odin, unable to quite find the right words to explain to him. "Love is ... complex. They are my brothers."

"And you love them. I know, I love my brothers. They ... they should be here too. We're all family."

Gudrún stiffened and ground her teeth. Oh, to have a family where love came so simply. Odin had no idea how Urd had blessed him in that. Could she afford to love her brothers? Guthorm, her half-brother and Grimhild's eldest—he was their mother's favourite, for which he had suffered almost as much as Gudrún, though he did not seem to realise it. He and Gudrún shared a bond, true enough, though she would not have named it love. More a mutual devotion to the pursuit of the Art and the return of the days of glory.

"Hogne treasures Gunnar," she said. "And I ... care for them."

"Why do you hesitate to embrace the bonds of family? What greater connection exists betwixt people?"

She swallowed. "You do not yet understand." Each of them was, or would become, a tool in Grimhild's arsenal, a weapon aimed at Midgard and the enemies of the Niflungar, all whilst the queen plotted and schemed



to claim all the world in the name of Hel. “You would be king of a single people. My ... *mother* will take the throne of all Midgard.” And her father, too, of course, by her side.

“You are lucky to still have your parents.”

Gudrún chuckled. “You have not met Grimhild, though soon you shall. Tell me then if you still think any of us lucky to have her.”

Odin paused then. “You ... *hate* her.”

This Ás was more perceptive than a man under her spell ought to be. He had an iron in his soul that would bring him all the more pain as Grimhild broke that will, ground him beneath her heel. The thought of it opened a hole in her stomach as deep and dark as the Pit. What had come over her? She grieved at the thought of Hogne and Gunnar slowly falling into the abyss of darkness that consumed all sorcerers. But thinking of Odin like that, of him becoming one more victim in Grimhild’s unending machinations to claim all lands, it hit her like a physical pain, a vise around her heart.

A disgusting sensation, as if ... as if she had drunk of her draughts. In Hel’s name ... She had let herself feel for this man. Grimhild had sent her to him as a whore, intent on capturing this king, though why the queen cared so much for one more pawn, Gudrún did not know. Except, Odin was not a pawn—he was a king on the tafl board, and Gudrún could no longer bear the thought of losing him.

Hel damn her for her weakness. As the Queen of Mist would damn Odin and devour his soul.



SHE HAD THOUGHT he would be hers, forever. Had even, in idle fancies, begun to imagine Odin’s adoration of her ran deeper than any philtre-born enchantment. When such musings took her, she could almost see him,

ruling beside her, lord and lady of a great court. Such illusions shattered, as illusions were wont to do, when brought into contact with reality.

Gudrún glared out the window from which Odin had leapt two days prior, as if she might somehow still spot him emerging from the river. The Singasteinn Odin had stolen was the only true gift Grimhild had ever given Gudrún. Wearing it, and speaking the proper incantation, she could take the shape of a seal—becoming one of the finfolk, in fact—and swim even in the freezing Morimarusa, freed from the limitations of her mortal form. Grimhild had given her the amulet the first time she had bled as a token of her newfound womanhood. And Gudrún had spent hours upon hours swimming in the depths, lost in the elation of her seemingly boundless new world. On her return, Grimhild had, of course, insisted she lie with a male sorcerer. It was tradition, a means to awaken her Sight and her heritage while inducting her into the Art. Neither the fear nor pain of that bedding had eclipsed the glory of swimming in seal form.

Old scrolls spoke of the Singasteinn in legends, even ere it came to the Odlingar kingdom from which Grimhild had stolen it. Some said it was crafted in the mythical saealf kingdom of Hiyoya, forged from the souls of finfolk. The finfolk—wereseals—had oft tried to recover the amulet, a few even tracking it to Castle Niflung some years back. They had failed. No one would take it from her.

Except Odin had done so, when she had let her guard down, had trusted him. And he had *left* her. And why in Hel's name did that part hurt more even than the loss of her precious treasure? After all, she had seduced him with a philtre. A little alchemy, a little mead, and a look at her breasts, and he was hers. *Should* have been hers forever.

Gudrún slammed the shutters on her window. Damn it. Damn him! How could he leave her? Was she not enough for the Ás king? Had they not shared something beyond words? He said he loved her. He said he ... She

rubbed unexpected moisture from her eyes. What in Hel's name was wrong with her?

Her arm ached, a glyph branded there itching. Yes, she had several vaettir bound to her, the most terrible among them a wraith, Irpa. She could send it out, have the vile creature suck out Odin's soul and leave his corpse a withered husk. And the thief would deserve it!

Except then he'd be dead. And that tasted foul, empty, and bitter.

He'd said he loved her.

She clutched the glyph on her arm. Why had he left her? Why? It had to have been some mistake, some lapse in his judgment. In his time with the Vanr woman, had she also ensorcelled him? If so, perhaps the Vanr's Art had interfered with Gudrún's. That must be it. Odin loved her; he would not have left her here, alone, unless he felt he had no choice. She just had to show him ... show him the truth. He could be her king. They could rule together one day.

She had to find him, had to bring him back. A wraith was not the way to do that. For such a task, she needed someone with more tact and more sympathy than any spirit would show. All beings from beyond the Veil resented Mankind, even the Niflungar. Especially the Niflungar, who enforced their mortal wills upon immortal beings. In the back of her chamber, a heavy shroud hung on the wall, concealing one more Niflung treasure. One Gudrún did not oft care to look upon, despite its uses. She stood in front of that shroud, running her fingers through its thick, black wool. Coarse. Rough, like what lay beyond. Maids had embroidered it, of course, for naught plain decorated the chamber of a princess. Yet, Gudrún had insisted on black embroidery upon black fabric, on designs intended to avert the eye rather than draw it.

Water was liminal, but sometimes a divination required something stronger. Something wrought in the darkness of Nidavellir, the land of the dvergar, who had forged such devices of quicksilver in earlier ages when

they yet took interest in the Mortal Realm. When they yet reached out from their strongholds, intent on conquest, ere the Niflungar drove them into hiding. Ere the Lofdar did the same to the Niflungar. Of course, some claimed these devices older still, come from a time before even the Mist. Gudrún wondered at the seemingly limitless expanse of history, the truth of ancient past as occluded by time as the land was by Niflheim's intruding vapours.

Gudrún yanked the curtain away. The mirror beyond it gleamed, its surface almost like water. So deep a person could lose herself forever looking into it, as though it might reflect the shattered depths of one's soul. It so drew the eyes that she had not even noticed the intricate silver border the first time she saw the mirror. Only days later had she been able to examine the dverg craftsmanship, the rune-adorned dragon framing the quicksilver.

A shudder seized her, and she let it run its course. Denying such things frightened her was foolish, for frighten they *should*. The quicksilver would reflect and amplify her Sight, acting as a focus. It would not, necessarily, show her things she wanted to see. Worse still, it might show her *to* things she did not wish to be seen *by*.

Whispering incantations under her breath, she pressed her palms upon the surface. It was icily cold. Thicker than water, and viscous rather than solid. The chill spread through her hands and arms until her knees shook. "Odin," she mumbled.

The quicksilver surface shimmered as she jerked her hands away. To anyone else, it would have seemed merely to reflect Gudrún. But for her eyes, Odin rode over snowy hills, mounted upon his monstrous horse. A stranger accompanied him, a man intuition warned her lay steeped in his secrets, perhaps even versed in the Art. Together they made way back toward Aujum and the Ás lands.

“Damn it.” Hel take that Vanr bitch and her sorcery, drawing away Odin from his true home. Gudrún ground her teeth. She needed to stop him from getting back to the Vanr, and now Odin had left her only one recourse to achieve that. “Show me Guthorm.”

Though ever his mother’s faithful son, Gudrún’s brother had, on occasion, shown Gudrún affection, even sympathy. Had she been born a man, she might have found Grimhild a more tolerable mother. Such was not her urd. Guthorm walked with steady purpose, Mist clinging to his every step. Such was the better part of cryomancy—calling Mist about oneself, concealing one’s form or purpose.

Those were forests in Hunaland, meaning Guthorm had only recently left one of the numerous petty kingdoms south of here. Grimhild had her pawns in nigh every one of those kingdoms in Hunaland and a fair number spread in Valland besides. Not so many in the Ás lands in Aujum, erstwhile homeland of the Niflungar.

Guthorm froze in place, his neck stiff ere slowly looking around. An adept sorcerer, he sensed her scrying. Which was expected. “Brother.”

He grunted, then turned to the side, walking a short distance until he came to a frozen stream. Guthorm sank to his knees and pushed snow from atop it, revealing the smallest reflection, one that would allow him to see her. She could not pretend to understand quite how this mirror worked, but work it did. The window it opened between places could sometimes reveal both directions.

“Gudrún,” he said. Guthorm didn’t speak much. He spent most of his time alone, stalking the Mist as Grimhild’s assassin. Those the queen could not sway to her cause through bribery, blackmail, or seduction, Grimhild had her son eliminate. A task for which he was exceedingly well suited, even ere she had gifted him with a runeblade, one more dverg-forged relic. In truth, a great many of the Niflung treasures came from the fjallalfar, who had a way with metals. They had forged Gramr for the Niflungar in the days

of the Old Kingdoms, perhaps as a peace offering, though Gudrún did not want to know what price they had asked for such creations.

She worked her jaw, trying to find the right words. Admitting her failure tasted foul. And yet, mayhap Guthorm could aid her, for he'd oft proved a masterful tracker. "Odin took the Singasteinn from me and fled from here, heading in your direction, I think." Her brother frowned and looked up, as if he might catch sight of the Ás even now. "I ask you to find him, bring him back to me."

"I will find him. And he will pay for his betrayal."

"No, no ... I want you ..." Her face was falling toward the quicksilver, as if the World had shifted and now the mirror had become *down* and drew her toward it as surely as the ground would. Her hair tumbled toward the shining surface. Gudrún caught herself on the silver rim with both hands. And still she kept falling inward. Quicksilver shimmered around her, blocking all peripheral vision, clogging her eyes and ears and mouth and nose. Suffocating, closing around her. In Hel's name!

It wrapt her in its chill embrace. Until all she saw was Grimhild. The queen had an icy beauty, with fair skin and hair like spun gold, all concealed loosely behind a mask of bone. A troll skull she wore when she wanted men—and women—to fear her. And everyone did. "You failed, Daughter."

"No, I—"

"You were to draw Odin to Hel's service. Not only did he leave, he took from you a treasure of the Niflungar. We do not part with our treasures, Gudrún. We do not let others take them. And so where you failed, your brother shall succeed. Odin's soul will be sent screaming to the Gates of Hel."

She was going to send him to kill Odin. That wasn't what Gudrún wanted at all. Odin had said he loved her. He had said ... He was supposed to be her king. "You don't have to—"

“Fear not, Daughter. I will deal with you on my return. Until then, think on your failure.”

A force slapped her across the face, severing the connection and sending her reeling. Gudrún crashed down onto her chamber floor. She lay there, head spinning, trying to catch her breath. Hel take Grimhild. Guthorm would never dare disobey his mother—no one dared disobey her. And that meant Odin was a dead man.

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## PART II

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*As the seas parted came the Mist, and from it strode far-seeing Aurgelmir.  
Lo, the frightful jötunn who drank from the poison rivers of Élivágar and  
thus was wrought anew. From his blood rose the frost jötunnar who founded  
the indomitable empire of Brimir. So did the Titans of old, once lost to the  
swallowing waves, rise again.*

— *Lost analects of the Lofdar*

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## THE DÖGLINAR

25 Age of the Æsir

*H*ervor jerked awake at the cry. She lay in a small tent near the fire. The scream had come from outside. Tyrfing slung over her shoulder, she darted out. The Mist had thickened. She couldn't see more than a few feet in front of her save right by the fire. And those cries had come from out in the Mist. Even the ghost lights had vanished, leaving them in profound, stifling darkness, a gloom so thick you could choke on it. All about the camp, men were scrambling, drawing weapons, fumbling around and searching for attackers.

Hel. Her hand closed around Tyrfing's golden hilt. It wanted her to draw it. To shed light in the darkness, to drive back the Mist and slay her foes. But what foes were those? Instead, she snatched a burning branch from the fire and stalked into the Mist, waving the flame ahead of her. Mist skittered away from the smouldering branch—she fancied she could feel its wrath at that—only to reform behind her.

Her foot snagged, and she pitched forward, toppling over on something soft and warm and wet. The torch hit the snow and flickered out. Hervor

scrambled up off the ... body. What was ... Hard to make out in the darkness. She leant in close. A crewman lay dead there, his face and neck gnawed off by some beast. Bile scorched her throat. She'd seen a lot of death, caused too much, but this was ... sick. She was soaked in his wound-sweat.

She pushed forward—or backward, she'd gotten turned around. She needed her damned torch. She was breathing too fast, sucking Mist deep into her lungs. She knew she was but couldn't stop herself. Fear had coiled around her gut and was clenching it like a serpent, squeezing ever tighter, blinding her. She waved her hands in the Mist. It was too thick, too solid even, pulling her away, driving her into the darkness.

Her foot brushed over another body, and she knelt. Hakon. His arm was bitten off at the elbow, a mask of agony on his face. Must have been his scream she'd heard. Ghostly whispers rang through the Mist around her, like the hiss of a fell wind, seeping out of Niflheim. This place was thick with dire spirits or vile beasts. Either way, Hervor was not prey. She was the fucking hunter. She jerked Tyrfing free with one hand, touching the iron pommel of her seax with the other.

Immediately it flared to life, radiating etheric flame that reflected off the Mist. The Mist did not retreat from the sword's faint light like it would a normal flame. Hervor panted, grasping her blade in both hands. She should have grabbed her shield from the tent ere she left. The scream had so caught her off guard she'd not even thought.

"Who is there?" she shouted. Other voices rang in the Mist, echoing unnaturally. Vaettir distorting the sounds, separating the party?

"Hervard," someone shouted. She couldn't identify the voice.

She spun one way and another, searching out whatever creature had done this. Tyrfing had burnt her father's ghost. That meant the runeblade extended into the Otherworld and could harm creatures not from Midgard. She needed but find the source of these murders, and she would make it

pay. And once dead, perhaps the Mist would disperse, and she could find the other explorers. She took slow steps, turning about after each, careful to keep an eye in all directions. Some presence, some unearthly being was toying with them. Once more, she rubbed iron to ward against vaettir.

“Starkad!” she shouted. “Tiny! Ivar!” Voices rang out in answer, but they all sounded far away, on the edge of some great abyss. Something brushed her shoulder. Hervor spun, sweeping Tyrfing through the Mist. It parted before the blade but reformed almost immediately.

Another scream echoed, resounding over and over, bouncing off the peaks.

“What are you!” she said through gritted teeth. “*Where* are you?” She turned again, and her heel brushed something. She looked down. A severed hand trailing blood. She kicked the morbid thing away.

Heartbeats had begun to ring out through the Mist. Maybe she could track her foes like that, though those heartbeats echoed in her head. Pounded at her temples. Not again.

*Thump thump.*

“Where are you!”

*Thump thump.*

There was a fire here. If she could just find her way back to it, she would be safe. Most vaettir would not draw within a fire’s near radius. Certainly not spirits of the Mist, cloaking themselves in frost.

*Thump thump.*

A wind blew at the back of her neck, tickling her hair beneath her helm. She twisted, slashing with Tyrfing. Again, it cut through Mist and naught else. She screamed in frustration. Maybe the blade could harm a vaettr, but only if she could see the damn entity.

*Thump thump thump.*

She screamed again but could not even hear her own voice over the pounding in her skull. The flickering light, the half-flame of the sword

revealed shadows dancing around her. Naught more. No answers, no salvation, no truth. Swinging wildly, she stumbled around. It was close to her, that much was certain. Toying with her, driving her to madness. Laughing as if it knew she would soon turn her cursed sword on herself. If it stayed away from her ... she had relied on an evil blade for safety. A blade that saved none.

*THUMP THUMP THUMP.*

Roaring in agony, she swiped the blade backward. It cleft through something half-solid and came away bloody. Ha! “Die trollfucking vaettr!” she shrieked. Again and again she swung, hewing through flesh. A form fell beside her. Hervor drove Tyrfing’s point into the body, then knelt beside it. Three great gashes had carved him up, but this had been a man.

She rolled him over. Rolf Quicktongue ... He had earned his name for his way of spinning stories to make himself the hero. On the moons they had sailed together, Rolf constantly spoke of all the women he had bedded. Raped, really, as he explained they had not known how much they wanted him until he showed them. He also explained how he’d helped a man find out his true nature by torturing him half to death. Showed the man who he really was.

If any man on this ship deserved to die, it was Rolf. Certainly more than poor Hakon. This Hervor told herself, even as she choked on a scream at what she’d done. Of course, Rolf had not gnawed Hakon’s arm off.

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**DAYS GONE: SIGYN**

799 Age of Man

Sigyn's sister stayed so oft alone in the moons since Odin had left. Publicly scorned, shamed by her new husband, perhaps Frigg feared to show her face. No—that wasn't like her. Sigyn doubted Frigg's dignity would allow that. It was worse, Sigyn suspected: her half-sister was, in truth, wounded by Odin's rejection, much though she tried to conceal the hurt.

When Sigyn knocked on Frigg's chamber door, there was a slight pause ere the woman called for her to enter. Most people would never have caught the reddening around her sister's eyes, so faint in the dim light of the brazier. But Sigyn's eyes were sharp now. Frigg had been *weeping*. Gods. *Frigg*, of all people. That bastard was lucky he wasn't here, else Sigyn would have found a way to shame him so completely he'd be the one hiding in his chambers.

Her sister sat on the floor, herbalist instruments strewn around her. Weeds and plants no doubt intended for one völva ritual or another. Or perhaps to dull the pain of a broken heart by enveloping the mind in a haze.

Frigg's spirit drum lay carelessly left on the floor rather than packed in a chest as was her wont, and Sigyn wondered, a moment, if her sister had striven to call upon an ancestor spirit for guidance. Too, Frigg's staff lay propped in the corner.

"What happened?" Sigyn asked after the silence had dragged on a hair too long.

"Naught, sister. I was just preparing a poultice for the hunters."

"And the fumes stung your eyes?"

Frigg sighed, then pushed away the poultice bowl in front of her. "There are times one can be too perceptive, Sigyn."

"Why let him discomfit you so?"

"Lord Odin is my husband, Sigyn."

"A political alliance. If you wished a lover, 'tis not as though he could fault you."

Frigg murmured, shaking her head. "You've no knowledge of what you speak."

Sigyn knelt by her side. "I understand you had a vision of you and him ruling together, but then you became infatuated with the vision, not the man. He may well be a future king, but he's also a—"

A bellow that shook the walls echoed, chased by a crunch of splintering wood.

Sigyn leapt to her feet. "What in Freyja's name?" Frigg, too, started to rise. "Stay sheltered!" Sigyn shouted and dashed from the room. Screams rang through the town, and the walls shuddered again. Sigyn raced from the fortress. What could make such sounds? More bellows echoed, sending shivers down her spine. It must be something out of the Mist. The sun had set, but even so, vaettir attacking the town? Such defied credulity.

She ran to Agilaz's house and snatched up her bow, for though she was no raven-feeder, she could not bide and do naught whilst others fought and died. Her foster father was still with the Godwulfs, and Orlun had gone,

taken her sword out to meet this threat. Sigyn scurried outside in time to see men and women scattering around the town square. She needed to see what was happening. She sprinted up the stairs to the wall. The thatched roof of a house below the keep trembled, then exploded upward as a massive form crashed through the wall, flinging debris in all directions. The creature that stumbled through stood over eight feet tall, its hide covered in rocky protrusions. A nose as thick as her wrist dangled from an elongated snout, hanging just past boar-like tusks.

Trolls!

Her father's soldiers launched arrow after arrow at the beast. Most ricocheted off the thick hide as though they'd hit a stone wall. Sigyn launched a shot, but it flew wide as the monster burst through another house. An instant later, it came crashing back out, a woman over its shoulder. Oh Hel. They sought troll wives.

A man chased out of the house after the beast, pounding ineffectively against the troll's back with an axe. The troll spun, a sweep of its massive hand sending the poor man crashing back through the walls of his house.

Again and again Sigyn loosed arrows at the monster, despite the pounding dread in her skull, the hammering of her heart. A few of her missiles stuck in its hide, barely slowing its rampage. Another troll stomped into view, a woman slung over one shoulder and a sheep tucked under the other arm. With one foot, it kicked a hunter who charged it. The poor bastard hurtled back through the air and slammed into a house.

Gods, Sigyn couldn't do this—she was used to hunting deer. Agilaz and Olrun were the warriors. But she had to do something or that woman would be ... She nocked another arrow, this time slowing her breath as she sighted along it. That thick hide covered most of the troll's body. She wouldn't pierce it except by luck—but maybe she could find a spot more lightly armoured. Like the back of the creature's knee. It would be a hard shot on a moving creature, even one of that size. But if she missed, she risked the

woman's life. She had one chance. Adjust for the wind, adjust for its movement, its gait awkward but constant ... Sigyn's eyes narrowed, her focus drawing in deeper and deeper until she saw naught else.

She loosed. The arrow soared, almost off mark. Almost, but not quite. The creature toppled forward with a shriek, the woman flying from its grasp. She tumbled along the ground through three rolls ere being lost in a snowdrift. Sigyn let out a whoop. Several other guards turned to look at her—whether shocked at her impossible shot or her outburst, she didn't care.

The wounded troll pushed itself to its hands and knees, jerking its head around with murder in its eyes. A few warriors advanced on it, clearly not eager to close the distance. The first drew too close—the troll lunged forward. Its claws rent right through his war-garb and tore out the rope of his guts, flinging it steaming onto the snow.

A woman shrieked a war cry, charging the beast. Olrún! The troll tried to turn, but ere it did, the shieldmaiden had scaled its back. She drove her sword straight down where spine would have met skull, igniting an eruption of dark blood that coated her face. The troll stumbled around, flailing wildly and unable to dislodge her. Olrún threw her weight onto the blade and drove it further down until the troll fell to its knees. Then she leapt off it and rolled along the ground.

Well, damn. Her foster mother seemed to have that one well in hand. Ordinary blades couldn't do that. One day, Sigyn ought to ask about how Olrún had pulled that off.

More bellows sounded from across the village. Sigyn had tasted the apple of immortality. She would not stand by; she ran toward the sounds, knowing it was about the stupidest thing she could possibly do. She sprinted around a corner in time to see another troll crush a villager with a single blow. A horse ran from the troll. The monster overtook the animal in three strides and flung it to the ground, then proceeded to jump up and down on the poor beast, shattering bone and flesh. Another bellow sounded inside the



house given to Odin's brothers. Shit, Sigyn couldn't leave them. She darted around the troll and burst in through the door. A grunt sounded in the corner, and she turned to behold rubescent eyes there as a crouched form rose. The thing that strode forward looked somewhere between a troll and a Man. Rocky protrusions had erupted from its face and elbows, though it wore what had been Vé's tunic.

"Oh, gods," Sigyn mumbled, backing away from the creature. Could a Man become ...

The troll-Man was on her in two strides. Sigyn tried to nock an arrow, but with one hand, the beast snatched her bow and crushed it, the other grasping her bodice. It ripped it away, the momentum flinging Sigyn right into its arm. She shrieked, pounding the rocky skin with ineffective blows. The troll-Man flung her over its shoulder and trod out into the street. Sigyn hung with her chest against its back, screaming, trying to twist around and reach the dagger at her waist. Its grip was iron, her weight not slowing the monster in the least.

"Help!"

"Sigyn!" her father shouted. Hadding wore his hauberk, which he had not done since she was a child. Broadsword held in both hands, he rushed toward her.

"Father!" He swung, connecting with the troll's midsection, drawing forth a roar of pain from the beast. A gout of black blood spurted over his face as he reared back for another swing. The troll was faster. It twisted, slapping him with a claw. The blow sent her father flying through the air. He slammed into a support pillar inside the house, splintering it and continuing onward. "Father!" Sigyn shrieked once more.

A bear roared on the other side of the troll. Sigyn never saw the impact, but she was flung free of the troll's grasp and tumbled end over end through the snow. Cuts and bruises stung her arms and chest and back. When she finally pushed up again, one arm trying to cover her breasts, a bear was

grappling with the troll, pummelling it into submission. A berserk. Was that Vili? Did he realise the troll was his brother?

Another house exploded as a troll charged straight through it, shoulder-slamming the bear. The troll-Man shook itself, glared at the bear for an instant, and then charged off. Sigyn rolled to one side, trying to get out of its line of sight. Instead, it just snatched up the first woman it came upon. She shrieked as it flung her over its shoulder to the position Sigyn had occupied a moment prior. Sigyn saw her face—Fulla. By instinct, Sigyn reached for her bow before remembering it had been destroyed. “Fulla!”

The trolls crashed right through the now-splintered main gate.

Pulling her cloak around herself, Sigyn ran back to search for her father. There had to be a chance! He couldn’t be gone just like ... The moment she saw his body, back bent nigh in half, head lolling to one side, she knew the truth—Hadding had been dead the instant the troll struck him. Unable to form any other thought, Sigyn sank to the ground beside his body, wailing.



OUT OVER THE RIVER, the boat carrying Hadding Gundericson’s body burnt, filling the night with an Otherworldly gleam that reflected off the Mist, setting it aglow. Sigyn stood apart from her half-sister, who watched from the shore alone, the wind flapping her dress about her legs. Ice had built inside Sigyn’s chest—a cold ache that naught seemed to fill. As if the Mist was inside, as if it moved to claim her. It wanted her, and she wanted to surrender to it. She knew Frigg probably needed her, but Sigyn had not been able to comfort her sister, nor even to speak.

Her father was gone, and he had died saving *her*. For a daughter Sigyn would have sworn he would not have given a petrified trollshit, he had given his life. Since her earliest days, she’d thought herself a burden to him, a reminder of an indiscretion that no doubt soured his marriage bed, and

later, a child too wilful to find a husband or do her family proud. Yet, when she had been in gravest peril, her father—old, crippled, and in pain though he was—had rushed out like a man half his age, glorious and valiant in a fight he'd known he could not win.

A tear streaked her cheek. She'd thought she knew everything. She'd thought she was so good at reading people, so godsdamned clever. So how had she missed something so basic? Had he ... loved her? The father who had never favoured her with so much as a smile had not hesitated to attack a troll for his daughter. People, she thought, were not always what they seemed.

The dozen small fires in the boat grew into one mighty conflagration, pushing back the Mist. The river would carry her father's ashes far away, and maybe—if all the other stories proved true—maybe valkyrjar would take his soul to Valhöll. For such a death, he deserved to feast alongside his ancestors rather than rot beneath the heel of Hel.

Had Odin given her father an apple, might he yet live? Mayhap not. Perhaps naught would have let him survive such injuries, but they would never know, and Frigg could never forgive her husband for denying her that.

Sigyn could not blink as the boat vanished into the Mist. Her father had faded with it, gone forever, taken from her ere she had ever known him. And with his departure, she could now never ask him the truth of his heart, the truth she had so long feared.

The Wodan warriors stood apart from the Hasdingi. It would fall to Frigg now, deciding whether the alliance would hold. Odin's people had fought with valour against the trolls, and many who lived today owed them their lives. If not for those warriors, many women—Sigyn included—would now be troll-wives, ensnared in a fate worse than death.

But then, those trolls had come for Vé, of that Sigyn no longer had any doubt, even if she would not share the thought with others. The trolls had

come for one of their own. It would be too much a coincidence for the creatures to attack the town after years of silence, on the same day Vé became one of them, had they not somehow known. The implications were disturbing. Did that mean all trolls had once been Men? Were they now possessed by vaettir, or were they something else, something corrupted by the Mist themselves? Or ... were some trolls created as such, and others born of troll-wives?

She wanted to despise Odin and his brothers for all that had unfolded. Maybe part of her did, though it almost meant hating his blood brother Loki as well, the man who had been the best thing in her life. He was the one person she'd found who could truly understand her, match wits with her, and more, be grateful for it. Perhaps Vé was the victim here as much as the rest of them. And if Frigg's vision was true, and Odin's quest was something more than a madman playing god ... then could the Mist be banished? It would fight him, she knew. But could Odin win such a battle, could the World know the true spring of children's stories? Could these Men-turned-trolls be saved?

Sigyn thought she loved mysteries. Now she just wanted some answers. None lay on the riverbank. She hugged herself and went to her sister, taking Frigg's limp hand to lead her away.

Neither spoke.



THE FUNEREAL PROCESSION had marched through the town and back to the fortress. The now-silent great hall where once her father had ruled. For a time, Frigg stared at her father's throne. Then she sat in it. A murmur rose among those in the hall at her presumption. And yet none rose to challenge her, for she looked every bit the queen, and who would question the

daughter of a jarl just after a hero's send-off. "Our people have been taken by trolls," Frigg said at last. "Who will go to rescue them?"

"Go to the Járnvidr?" someone asked. "That's suicide. Not even the Godwulfs venture within the dark depths."

Tyr strode forward. "I shall go, my lady." He and Hermod had returned only this morn, whilst her foster father had remained to help ease Jarl Høenir's first days as ruler.

Odin's brother Vili joined him a moment later. "And I."

"And I." Odin's voice boomed through the hall from where he stood at its threshold.

Frigg rose from the throne at his entrance. Then Sigyn noticed Loki in the shadows behind Odin, watching her. She drifted from Frigg's side to meet Loki, as Odin approached to converse with his wife.

"I ought never have left you alone," Loki said.

"Did you know about Vé?"

"Aye."

Son of a troll. She raised her hands to slap him, though he didn't flinch. "You don't think that was something I ought to have known?"

"Perhaps. I'd hoped to have more time ... Things are progressing more quickly than I anticipated."

What in Freyja's name? "Well, *that's* a shame. Does it bother you that I was almost raped by a fucking troll?" Others turned toward them at her outburst.

In answer, Loki placed a palm against her cheek, his eyes pained. "That would not have happened."

"If we're going to spend eternity together, you'd better start trusting me!"

"Sigyn, I—"

She silenced him with a finger pointed at his nose. "Don't think this is over, either." She spun on her heel to stalk back to Odin and Frigg, even as

she realised what she'd just said. Eternity. Even vexed as she was, she could not imagine spending forever with anyone save Loki, and perhaps that boded well for their future. That thought made her boil even more inside. Damn him. He deserved her ire, and she was *not* going to let it abate because of some warm cosiness he managed to engender inside her.

She found Odin and Frigg leaning into one another, whispering in tones no one should have been able to hear. Yet Sigyn caught their words, her ears seeming to filter out the rest of the noise of the hall.

"I'm sorry," Odin was saying.

"My father is still dead, husband. And where have you been?"

"I was ... detained."

"Detained? Is that what you will tell our child, Odin? You failed to save his grandfather because you were *detained*?"

"Our ... child?" Frigg pulled his hand by one finger, placing it over her abdomen, her face grim. "You mean the child we will one day have?"

She shook her head. "It's a boy. A völvu knows these things. We shall have a son. What kind of father will you be?"

Sigyn tapped her finger on her lip. That explained Frigg's earlier emotional state. To carry Odin's child whilst he'd ridden off in anger .... She hoped never to face such a situation. And how keen her ears had grown. Would she one day be able to track scents like a wolf? See in the dark? The possibilities seemed so intoxicatingly endless she felt giddy.

"I will be a father our son can be proud of," Odin said at last, his voice sounding hoarse.

Frigg leant closer still. "I will *never* let you forget that promise, husband. You've failed your family once. You shall not do so again."

To Sigyn's surprise, Odin didn't challenge her claim, instead nodding with utmost sincerity. "This I swear." Then he spun and strode down the hall. "We ride for the Járnvídr! We ride to save our people!"

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**STARKAD**

## 25 Age of the Æsir

S words in hand, Starkad plodded through the Mist, with Afzal a few steps behind him. The Serk wielded a curved sword that had belonged to his father. Shamshirs, the Serks called them. Afzal could hold his own, but Starkad wasn't about to send him wandering out in the Mist by himself. Not with whatever had done that to the bodies. "Ghuls ..." Afzal mumbled.

Starkad turned, slowly, counting the tiny flames of other torches moving through the Mist. Afzal held their only torch since Starkad could not well wield two swords and carry one. "What are ghuls?"

"Like draugar, I suppose."

Hakon's arm was gnawed off. "More like the work of varulfur." Not that he thought varulfur dwelt on this island. Hel, maybe Afzal was right. Maybe these ghuls of his did lurk in the Mist. "Stay close."

A fell gleam lit the night ahead, but not one of any torch. Starkad pushed forward, past Tiny, who was inspecting another body. The big man shook his head at Starkad's approach. No idea what hunted them. The light vanished, but a torch ahead called him on in that direction. Hervard knelt

beside a body hacked to pieces. Afzal moved closer, his torch revealing the corpse. Rolf Quicktongue. The two men had been at each other from the first day of this voyage. Small wonder, as Hervard had first beaten Rolf bloody and then—worse in Rolf’s mind—poked holes in Rolf’s tales of self-styled heroism.

“What have you done?” Starkad tried to keep from shouting. Already, other torches were heading this way. Bragi stepped out of the Mist and stared at the corpse, shaking his head. “What have you done?” Starkad repeated.

Hervard rose, challenge in his eyes. “Something came upon me in the Mist, attacked me. I didn’t know it was Rolf—I defended myself.” He turned about, looking at each of the gathering party. “As would any of you!” The boy’s voice shook, his bravado faltering as the weight of his actions settled upon him.

Starkad lowered his swords but did not sheath them. “You murdered a member of the crew.”

Hervard spit. “’Twas not murder, but an accident. And I’ll pay wergild to his kin.”

Orvar cleared his throat. “Everyone draw in, close to the bonfire. No man by himself. Now!” The murderer glared at Starkad ere moving toward the flame as Orvar had commanded. Starkad lingered, though he sheathed his swords and ushered Afzal back toward the fire. “Well?” Orvar asked. “You believe Hervard?”

Starkad glanced down at Rolf’s body. Hervard had hacked the man repeatedly and impaled him. “Rolf may well have crept up on him. Maybe meant to murder Hervard, I don’t know. Quicktongue was treacherous as a snake and about as pleasant as a troll’s arse. But still.”

“Still—how does a man accidentally strike another so many times?”

“Aye, and I’d have sworn I saw a strange gleam from this direction.”



Orvar's face grew darker, if that were possible. "I thought the same. We have bigger problems before us, though. Something dwells on this island, something that ought not to be here."

"Stumbling around in the night is not like to get us far."

Orvar shook his head. "It's all night here, Starkad." Indeed.



BY THE BONFIRE, Afzal had lit his smoking pipe. He burnt those rank herbs, sucked them down through a tube. All of it inherited from his father, Hakim. When they had left Hakim's broken caravan, Afzal Ibn Hakim had taken the few of his father's possessions the raiders had left behind. A sword and a smoking pipe. Some foreign herbs, the boy claimed, let his father pierce the Veil between worlds. Not certain why, Starkad had helped Afzal get revenge on those raiders.

"Times like these call for drink, not cocking smoke," Ivar said, staring at Afzal. The Serk ignored him, continued puffing away, and stared off into the Mist as though he saw something there. Perhaps he had. Starkad could never be certain.

There was a story Tyr told—spreading among völvur and skalds now—a story that Odin had hanged himself from the World Tree. Sacrificed himself to gain wisdom from beyond this world, to see into the secret Realms. Some völvur had tried to repeat this miracle. They were dead now. Afzal's way seemed more effective.

The young man blew out a long, shuddering breath as Starkad slunk down beside him. Starkad focused on Hervard. The man sat alone, shunned by the others. He'd always been a loner, but after tonight, who would trust him? Once the immediate threat—be it ghuls, draugar, varulfur, or some other vaettir—was dealt with, he would need to see to Hervard. Rolf got what was coming to him, but ... they could not have men in their small

party murdering one another. Their numbers were too few for petty rivalries to end in blood.

Starkad spat on the snow. This island was cold as Niflheim, and the wind had begun to howl, grating on his mind. Still, he did not wish to leave, not ere they uncovered Thule's secrets, and plundered its treasures. The so-called colony would not last the winter, he had no doubt. But long enough to explore the island and find Nordri. That much, they would manage.

"What do you see?" he asked Afzal.

The Serk sniffed, coughed, and rubbed his eyes. "Shadows."

"We all see shadows. Night has a death grip around this land, squeezing it dry. There must be more than that."

Afzal coughed again and wrapt his arms around himself. "Shadows stalking us, converging from all sides. This place is accursed, abandoned by all goodly folk, by the very gods. You want to know what I see, Starkad?" Afzal turned to the bonfire. "I see a day when all warmth fades and all fires dwindle. And I see it growing cold for us, ever colder. Shadows are circling us, looking for a way in."

Starkad groaned. They definitely needed more mead.

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**DAYS GONE: ODIN**

799 Age of Man

No words escaped over the lump that rose in Odin's throat as he rode toward the Járnvidr. A son. Frigg was right. This child would hear tales of all Odin had done in his life, the good and the bad. And his son would know the World through those deeds even as he would learn right from wrong by lessons Odin never set out to teach. The boy would learn honour, as Odin's father had tried to teach his sons. Odin's son would be worthy of the line of Borr ... A grandson Borr would not see, unless he looked down from Valhöll. Odin prayed he did, for he did not see his father's shade, no matter how oft he looked into the Spectral Realm. Too, Odin hoped his son would learn to be a better husband than Odin had been. He had betrayed Frigg, and he would have to live with that, though the knowledge he had been ensorcelled did offer some slight balm to his conscience.

Tales had spread of the troll attack even ere Odin had reached Hadding Gundericson's hall. The town was thick with shades of the fallen, as yet unsend and aggrieved, though Odin had no time to tend to them. Vé was gone, Odin knew it before he'd even spoken to Vili. He was gone to the

Járnvidr, gone to his kind, and he had taken women. Odin would warm Hel's bed ere he let those women suffer such an urd. He would get his brother back. He would save them all. He had made an oath, and though Gudrún's machinations had cost him much time, he could still make it to the Odling castle if Tyr's reckonings were right. There was another day, at least, ere the solstice. He'd make it. He had to. He had to break this curse.

The Járnvidr was the long-rumoured home of the trolls and thus Odin's destination. If past experience was any guide, these monsters would mostlike sleep away the daylight. With sunset they'd wake, they'd feed, and then they'd fight over the women. Odin could not change what had already passed, but if he could spare these women even one more night of it ... And judging by the sun, time grew short.

He glanced back over his shoulder, at the war party behind him. It was comprised of Tyr and Vili and the others as well as several Hasding hunters. But they could never move as swiftly as he could. And those women—and Odin's brother—had no time. “The Járnvidr, Sleipnir!”

The horse twisted his head around, watching Odin with his inky black eye. Then, Sleipnir again took off at a gallop.



LEAGUES BLURRED until Odin and Sleipnir passed into the Járnvidr. The trees here twisted back on themselves, their roots grown in a tangled mess of crisscrosses resembling spiderwebs. Legends said the bark was iron-hard, and trolls sometimes sharpened the edges of the roots into razors. This was no place for Mankind. Not even the Godwulfs crossed into this cursed wood, much though they claimed to ward Aujum against it. Sleipnir's pace slowed to a walk, the sharpened foliage too dense to allow a faster pace. Ravens perched on the branches watched his every move. Odin glowered at Gjúki's spies.

The horse climbed a hill, at last stopping before a tunnel dug into it. It must have been a troll burrow. It was too low for him to ride through or even bring Sleipnir, which was a shame, since his mount would help even the odds against the trolls' superior size and strength. Troll hide would deflect most weapons, but not Gungnir. Odin dismounted and hefted the spear, immediately feeling its power flow through him. His legs had healed and his strength returned. All that remained now was the task at hand. This weapon, this spear born of dragon's blood—its blade said to be forged back when seas yet covered the world—would give him the strength for that task. Naught in Midgard, not even trolls, could stand against it. Ymir had fallen, as would these monsters. Odin lit a torch. He would have preferred having both hands for his spear, but he needed light more than the trolls did. Maybe it was pride that made him come alone. Maybe he would find valkyrjar awaiting him this night. But he'd made so many errors ... he could not let this become another.

He crept forward, following a steep descent. Ahead, deep snores echoed off the walls. The tunnel opened up into a central chamber accessed by a maze of side passages. Odin knelt at the entrance, taking stock of the scene. Huddled masses that looked like mossy boulders slept, piled atop one another. Six trolls perhaps, though it was hard to be sure given their sleeping arrangements. More might well dwell deeper in the burrow. These were the jötunnar, he now knew, those poisoned by Mist and hungry alike, and he could no longer deny their blood flowed in his veins. So then, to be a Man, rather than a beast, it was a choice, and one which needs must be made anew with each passing day.

In the centre of the chamber, iron roots had ripped through the ground like claws rising from the dust. Those roots bent into a cage where a half dozen naked women lay huddled in each other's arms, bruised and bloodied. The nearest he recognised as one of Frigg's maids. Her hair was fiery red, even in the torchlight—probably what had led the troll to choose

her in the first place. The root cage had sprouted thorns that looked sharp enough to shred skin and sinew if the women tried to slip through the cracks. Troll seidr? It didn't matter. One way or another, he would set them free. No sign of Vé ... unless he had become indistinguishable from the other trolls. He refused to believe that.

Odin laid the torch on the ground and rose, both hands on Gungnir as he snuck forward. The red-haired maid looked up abruptly at him and started to whimper, drawing the eyes of the other women. Odin silenced her with a finger to his lips and continued toward the largest mass of trolls. Three of them in here—it had looked like four from the entrance. So with the two on the other side, five trolls occupied this warren. And gods knew how many beyond.

Too many. But the only other choice was to wait for Tyr and risk these monsters waking. He could be here in less than an hour, mostlike. No. The element of surprise was an advantage he couldn't surrender. He just needed a way to diminish their numbers ... They lay sleeping in a pile. All three of them lumped on top of one another in a mass, like dogs in a litter.

He hefted his spear over his head and slammed it straight down, roaring with the effort. Gungnir sank through one troll's skull, into another's chest, and apparently through the arm of the third. And it kept going, embedding right into the stone. The wails of the wounded trolls were a night-deafening cacophony. The other two leapt to their feet. Odin grasped his spear but didn't pull it free. The first troll was dead, the second dying, but the third was just pinned under them. If he removed the spear, he'd free that troll. "Hel's arse."

The troll's flailing became frantic as it tried to dislodge itself from its fallen brethren and the spear. Odin spun to face the remaining two. He drew his Volund-wrought sword—a sword given to him by Frigg to protect their family—and readied against the charge. He could only pray the sword held true to its promise. Trolls had weak spots, albeit not many. The joints, the

eyes, the noses ... groins ... Odin stepped in front of the cage. The first troll rushed at him, all fury and animal aggression. Odin leapt to the side and rolled as the troll swung a meaty hand at him. The creature slammed its palm into one of the roots, a thorn punching through its flesh.

It wailed in agony, bending the root as it yanked its hand away, further shredding its palm and spraying the women with black gore. Odin came up swinging at its knee with enough force to cut to the bone. The troll toppled forward, clutching its wounded hand, howling like a fiend of Hel. A heartbeat later the other troll slammed into Odin. The impact knocked all wind from his lungs and sent him flying backward. He crashed into the burrow wall and fell, smacking his chest on the ground. Vision blurred, he gasped. Fiery surges of pain rocked his body with each ragged breath. Broken ribs.

Dimly, he heard the troll bellow. Odin pushed his face up, half expecting to see the troll ready to rip his head off. Instead it grabbed him by his tunic and slammed him up against the burrow wall, sending fresh jolts of pain coursing through his body. Distorted as the troll's face was, he recognised it. "Vé!"

Again the troll slammed him against the wall, knocking all wind out of him, ere flinging him away. Odin crashed along the floor and rolled up against another wall. Pain blinded him. He couldn't rise. For a moment he'd matched strength with a snow bear and fought through the pain of his wounds like a berserk. That power was in him. He reached for it, falling inside himself, desperately grasping for it. Something inside him seemed to rupture, filling his limbs with more strength than he'd ever known. The troll—his brother—charged forward and swung a claw down at Odin.

Odin flung himself out of the way. The pain of his broken bones faded in the surge of power rushing through him, and he drank that power like mead. Ere Vé could turn, Odin charged him, wrapping his arms around his brother's midsection. His momentum and enhanced strength allowed him to

heft the troll's weight and charge forward, slamming him into a wall. Rather than grant him respite, Odin rained blow after blow upon his brother. Vé could take it; he'd had an apple, too. Odin pounded his fist again and again into Vé's ribs until they cracked. An uppercut to the troll's jaw sent his brother stumbling backward, head colliding with the wall.

Dazed, Odin backed away, then wrapt a hand around Gungnir. The dragon's Megin filled him, fuelling his own, blending until he could no longer tell the difference. The pinned troll wrapt a hand around Odin's leg. He yanked the spear free and slammed it into the last troll's head, then whipped it around in front of him, pointing it at Vé.

His brother watched him, gleaming eyes locked on Gungnir. The troll was wounded, stunned. Odin could close the distance and finish this. They both knew it. Tyr and the others would be here, ready to clear this burrow and end the threat. And they would hunt down and kill Vé, never knowing who he was.

"I'm so sorry, Brother," Odin said. "I swear I will return the amulet and restore you. I'll force that ghost to break this curse." He glanced back at the women he'd come to rescue, then turned back to Vé. "Run!"

Vé needed no further prompting. He took off, lumbering down a side tunnel.

Odin slipped to his knees. The power he'd drawn seemed to flee the moment his heart began to slow. With it gone, the renewed agony of his wounds hit him like a fresh torrent. He fell over, dimly aware of the women shouting. His vision blurred.



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THE VÖLSUNGS

## 26 Age of the Æsir

*T*he ancient tower stood empty. “Vófuthr!” Sigmund shouted. No answer. Not from the ruin, nor anywhere around it. “Whither have you wandered, old man?” Sigmund mumbled.

Fitela snorted. “We do not need the hermit. We have a plan. We were the ones who brought down Gylfi and turned Wolfsblood’s fellow kings against him. We destroyed his varulf pack, you and me. Have you not the courage to see this through without some Mist-mad wanderer looking over your shoulder?”

Sigmund could not stop the growl that built in his chest, rumbling outward as the wolf awakened. “You dare question my courage?”

Fitela froze, then fell back a step and lowered his head. “Forgive my hasty words, Uncle. I ...”

Sigmund launched himself forward ere he knew he meant to and hefted Fitela off the ground by each arm. “Who leads this pack, boy?”

Now his nephew glared. “I follow you in all things, Uncle.”

Sigmund tightened his grasp, drawing a slight grunt of pain from Fitela. Finally, he dropped the young man and backed away, then raised a finger in warning. “I know you wish to honour your mother by avenging her father. But Völsung was my father as well, and more, you cannot imagine the horrors I suffered at Wolfsblood’s hands. The depravity and torment he put me through. I watched my brothers die before my eyes—terrible deaths.”

“Well do I know it, Uncle.”

Sigmund shook his head. “Knowing a thing is not the same as living it. To hear of it is not the same as to taste the fear, smell the blood. To watch, helpless, as those you love die in agony and terror.” He strode from the tower ruins back into the marsh.

No, he did not *need* Vófuthr, though the old man’s counsel had proved wise time and again. He had offered the comfort of knowing one more person was on their side. But Fitela had a point—Sigmund had done enough on his own. And if Vófuthr was absent, still he could finish this on his own as well. Vern and Carr and all the others—he owed them that.



SIGGEIR WOLFSBLOOD’S fort sat atop a hill, all of it surrounded by a wall twice the height of a man. A fair swathe of that wall was wrought from stone, but the original builders had never finished it. Thus, Wolfsblood had plugged the gaps with a spiked wooden fence. From below the hill, Sigmund crouched, watching the pair of shieldmaidens guarding the main gate. Certainly they could overcome two such women, but how many more warriors lurked behind that wall?

“A rumour tells it,” Fitela said, “that Wolfsblood has hired twelve berserkir women as mercenaries, savages of Döglinar.”

Sigmund grimaced at the thought of it. Wolfsblood had hired mercenaries ere now—Eightarms’s face flashed in his mind—so he would

scarce put it past the king. Much less now, after having all of his varulfur murdered. But where in the Gates of Hel would a man even find *twelve* berserkir women? “Skalds are wont to spin a single skein into a tapestry.”

They had visited the towns on a few occasions, posing as vagrants, and purchased supplies with bounty plundered from Wolfsblood’s men. More importantly though, Fitela used the time to glean such rumours. The boy planned too much sometimes. Sigmund’s hand drifted to his sword. Berserkir or not, he’d take down any man or woman who faced him.

“Twelve of them,” Fitela said, eyeing Sigmund’s hand. “’Tis not valour but folly to challenge such all at once. Only the tale of the Arrow’s Point claims a victory in such a stand, and even then at dire cost.”

“This from the child who thought to take on twelve full-grown men.” Damn it. He ought not to have said that.

And indeed, Fitela’s face soured at the reminder of a time his uncle had nigh to torn out his throat. “What matters more to you, Uncle? Your precious honour or your revenge? Set aside your Hel-cursed pride and let us find one of these women alone and test her mettle.”

Sigmund groaned. More waiting. After so many years, he had thought today would finally be the day. Summer had come, and Jarl Olof’s raids had begun. Already, Wolfsblood had sent the bulk of his levies north to fight against the Njarar invaders.

Now was the time. But ... but damn. The boy had the right of it. They would have but one chance at this, and they could ill afford to squander it over matters of pride.



THEY HAD FOLLOWED a pair of the women all the way from Wolfsblood’s fortress down to a town by the sea. They could have been mere shieldmaidens—worth killing either way—but the confidence in the way

they moved bespoke something more. They had a wildness about them Sigmund knew well, for it lurked in himself and Fitela, too. Therianthropes, varulfur or berserkir, they existed forever on the fringes, needful for their peoples, but removed from civilisation. Their power was their curse.

The day stretched on and still the women stuck together, visiting the jarl's hall where Sigmund could not well follow. So instead, he passed his time idle by the sea, keeping half an eye on the hall. Toward twilight one of the women emerged alone and trod along the shore, perhaps seeking a private place to relieve herself. Sigmund rose and followed at a distance, beckoning to Fitela who had perched by the town wall. His nephew fell in beside him. The woman headed out, some distance away from the buildings, ere squatting and dropping her trousers.

"You could kill her like this," Fitela said.

"No." He would not sell his honour so cheap as to strike a foe like that. Sigmund held back until she rose again, then he pulled his sword and advanced. The woman turned to look at him at last, saying naught as she drew an axe from her belt. "Stay there," Sigmund said to Fitela. "Do not intervene."

The young man grumbled something under his breath. Sigmund paid him no mind, charging forward, sword high. The shieldmaiden met his downward swing against the point of her axe, thrust it aside, and shoved. The force of it sent him stumbling back a pace. Strong as a damned troll—definitely a berserk. Which meant he needed to act with care. He feinted left, then slashed in from the right, scoring a gouge on her side. That drew a roar from her and, instead of falling back, she surged forward, swinging that axe in great cleaving chops. A single hit would have lopped off a limb. Or a head. Sigmund fell back under the assault. She wasn't agile, but the sheer power behind her blows meant they came fast, almost too fast. Spittle flew from her mouth as she spewed incomprehensible curses at him.

She had given in to her beast. It made her powerful, aye, but not clever. Sigmund fainted again. She didn't fall for it. In fact, she continued her attack as if she didn't care if he struck her at all. Sigmund twisted, trying to get out of the way of her wild assault. Her axe smacked the sword from his hand, and her shoulder slammed into his chest, sending him stumbling away. It knocked the wind from his lungs, and he pitched over backward, tumbling into the chilling sea.

The berserk charged in even as he tried to rise, hacking and hewing. Sigmund dodged one way and the next, finally throwing all his weight into her abdomen. Strong as she was, she didn't weigh overmuch, and he heaved her forward, down into the surf. The axe fell—buried in wet sand, no doubt. The woman splashed around for it for a heartbeat ere grappling him.

Sigmund stretched, reached for the dagger at his waist. She was stronger. She pushed his head underwater. Saltwater shot up his nose, burnt his sinuses. Coursed down his throat. Sigmund flailed. He beat at her arms, but they were iron.

Inside, the wolf writhed, clawing its way up from the depths of his soul. It had awakened. And that meant the accursed sun had set.

*Beast.*

Sigmund surged upward, flinging the woman off him even as he began to shift. With a roar, she did so as well, tearing her tunic apart. The change hit him hard, expunging the water from his lungs. He finished shifting ere her and, despite the pain and wooziness of his change, managed to launch himself forward. His teeth sunk into her neck, deep, rending flesh and tearing out a chunk of it.

A massive bear claw raked his back and sent him tumbling over into the water. His wounds burnt like fire! By the time Sigmund had rolled over to look back at her, the berserk teetered, clawing at her torn-out throat as if bear paws—as if aught at all—might staunch the blood flow. A moment later, she collapsed into the water.

Rather than risk discovery by the other berserk, Sigmund too took to the sea and swam out away from the town.



FITELA MET him some distance away, close to dawn, in a grove of elms. Sigmund lay on his stomach, head on his arms, letting the air cool the agony of the wounds on his back. The berserk had so rent him she must have almost struck his spine. Had that happened ... Had that happened, he would never avenge himself against Wolfsblood.

Fitela dropped Sigmund's clothes—they fell with a wet plop—before him, then collapsed in a heap. “Still think you want to fight twelve of those bitches all at once?”

“Eleven now.” He didn't look at the young man, though. Meeting his gaze seemed painful under the circumstances.

Fitela snorted. “We cannot face eleven nor even five of those women at once, much less in any kind of fair fight as you seem to insist on giving them. She damn nigh took your head off because you refused to kill a woman while her trousers were around her ankles.”

Sigmund groaned. “You who grew up in the halls of Wolfsblood might never understand—”

“No! It is you who does not understand! Born a prince, son of the greatest king in Hunaland. Oh aye, you thought you could claim the whole fucking World, that it was your due. And here, you look down on me for speaking practicality ... for speaking reason. Your honour is not your strength, *Uncle*. It is merely a remnant of your spoiled arrogance, from still thinking yourself a prince.” Fitela huffed. “Yet you have spent nigh as long as a vagrant as any royal.”

Sigmund pushed himself up, ignoring the fresh lances of pain it sent through his back. “How dare you, boy! You think to challenge me?”

“I try to *help* you! All I have ever done, from the day I was born, was seek to prepare to return our house to prominence.”

“Our house? You are as much of the vile line of Wolfsblood as you are a Völsung, a lineage made plain by your refusal to guard your tongue or your actions.”

“I am *not* ...”

“Not?” Sigmund folded his arms over his chest. “Not what?”

Fitela sighed and waved it away. “Not your enemy, nor do I embrace Wolfsblood’s house, as you well know. We have tried your way, Uncle. Now I bid you heed mine. Let us find an alternative.”

Sigmund frowned. Much as he wanted to dispute it, the wounds on his back did lend credence to the boy’s argument. He had worked so many long years to avenge his family. If he died ere succeeding, it all amounted to naught. And if he gave Wolfsblood more time to gather his strength—for now the king had to know someone plotted against him, what with one of his women missing—the undertaking would become that much more difficult. So, let them see what Fitela could come up with.

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**DAYS GONE: TYR**

799 Age of Man

*T*he twisted Járnavidr lay ahead of them. No horses inside. Even hounds wouldn't venture there. Dogs were wiser than Men, came to it. Hermod Agilazson rose from where he knelt. "He passed this way, maybe an hour ago."

"Got your father's gift at woodcraft," Tyr said.

Hermod smirked. "I'm fair certain that's the only eight-legged horse in the area." He switched his torch to his left hand so he could draw a sword. "No woodsman enters the Járnavidr. Leastwise, not ere this day."

Vili strode forward, axe in hand. "Wish the fucking sun would set."

Tyr spat. "No. You don't. Trolls won't come out in sunlight." He drew his sword. This would be bloody. But his lord—his *king*—had ridden in there. Tyr would not leave the son of Borr to face this by himself. He ought to have seen what was happening to Vé. Had he remained, maybe he could have stopped it. Maybe not. Tyr lit his torch off Hermod's. He edged his way into the thorny wood. Had to be careful. Trees here could shred a man



right through his hauberk. Vili pushed past him. Berserk tore a gash on his side but didn't slow.

"Odin!" Vili bellowed. "Where the fuck are you, Brother?" Tyr cringed at the noise.

"This way," Hermod said, pointing off to Vili's left. "Deeper inside."

Vili raced off blindly, axe clanging against the iron-like trees. After a dozen strides, he paused, looked around. Huffed while Hermod caught up and pointed in a new direction. "Vili," Tyr said. "Guard our backs."

The berserk grunted. "Soon as the fucking sun sets ..." That would be in mere moments.

They pressed on, even as darkness spread over the wood. Fast as if someone had shuttered a window. Then only torchlight remained. In the dark, the Mist, a man couldn't see five feet. "Stay close," Tyr commanded.

Vili doused his torch. He fell to his knees, groaning and roaring as he shifted. He tore off his clothes, all but the bearskin, as the animal burst forth from inside him. A louder bellow rang out from off to the left. A moment later, a massive form lumbered through the trees, crashed into one of Tyr's men. Impact flung the man's body into a tree, impaled him on a thorn bigger than Tyr's arm. Tyr roared at the beast. Troll turned to meet his charge, not fast enough. Tyr leapt into the air, clanging his sword against its skull. The troll recoiled, stumbling backward, ere slamming its claw atop the spot where Tyr had stood. Tyr rolled forward between its legs. Drew a knife in the same motion. He slammed the knife into the back of the troll's knee. It pitched forward.

Tyr mounted its back. Grabbed his sword, rained blows on the troll's neck. Blade clanged against rocky protrusions and skin tougher than armour. But a few blows bit. Geysers of black filth spurted out of those wounds, drenching Tyr.

A bear collided with the troll. Tyr tumbled off backward, dropping his torch. Bear bore the troll down, clawing out its face, its guts. Another troll

came crashing through the wood an instant later. Tyr snatched up his sword and raced in. Dodged to the side. Troll's hand slapped a tree, cracked it. Tyr's blade hit it in the abdomen. Blade snapped in half. Arm numb with the impact, Tyr stared a heartbeat at his broken sword. Damn. The troll seized him by the tunic and hefted him off the ground. Tyr beat at its wrist with the hilt. Troll roared in his face. His stomach lurched. He dropped his weapon and clutched the troll's arm. Tyr's brain rattled around in his skull as the troll shook him about. The troll slammed him against a tree. Knocked all wind from his lungs. His arms lost their strength, and the troll flung him on the ground. Bellowed at him.

Tyr tried to roll over, to grab a weapon, torch, something. To catch a breath. Troll was going to smash him, maybe step on him.

Hermod hewed at the back of the beast's knee with his sword. Troll wailed, spun on him. The young man thrust the torch in the monster's face. That sent the troll reeling backward.

Tyr scrambled to his feet, grabbed his fallen sword hilt, and raced to Hermod's side. By now, Vili had risen from the other one. Swaying, bloody snout. Still charged into the next troll. The bear shoved the troll backward, driving a thorn through its shoulder. The trolls' twisted wood could hurt them.

Tyr drew all the strength he could. Everything the apple had given him. And he slammed his shoulder into the troll's gut as it tried to pull off the thorn. Half the wood seemed to tremble with the impact. Then Vili's claws began to rend its neck. Black blood sprayed everywhere.

Tyr retrieved his torch. As he let his strength go, pain flooded back in. His back felt like a giant welt. He was lucky the troll hadn't snapped his spine.

"Can you continue?" Hermod asked.

"You saved my life."

The man shrugged. “You probably saved mine too. Sleipnir went this way.”



ODIN LAY unconscious in a troll burrow. Sleipnir had waited outside, leaving no doubt where his master had gone. Fool son of Borr had waded in there alone. It was like storming the Gates of Hel, going into a troll’s lair.

Except, within, so many dead trolls lay in heaps. Odin had single-handedly slain twice as many trolls as the three of them together had taken.

The women had fled their cage but still huddled together. Weeping. Trembling. Nigh broken by the violence and horror. “Get them out of here,” Tyr said to Hermod. “Stick close to Vili.”

He knelt by Odin’s side. Tyr’s place was here until he could wake his king.

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## THE DÖGLINAR

### 25 Age of the Æsir

The sun had risen, bright in the sky. It reflected off the ice and drove back the Mist, nigh blinding Hervor as she looked across the frozen island. The sheer size of this place was striking. They would indeed need a full winter to explore the whole of it, especially with but a few hours of daylight at a time. And as they drew closer to the winter solstice, the daylight would grow ever shorter. But then, Hervor had not actually come here to explore some forgotten island. She needed to draw Arrow's Point off alone and face him down, this she had sworn to her father's ghost, and only avenged might he and her uncles find rest. The unfortunate incident last night with Rolf—not that he had not deserved it, accident though it had been—would make the others suspicious of her, especially if she killed another of their group.

Hervor would need to make certain they could never trace the Arrow's Point's death back to her. That meant waiting for exactly the right moment.

Orvar-Oddr beckoned all the crew together now and held up his arms. "We all know something hunts us in the night. We also know nights are far

too long and will be upon us again in a few scant hours. We are left with but two choices. We return to the ship and sail for home as cravens and failures ...”

“Like a beetle-cocking troll’s arse we will!” Ivar shouted.

“Or else we become the hunters and make use of those few hours of daylight to find what stalks us and make an end of this.”

“You did not really think that a choice?” the Axe said. A few of the men laughed. Hervor folded her arms.

“So be it,” Orvar said. “Still, we needs must leave someone to guard our boat; I would not risk leaving ourselves stranded on Thule. Starkad and I will go, take the Axe, Bluefoot, Tiny, and Loud with us and scout the way. The others—”

Hervor stepped forward. “I didn’t come here to be left behind.”

“No one did,” Starkad said. He looked back at the crew, worked his jaw, then spit. “Fine though, Hervor. You—who seem overeager with that sword of yours—I’d rather have where I can keep an eye on you.”

“Master?” the Serk said.

Starkad waved a dismissive hand. “Of course you’re coming, Afzal. The rest of you, gather as much wood as you can in the daylight, then build a perimeter of fire. And for the gods’ sakes, let naught damage our ship. None of us want to spend the rest of our lives on this frozen, Hel-cursed island.”

With that, they set out, climbing the icy slopes. Like the others, Hervor had fitted iron crampons to her feet, making the climb easier. Not *easy*, though. Everything that was not snow and ice was rock, rising at dramatic angles that oft had her using her hands to balance herself, even climbing directly with them. Starkad led the way, pushing them ever deeper, toward the heart of the island. Maybe he was following tracks, maybe he assumed their foe must lie beyond the shores of Thule. Either way, he paused only rarely, glancing around a moment ere adjusting their course.

The old man, Bragi Bluefoot, lagged behind, last in their party. Orvar-Oddr was a fool to bring him along at all, much less on their attempt to hunt for whatever fell creature had attacked them. The man wanted a skald along to sing their praises when all was said and done, Hervor reckoned, but such would not happen if the skald dropped dead on some nameless mountain. The man uttered yet another grunt as he tried to pull himself over an icicle-crusted ridge. Fuck it all. Hervor turned back and knelt on the ridge, offering the old man a hand. He took it, pulling himself up, then lying on his back panting.

“Don’t worry. Just enjoying the scenery. The gods make wonders, you know.”

“Starkad pushes too hard,” Hervor said, “like a man pursued by vaettir.”

Bragi chuckled. “Starkad always pushes hard. ’Tis his nature ... his curse, you might say.”

“Curse?” Hervor helped Bragi back to his feet. “We don’t want to fall too far behind.”

“Damn if that’s not the truth.” The old man stared at the ice face above them. They’d have to climb almost straight up or else lose time searching for a way around. Lose time and they’d not find the others again ere nightfall. Already, the sun seemed to be waning.

“We can’t get caught out in the open like this,” she said.

Bragi winked. “You don’t say?” He hefted himself upward, digging his crampons into the ice, then climbing with surprising grace. Not quite a useless old man after all.

Hervor followed him, not looking up, given that he kept sending showers of ice down on her. “So what *is* Starkad’s curse, then?”

“Oh, the tales about that one. He doesn’t talk about himself overmuch, makes it hard to say what’s true and what’s not. Tales say he’s killed more men than any save maybe the Æsir themselves.” Hervor frowned. Aye ... the slaughter of many men. Brothers, fathers ... more blood on his hands

than most could imagine. Bragi panted. “There’s a story though ... Tale was, he killed a jötunn.”

“Trollshit.” Stories claimed Odin had slain a jötunn. Gods might do so. Mortals did not.

“That’s the story anyway. And with his dying breath, the jötunn cursed Starkad with eternal wanderlust.” Bragi grunted, pulling himself upward more, panting. “Some also say there was more to it ... that ... well, that he would always hurt those dearest to him. Not sure on that one.”

“Well, you’re his friend. Has he hurt you?”

“Not yet. I—fuck!” Ice shrieked, cracked, and fell, sending Bragi crashing down atop her. She tried to catch him, but he raced past her. One of his crampons caught in her hauberk. Two spikes punched through her war-garb and dug into her back ere his weight ripped them free.

Hervor screamed, clutching the side of the mountain for all she was worth. Bragi had wrapt his arms around her waist. His weight was bearing them both down, threatening to send them tumbling below. They’d like as not shatter bones on the ice. She glanced down at the old man. Her blood was smeared over his face, dripping on him, dribbling down her back. “Do not let go, you old fool.”

If she moved even a foot, they’d fall. Nor could she support them both forever. Slowly, muscles aching, she slid her arm over a wide rock. She needed a proper grip. Odin’s balls, the wound in her back was on fire. She ought to just let the clumsy trollfucker fall. Except he seemed like a decent man.

Panting, getting so hard to hold on. “You have to climb up my back. Can you grab my shoulder?”

Bragi shifted, his bloody face pressed into the small of her back. With one arm, he tightened his grip around her waist; and with the other, he grabbed a fistful of her blood-soaked mail. That he used to heave himself

upward to her shoulder. From there, he reached for the rock. His crampons scratched her arse, and she had to grit her teeth to keep from screaming.

“You fall down, Bluefoot?” Tiny shouted from above. Hervor glanced up as the big man tossed a rope down to the skald.

Bragi grabbed the rope. “You wouldn’t think you’d miss a few toes so much.” Hel, Hervor was going to kill the both of those trollfuckers.

The skald climbed the rope enough to get above her, then Tiny hauled him up. Hervor lay against the cliff side, panting, trying not to think about the pain. The bleeding, the cold. The fucking *pain*. Finally, she pushed away and began to haul herself upward as well, hand over hand, her crampons dug into the ice and not someone else’s back or arse. Imagine that. What a way to use climbing tools. And who in the Gates of Hel tried climbing with crampons if he was missing toes?

At the top, she rolled over. They were standing atop one of the lower mountains. Across a valley pitched an enormously tall cataract. Though thin, it fell so far and with such force, it had not frozen over, at least not this early in winter, though ice gleamed all around it, throwing back sunlight like a mirror. The water pitched into a lake so far below the roar was diminished by distance.

She rose to her knees and stared at the fall, breathless, and not just from the climb. Never had she seen a sight like this. The land stretched out beyond the cataract in an endless plateau, shrouded by Mist, as was the valley. But it was deep, wide, and within it, beyond the rocks, grew a small wood, defiant of the omnipresent cold. Life clung on with stubborn fingers.

“It’ll be dark soon,” Orvar-Oddr said.

Starkad nodded. “We cannot linger here. The valley beneath the fall will offer shelter and fresh firewood.”

“So.” Bragi cleared his throat. “What you mean to say is, you want us to now climb back down. In the dark. Into the Mist. And the dark.”



Starkad offered no answer save to start walking in that direction. Hervor stifled a groan. Killed a jötunn, had he? Well, that was fucking amazing. And now he was king of Midgard. And telling her to march on, to climb on, never mind the holes in her back. Worse still, he had the right of it. There was no shelter up on the mountain, not from the howling wind, not from the icy chill it brought, and least of all from any foes who might hunt them come dusk.

Bragi suddenly grabbed her and pulled her to her feet. “We have to get a fire going ere full dark sets in. That means we’d best do as he says. Can you walk?”

Hervor sneered. “Just don’t fall on me again, old man.”

“Eh. Well, I’ll just go first this time.” And he did.



DAYLIGHT FAILED THEM, giving way to the ghost lights, brighter here than even in Nidavellir. The Mist grew perilously thick at night, sweeping in like a fell tide, then coiling about them, serpentine and hungry. One more reason to hate the night. Still they climbed down, torches in hand, Hervor’s steps wobbly from pain, fatigue, and blood loss. The slope had grown level enough to allow that much, at least. Far ahead, the crash of water echoed through the valley, almost allowing Hervor to forget what a horrible place this truly was. Almost but not quite. An island without proper day, where beasts fed upon men in the night. Truly, it seemed a landscape dreamt up by Hel.

“You seem deep in thought,” Bragi said. The old skald walked beside her as they brought up the rear of the party. If she was quiet, perhaps it was because blood continued to seep out of her wounds, freezing against her hauberk. The wounds were not as deep as they might have been, but still, she would probably have to stitch them. Already weakness slowed her

steps. And you never let men see weakness, especially not men who might be enemies.

Better, then, to keep him distracted. And skalds loved to talk. “Whence do you hail, Bluefoot?”

“Originally? From Njarar. When I was born, Old King Nidud reigned over the kingdom.”

“I know that name.” She couldn’t quite place it, but she had heard of Nidud.

“I should think so. His tale has become quite famed—or infamous, perhaps, much as the king. I was but a boy, mind, so I didn’t hear the tale until years later. You see, we lived in a small town below the mountain where Nidud reigned. The old king was fabulously wealthy since his ancestors had stolen a dverg hoard.”

Hervor chuckled. “You expect me to believe a man stole from dvergar and got away with it?”

Bragi put his hand over his heart as if offended. “Would a skald lie?”

“Only while breathing.”

Bragi shrugged in acknowledgment. “Never mind that. However much gold he had, it wasn’t enough for him. He spread war in Svjarland and in Aujum. The Æsir lived there in those days, ere we knew they were gods. And Nidud wanted weapons to challenge them. So he abducted the most famed smith in the North Realms—Volund. Well, Volund didn’t want to work for cruel Nidud, so what did the king do? He hamstrung the smith so he could never leave the forge.”

She *had* heard this tale. Of the cruel revenge of the dark smith. “And Volund repaid him by killing his sons,” she said. It was getting harder to speak. Her breath felt short, and her back seemed on fire.

“Oh, aye, that’s the short of it. More properly, you might say Volund ruined Nidud’s line. The king killed himself and left the throne to his last son, Otwin.”

The rest of the group had gathered in the valley before the waterfall. The fall pitched down into a wall a dozen feet below the level where they stood. Down there, seals lay upon the banks, so the river must lead to the sea at some point. Had they known, maybe they could have sailed the ship up this far.

Orvar-Oddr stood in the centre of the party, pointing at the woods. “Go in pairs, get firewood. Do not wander far. We camp here and wait for better light.”

Starkad took his Serk friend, Orvar went with Ivar the Loud, and Tiny and the Axe went off chatting, leaving her with Bragi. Orvar had ordered them not to go alone. But then she did not care much for orders from him or anyone else.

“Go on,” she told Bragi. “I’ll catch up.”

“Orvar said—”

“Orvar didn’t know a clumsy skald put a crampon spike through my back,” she snapped.

“Ah, you can’t well patch yourself up. Here, let me see it. I’m a fair hand with a needle, and I even know a thing or two about vólva poultices.” Well that pranced close to the line of ergi, if aught did.

Hervor sneered. She wasn’t about to take off her armour, much less her shirt, in front of the old man. Might be a tad difficult to maintain her disguise at that. Given she had gone to extraordinary lengths to conceal her gender while at sea, so she wasn’t going to let on now. “I can see to myself. Go fetch the damn wood.”

Bragi shrugged and trotted off toward the trees, mumbling under his breath. Hervor plodded around the proposed campsite until she found a slope leading down to the water, one that put a number of large rocks between her and the rest of the group. There she slumped down with a groan. Chills wracked her. Blood loss? Or just the fact it was cold as Niflheim this far north? She set Tyrfing down. This would not be enjoyable.

Gingerly, she tried to remove the chain. Blood had dried against the mail, making it stick. Worse, links of chain had wedged into her skin, even through her habergeon. The crampon had torn through metal, leather, and flesh like a weapon.

Teeth gritted against the pain, she peeled the rings that had punched through leather out of her back. A grunt of pain escaped her as iron tore flesh. She slumped against the rock, panting as the last links broke free. She despised this place. She fucking *hated* this whole damned island. And the whole Yngling dynasty for forcing her to come here—as if she did not have enough reasons to gut them all for the murder of her kin, for damn nigh ending her father’s whole line. Hervor was among the last of the Döglinar; she would not bear the stain upon her people’s honour. Next to that, pain was but a pittance.

Still short of breath, she pulled the hauberk over her shoulders and tossed it aside. That would need some serious repair, too, and she was not like to find a smith on Thule. Well, there was no help for that. She unlaced the habergeon, then tossed it aside so she could pull up her tunic. Twisting around, she could see the bloody mess on her back and her flesh already looking sallow. There was no way she’d ever reach that to stitch it though. Damn Bragi. She stretched, reaching around, even knowing it was helpless.

“Hel,” she groaned. If she didn’t get this patched, she’d not see another day. “Frigg ... I could much use your help here.” The goddess, of course, did not answer, and Hervor let her tunic drop back into place. Beneath that, she’d used linen strips to bind her breasts as close as she could. But without the jerkin and armour, someone would notice. More so if she had to remove the tunic. Bragi had made this mess of her back. Maybe the old man was the one who could help her now.

She pushed herself up, then stumbled back along the path until she could spot men returning from the woods. “Bragi!” she spat when the old

skald came wandering back with an armful of firewood. He looked around. “Bragi!”

The man nodded in her direction now and trotted over after depositing the wood at the campsite. “Come to your senses, boy? I’ve seen a lot of fool things in my time. Never saw a man stitch up his own back ere now. Though I imagine it might have made a fine tale had you managed it.”

Hel take the smug old man. Hervor spat in the snow. “Will you tend it or not, skald?”

“Aye, of course I’m going to help you. Can’t well let the man who saved my life bleed out, can I? Doff the tunic and let’s get you set, then we can all get to the fire.”

Hervor glared at him a moment. Then she turned around to face the river, sat, and pulled her tunic up over her head.

“Huh.” Looking at the linens.

“Another old injury,” she said.

“Uh huh.” The skald sat down behind her.

She glanced back, and he was heating his needle on his torch. “What in Hel’s crotch are you doing?”

Bragi chuckled. “A völvva once told me fire vaettir help seal out infection from the Mist.” After a moment, he pressed calloused hands against her back. Then he set to work.

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**DAYS GONE: ODIN**

799 Age of Man

Odin's head felt apt to burst as Tyr shook him awake. "My lord!"

Odin grunted, then rolled over to spit out a mouthful of blood. "What happened?" A fool's question, as Tyr's gaze clearly stated. Odin pushed himself up, fresh shots of pain scourging every part of his body. The trolls would have pulverised a mere Man. As it was, even the apple had barely allowed him to survive the beating that ... Vé ... that Odin's brother had dealt him. How much time had he lost?

"You must wait for your wounds to heal," Tyr said.

Odin pushed the warrior away, grunting with the effort of it. He'd wasted too much time already. He'd meant to ride all night to reach the Odling castle, but his time lost to the trolls and unconsciousness would cut deep into that period. "I must be gone," he said. "See the women safely back to Halfhaugr."

Night was in full swing ere Odin rode from the Járnsvidr. Vé had lost himself to that monster, and Odin would do whatever it took to restore him. His injuries meant naught compared to that. Sleipnir ran like the wind as if

he understood the urgency too well. Singasteinn had become a hot weight against Odin's chest. He needed this to be done. He needed to be free of ghosts and curses and the Mist. The weight of it threatened to suffocate him, an avalanche of Urd, crushing him and leaving a poor imitation of a man in his place. Odin had made an oath to Idunn to become king and, in so doing, had accepted responsibility for all the Æsir. The throne was one more burden, but one he had agreed to shoulder. He had to give them a better World. He would not allow anyone to suffer Vé's urd again.

A sharp hiss filled the air to his left a heartbeat ere the Mist slammed into Sleipnir like a solid wall. The horse tried to bank but was knocked through the air end over end. Odin, bareback, tumbled off and hit the ground hard.

"Sleipnir!" he gasped. His mighty steed hit the hill, tumbled once more, and lay still. "Sleipnir!"

"The horse cannot save you this time, traitor," a voice called from the Mist.

Odin pushed himself up, searching for where Gungnir had fallen. It had landed some distance away, down the slope of a hill. "Who are you?"

Mist clung to the man as he trod through it, revealing himself at first in silhouette, then in truth. Guthorm. Gudrún's brother, Hel's assassin—Grimhild's favourite. Odin edged toward his spear, not taking his eyes off this newcomer. He struggled to claim the power within, that strength that let him lock out pain. A rustling sounded behind him. Someone moving through the Mist. Many someones.

"You have betrayed my father, little king of younger Men. You've turned away from the Lady Hel and spurned the gifts that were offered to you. And you have shamed my sister! That we shall not abide." With agonising slowness a sword crept from his scabbard. The Mist seemed to coalesce around it, as though it radiated cold. Runes decorated the length of a woven steel blade. A runeblade. The stuff of legend. Guthorm held the

sword before his face, as if saluting Odin. “This was forged by the dverg princes. No finer blade graces Midgard. Retrieve your weapon, Odin. Die like a warrior.”

Odin swallowed. He desperately wanted to check if Sleipnir lived, but Guthorm would permit him no such chance. Instead, he resumed edging toward his fallen spear. He’d practiced gazing into the Spectral Realm with Gudrún. Gjúki had said that once the door was open, he would always know it was there. Well, now Odin needed to know. He needed to see the sorcerers creeping through the Mist, seeking to surround him.

His eyes glazed over, and an instant of dizziness swept him ere he righted himself. It grew easier each time he embraced the Sight this way. The shadows in the Mist leapt into clarity, even as colour seeped from the World. Many of those shadows were wandering ghosts, trapped on Midgard long past their time, but Guthorm did have a half dozen warriors with him. A hunting party seeking their prey.

Odin knelt and retrieved Gungnir. As he clasped it, its Megin merged with his, making it easier to hold onto his strength. “Are you quite certain you want to do this?” Odin asked. He levelled the spear before him, as if inviting Guthorm in.

The man stalked closer, sword before him. “Aye, Ás, the ineffable shadow of vengeance looms above you now.”

Ere Guthorm could reach him, Odin spun, slashing out the throat of one of the not-so-hidden sorcerers in the Mist. He reversed his momentum and juttied out the butt of his spear, breaking the nose of another man. The sorcerers scattered, suddenly realising how vulnerable they were. Odin hurled Gungnir like a bolt of lightning. It crashed through a man’s chest and exploded out the other side, piercing into a boulder beyond. The dragon was thirsty for blood this day.

Guthorm roared, charging him. But Odin wasn’t finished, nor did he intend to face the prince with other sorcerers at his back. He dove into a



roll, slipping under Guthorm's furious swing. The power the apples gave him made him fast. He easily chased down another man and slammed into him, the impact sending the poor bastard rolling along the ground. Odin sprang forward, snatched Gungnir, and spun around to meet the Niflung prince. He raised his spear to parry the prince's downward chop. Sparks sheared off Gungnir at the impact. The runes on that sword radiated a fell luminance. Odin had never seen another weapon of ancient power besides Gungnir. This sword was extraordinary, seeped in eldritch energy and hungry for blood. Again and again he parried Guthorm's onslaught. This man was a master to rival Tyr.

Odin fell back, quickly losing ground. Left, right, and again he jabbed, trying to drive the prince backward, to gain manoeuvring room. But Guthorm forced their bodies ever closer, gave him no chance to use the spear's superior reach. The prince swung low and, when Odin tried to parry, suddenly altered the direction of his swing. The feint earned him a gash along Odin's left arm. A hot burning lit up and down his fingers, almost immediately replaced by a sudden chill as his arm began to numb. Was it the power of that sword? Odin tried to fall back again, a manoeuvre that only earned him a shallow cut across his thigh. That too began to go numb.

He was going to lose. The realisation of the inevitable hit him like a blow to the gut. Guthorm was simply a better warrior. The prince would slay Odin. His corpse would rot and his soul would writhe under the lash of Hel.

Odin gave over trying to attack, focusing instead on keeping the prince at bay. He'd lost all track of the two remaining Niflungar. Perhaps they had fled, or perhaps they knew their prince could handle this battle. Odin's damned leg threatened to give way with each step, too numb. But feeling had begun to return to his arm. His body, his immortality would heal the wounds, even those caused by the runeblade.

Guthorm launched another onslaught, a series of cuts and thrusts Odin narrowly avoided. The prince panted, nigh snarling with rage. He mustn't have expected Odin to last this long—because an ordinary Man never would have. Odin might not have Guthorm's skill or speed, but he had the strength and stamina to outlast the trollfucker. The thought must have shown on his face, because Guthorm, now streaming sweat, snarled again and began another series of attacks. This one Odin recognised. Guthorm had that speed because he had probably practiced a handful of forms ten thousand times.

Odin made no attempt to attack. He gave ground freely to the prince's foray, his leg already regaining strength. The prince's chest heaved, but still Odin let him come on, making no retaliation. Guthorm tried another series he'd already used, this time his attacks a little slower, his feints more predictable. Knowing exactly where the blow would land, Odin twisted aside, letting a sword stroke graze his arm rather than trying to parry it. At the same time he thrust forward, driving Gungnir through the Niflung prince's sternum. The prince looked down at the spear impaling him as if in shock, eyes wide as his blood gushed from his ruptured chest. Odin glanced around, spying the remaining sorcerers lingering on the edges of the battlefield. These Niflungar were not used to Men seeing them, much less slaying them. They had transcended mortality but still feared it. That was their weakness.

"Go back to your king!" Odin shouted at them. "Tell them a new king rules Mankind! Tell them a new god rises!" For that was what he had set himself up to become. Only risen to such an edifice could he do what he must to save this world. To save Mankind, he must rule them all. Guðrún had been right about that.

With a last look of disgust, Odin cast Guthorm down into the snow, pausing only to claim the runeblade, then checked on Sleipnir. The horse neighed at his touch, gingerly trying to climb to his feet. By the way

Sleipnir favoured two of his legs, they must be broken. The horse was lucky he had so many to spare. But Odin certainly couldn't ride Sleipnir, not now. "Can you make it safely away?" he asked.

Sleipnir snorted. As usual. Odin nodded. Then he had a hard run ahead of him. He dashed up the hill and ran on toward the old castle.



STEP after merciless step he ran until even his superhuman stamina waned. Until his chest burnt and broken ribs ached even through the sheen of power he'd used to block the pain. Breathless, he climbed the steps before the castle. He'd made it. Moons of struggle, and he'd at last save Vé. Ere he reached the top, the sun crested over the Mist, warming his skin. He had made it only just in time.

And then the warming became a burning, a searing, like his arms and chest were aflame. Steam rose from beneath his cloak. Odin screamed in horror and pain, hurling his garments away. His cloak, tunic, and gloves—all he tossed aside, revealing the singed skin beneath, still smouldering with wisps of smoke. The acrid, sickeningly sweet smell of his burnt flesh filled his nostrils, and Odin retched.

When he looked down, he saw the burns were not random. They encircled his arms and chest in a ring of runes. From the pain, he could only guess they covered his back as well. Covered all of his chest save the spot where the Singasteinn hung.

Weak with exhaustion and agony, he crawled on his knees up to the entryway. Then he flung the amulet into the castle. An echo rang through the empty hall as it clattered across the frozen floor. "Ghost! I have returned your amulet!" No answer came. "Odling!" What had Loki named her? "Herja!"

No answer, still. No, he had done it. He'd had one more day. Surely she could not have begrudged him the first rays of dawn on the solstice itself. Mere moments ... He looked again at the runes marking his skin. What did they mean? The old languages, the old words were said to have power. Völvur knew such things, but Odin did not.

*All you build will turn to ash, your children shall die, and your dreams shall burn.*

"Damn you!" he shouted at the empty castle. His voice echoed through the halls. He stormed upstairs and beat down every door, searched every corner. No sign remained of the ghost. She held him to her curse, and he had failed her, even if only by a moment. And this ... this meant ...

He'd thought her curse was what was happening to Vé. He'd thought that had been the price, the warning. But it was never that. The awful urd his brother faced had naught to do with the ghost, did it? It was merely the price of a spurned and neglected brother left too long in a cursed world. Odin had failed. He'd failed his brother and thus failed his father. Whether this ghost could have ever healed him or not, Odin had failed Vé. He had failed up on that mountain, way back, when his pride put vengeance for the dead ahead of the safety of the living.

Now Vé's body had betrayed him and made him a monster. But Vé had taken the apple ... he would be as a god among the trolls, a king among their kind as much as Odin was among Men. The realisation settled on Odin with overwhelming certainty. Frigg said völvur just knew some things, and so, too, did Odin. He just *knew*, with a prescient certainty born of the Sight.

At last, at the threshold to the castle, he stared down at the golden amulet. All of this for a piece of jewellery. For greed. For pride. He slipped to his knees. The avalanche of Urd had finally buried him and left him in the abyss of despair, powerless and broken. Urd. Vast and terrible as the World itself. Urd that stole all worth having and left behind ash. Or perhaps, to blame urd was but one more way to try to evade his culpability for all

that had passed. Odin's failings, his anger and his hubris, *they* had ravaged his brother as much as the Mist. And rather than face it, he had deluded himself, or allowed a ghost to delude him, even knowing vaettir lied. That they hated the living.

And at long last, Odin could return their enmity.

No blow could strike the ghost who had so betrayed him, nor had rage yet availed him of any benefit. His anger had cost him everything he cared for. Odin rose, trembling, and let the Singasteinn fall to the floor, heedless of the echoes its clattering made. So then, let this be the last of his anger. The final act, to count himself and Vé avenged against Odlingar and Niflungar alike, in the only manner he was ever like to achieve.

Roaring, he drove Gungnir's point through the Singasteinn's pearl. The amulet shattered beneath the dragon spear's blade, opalescent shards skittering along the frozen floor. A wail erupted around him, not in the Mortal Realm, but just beyond the Veil, audible only because of his shamanic gift. Whether the parting anguish of the spirit at last freed from the amulet, or the grief of the Odling ghost forever denied her treasure, it mattered little.

Odin did not look back. Naught remained for him in the castle. Naught, in fact, had ever waited for him here. He was left only with an oath to take a throne he had never wanted. And a final obligation to protect what remained of the Æsir, from now until his last breath.

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STARKAD

## 25 Age of the Æsir

Whatever vaettir dwelt on Thule, Starkad was going to be prepared for them now. Much as he wanted to blame Hervard for Rolf's death, the man *might* have made a real mistake. Either way, some dangerous beasts lurked here, and the best way to prepare for beasts and vaettir alike was with flame. Flame and spears. "I want small bonfires ringing the main one," he ordered. "There, there, and thither by the rocks."

Tiny grumbled about how much wood it was going to take, but the Axe laughed. "Remember that battle against the men in Jutland?" the old veteran asked. Starkad nodded. A pair of Jute jarls had tried rising up against Healfdene, who'd hired Starkad, the Axe, and others to make an example of them. The Axe rubbed his greying beard. "We put those giant wooden spikes all around the camp thinking they might attack in the night. Had those big burning torch poles too."

Starkad snorted. "Cravens took one look at the defences and refused to attack, started building their fortifications." It almost made him smile. "I remember. Not sure that's likely to happen tonight."

The Axe shrugged and waved in the general direction of the island. “I’d much rather be on the offence, but best to have the defences in place.”

Tiny dropped a massive armful of wood in front of the Axe. “Then you can make those defences. I’d rather hunt our foes down.”

The veteran chuckled. “And we did, despite the locals raving about it being dragon country.” He snorted. “Didn’t see any dragons. Just men and blood and screaming.” He turned, as if examining the campsite. “This place, though. This place looks like it ought to house a dragon or two. A refuge for old, wily serpents. A place not meant for Men at all. Old gods dwell here, I warrant.” He spat and touched iron, grown solemn. “In the dark, I’d swear I saw the hills themselves shifting. Landvaettir waken, us coming here.”

Starkad had begun setting the woodpile, preparing the bonfire, but he looked up at the Axe’s words and slowly took in the woods, the icy slopes, untouched by man in countless long winters. He had seen a great many monstrosities in his day, but dragons were not among them. And landvaettir? Could there be life in the stones, in the falls, in the woods? Mayhap so. He rubbed his iron brooch.

“I’d like to see a dragon,” Tiny said. “Imagine the fame of it, to slay such a creature. I hear Odin slew a dragon once.”

Starkad spat. “You wouldn’t like to see a dragon, Tiny. Even the jötunnar avoid the serpents.”

“Besides,” the Axe said, “such talk can anger the gods. Have a care lest they grant your request.” Tiny grunted at that, chastised.

Starkad rose. “Get those fires going. All of them. Dragons or no, we don’t know what might lair here on Thule.” With that, he made his way back to where the rest of the group sat. They had gathered around the central bonfire, most gnawing on what remained of salted fish.

Ivar spit out a bone as Starkad sank down by the fire. “One good thing about the sea—fresh beetle-cocking fish. We’re going to have to hunt if we’re to winter here.”

Starkad grunted. "Saw some tracks in the snow. Looked like fox."

"Wonderful," Ivar said. "A fox ought to feed the eight of us for an hour. Assuming Tiny doesn't inhale the beast whole."

Orvar grunted. "There are seals down there. It means fish in the river."

Ivar flung another bone into the fire. "Troll cock on fish. Let's hunt the beetle-cocking seals."

At that, their leader snorted. "As much noise as you make, the seals would be halfway back to the Faeroerne Islands ere you got close enough." Orvar shook his head. "No, I'll take my bow and shoot one. Then we'll all have fresh meat."

"All right," Starkad said. "Go with care, though. The Mist is thick tonight."

Orvar rose. "I reached manhood in Nidavellir. I know how to hunt a damn seal and not one of you is as good a shot as I. Just try not to make too much noise over here. Don't want to scare them off." With that, he trod off, down toward the river.

Afzal had melted snow in a pot, and now he dipped a drinking horn in it. The Serk took a long drink, then passed it to Starkad, who also drank. Warm water was no substitute for mead, but he supposed it would keep him alive. Though, Starkad did not look forward to trying to sleep; Vikar waited for him in dreams. And on the nights where his brother's ghost left him be, there was always Ogn's. Hers was, perhaps, the worse of the two, for she slipped in and out of his mind like a mara—a nightmare spirit. Maybe that was what she had become. Maybe he had made her into it.

"Oh, now you'll take the cocking drinking horn," Ivar said. "You Serk men seem a lot like little girls to me. Can't hold your mead, won't taste the beetle-cocking ale. A sip or two might put some hair on your stones, boy."

"It seems to me," Hervard said, where he sat wrapt in a blanket, "you have cocks on your tongue a great deal, Ivar."



Starkad spit water laughing and Ivar scowled. “Aye, well, what the troll cock ... what’s a ghul anyway? I hear you’re all saying that’s what’s preying on us.”

Afzal shook his head. “Unclean spirits of the restless dead. But I don’t know if that’s what we face. Could be though. Where I come from, the caliphs banish the Mist from the cities by binding spirits of flame they call ifrit. But some men—sorcerers—use ghuls to prey on their enemies. Tales to scare children, mayhap.”

Ivar’s eyes widened at that. “Thor’s thundering cock! Your rulers are wizards, it sounds to me.” Afzal stared into the flame and made no answer, and Starkad wondered how close to the mark Ivar had hit it. After so many years fighting the Serks, it had taken Starkad time to warm to Afzal, and even still, he had found the young man odd in many ways.

Bragi, whom Starkad would have expected to jump at the chance to hear of lands so far off, was watching Afzal but said naught. When the skald fell silent, trouble was amiss. That was one thing Starkad could count on.

“What is it, Bragi?” Starkad asked. The old skald looked to him, then shook his head. Starkad scowled, then cocked his head off toward one of the fires Tiny and the Axe had finished setting but left untended. He rose and waited for Bragi to do the same and follow him. The skald did, amidst hard looks from the others, especially Hervard. They might not like secret talks, but Starkad and Orvar had agreed to be careful not to reveal overmuch. The men were on edge enough already, without knowing the full truth of this dire place.

“Speak, old man,” Starkad said when they reached the perimeter fire.

“We ought not to have ventured here, I think.”

Starkad groaned and cracked his neck. “Bit late to think of that now. And I doubt that’s what so troubles you, so out with it.”

Bragi sighed, rubbed his arms. “We’ve seen a lot, you and I.”

Starkad shrugged. “Wars and raids and more than one vaettr, aye. What are you on about?”

The skald warmed his hands by the fire. “All men have secrets, Starkad, as well you know.” So that’s what he meant. Bragi had been around long enough to have heard tales about Starkad, stories he had shared with few men besides Afzal. The old man mostlike knew about Vikar, the self-made king, slain by his brother. Kinslaying was the worst of Starkad’s crimes.

Starkad too warmed his fingers. This place was cold as Niflheim. But ’twas wondrous, too, strange and unknown. How could a man deny the call of such a place? To uncover its secrets, unearth its long-buried treasures. He did not know why the dvergar had left this island, but he would find out. He would have it all until Thule had no hidden places left. And then he would move on. Such had become his way. Maybe one day he would even travel to Serkland, beyond the Midgard Wall. Afzal did not ask to go home, seemed almost as wary of his homeland as men like Ivar were. And yet ... what strangeness must lie there, in a land where men ruled spirits of flame?

“I do not ask you to share all your secrets,” he said at last. “But if something threatens us, I need to know it.”

“Eh. Threatens? No, I think not. But sooner or later you’d learn of it, and I’m worried what would happen if that came at the wrong time.” Starkad spread his hands, awaiting some explanation, and Bragi sighed, resigned. “Hervard—well, it seems he is not a *he*.”

“What?”

“*She* has been concealing herself from us. Damned well too. I’m not one to miss noticing a woman oft, and Odin knows how she managed it on the long voyage.”

Starkad knew his mouth hung open, but he couldn’t quite think of a worthy response. Ivar would have. Something involving trolls and cocks, no doubt. And Bragi was right—if Hervard, or whatever her name was—was a woman, she had hidden it well. She had lied to them for moons. No

surprise, that. All women lied. They had treachery woven into their souls. Starkad ran his fingers over the hilts of his swords, simmering.

“She is not Ogn,” Bragi said. The warning in the skald’s voice grated on his nerves. It did not matter. They were all the same. Starkad stormed back toward the main bonfire, even as Tiny and the Axe were heading that way. “Starkad, wait,” Bragi called after him.

He did not.

Hervard rose as he drew nigh to her and held up her hands in warding. He grabbed her by the tunic and yanked her to her feet. She tried to bat his hands away. He knocked hers aside. She pushed at him, and he punched her in the gut. She doubled over, and he grabbed her chest. Definitely a breast.

Starkad flung her to the ground. “You lying bitch.” She grimaced, groaning in pain. Blood had seeped through the back of her tunic. She rose, fists balled. “No more lies, woman. Who are you?”

“Woman!” Ivar shouted. Several of the others had risen, too.

The woman spat at his feet. “I’m Hervor. What of it?”

Starkad toyed with the idea of hitting her again. “Besides the obvious? You lied to us all about who you were.”

“Because you men think with your fucking cocks! To say naught of your kind oft not placing enough trust in shieldmaidens.”

“Hard to trust liars,” he spat. Her eyes narrowed, her hand going to the golden sword hilt on her shoulder. Her fingers closed around it. “You want to see who’s faster with a blade?”

“Starkad!” Bragi grabbed his shoulder. “Whoever she is, she saved my life on the cliff.”

Hervor charged forward then, swinging not with her sword but with her fist. Starkad shoved Bragi aside, blocked her punch on one arm. With the other, he landed a hook on her ribs. She buckled under it. He snapped his other fist into her gut and, as she doubled over again, slammed an uppercut into her chin. The woman pitched back and landed in the snow.

“Not fast enough,” Starkad said. Bragi had grabbed him again and was pulling him away. This time, the Axe helped. The two men pulled him aside until he shrugged them off.

“Having a trench instead of a cock isn’t a crime,” the Axe said. “We’ve fought with maidens on a shield wall.”

Starkad spat, then pushed away from them. He paused only to grab a burning branch from a perimeter fire, then stalked away from the camp. He didn’t need them, not right now. Could they seriously be taking her side after so many moons of deception? Hervor was right—they were thinking with their cocks. The only woman on the whole damned island, and maybe they both wanted to bed her. Well, let them. Let them fuck her all damned night if they wished. Such was the only use for a woman. *He* didn’t need her, and he didn’t need them.

No! No, Starkad had trusted a woman once, had loved Ogn, had fought a fucking jötunn for her. And she had betrayed him, fallen for the monster instead of the man. Such was the way of women, traitors, and unworthy of faith. And her ghost would haunt him for all his nights. Even now it lurked somewhere out of sight, waiting for him to shut his eyes so she might wrap her fingers around his heart and squeeze. Ogn was his mara, but Hervor wasn’t going to be one. Her death would not be on his head; it would be on her own. There would never be another Ogn.

Never.

Never.

Never.

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**DAYS GONE: TYR**

800 Age of Man

The summer solstice had come and gone, bringing a new year. Eight moons of work. And now, nine clans had gathered in Halfhaugr. Odin Borrson had called the Althing, and every clan had come. He and Tyr and Idunn had passed among them, fighting, bargaining. Killing. They had gone too far to turn back. Tyr had gone too far. No matter how many battles he had to fight, he would see this through.

“Will they choose him?” Idunn asked. The Vanr goddess stood behind him, peering at the circle of jarls.

Tyr didn’t answer her. Really, it was not for them to speak now. Now came the time for the jarls to speak.

Hœnir Storkrson stepped forward, into the circle, the aging man taking in each of the jarls now. “We stand here, the heirs of Loridi. In his honour we hold the Althing.” He looked at some of the other jarls. Arnbjorn Radmundrson, the jarl of the Itrmanni had proved especially difficult, despite being Frigg’s maternal uncle. “Some of you have objected to this Althing. Loridi said we were to hold it but once every nine summers. And

this was not that summer. So then, I ask you brothers, why are we here?" He did not pause long enough for anyone to answer. "Because times require us to change. More than a hundred winters back, Vingethor called the Althing. And that was also not the ninth summer. Yet he called it, when our foes pressed in upon us, and our ancestors answered. Because the hour had grown dire, because we needed a new way. As we need again now."

Hœnir pointed at Odin. "Our ancestors named Vingethor king that he might lead them into better lands. Now the time has come to once again call forth a king who will lead us."

"Lead us where?" the jarl of the Itrmanni demanded.

"Wherever the fuck he wants," Vili said. Odin had named Vili the new jarl of the Hasdingi. Frigg did not seem over pleased at it. But Vili was a son of Borr; Odin had to honour his kin.

Hœnir scowled at the fool berserk, as did Odin. A son of Borr, aye. Without the least measure of his father's cunning.

"To lead us into a future where we stand united," Odin said. Hœnir fell back into his place, allowing Odin to stand in the middle. "United against our common enemies. I say to you, our enemies are the enemies of all Mankind. The Mist, the everencroaching chill, the grasping hand of Fimbulvetr. No longer will we watch our numbers fall with each passing winter. Moreover, raiding together, we can challenge the rulers of any other land. They will tremble before our strength, and we, all the Æsir, shall know fame across Midgard. Fame, and wealth beyond measure." Several men whooped at that. "I would be your king and give you this future." He raised a hand for a silence. "Name me."

"I name you King Odin," Hœnir said.

"I name you the king of the fucking Æsir," Vili said.

"I expected more formality on such an occasion," Idunn mumbled. So had Tyr.

Annar Ótmarson stepped forward. Odin's cousin had stayed here in Halfhaugr over a moon, helping him prepare. "King Odin."

Jarl Steinar Ofridrson of the Friallaf clan stepped forward. "King Steinar." Everyone fell silent.

Odin turned slowly to face the jarl. "You wish to be named?"

Steinar spat on the floor. "Men say you're a living god. That you've killed jötunnar, trolls, and all manner of vaettir. I shit on your tales, and I piss on your fame. I say you're a man and a liar. Where were you when we sacked Kaunos and gutted the Miklagarders? Was your spear beside mine? Did you break the shield wall? Or were you too busy fighting—or fucking—a troll?" Gasping filled the hall. "I hear too, you let it in you, the woman's power, so I name you not king, but ergi."

Odin worked his jaw. Tyr couldn't act here; a man had to answer such a charge himself or be outlawed. With a long sigh, Odin drew the sword from his shoulder. Frigg's family sword. Strong, well wrought. Some said forged by Volund himself during the Njarar War. Blade worthy of a king.

"Your words leave no space for compromise, Jarl Steinar Ofridrson."

The jarl drew his sword. Advanced on Odin, who stood still, sword pointed at Steinar. The Friallaf jarl lunged forward, batted away Odin's sword. Or tried. Odin moved faster, much. Twisted the blades out of the way and caught Steinar by the throat. With one hand, he hauled the man off his feet. Then he drove his sword through the jarl's belly. Odin flung the man onto the ground. Ofridrson's skull cracked on the stone. He lay still, blood streaming from head and gut. After that, no more jarls challenged Odin.

Odin took the throne. A throne that had once belonged to Hadding. His daughter Frigg now sat beside Odin, her belly thick with child. A procession of völvur entered, bearing a golden torc of the most intricate weave.

"By the Tree," Idunn said. "Beautiful."

The eldest völvu placed the torc around Odin's neck. The hall erupted in cheers. A people bursting in joy. In hope.

Idunn spoke, but Tyr couldn't make out her words. Her hand touched his shoulder, and he turned to her. Her smile was warm, yet almost ... afraid. "Congratulations," she said. "You did it. Odin is king of the Æsir."

"You do not look as well pleased as you might."

She laughed. Another, almost true smile. "I am quite pleased."

"Will you ... remain among us still?" It was the question he had feared to ask all these past moons. Under the apple's effect, he had lain with her. Now he desperately wanted to hold her again. But how does a man ask a goddess to stay by his side?

Ere she could answer, Frigg gasped. Clutched her belly. Screamed in pain.

Her maid, Fulla, rushed forward to her side. "The babe is coming! Make way, make way!"

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**THE DÖGLINAR**

## 25 Age of the Æsir

*H*and to her bloody lip, Hervor climbed down toward the river. She ought to have drawn Tyrfing and fought Starkad. She was so close to her vengeance upon the Arrow's Point, to bringing peace to her father's and uncle's tortured shades. The sword hungered for his blood; she knew it did. But if she drew it ... it would have to taste someone's blood. And Starkad Eightarms did not lose a sword fight. With his fists alone, he'd thrashed her ere she knew what had happened. What then? She was good, but she'd be a fool to think herself a match for Starkad under any circumstances. Or Orvar-Oddr, if he expected a fight. The two of them were like legends.

Right now, though, Orvar was alone, hunting seals in the Mist. Alone on an island where they knew some vaettr or beast stalked them. It was the best chance she was like to get, and she would not waste it. No, and she knew enough of stalking silently to creep up on him. He would not see her coming. She'd run him through, dump his body in the river, and sneak back to camp. No one would know what she'd done—they'd think the beast had taken him.

Even if Starkad had more blood on his hands, Orvar-Oddr was the Arrow's Point, of that, she had little doubt remaining. He had murdered her family in service to the Ynglings, had condemned them to eternal torment rather than offer a pyre. Oh, the Arrow's Point would not be the last to die for those crimes. The Döglinar would have their vengeance.

Hervor had paused in camp only to grab her hauberk. No sense in facing Arrow's Point without her war-garb, damaged though it may be. Starkad would still be a problem. She could run him through whilst he slept, but the others would kill her. He was a bastard, a son of a troll. But she would have to find a way to keep him from turning on her. By Odin's spear, what was his problem with her? So she had pretended to be a man. It was only sensible to do so, that was a lesson she had learnt well, long back.

She braced herself on a rock as she descended. Her ribs felt like she'd been kicked by a donkey. Naught seemed broken though, Frigg be praised. Damn Starkad.

The barks of seals echoed out even over the roar of the waterfall. They sounded near. Strange that Orvar had not felled one and returned yet. Or maybe he had. The creatures were no doubt heavy. What a way for the great Orvar-Oddr to die—a sword through his back whilst dragging a seal carcass up a slope. Shame no one would know or tell that tale, for it would prove a fitting end for the slayer of her kin.

She struggled to contain her grunts of pain. He'd never hear her coming, not over the cataract and barking seals. Still, best to keep silent. Stick to the shadows. She had not brought a torch, of course. 'Twas dangerous to wander in the Mist without flame, very dangerous. Even if she didn't go Mist-mad, vaettir could creep up on her. But then, she could also creep up on a man. Advancing in a half crouch, she scurried from one rock pile to the next, right up to the river's edge. She ought to have seen Orvar's torch by now. Even if he had left it somewhere, it should have been visible.

Why wasn't—

On the ice near the river, the man's bow and quiver lay. What in Hel's frozen underworld? She near leapt to her feet, hand on Tyrfing's hilt, barely suppressing the urge to draw it. Not until she was certain. That lesson she had learnt with Rolf. Orvar must be here now, waiting for her. He had seen her coming. Must have. She turned in place, slowly, not releasing her grip on the sword. Where was he? There. A man stood a dozen feet away, on the riverbank. Hervor advanced.

The man was not Orvar. In fact, he was naked. How had he not caught the deathchill like that? As she drew nigh, several other naked men and women came into view. One among them, a woman, had Orvar slung over her shoulder like a fresh kill. Was he dead already?

No. He stirred, ever so slightly.

Hervor froze in place. These people had not seen her yet. And they were taking Arrow's Point. If they killed him, was her vengeance satisfied?

No. No, she had promised her father's ghost *she* would slay the man. She had sworn an oath on Tyrfing. Orvar must die by her hand, her kind demanded it.

Were these strange, naked people the ghuls Afzal had spoken of? It little mattered, even if she needs must kill them to get to Arrow's Point. She had taken only a single step forward when her foe's captors began to walk into the river. Hervor almost tripped. They just stepped into the current and dove under, dragging her prey with them. The cold might not affect them, but it would surely kill Orvar ere long.

"Oh, damn it." She started to run, fighting through the pain in her ribs and back. Damn it! The man's captors moved quickly in the water, vanishing into the Mist over the river in a few breaths. It was so thick down here and growing thicker, almost like wading through water. "Stop!" she shouted. "To arms!" Her voice might echo, might carry to the camp above. Might not, too.

Grunting, she ran on, racing along the riverbank. She had to catch them, and fast. Or her chance at vengeance would be lost forever.



STRUGGLING, panting, Hervor ran. Firelight appeared ahead, and she stumbled toward it, then fell short when the torchbearer turned on her. Starkad.

He glared at her. “Someone was in the river,” he said, voice flat.

“Aye, they took Orvar!” Her lungs hurt. She was sucking down great gasps of Mist, too. She drew closer to the protection of his torch.

Starkad grimaced. “Water vaettir, most like. Nixies, mayhap. We have to find them. What are you doing down here?”

“I ... needed to treat my injuries. Wanted to be alone.”

“Then bide here if you wish. I’m going to find Orvar.” He spun and began to run down the riverbank. With her injuries, it took all she had to even keep him in sight. She needed a torch, flame, light. Gods, she needed some damned rest. Someone else was climbing down the slope, bearing another torch.

“Get down here!” she shouted. “Hurry—”

Solid Mist hit her with enough force to lift her off her feet and fling her onto the frozen waters. She landed hard and skidded toward the river’s edge. Her mail sheared through the ice. The impact sent fresh jolts through her injured back, and she struggled to breathe, to even see straight.

“What?” she groaned.

“Little girl ...” The voice seemed to whisper from the Mist, coming from all around her. “You have trespassed against an ancient power.”

Hervor rolled over and rose to her knees. *Everything* hurt. But she had heard Mist whisper such things before. “Another sorcerer?” She slung Tyrfing off her shoulder but did not draw it. Still in the scabbard, she

pushed the point against the ground and used it to steady herself. “How many of your ilk must I slay?”

A shadowed form coalesced out of the Mist, taking on the shape of a man with ashen hair. He bore a blade in his hand, which he pointed at her. “I know not how you bested one of us, but if you think to face a Niflung blade master, then come. I shall send you swiftly to Hel. There is none greater.”

Hervor groaned. She had no idea what he was on about, save that he seemed to worship Hel like some Mist-mad abomination. That being the case, he wasn’t like to allow her a respite to recover from her injuries. She rose, swaying slightly on her feet. And she drew Tyrting; it gleamed, pale flame reflecting off the Mist and casting the river in ethereal colours, as if in dream ... Or a nightmare born beyond the Gates of Hel.

“Hervor!” Afzal shouted from the slope.

“Fool child,” the sorcerer said. “You bear a blade not wrought for you, nor for any of your childlike people. And bearing such a treasure you tread *here*, upon these ancient shores. You have no idea what evils lay buried beneath Thule. My killing you is a mercy.” The sorcerer glanced at Afzal who was running toward them, then turned back to her. “You are strong to have taken the sword and favoured to have slain a Niflung. Kill the foreigner and give the sword to me. I will spare you, take you away from this cursed island.”

Hervor gritted her teeth. She was in no shape to fight this monster, aye, but she sure as Hel was not going to kill Afzal, who deserved such less than any other man in her crew. Besides which, Arrow’s Point was still out there, waiting to die on Tyrting’s edge. In answer, she advanced slowly, struggling to remain on her feet.

The sorcerer chuckled and shook his head. “You shall find no peace, even in death.”

Torch in one hand, curved sword in the other, Afzal bellowed and rushed the sorcerer. Hervor pushed forward as fast as she could, but the Serk reached the Niflung first. The sorcerer spun, hand trailing Mist like a whip. It wrapt around Afzal's legs and swept them out from under him, sending him tumbling to the ground. The Niflung leant in to impale Afzal, but Hervor lunged forward and knocked his sword aside. As Afzal struggled to rise, the Niflung spun, sweeping his sword in tight arcs that drove her backward. The sorcerer twisted, struck at Afzal, who barely got his sword up to block.

The Niflung moved fast enough to keep her crewmate from being able to attain his feet. Afzal gave over trying and swept his sword at the sorcerer's legs. The sorcerer responded by whipping Mist around into a disk that froze like ice and blocked the attack, even as he struck at Hervor with his blade. She parried on Tyrfing, falling back. At full strength, she could have fought him, maybe.

He didn't try to block Tyrfing with the Mist. Mayhap his magic could not turn a runeblade. It had pinned Afzal, though.

"Use the torch!" Hervor shouted at the Serk. Afzal did, swinging the flame. It dispersed the Mist shield, forcing the sorcerer back a step. Hervor pressed forward, hewing with Tyrfing with all the strength she had. Her enemy fell back farther, finally allowing Afzal to rise. 'Twas a brief respite. A wave of the Niflung's hand sent a wall of Mist surging at them. Hervor cleft at it, and it broke apart before Tyrfing. Afzal, however, hurtled backward, his torch skittered along the ice ere falling into the river with a hiss.

The sorcerer chuckled. "You ought to have taken my offer already. But I ask you one more time, little girl. Kill the boy and give me the sword."

"Go to Hel."

The man shrugged and advanced on her. "The only thing your companions will find of you is your head. I shall leave it for them." Lacking

a retort, Hervor settled for a glare.

Beyond the sorcerer, a torch burnt through Mist. He jerked his head in that direction, as if drawn by the burning vapours. Then the Niflung turned back to Hervor with a sneer. “Just one more of your friends who will die for you, girl.”

That torch touched the ground, and a line of flame erupted, surging out in an arc that ran all the way to the river. Mist recoiled and leapt away, almost seeming to shriek in pain. The flame cast Starkad—drawing his second sword and advancing—in a fell red gleam, making him seem some spawn of Muspelheim. The Niflung whirled on the newcomer, wariness now in his posture.

“I’m not like the others,” Starkad said. “Well do I know your kind, sorcerer. I may not have sought quarrel with you, but nor will I turn from it.” He pointed a blade at the sorcerer. “Your dire queen unleashed Fenrir, and for that crime you too shall pay.”

Now the sorcerer wagged a finger at Hervor, who stood panting. The promise of a return. Then he turned back to Starkad and jerked his free hand forward. From it flew an icicle the size of an arrow, which shot for Starkad like a flung spear. Starkad cleft it aside with one sword and continued advancing. The sorcerer flung another shard of ice and another, a barrage of them. Starkad leapt over one and cut aside others, ever closing in. Impossibly, the barest hint of tension now laced the sorcerer’s moves. He arced his hand, sending a whip of Mist at Starkad the way he had at Afzal. Starkad jumped over it, flipped on the air, and swung with both swords at once. The Niflung parried one and took a deep gash to the face with the other.

Starkad whipped his swords around in lightning-fast arcs the Niflung barely parried. In a few moves, the sorcerer had gashes on his arms, legs. Starkad was a storm of death. Hervor had never seen aught like it.

*Thump thump.*

Oh, Hel ... Tyrfing. It wasn't enough for someone else to kill her foe. She had to do it, or the runeblade would not be satisfied. Even now, it tugged on her arm, tried to drag her to Afzal, who yet struggled to rise. Hervor grabbed her wrist and pulled back.

"No. No. No." Rather than risk being forced to kill the boy, she hurled herself at the sorcerer.

Starkad had earned wounds as well. He was bleeding from his temple and from one shoulder. It slowed his left sword ever so slightly, though he had driven the sorcerer back to the river. Hervor dove into the fray, desperate to stop the pounding in her head. She swung at the sorcerer, whose face now shone with desperation. The Niflung ducked, swept his hand along the water.

Bits of the river froze in spikes that launched themselves at Starkad like a barrage of arrows. The warrior fell back, dropped one sword as a spike hit him, though he cut aside many others. Hervor lunged forward with her full weight. The Niflung parried. She scraped her sword along his blade, then lurched. Tyrfing's point sliced a thin line along the man's chest.

He froze, looking down at the wound with more concern than he'd shown the half dozen Starkad had given him. He knew. He understood what the sword would do to him. The wound would not heal, would not close. That scratch would prove direr than had another blade gouged him to the bone.

Hervor backed away. The pounding had abated, for Tyrfing had tasted blood. It knew death belonged to it now and that must have been enough. The sorcerer's look of astonishment turned to a glare filled with more hatred than Hervor had known a man's face could show. He advanced on her, ice coiling around his arm.

Starkad leapt forward and hewed off one of the Niflung's legs at the knee. Even as the sorcerer fell, Starkad spun on and lopped his head off. At



that, Starkad turned to stare first at her, then at Tyrting, still gleaming in her hand.

“Hel will still feast on your souls,” the sorcerer’s head said. “There is no escape from here.” Both she and Starkad froze, then turned slowly to face the talking, decapitated head. Blood seeped from its stump; its eyes had begun to glaze over. “Anguish ... without end.” It said no more.

Hervor tried to scream but couldn’t get it past the lump in her throat.



IN THE MOONS she spent with Red-Eye’s Boys, Hervor had seen murder, rape, and all manner of human cruelty. She had since witnessed the burning, tormented ghost of her father. Somehow none of that quite compared to being cursed by the severed head of a sorcerer. Such things were not possible. They did not happen, save in fanciful skald’s tales.

The others had climbed down the slope and were arguing about what had happened. Hervor dropped to her knees by the river’s edge and splashed her face. The freezing water seemed to loosen the tightness that had settled around her chest. She sucked down a long shuddering breath. She knew little of sorcery, save it was the domain of mad Men and those more wicked than even bandits. But since claiming Tyrting, two of these Niflungar—whoever they were—had come for her. They seemed able to meld with the Mist, and moreover, he had commanded it like a weapon. Blessings of the dark goddess Hel?

Someone grabbed her by the shoulders and jerked her to her feet, spun her around. Starkad flung her away from the river and into the midst of the crew. “You brought them here!”

Hervor grimaced and rose. She was damned sick of him. Instinct drove her to draw Tyrting once again, though, after what she’d just seen, she well knew that would prove suicidal. Any doubt she’d had about Starkad’s

prowess was gone. Maybe he truly had received instruction from the war god Tyr, as tales claimed. “I did not know these Mist wielders yet pursued me.”

Behind him, Orvar returned, leaning on the Axe’s shoulder. The sorcerer’s attack must have allowed him to escape his captors. But how would ...

Starkad raised a finger, working his jaw as if so angry he could not form words. He shut his eyes a moment ere he spoke. “You have drawn the ire of the Niflungar upon us. And you did not even think to warn us!”

Warn him? She wouldn’t trust Starkad to wash her damned clothes. “You seemed to handle the sorcerer well enough.”

“I was *lucky*. And if we are *very* lucky, that was the only member of their fell kingdom to pursue us to Thule.” He looked around at the rest of the crew. “Because I do not relish the idea of facing more of them, especially not if they come in numbers. Would you care to fight three or five or ten such men?”

Hervor snapped her mouth shut, her retort dying on her tongue. Starkad called them a kingdom. She had not even considered they might come in numbers.

The fisherman’s wife, the widow of the man she killed, had cursed her to Hel. In the moons since, these Niflungar had come after her, twice now. Was it merely for Tyrfing, or did they want to punish her for violating their domain on Samsey?

“So you’re telling me beetle-cocking sorcerers are here?” Ivar asked. “Men using ... *seidr*?” He looked at Afzal for some reason, as if the young man ought to be some expert.

Afzal raised an eyebrow at him. “The Art is a real thing, but I know naught of it.”

Orvar shrugged off from the Axe. “These sorcerers may or may not still be here. Someone else attacked me, and I barely got away. Vaettir, I think.

They were taking me deeper into the island.”

Starkad glowered. “Perhaps these are nixies. Such vaettir are known to take men captive from time to time.” He spoke as though with some firsthand knowledge, Hervor thought.

“What are nixies?” Afzal asked.

Bragi pointed to the waters. “Saealfar of the rivers—mermaids.”

“Why would cocking vaettir want to—”

“I don’t know, Loud!” Starkad snapped. “Who knows what drives vaettir to do aught?” He spun back on Hervor. “We’ll deal with the vaettir soon. First though ...” He stalked closer, blood-stained blade still in hand. “Someone in our midst has proved more liability than ally.”

“I might be dead, if not for her,” Afzal said.

“Peace, Starkad,” Orvar said, fixing Hervor with a long look that could have meant aught. “We have enough enemies.”

Starkad glared at Hervor a moment longer, then spat. “Fine. I say we go after these vaettir, follow the river as we can, and search for sign of them.”

Hervor ground her teeth. Now they were to risk their lives hunting river vaettir? Odin was having jest with her; she knew he was. But, still, she needed to kill Orvar. Moreover, Starkad seemed half ready to cut her down where she stood. Some woman must have so riled him against all female kind and done Hervor no favours. She could not afford to antagonise Starkad in the least now. He was her best chance for fulfilling her oath—both their best tracker and their best warrior. To say naught of her desire to make it off Thule alive.

“You would have us take a great chance against these vaettir,” Tiny said. “This is not why we came here.”

“I agree with Starkad,” Hervor said. Everyone looked at her like she was the talking severed head. She needed him on her side, though, at least for now. “We have to follow our honour.”

“You have honour now?” Starkad asked.

Hervor flinched, then tried to cover it. Best ignore that. Arrow's Point would soon see her honour, borne on the end of her runeblade. Except ... how was she to even consider striking at him *now*? "These creatures have attacked us at least once and, mostlike, were the threat on the shores when we first arrived."

Starkad folded his arms. "Afzal?"

"I go with you either way, Master. My vow is to serve you until I have repaid my debt."

Starkad rolled his eyes, then looked to Bragi. The skald shrugged. "We all die sooner or later. May as well make it a tale worthy of Valhöll."

"No trollshit, beetle-cocked vaettir are scaring me off," Ivar said.

Tiny raised his hands in submission. "It sounds decided, then. Do we wait for daylight?"

Orvar shook his head. "It would be too long in coming and too short to catch them when it arrived. We have to press on through the night. If we are to do this, we must do it now."

Hervor blew out a low breath. Hunt vaettir in the night ... such did not bode well.

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**DAYS GONE: ODIN**

800 Age of Man

A peal of thunder rang out over the night. Odin stood upon the ramparts atop Halfhaugr, the golden torc an unfamiliar weight at his neck. Below, his wife wailed in labour. But some places remained forbidden to men, even to kings. So he watched the night over Aujum, heedless of wind or rain. Aujum—his land now, all of it, as all the Æsir bent to him. He'd kept his oath to Idunn, though it had not bought him the one prize he had truly sought. Vé was gone, lost forever because of Odin's failings. Neither he nor his father had sought a throne, and now, with it done, part of him wanted to cast the torc out into the night. But more than his oath to Idunn held him now. He had made an oath to himself, to make a better World for the Æsir.

This storm had raged long, all through the labour, as if wakened by the pain of his wife. If she knew of Odin's disloyalty to their marriage bed, she did not speak of it. Nor comment when he woke in the night, flush with dreams of a sorceress who held a piece of his heart he could never recover. He leant against the ancient dverg stone and sighed. He had made enemies

of the Niflungar, and they would come for him. He'd need to prepare Aujum against them.

"Holy lords of Vanaheim, it's wetter than the bottom of the whale-road up here," a woman said behind him.

Odin turned. Frigg's maid stood on the threshold, under the fortress eave, peering out at him and blinking into the night. "The babe is born?" he asked.

"Oh! Indeed, and right well he was. More than healthy and good as new." Fulla's fiery red hair blew in the wind. She trembled as Odin approached. She'd always trembled since her time with the trolls. He'd feared to ask how they had used her. Such was not his place, though more than once he had found her weeping in Frigg's arms. Still, she did not give up, did not give in to despair. Even a simple maid had something to teach him.

Odin could not afford to surrender to this melancholy, this miasma suffocating him. He was a father now. That alone ought to have left him elated and calling for unending mead. Ought to. If he could but forget for one moment that neither his father nor brother could ever share his joy. He patted Fulla on the shoulder and hurried inside, half running down the stairs to the ground floor. Frigg had refused to move into her father's old room, so they stayed in her chamber. Odin paused there a moment ere easing the door open.

Sigyn Haddingsdotter stood inside, a babe cradled in her arms. A tuft of red hair crowned a head peeking out of a bundle of blankets.

"M-may I?" Odin asked. His sister-in-law smiled as she handed him the bundle. Odin took his son gingerly. Bright eyes, so like Odin's father's. Looking back at him. Odin sucked in a breath that stung his lungs. Father *was* here, he knew he was. "Uh ... What shall we call him, wife? Have you given it thought?"

Frigg nodded. “Much, indeed. His name shall be Thor.” *Thunderer*. A crash of lightning rang outside. How appropriate.

“Rest a bit,” he said to Frigg. Tradition demanded he show off the boy. He carried little Thor out into the great hall where jarls and thegns and warriors of nine clans gathered now, feasting and toasting their new king. Not an honour he had sought, but one he had claimed, nonetheless, and could not now shirk. Not now, nor ever. Let them drink deep of the mead and take what joy they might—these people had earned it ten times over. They had bought it with blood, with centuries of hardship beneath the encroaching Mist.

Odin raised the baby high. “Behold Thor Odinson! Prince of the Æsir!”

The cheer that rose through the hall overshadowed even the continuing rumbles of thunder. Would Father be proud now, to see Odin on a throne of the clans? He had wanted an end to the internecine wars. Odin would give him that lasting peace, in Borr’s name. Thor could become a symbol of his grandfather’s dream.

The twins crawled about on the floor around the throne as Fulla chased them around. His other children, and he had to do right by them as well, by all his people. Odin nodded to Fulla, who came and took Thor from him. As he turned back to his people, Loki strode up to him. Odin clasped his blood brother’s arm. “I suppose I owe this birth to you, in a way.” Loki smiled, shook his head. “I wish that I ... well, of course he’s far too young for an apple, anyway.”

Loki nodded. “Undoubtedly. But, my friend, if it would ease your mind ...” Loki produced a golden apple from a pouch on his belt. “I might have saved *one* more for just this occasion.”

Odin took the apple, his hand almost seeming to shake. A hollow opened in his chest. No words seemed worthy of such a boon. “Brother, I ... You did this for me?”

“You’re welcome.”

“But if you had an apple to spare,” Odin asked, “why did you not give it to Hadding?”

“It would not have saved him,” Loki said. “No man can change his urd.” Odin grunted. He had mused over and over on that topic. Perhaps Loki blamed Urd, but Odin could not. Still, ’twas always hard to know his brother’s thoughts. This brother, at least.

Vili raised a drinking horn in salute ere downing the whole thing in one swig, earning him raucous laughter and cheers from those about him. Odin nodded at him, then passed among the rest of the hall, accepting the well-wishes and embraces of men and women from nine clans. Nine clans, bent to Odin’s will, united under his rule, as Idunn had bid. And the Vanr woman? She moved in and out of the light of braziers, eyes watching him like a weight on his soul. Once satisfied all here had seen him, Odin drifted away, followed Idunn down the hall and downstairs. The Vanr goddess led him to the room Frigg used to brew her potions and salves and stood there, staring at the wall. The brazier down here cast the room in heavy shadows that tightened around his throat like a noose. Long ago, someone had worked seidr in these depths, and the foulness of it still tainted these stones. Odin was about to ask what she did here. But something was ... odd. Those runes on the wall. He couldn’t read them, but they ... looked much like some of the runes now wrapt around his chest and arms. After pulling away his tunic, he looked down. Aye, some of the same verses marked his body.

His stomach lurched. His palms had gone clammy. He did *not* want to ask the question he knew he must. “Idunn ... What is this?”

“Five thousand years ago, the Vanir were a clan much like the Æsir. Not quite so primitive, but similar.” Primitive? “This was ere I was born, of course. My grandmother came to them, after the breach to Niflheim released the Mist and its chill. She thought she could lead them to a better future. The land was changed, the Worldsea that had so long inundated it receded. Grandmother, she led them across this world and to the pair of



islands we now call Vanaheim. She was looking for something—the Tree of Life. Her people had called it Djambo Barros, but to the Vanir it was called Yggdrasil.

“Imagine a tree stretching up to the heavens, with roots reaching far down into the earth. And imagine it had golden fruits. The tree itself held the Mist and the chill at bay, giving my people—including my mother Eostre, who was nigh grown by then—a shelter from the Hel-cursed place this world had become. And when they ate the fruits, it changed them. It made them immortal, or nigh to it, and gave them insights, along with powers much like you yourself have begun to develop.

“My mother ate the fruit, and I was given one when I was old enough, too. By that time, we already knew the apples didn’t grow quickly. There would never be enough for everyone in the World nor even all of our people. My grandmother, she never took one. I guess ... I guess she missed my grandfather and didn’t want to face eternity alone.”

Idunn hugged herself, and Odin couldn’t keep himself from taking her hand. The goddess knew more of loneliness and despair than even Odin. Facing long centuries as she had, he would no doubt endure the same heartache. And if he survived as long as Idunn, would his hope have finally withered, or would he become what she was now? Lost and alone and clinging to one last, desperate dream of redemption?

“’Twas long ago,” she said but shut her eyes for a moment. “When she was old—very old—she called for me and told me all the stories of her life. Wonderful stories of that sea-drenched world ere the ice and the Mist, a world I’d never known. She spoke of beautiful islands so hot you had to rest in the middle of the day, of waters so warm and clear that swimming was a pleasure ... she called her people heirs of Mu. Later, she told me she feared she might have made a mistake in bringing the Vanir to Yggdrasil, for she had sought to save Mankind, not to elevate a single clan to godhood. And

the Vanir jealously guarded the tree and its fruit, denying other clans the warmth of the lands of spring.

“I don’t know. Mayhap, had they tried harder, they could have found a way to banish the Mist. Instead, they cast themselves as gods. And they fought the chaos, aye, and the jötunnar of Brimir. In the war, the jötunnar were driven into Utgard. But eventually my people cut themselves off from the rest of the World and let it languish. Our king, the king before Njörd—Mundilfari—he walked away from his throne and vanished, and the rest of us, we just withdrew. And for a long time, I watched. I watched with the eyes my grandmother had opened, as Vanr society became so isolated from the rest of Midgard we might as well have lived on another world.

“And maybe that was *my* fault. I let centuries pass, lost in doubt and unsure what to do. And then I started making pilgrimages to Midgard once more, determined to see the people who lived there. To find the strongest.”

Odin shook his head and released her hand. “I don’t understand why you’re telling me all this, Idunn. Or why you wanted me to take this throne, but I held my oath. I made myself king.”

She shuddered, then tapped a finger on the runes branded on his chest. Her touch left him tingling, and he backed away, pulling his shirt closed. “I told you once you had become king I would give you one more task as the price for those apples.”

“And what would you have me do?”

Her eyes flashed with intensity he did not often see in her. “You will gather the clans, all the Æsir, and march them to the west. Far, far west, beyond all lands you know. You must march on Vanaheim itself, and there, dear Odin, you must fulfil the greatest of your tasks. You must cast down the gods, overthrow the Vanir ... and take their place.”

## INTERLUDE: THE HALEYGAR

### 5 Age of the Æsir

A great many men and shieldmaidens had gathered to watch the holmgang, a veritable army on both sides on the island. Some I had brought with me from my crew in Nidavellir. More though had come to watch Yngvi's champion Hjalmar fight against a fabled Haleygar. Aye, I recall pacing around the man, panting and exhausted. It felt we'd been battling for days. Who could say? I had lost any track of time. Nor did my foe look steadier on his feet. Neither of us had given ground despite the countless blows we each had struck. I spat out a mouthful of blood. By Freyr's flaming sword, I wasn't certain what blow earned me that iron taste. Staring down Hjalmar, I tossed aside my battered shield. Another blow would have shattered it anyway, as had been the past two.

Hjalmar grinned and flung his shield aside. "Maybe we ought to have chosen flyting instead of a contest of arms."

"I would find it hard to match insults with a troll's wife," I countered.

Hjalmar flexed his arms. Probably as sore as my own. "You mean to say you do not speak to your woman, Haleygr?" Several of the onlookers laughed at that.

I tried not to smile. “I more oft whisper my tales in the ears of your lady while we lay in tangled furs.”

“Alas, I am not married. Perhaps a man from Hálgoland has mistaken my goat for a woman?”

“More likely I mistook your mother for a goat and sent a thrall to draw her milk.”

Hjalmar chuckled and wiped blood from his brow. He looked to the sun, which now that I checked, had already settled low on the horizon. Maybe too late to leave this island and reach the mainland ere nightfall. After meeting my gaze, Hjalmar drove his sword point first into the ground. “Champion.”

I did the same, grateful for any chance to let go of the weight. My arm felt apt to fall from my shoulder. I nodded at my foe, slowly working my sword arm. “You wish to yield?”

Hjalmar laughed. “Odin’s spear, man! I would acknowledge you as an equal. Come, why should we meet the sword-sleep at each other’s hands?” I rubbed my face. Hel, perhaps this Sviar was right. And it seemed these people had accepted the Æsir as gods. I had heard rumours of these new gods, stories they had overthrown the Vanir even. Hard to credit such tales, at least back then. Now I know, of course. “Come, Arrow’s Point,” Hjalmar said. “Feast with us.”

I looked to my men. Several of them nodded. Well enough. “Come then.”

We returned to our camps. None among us wanted to cross even a short stretch of the whale-road at night, given the choice. So the two crews joined together and built great bonfires to hold back the Mist. My gut growled in anticipation of the roasting fish. Hjalmar stalked to his fire, hair dripping, and sunk down beside me. “I suppose I ought to be honoured my fame has reached so far north.”

I shrugged. “A housekarl who had fought a draug and won, protecting his new king. Aye, men speak of that even in Nidavellir.”

Hjalmar blew out a breath. “Not a story I tell sober.”

“’Tis fortunate my men have brought ale then.” I motioned to his people, who dragged a cask of it over to the fire, then brought mugs to each of them. I scooped a mugful for Hjalmar and offered it to the Sviar.

The man downed it all in one swig, belched, and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. Then he stared at me. “Does such a tale so intrigue, then?” I spread my hands. Few men fought draugar and walked away. The wakeful dead could not easily be sent back to their graves. I had slain one once, at the cost of the lives of three of my men. Hjalmar cleared his throat. “Last summer, around the solstice. King Alrek and his brother Eric set out riding. No man knows what they quarrelled over, but they slew each other. And they lay in the snows, unburied and unburnt.”

And I knew what that meant.

Hjalmar dipped his mug in for more mead. “Aye, the Mist raised them. I don’t know what happened to the king, but his brother Eric was taken by a fell rage, and he came after the sons of Alrek.” He shook his head, then drained his mug again ere blowing out a long breath. “It came in the night. Got through the walls—I don’t know how. The fire pit dwindled to cinders.” I almost choked on my mead. No one let the main fires of a house go out. And that a creature of the Mist like a draug could exert such influence ...

Hjalmar nodded at me as I coughed. “Aye, hard to believe, is it not? But happen it did. Alrek has two sons, Yngvi and Alf. By chance, it came for Yngvi, whom I had called upon that night. The new king is already a man grown, and together we drove the creature into the hearth. I’d swear its shrieks came from the mouth of Hel herself.” The man unlaced his tunic to reveal a series of long scars running along his chest. Five of them. “Eric did that with his fingers.”

“You took a wound to save your king. I would call your fame well earned.” I clapt the Sviar on the shoulder. “And if it pleases you, I say we leave this island not as foes, but as brothers. For it seems I have finally met my match.”

Hjalmar stared at me a time. Then he drew a knife and sliced open his palm. I took the blade and repeated the gesture. Then we clasped hands. “Brothers,” Hjalmar said.

“Brothers.”



THE KINGS SAT me at their table, availing me of their hospitality. I knew, even then, they hoped to enlist me in their raids and wars. Nor was I opposed to some mercenary work, here and there.

“So,” Yngvi said between bites of mutton, “Arrow’s Point. You’ve led a great many raids in your time. I have a mind to do so as well. It would please me should you join me.”

I glanced at my new blood brother, but Hjalmar was staring at the princess. What was her name? Yngvi had mentioned it, but I hadn’t taken note. There were a great many women there, shieldmaidens too, each more into the fullness of womanhood. I cleared my throat. “Where do you think to raid? To Kvenland? Reidgotaland?”

Alf snorted. “My brother is convinced Odin wants him to claim islands in the Morimarusa for our people.”

“Odin?” I looked now to the other king. “This Ás usurper?”

Alf opened his mouth, but Yngvi answered. “The Æsir are the new gods. They have taken Vanaheim and named it Asgard. Our cousin, King Gylfi of Dalar, spoke with Odin, king of Asgard, some few years back.”

“These Æsir visit Men?” Stories told that the Vanir had not walked upon Midgard in uncounted generations. A man could send prayers to Njörd or

Freyr or Ullr, and maybe they would answer. But the Vanir did not show themselves. And now a new race of gods had supplanted them. Some might call it just, I supposed, if gods were not above justice. Assuming, of course, I believed aught of this.

“So Gylfi claims,” Alf said. “Father thought him a liar, intent on promoting his importance, and mostlike would have denounced him, had he lived.”

Hjalmar was whispering something to the princess now, and she was smiling. Neither seemed to be paying attention to the conversation. At the time, I thought it well for him. Would that I had known what would come of those whispers. I did not. I cared more for the words of the kings.

Yngvi motioned to a thrall for more ale. “Gylfi rode through here, two moons past. Told of his encounter with the High One, the one he said could only have been Odin. Rumour claims Gylfi learnt some of the Art from a wandering wizard.”

“Which is all the more reason to doubt him,” Alf said.

“I agree ’tis unmanly,” Yngvi admitted, “but still, if anyone could recognise a god when he saw one, would that not be a sorcerer?”

Time would tell. I had made no judgments about gods, nor did I see this as the time to start. I slapped a hand on the table, and Hjalmar started, looking at me. “I have indeed raided into Reidgotaland. If you would go there, King Yngvi, then I will come with you and my blood brother. Most of the kings there are not strong.”

The feast ran well into the night, and even after, King Yngvi and others sat long at the drinking table. Alf excused himself, as did Hjalmar. I followed my blood brother. The man stumbled, half-drunk, perhaps. He wandered outside to piss, and I gave him a moment, warming myself by a brazier.

Hjalmar returned, blinking against the firelight. “Is the room not to your liking, Brother?”

“It is quite comfortable. I was more concerned with things here not being to your liking.”

Hjalmar groaned. “I’ve had a bit to drink. Perhaps we could save the flyting for tomorrow.”

I rubbed my hands together. The Mist had grown thick this night, embowering the brazier, whilst never quite encroaching into the fire’s warmth. Like it was hungry for our souls, just barely held back. “I’m not having sport with you. I do see the way you look at that princess, though. And she is what, thirteen, fourteen winters?”

My brother warmed his hands over the fire, eyes wistful. “Ingibjorg. She’s Yngvi’s daughter, aye, fourteen winters now. Well past marrying age, but her father holds out. He wants a better match for her than a simple housekarl.”

“Even one who saved his life?”

“Even so.”

Hard to say whether that made Yngvi a bad king or a great one. Politics were everything. And true, a princess was far above a housekarl, nor could Hjalmar likely afford sufficient bride price. The latter problem, though, might be solved with these raids. “Yngvi plans to set sail soon. You want to win the princess’s hand? Impress her father. Win glory, win spoils, and show him how much he has to gain.”

“You think the king would agree then?” Hjalmar murmured something unintelligible ere looking at me again. “She would marry me if he’d allow it. She’s said as much.”

I was never going home again. Never could I look upon the lands of my birth for fear of a fool prophecy. This place though, it felt right. And Hjalmar was a good man, my blood brother. I sniffed. “Brother, I swear to you. Fight with glory, with valour. I will help you win the hand of Ingibjorg, no matter how long it takes.”



Hjalmar clasped my arm, then embraced me. Those were the good days, however brief.



THAT SUMMER HAD BEEN KIND, at least to me. We had made three raids into Reidgotaland, even established a settlement on one island. The last, in particular, had pleased Yngvi, who planned to inspect it now that summer was returning again. We'd heard little from the settlement over the winter, small surprise. No one wanted to sail the Morimarus with the risk of storms. To do such and test the patience of Rán was to invite the sea to cast her net over you.

Leading those raids had won me renown and booty both, enough so I'd even taken a wife among Yngvi's people, Eira, the daughter of one of his jarls. She was young and like to give me many children, I had thought.

With winter ending, I'd returned to Yngvi and Alf's halls by the River Fyris. Already, those halls were thick with the kings' people, all eager to know when they could next raid.

Hjalmar sat among those men, casting frequent glances over at Ingibjorg who sat beside her father. She seemed to be offering discreet smiles to the housekarl whenever her father was occupied in conversation or drink—which was often. The couple had clearly not yet received Yngvi's blessings. Shame, that. Had Yngvi relented sooner ... well, he did not.

I strode over to my friend Hjalmar and clapt him on the shoulder. "So glum, Brother? The winter moons have passed! You ought to leave your mood with them."

Hjalmar grunted in acknowledgment, then beckoned me to sit. I did, and thralls brought mead out for me, followed by a steaming hunk of mammoth

flesh. The hunts had been kind to some, it seemed. Mammoths are dangerous prey, but they do well to feed a large host.

The thegns were debating where they ought to strike next, as if the choice were theirs and not up to Yngvi and Alf. “We ought to have taken Samsey already,” Sveinn said. “It’s central, decently sized, inhabited only by a few fishing villages. Would have made a better spot for the colony.”

Einar scoffed. “The Dani say Samsey is haunted by sorcerers. Even the fiercest of the Skjöldungar won’t chance it, nor pirates.” Such tales I too had heard, though I found them hard to credit.

A slave approached and whispered something in Hjalmar’s ear. My blood brother rose and accompanied the man away.

“’Tis a big enough island,” Sveinn said. The thegn was young, but I had seen him fight. A brave one. “You really think a few sorcerers lay claim to all of it? Arrow’s Point! You’ve raided all over the North Realms—you ever see a sorcerer? Ever had one rise up to stop a single raid?”

I shook my head. “Völvur here and there, but they don’t get involved. They don’t work their seidr on raiders, we don’t cut off their heads. Works out for all concerned.”

The thegns laughed. No, I didn’t know much of true sorcerers. But seidr was real, I had no doubt, for my arrows told me that much. I wanted no fight with anyone who wielded such Otherworldly ability. It was possible for a man to be too brave.

Hjalmar returned to the main hall a moment later, guests behind him. “My king, may I announce the twelve sons of Arngrim, Jarl of Bolmsö.” He spoke with a loud voice that rang through the feast hall, though he did not hide the look of disdain on his face.

And like that, our high times ended. “Who is this Arngrim?” I asked Sveinn.

“A jarl in Ostergotland,” Sveinn said, “who holds islands in a lake there.”

“Gautar, then.”

“Aye, they marry among them, but they count themselves Döglinar,” Sveinn said, invoking the name of a kingdom fallen into legend, though one I knew from my youth. “Rumour has it Arngrim’s a berserk and so are his sons.” I scowled. A berserk as a jarl. That was new.

King Yngvi rose to greet the newcomers. King Alf remained in his seat. There were twelve of the men, each clad in a bearskin, each bearing arms that looked well worn. Blood splatters still caked furs of more than one of those berserkir. Hjalmar stepped aside but did not return to his seat beside me. The housekarl seemed to mistrust these brothers even more than Sveinn. I had to stifle the urge to touch my sword hilt. Aught that so discomfited Hjalmar sent my blood racing with unease.

When Yngvi had retaken his seat, one of the sons of Arngrim strode forward from the others. “Thank you for your welcome, King Yngvi. Far have I travelled to reach your table. I am Hjorvard Arngrimson of Bolmsö.”

“On what errand do you come to us?” Yngvi asked.

“Word of your daughter’s beauty has spread through every kingdom in Svjarland. I made my vow before the sight of the new gods that I should make Princess Ingibjorg my wife. I will marry her and no other.” Yngvi looked to his daughter first, then to his brother. Alf whispered something in his ear.

“Would he consent to this?” I asked Sveinn.

“The brothers are well known for their prowess. I doubt the king wants them as enemies.”

Hjorvard cleared his throat as Yngvi listened to whatever Alf advised. “Come now, my king. Tell me swiftly the result of my errand.”

I glanced to Hjalmar, who by now was gnashing his jaw. My blood brother looked to me, and I nodded back. My friend had to speak now, ere it was too late. With a return nod, Hjalmar strode forward again. “Lord king!” Yngvi turned to him. “Since I came to you, I have won great battles in your

honour. I alone stood beside you against the draug. I have served well and brought you riches on many raids. Please, my king. Grant my request and honour me with your daughter. You know my heart has always been set on her.” Hjalmar pointed at the berserkir. “These men are famed, yes. But famed for their wickedness. They plunder the weak, rape everywhere they go, even in your lands. You cannot give Ingibjorg to a man such as this!”

At his words, the berserk brothers hurled back several angry shouts. Some reached for swords, axes. Yngvi and Alf’s warriors responded in kind, rising from the table. Yngvi sat a long time, staring first at Hjalmar, then at Hjorvard, and at last at his brother. He turned back to the centre where the brothers and Hjalmar stood. “You are both great men. Hjalmar is correct—he has done me honour and served my family well. Hjorvard’s fame and noble lineage have also reached us and I ... I could not refuse either alliance.”

“My king?” Hjalmar asked.

Yngvi held up his hand. “No, Hjalmar. In such a case, ’tis only fair to let Ingibjorg choose who best suits her.”

The princess’s eyes widened and her mouth worked wordlessly. Poor girl had probably never been asked to speak before such an assembly. Women rarely were. With a shudder, Ingibjorg rose from her seat, her gaze upon Hjalmar. A good sign. “You are fair, Father. I would rather have the man I know to be good than one of whom I know only tales ... many of those evil ones, no less. I choose Hjalmar as my husband.”

The gathered sons of Arngrim looked at one another. I could have sworn I felt their outrage, and several more put hands upon weapons.

Hjorvard looked to the king, then to Hjalmar. The berserk spat. “I do not accept this man as my equal. I challenge you to face me in combat, Hjalmar. Face me in holmgang or be cursed by all you meet as an outcast. If you dare marry ere meeting my challenge, you will be despised by all, and my father shall consider it an act of treachery against Bolmsö.”

Hjalmar stormed forward. “Naught will hold me back, berserk. But as the challenged party, I will name the time of our holmgang. Nine days hence, at *dawn*.” Good, I thought, for he would not allow the berserk to fight in moonlight. As it was, I’d lost my father to a berserk.

Hjorvard glowered. “Then I will name the place. The island of Samsey, where your people fear to tread. Do not think we have not heard how you sail around it, made craven by children’s tales. On those shores, meet us if you have the souls of Men.”

“I shall be waiting for you,” Hjalmar said. “Ready to cleave your head from your shoulders.”

Hjorvard spat again, a gesture repeated by each of his eleven brothers in turn. With that, the sons of Arngrim stormed out of the hall. Evening was already upon them, but berserkir do not fear the Mist as other men do. Perhaps they were already mad with it.

I rose, joining the others in the centre. “I find it hard to trust these berserkir, and their choice of a duelling island worries me.”

Yngvi shook his head. “Perhaps so, but the time and place are set. Hjalmar cannot back down now.”

“Then I will take a crew with me,” I said. “And we will make certain this is no trap and that these brothers intend to fight with honour.” I strode over to my blood brother. “Come. Let us eat and make plans. First for your battle, then for your wedding.”



WE ARRIVED on the island of Samsey, and there the Mist swelled like a pus-laden wound, seeming ready to burst with poison. Mutters spread among the crew, words like troll or draugar bandied about. Even jötunn. I thought the latter unlikely. Such monstrosities were said to lair in Utgard, beyond

the protection of the Midgard Wall, and few came past it. That, at least, I felt confident about. The men though had begun to whisper prayers to the Vanir or the Æsir, depending on their wont.

Torch in hand, Hjalmar moved up beside me. "Shall we?"

Jötunnar aside, the place suited me little. "Perhaps 'tis best if we scout this island ourselves, leave the others to ensure our ship remains secure. Even if the brothers have laid no traps, Samsey has an ill repute and a worse feeling to it."

My blood brother could not back down from the challenge now. We were committed. "As you wish." Hjalmar leapt over the gunwale and landed in the sea up to his waist.

I followed. The waters were freezing, colder than any lake, even in summer. I could not quite stifle my gasp.

"That'll wake you," Hjalmar said.

I snorted, best I could with my stones freezing off. We waded over to the beach. Gods, the Mist was so thick I could not see past five feet. I pulled another torch from my belt, then lit it off Hjalmar's. Best we both carried one in a place like this.

"I doubt that Hjorvard's ever been here."

I grunted in agreement. Not even a berserk would have chosen this place, had he known. At least I would think not. Berserkir were half vaettr themselves, but still. This place looked like some vision of Niflheim.

Hjalmar set out, waving the torch in front of him. I lagged a few steps behind, checking our flanks. I could not well use my bow whilst holding a torch. If we came upon aught out here, we'd need swords, and we'd have little warning. It was tempting to draw immediately, but we might have been there hours, and even that slight deadening of my arm from fatigue could slow me, cost me my life.

"I dislike this place," I said.

“Look,” Hjalmar pointed at hills barely visible through the Mist. “Is that ice? Has it not melted?”

No it hadn’t, not even in summer. Indeed, an unnatural chill had settled over this island, like winter had loosened its grip but refused to depart entirely, even for a few moons. We walked a long time, the ground beginning to slope upward. As it did so, the ice grew more prevalent and our steps became more difficult, slower. I hadn’t packed crampons or ought else for climbing on ice. Hadn’t thought to need it in summer.

We turned aside from the icy slopes. If the berserk brothers had laid a trap, it would not be in the hills or frozen mountains. And any dangers lurking there were best left alone, unwoken. In truth, though, it was not the dangers of the island that undid us, but those of the berserkir. A thick forest covered the lower shores of Samsey, and we searched it several hours without sign of life, save for a few ravens here and there. If there were ravens, there must be food for them, but I saw no game.

Dawn had drawn nigh as we returned from the forest back toward the ship.

“Are you prepared?” I asked. “You had no sleep in the night.”

Hjalmar snorted. “Could you sleep the night ere you were to duel a berserk?”

Not a chance—not even a duel against a man. A man’s blood boiled too hot on such nights, and there was no cooling it for sleep. A great howling rang over the island as the sun began to rise. Many voices rose in a battle cry that seemed more bestial than human. I exchanged a glance with Hjalmar, then we both knelt in the forest. That sound had come from the ship.

We crept forward until we could see the edge of the shore. Screaming men leapt over the gunwale and waded ashore, many of them. All had swords and axes drawn, visible because one of them shone like a ray of pale

sunlight, illuminating the face of the eldest of the berserk brothers, Angantyr.

No one moved on Hjalmar's sea-steed. The brothers had slaughtered every last warrior and sailor, then come ashore, laughing, panting, and coated in blood. All our men, our friends, allies. All dead.

And us, alone against the twelve berserkir hunting us.



WE WERE desperate and nigh to mad with grief over the loss of our people. And in that state, we watched the berserkir stalking closer to our hiding place.

"Odin preserve us," Hjalmar mumbled. "What is that sword?"

I spat. "A runeblade. Arngrim is said to wield Tyrting. The jarl must have gifted it to his son."

Hjalmar groaned. "This was not Angantyr's fight. The holmgang was between me and Hjorvard."

"And now it is twelve on two," I said, "and the twelve scarce mortal. Come, Brother, let us slip off into the forest. There must be some other way off this island."

My blood brother glanced back at the woods behind us, then at the ship we had arrived on. "My crew are murdered in the night. Even could I walk away from that, we have never fled from our foes. Let us not start now. We will be Odin's guests in Valhöll tonight."

I blew out a long breath and shook my head. Hjalmar spoke truth, I supposed, little though I liked it. We had fought many battles before and never ran from any foe. If I was to die, I would do so with honour. Not that I intended to die. I rose then, drawing my sword. "I've no wish to meet this



Odin, leastwise, not yet. So, our only choice is to kill all twelve of these berserkir.”

Hjalmar too rose, drawing his sword. “What do you think? Will you take Angantyr and Tyrfing? Or try your luck with the other eleven?”

I shook my head. A man with a runeblade or overwhelming odds ... I could see why Hjalmar would split us thus. Angantyr was not only most famed, but that sword would give him a fell strength. Still, I had a shirt woven by alfar, which perhaps could turn even a runeblade. “I’ll fight Angantyr. Your armour won’t stop Tyrfing.”

Hjalmar’s eyes were locked on that glowing blade, as if seduced by a woman in firelight. “No, Brother. Never have you taken precedence over me in any battle. You think to take the glory for yourself today? Angantyr is mine. I will kill the berserk for Ingibjorg, and then none may say I did not win her.”

I opened my mouth to object, but Hjalmar charged, racing for Angantyr with a battle cry. I had no choice; I raced after him, sword and torch high. “They fight alone!” I shouted at the other berserkir. “And let the strongest and bravest among them win.”

Hjorvard looked first to Hjalmar, who now parried and danced with Angantyr, then to me. The berserk flashed his teeth, then strode forward. This was it then. I tossed the torch to the beach and slung my shield off my back. I barely had it in hand when Hjorvard reached me, screaming in a mindless rage. The berserk’s sword cracked off my shield. The impact rang through my arm and left my shoulder stinging. Hel, the man was strong!

Already Hjorvard had reeled back for another strike. I stepped aside, dodging again and again. Rather than try to block those mighty blows, I evaded them, batting them aside with my shield only when necessary. On the third blow, my shield cracked. The trollfucker had inhuman might and stamina; I wasn’t going to outlast him. Hjorvard fought with more ferocity than skill though, always on the offence, unrelenting.

Just how good was my alf-woven shirt? It had turned blades whenever tested. I dropped my shield low, granting the berserk an opening. As expected, the man leapt, intent on chopping me in half. I allowed the blow to connect, swinging with my attack rather than trying to defend myself. The attack slammed into my abdomen and hurled me from my feet for a bare instant ere I struck the beach. My gut felt like it had been kicked by a mule, and I gasped, struggling to turn over.

Finally, I rose to my knees.

Hjorvard had fallen, a great gash along his neck. I rose, hand to my stomach, as the other brothers roared in amazement. Had the man hit me anywhere else, he might have broken ribs. The next brother bellowed at me, slathering and wild as a cave hyena. And still, it seemed they had enough honour to face me one at a time.

This next brother leapt forward, swinging his axe in great swathes that could have cleft a man's skull in a single blow. I danced to the side, swept my shield upward, and hewed low at the same instant. My sword bit through the second brother's kneecap. Even a berserk could not stand without those. I leapt on him, slamming the rim of my shield down onto his throat. Bone crunched under the blow. I had not even risen when the next bellowing brother crashed into me. I raised my shield, and the man collided with it. The force of it shattered the shield and sent me tumbling end over end through the sand. I rolled over on the beach even as the man raced forward, sword raised.

Unable to think, I flung sand in the man's face. The berserk stumbled a moment, giving me time to rise and swing my sword. I opened the man's gut with one blow, then rolled away. The dying berserk flailed wildly, keen to strike me down even as his intestines spilled over the beach. The stink of blood mixed with shit hit me as I stumbled away.

Another brother was racing in on me now, foaming at the mouth. I slipped a dagger from my belt with my free hand. As the brother neared,

reeling back for a killing blow with his axe, I surged forward under his arms and drove the knife into his belly. The berserk barely slowed. A meaty fist slammed into my face and sent me tumbling away. I lost my grip on both my sword and the knife.

I did not dare stop for them, though. Instead, I rolled through the sand without looking. Dust flew a heartbeat later as that axe crashed into the spot I'd lain. The dying berserk swung again and again, forcing me to give ground and scramble away.

But the man was slowing. Gasping for breath, I managed to gain my feet, then raced over to snatch up my sword. Even as another brother raced for me ...



I HAD SLAIN ALL but one of the brothers, and as the last circled, I tossed aside the broken hilt of my sword. Rage wafted off the berserk so thick I could have almost seen it fuming the air. But the man did not charge in. Perhaps the sight of ten of his brothers dead and dying on the beach instilled the barest hint of self-control in him. Though bleeding from a dozen wounds, I must have seemed tempting prey. I knelt to pick up the axe of one of the dead berserkir. My lungs felt aflame, every breath agony. I wanted to pitch forward and lie in the sand and sleep, to rest for days. Whatever happened next, skalds would sing of this battle. I had slain ten men in single combat, one by one without a moment of rest. Not just ten men—ten *berserkir*. This day, my deeds here, men would remember it. I allowed myself to believe that, to believe it a good thing, to think that, mayhap, Odin watched now, maybe valkyrjar were circling, awaiting my fall.

The last berserk spit, then stalked forward, sword in front of him. Didn't fling himself wildly. He had learnt something from the deaths of his brothers. At long last, they faced a foe where sheer ferocity was not enough. Still, the man wanted to charge, to let rage take him, his visage made plain how his blood boiled.

I beckoned him with the axe. "Come now. Do you not wish to join your brothers in Valhöll? Do you not share their courage?" The berserk stiffened. That had hit something. "Perhaps you were the youngest ... never quite their equal. Not worthy to sit at their table among the honoured dead? Do not take it amiss. You can yet go home and embrace your mother, boy."

I had not even finished speaking when the man charged at me, shrieking like an animal. I didn't have the stamina to fight him. I had almost naught left. Naught save a trick I'd already used. One that, hopefully, the berserk was too enraged to prepare for. As the man swung, I too attacked, making no effort at defence. The berserk's blade swept up over my alf shirt, scraping along it as though it were armour, ere shrieking loose and drawing a cleft from my chin—you can still see the scar.

Of course, my axe buried in the berserk's skull. I stumbled away, fell over, and lay in the sand. I don't know how much time passed. Less than an hour, mostlike. The sun had risen but not high. I pushed myself and crawled forward. Angantyr and Hjalmar both lay nearby.

My ... brother ... my blood brother was ... I rose, stumbled over to where Hjalmar lay. The man looked to me, alive, but his eyes had grown weak. His helm was cleft down the middle, a vicious wound over his face. Even his chain had been rent. Tyrfing had cut clean through the mail like it were cloth.

The berserk was dead; Hjalmar's sword had cut half his face off. And Hjalmar ... more than a dozen wounds oozed blood. Gasping, I pressed the wounds, hard, yet could not staunch them. Blood seeped through my fingers, ceaseless, inevitable as it coursed for the snows. I could not tear my

alf shirt but ... I yanked off Angantyr's armour, then his tunic, and tore it in straps. Each I bound against Hjalmar. The blood continued seeping, slowing aye, but not thanks to my efforts.

My blood brother fumbled with his ruined helm. I helped him, easing the thing off. "Brother. I cannot staunch the bleeding. I fear you have seen the end of your days."

"Ugn. No, I can't see ... except maybe my father. He is drinking at Valhöll. And valkyrjar ..."

Death visions had taken the man. Or perhaps a valkyrja did come for his soul. I wondered what he saw. "I'm sorry, Brother."

"My arm ring ... for Ingibjorg. Do not let her wonder ..."

I grimaced, then slipped the red-gold ring from my brother's wrist. Yngvi's father Alrek had given him that on achieving manhood. And he was right. Ingibjorg would know it, know what it meant.

"There is a raven ... his meal on my blood ... Odin ... why?"

Hjalmar's breath left him. Trembling, I shut my brother's eyes. I was mad with grief ...

Samsey was thick with barrows of the Old Kingdoms, from days when men entombed their dead rather than freed them on pyres. I did not know or care why the old men did such things. I did know why my people burnt bodies though. As the body lingered, so too might the soul, unable to escape Midgard. Bound to waste away the ages in half sleep, locked in eternal damnation. This, I thought a fitting urd for the berserk brothers who had wrought countless evil deeds in their lives. Not least among them the slaughter of Hjalmar and all his crew on a day sanctioned for a duel. These men had violated law and custom and did not deserve to feast in Valhöll. They deserved to linger in torment for their crimes, or so I thought then, bereaved as I was.

So I laid them in one such barrow. The torch gave the only light in that suffocating, sepulchral gloom. On ancient slabs, I laid them beside their

cursed weapons. Let them comfort each other down through the ages. Or not. Samsey was a place of nightmare, an island best left lost in time. And Tyrfinn ... fell power coursed through me as I held it. I could take this sword and with it become the most famed warrior in all the North Realms. I could become a king and raise up such an army I might challenge any nation of Men, perhaps even the dvergjar of Nidavellir.

And, more like than not, meet such an accursed urd as these berserker. Like all the works of the dvergjar, the blade cut in more than one way. It did not belong in the World of Men. The runeblades were works of ancient evil, driven by curses to destroy all who crossed their paths. So I laid it upon the slab. The sword seemed to glimmer with hidden flame, begging me not to abandon it. It *wanted* to go, to be free, to kill, murder, and sow discord across the land. It *wanted* to work its evil.

I sealed them in that barrow.

I would keep my promise and return to Ingibjorg Yngvisdottir, give her Hjalmar's blessing. Give them the warning that Starkad had been right; no living man ought to ever again tread upon Samsey's shores.

That done, I walked away from Svjarland. Walked away from even being Arrow's Point.

I fled my grief ...

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## PART III

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*With jötunn clans united did the empire of Brimir come to dominate all the Earth. For long centuries did the jötunnar rule, Mankind their thralls. 'Tis not recorded who struck the first blow, be it Vanr or jötunn. But war did follow, bitter as the bite of mountain winds, sweeping clean the land. And when the last blow did fall, the Vanir banished the jötunnar behind the farthest mountains and there raised a mighty wall of ice and stone to enclose their middle world: Midgard.*

*— Lost analects of the Lofdar*

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**DAYS GONE: ODIN**

800 Age of Man

Waking or sleeping, it mattered naught, for Odin could no longer tell the difference, until he thought he might well remain caught betwixt the two. His time with Gudrún and Frigg had blurred all lines even whilst opening his mind until at last he could no longer say whether the things he saw were real or but figments. But, tormented by the Sight, see them he did, in a cavalcade of unbidden flashes, sourceless voices and haphazard intuitions.

*Borr, his father, once the strongest man Odin had known. Head tall, the flicker of torchlight illuminating his short red beard as he wandered Unterhagen in the night. Odin had never known why his father had gone to the village that night—but he knew now whom he had met.*

*Jarl Arnbjorn Radmundrson of the Itrmanni looked up sharply at a crash from outside. He and Borr stood around a fire pit in a small house. They had been debating something Odin had not caught. “Trolls?” Borr said.*



*Arnbjorn blanched and fled from the house. Borr groaned and drew his sword. Outside, a pair of men waited for him, each staring off nervously into the thick Mist, spear in one hand, torch in the other. “Arnbjorn and his men ran off,” one said.*

*In the Mist, a man screamed. Another crash echoed. Odin’s father had gone out into the night, into the Mist, to protect the villagers. Gone out ... and never returned.*

“Father ...” Odin mumbled, half-aware he was talking in his sleep. On the edge of his consciousness he knew Frigg had placed a hand on his forehead, hoping to comfort him against visions she couldn’t see. He could shut them out, leave them behind. Gudrún had taught him such things—to close his mind to the Sight. But then he would never see his father again, not whilst Odin walked Midgard, a time that, given his newfound immortality, could stretch into eternity. A separation so final, so absolute, keeping Odin from reuniting with his parents and his ancestors, and he had taken the apple without giving it a moment’s consideration. Idunn had made him a god. But there *was* a price—solitude. He was a god doomed to walk the World without those who had shaped him.

So he could not resist the vision, the call to see what his father had seen. The temptation to understand a life that wasn’t his, yet felt so close he ought to be able to touch it.



*BORR and his men were greeted with more screams as they trod into the village. The people no doubt feared a raid, unable to conceive that other Men would come to their aid. Odin’s father had been a hero, though, not just to his sons, not even just to his people, but to Mankind. And Odin had failed to live up to his father’s legacy.*

*Snow crunched under Borr's knees as he knelt to examine a depression. In the torchlight, in the Mist, he couldn't see it for what it was. But Odin could see. A footprint, one so massive his father's whole body could have crouched in it. The footprint of the frost jötunn Ymir. Was any of this real, or had Odin's mind built this vision from the fragments he had learnt in visiting the remains of the village, and from the tales Loki had spun of these events?*

*Odin's heart pounded in his chest, apt to burst through his ribs. He wanted to scream at his father, shout a warning that might somehow pierce the shrouds of time and death, and weave a new urd for Borr.*

*Instead, the silence was broken by a crash like thunder as a house exploded, spraying splinters and thatch over Borr and his men. Through the Mist, Odin could only see to the jötunn's waist as he trod forward. But he knew the thing, the blue tint of his skin, the iron plates covering his legs. Borr spun, levelling Gungnir against a foe far beyond his ken. Ymir's bellow drowned out the battle cries of Borr and his warriors. The jötunn surged forward, smashing one warrior with his hammer. Borr never hesitated, never backed down, charging the monster. Ymir batted the spear away, and it embedded itself in the same tree Odin had found it in days later.*

*The jötunn snatched up Borr in one hand and hefted him to his face. From Ymir's head jutted a granite horn, stretching nigh unto five feet long. His icy breath stung Borr's face. Ymir kicked away another of Borr's warriors, remaining focused on Odin's father's face, meeting his gaze.*

*And then the jötunn spoke, his voice like the rumbling of a glacier. His words were foreign and unknowable, except ... Odin could have sworn he made out one word—Hel. The dire goddess of Niflheim, Mistress of the Niflungar.*

*Ymir squeezed his fist, and Odin screamed, feeling his bones snap as his father's had.*



HE JOLTED UPWARD, roaring at naught, suddenly stifled by the tent above them. Dimly, as though he still dreamt, he knew Frigg had thrown her arms around his chest, leant her head against his back. Their babe cried, wakened by his outburst. Odin shrugged free of Frigg, crawled over to Thor, and cradled him in his arms. “There’s naught to fear,” he mumbled.

The two varulf babes had sat up, watching Odin with wary eyes. Geri pensive, on the edge of tears; Freki with his head cocked to one side. Tyr stuck his head in the tent, but Frigg waved him away. “Tell me what you’re seeing,” she said as soon as Odin’s thegn had slipped back out.

Odin couldn’t look away from Thor’s eyes, from the boy’s red hair. Hair the colour of Odin’s father’s. “There is naught to fear,” he repeated, unable to still the tremble in his chest. Because there *was* something to fear. The jötunn had come specifically for Borr. He had paid no mind to the villagers or the other warriors, at least not until he had finished with Odin’s father. Why? Could Odin have conjured such things in his mind, or had he witnessed the real finality of his father’s last moments? They had found his body broken and no one left to tell the tale of what had destroyed that village. Only later had Loki told him about the jötunn.

“He took my father,” he mumbled.

“Husband,” Frigg said, gingerly taking Thor from his grasp. “You avenged him. You killed Ymir.”

The jötunn had taken his father away from him ... taken him ere his time. Now, thanks to the apple of Idunn, Odin might never again see his father’s face. And would Borr the great, Borr the hero, be proud of all Odin had done? He had become king of the Æsir, but was that even what Borr would have wished? Mostlike not, nor, in truth, had Odin wanted such a thing. Idunn had forced the role upon him, and now, responsible for all the Æsir, he could not shirk it.

“He has my father’s eyes, his hair ...” Odin said. Had his father once comforted Odin thus against the horrors of the night and the Mist and the cold? Would he be proud? No. Borr would not be proud. *Odin’s* pride had cost him his brother Vé, whom the Mist had transformed into a troll. And because Odin had given Vé an apple ere that, he would be more than any troll had ever been—a fresh horror Odin had now visited upon Midgard. And if they did not take Vanaheim as Idunn urged, then all he had done would amount to naught. Or all of it was ... Urd, and his actions had scarce been his own, he but a piece on a tafl board. Against whom did he play then? The Mist? Hel? The Norns?

Odin heard Frigg nursing Thor, felt her warm hand on his bare back. But he couldn’t bring himself to look at her. She was his wife, and still he dreamt of another woman. Of Gudrún, the sorceress who had ensnared him, bent him to her will, and tried to bend him to the service of Hel. He shuddered, and Frigg removed her hand. His mind wandered too far these days. He rose and donned trousers, not bothering with a shirt. The cold no longer had so much effect on him. Still, he strapped his sword to his side—the sword Frigg had given him to protect their family. Though he always preferred to fight with Gungnir, the sword’s weight was a comfort, a reminder he had not yet failed his son. “I need to find Loki.”

“Again?” Odin pretended not to hear the judgment in her voice. Aye, again. Again he sought the council of another over his wife. But Odin’s blood brother knew things beyond even Odin’s völva wife’s ken. That Odin could look *him* in the eye without feeling the guilt of having betrayed his wife may also have crossed his mind.

He stalked into the night, among the countless tents, hundreds of them. All nine clans of the Æsir, all marching into the unknown under his command. At Idunn’s urging, Odin had uprooted an entire civilisation, sent all his people trekking through field and forest and hills in the hopes of

finding a better World. But if they fell, if they failed to take Vanaheim, Odin would have led his people to extinction.

Two moons since they named him king at the Althing. Two moons, and he had crushed Hun kingdoms beneath his march, won plunder for his people. And lost a great many lives. It was, according to skalds, the Huns, or their ancestors, who had driven Vingethor to make his Great March, generations back, when the Æsir fled Bjarmaland for Aujum. The irony that Odin now sacked their lands was not lost on Odin.

“Would you be proud?” Odin whispered into the night, though never had he found his father’s ghost, no matter how oft he searched the shadows of the Spectral Realm. Was Odin a hero following in his father’s footsteps, or was he drunk on his power, entranced by his myth? Oh, the men here worshipped him as a god—the god who had fought the jötunn Ymir, fought trolls, fought varulfur and won, time after time. Except when he didn’t. His skin bore the runes of a ghost’s curse, a constant reminder she had damned him, promised he would lose *everything*. As he had lost Vé. And the Æsir? They thought the runes were another indication of his mystique, of his apotheosis, as Idunn called it.

So they had followed him across the border into Hunaland where they found little welcome. His people met skirmishes every few days—not all at once, but whenever they ventured out to hunt or forage. Hundreds of bonfires lit the night, holding back the Mist. Perhaps the World had never known such an army. But they were an army burdened by the young and the elderly, by those who could not well defend themselves. Thus, it fell to Odin to protect them all.

The Æsir had raided into Hunaland for generations. Small wonder the kings here did not welcome them. And through these delays, already the first snows had fallen. Winter returned and they had not yet crossed half this country, if Idunn measured correctly. Tyr had argued they ought to take only raven-feeders, seize Vanaheim, then come back for the women, children,

and elderly. It had been Idunn who pointed out the flaw in his plan—they would either have to leave a significant force of warriors behind to watch over those helpless people or leave them defenceless. What she left unsaid, or perhaps was too naïve to even see, was that if Odin left people behind, he risked more than their lives. He risked losing control of them. Odin’s presence held these clans together by a thread, gossamer and tenuous as a spider’s web. Old hatreds and rivalries and petty ambitions were set aside whilst their god-king walked among the people. But only just.

Loki sat upright as Odin entered his tent, while Sigyn burrowed deeper under the blankets, clearly naked—a sight Odin would not have minded seeing. From the look in Loki’s crystal blue eyes, his brother knew exactly what Odin was thinking. Aye, Odin was a terrible husband. Frigg deserved better. Maybe ... maybe Thor deserved a better father. No! By Freyr’s flaming sword, Odin would be worthy of his son, worthy to continue his father’s line.

“I would speak with you, Brother.” Loki glanced at Sigyn, then rose, pulled on his trousers, and followed Odin outside. “I’ve had another vision,” Odin said as they walked outside the camp. Loki always kept his tent on the outskirts as he didn’t seem to relish being too close to the company of Men. Odin’s blood brother held himself apart, always. Out here, in this never-ending mountain range, that meant he slept on icy slopes above the valley where the rest of the Æsir camped. But there was no one Odin trusted more.

Even despite, or perhaps because of, Loki’s völva-like knowledge. Men named males with such seidr as *ergi*—after Odin had slain Steinar Ofriðrson, none named him thus to his face, of course—but Odin could no longer pretend he was not a shaman, a wizard. The Otherworldly had wrapt its icy fingers about his throat, and now, it would never let go. *Necromancer ... shaman ...* Who better, then, to guide Odin along this shamanic path than one possessed of such strange cunning as Loki?

“You’ve opened yourself to the Otherworld,” his blood brother said. “’Tis not a door you can shut.” Odin shivered at that, for Gjúki Raknison had used nigh the same words. “The Sight carries with it many aspects, and sometimes you see things you might rather not.”

“Was it truth?” Odin asked.

Loki shrugged. “What is truth? Your question belies a simplistic worldview, Odin. Do you ask whether it could have been a mere dream? Of course it could have. But then, even dreams may have meaning, though not always literal ones. If what you saw was not actual reality, that does not discount that it may have held *some* reality worth gleaning.” Hel’s icy trench, Odin hated when Loki spoke in such riddles. And by the gleam in his eye, the man damned well knew that. Payback for fantasising about his brother’s woman, perhaps.

“Ymir wanted my father, specifically. *Spoke* to him. Why would he do that? Why—assuming this was literal truth—would a jötunn speak to a Man, least of all one he intended to kill?”

“What did he say?”

“I couldn’t understand his language. Something about Hel, I think.”

The bare hint of frown. “Perhaps he merely threatened to send Borr to her.”

Perhaps. But Odin’s gut insisted it was something deeper. Ymir had come for his father, Odin was certain of it. He rubbed his face. These mountains left everyone on edge. They needed to be free of them, free of the Mist and the death and the pain. “How far to reach Vanaheim?”

Loki looked up at the night sky for a time ere answering. “Several moons at least, depending on our progress. Not ere summer. We have to pass through Hunaland and Valland. There will be some flatlands beyond this, then more mountains, albeit not as treacherous as these. And that is only to reach the shore at the edge of the land. We will also need to cross

the whale-road and decide whether to do so in Valland or press on further south, into Andalus.”

“Then spread the word. We break at dawn and march hard.”

The Niflungar were still out there, probably hunting him. And they would not hesitate to prey on his people in order to get to him. To prey on his family. Odin would not allow it, not whilst he yet had breath in his body.

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**STARKAD**

## 25 Age of the Æsir

*T*he river ran swiftly, cutting a canyon through the island. Following such a canyon, with ice-crusting walls rising to either side, did not seem over wise to Starkad. Archers, should their foes have any, could tear them to pieces. But scaling those walls would have taken too much time, even if these water vaettir had chosen to travel above. Besides, vaettir rarely had archers. Still, this island was wild, well beyond the bounds of civilisation. 'Twas possible jötunnar or other dangers lurked here.

The dvergar no longer dwelt in Nordri, nor in any of their great cities outside Nidavellir, though he did not know why. Perhaps something to do with the falling-out between the dvergar and the princes of the Old Kingdoms, in the days after the dvergar forged the runeblades. It little mattered, now, he supposed. Wherever dvergar went, they dug up, forged, or otherwise crafted treasures worthy of the ages. Hervor bore one, a runeblade, hard as it was to believe such, and having seen it, the blade called to him, bade him kill her and take it for himself. Armed thus, Starkad could have conquered whole lands, made a king ... as if his wanderlust

would allow such. Still, if he felt the pull of that accursed blade, others mostlike did, as well. Tyr warned him, in the days after giving over Gramr; the old Ás warned the blades claimed a price. Starkad wondered if Hervor knew what bearing that blade might cost her. Either way, the Niflungar would mostlike come for it again. Starkad could take it from her—might even save her life in doing so. Probably not. Probably the Niflungar would still hunt her and then kill her once they realised she no longer bore that blade.

Besides, saving her life was not his problem. She had wrought her urd. He strove to keep thoughts of robbing her from his mind. Sometimes, caught off his guard, he almost thought he heard her blade, whispering to him, its voice a susurrations borne on the Mist.

He pushed the others hard. They were exhausted, of course, had walked for hours until dawn had, at last, broken, gilding the sky with fire. Light was their only ally, and a fleeting one. They *had* to push forward. Vaettir liked to lair in old, abandoned places. And what better ruins than a dverg city? He did not know exactly where, but according to Yngvi, Odin had claimed ancient Nordri lay at the heart of Thule. With the sun up, the island was warmer. Which was to say, wrapt in a fur cloak he didn't feel his stones were about to freeze off. But then winter had only just settled in here, and it would grow colder still. And unless he missed his guess, their daylight would fade soon. Already several hours of it had passed. The ever-present Mist thinned in daylight, perhaps retreated to hiding holes and dark places, like some nocturnal mass. It would return, always, always as the light failed.

Ahead, someone was sitting on the ice by the river. Three men and a woman, all naked. They sat camped before a tunnel in the cavern wall. Starkad held up a hand to stall those behind him. They slowed, now creeping forward. They would have seen the vaettir as well. Orvar moved close behind Starkad, then unshouldered his bow.

“Cold doesn’t bother those cocking spirits,” Ivar said. Starkad glared at him and jerked his hand for silence. Leaving the others behind, he began to edge forward in a crouch. The sun dipped below the mountains. Darkness would return in mere moments. And if the nixies leapt into the waters, he’d never catch them. They needed to get ahead of their foes, cut them off. He glanced back at Afzal, then motioned for him to flank the vaettir. Long winters together had taught the boy well. Hervor broke off and went with him. Starkad frowned. At least she seemed to know how to move without making noise.

The problem was, the rocks provided little cover. He was going to have to wound one from a distance. Scowling, he motioned to Orvar.

The vaettir had begun to stir with the setting sun. They seemed to take their respite in daylight—the only reason he’d caught them at all, mostlike. Most vaettir preferred the night, even flourished in the Mist. Orvar stood swiftly, drew a bead, and loosed. The twang of the bow drew their eyes, but not fast enough. The man’s arrow struck one of the males in the shoulder, spun him around and dropped him. The vaettr screamed in pain like any Man might.

The moment Orvar loosed, Starkad raced for the vaettir. As he did so, Afzal charged, shamshir in hand, followed by Hervor who had drawn that shining runeblade. The female vaettr ran to the fallen male while the other two rose to meet the charging warriors.

The sun winked out. The vaettr Afzal was rushing dropped to all fours and arched his back. A primal snarl echoed off the canyon walls. Starkad faltered. Oh, Hel’s blasted gates ... He had missed his guess, and these were not vaettir, not fully, but therianthropes. The creature’s neck elongated, popping and shifting, as did his snout. Teeth jutted from the creature’s mouth, growing pointed and sharp, even as his legs melded together. His flesh grew dark, slick. The creature—a finfolk—barked loudly. A thrust of

its tail sent it skittering over the ice toward Afzal. The boy panicked, stumbling backward.

Hervor leapt in there and cleft her runeblade into the seal's face. It barked again, this time in sharp pain. Starkad's feet skidded on ice as he ran. The Axe and Tiny had engaged another seal, whilst Ivar and Tiny chased after the female who had headed for the river. The only light came from Hervor's sword, shining like a tiny sun.

An arrow sprouted from a seal's meaty flesh, but Orvar's aim was off. The darkness must have interfered.

Starkad stumbled as he slid to a stop before the finfolk Orvar had shot. Hervor seemed to have the other one in hand. The seal barked, angling for the water. Starkad interposed himself. "Resume your human form!" The seal barked at him, glanced at the cavern. The first arrow had popped out of his shoulder when he'd shifted his form, but he was trailing wound-sweat.

The Axe screamed in agony and Starkad spun. The seal they fought had sunk its teeth into the Axe's knees and all but ripped his leg off. The man had fallen, still clutching his axe, whilst Tiny hacked at the beast with his sword. In Starkad's moment of distraction, the wounded seal surged past him and dove into the river.

Hervor bellowed and hewed off her seal's head. They weren't going to get a single prisoner unless Tiny stopped. And given the rage with which he'd set upon the one who'd hurt the Axe, that didn't seem likely. A horrid sound rang out from the cavern, something between a moan and a growl. Not a sound people made. No, but Starkad knew that sound, and dread welled in his gut, memory of childhood nightmares that had pursued him and his kin halfway across Midgard. In the darkness, pinpoints of red light opened—eyes lit with hatred of all life. Maybe the blood had woken it. Maybe the screams. Maybe the light from Hervor's cursed sword.

Whatever the cause, Starkad knew what was coming. "Fall back!" he bellowed.

The creature that emerged from the cavern moved like a warrior in pain. Bits of sallow flesh clung to exposed bone, reaching out from beneath war-garb that had survived the test of time better than the draug itself. It bore sword and shield and no doubt knew how to use them.

Hervor spun on the dead warrior, sword readied. Starkad rushed to her side. "Leave this creature to me. Fall back with the others."

"Starkad!" she said. She was pointing at the cavern. More pairs of glowing red eyes were advancing. At least a dozen pairs.

"Master!" Afzal shouted. Starkad glanced at the boy. The ice behind them had split. Skeletal hands erupted from that ice as more of the draugar began to claw their way free.

"We have stumbled upon the Gates of Hel," Tiny said. The big man was dragging the Axe away.

His assessment was hard to argue with. Starkad had fought draugar on rare occasions. He had never faced an army of them. Orvar had scrambled down the slope and was joining the others as they retreated. The nearest draug lunged at Starkad. He parried on one sword and attacked with the other. The draug blocked on its shield with practiced ease. They fell into the dance as more and more of the creatures advanced. Their war cries sounded more like hisses of things that hated life and light.

Starkad cut the draug's leg out from under it. It fell to the ice, then began to claw its way toward him. He leapt backward. "Retreat! Fall back!"

Ivar was hacking at one that had emerged from the ice. "Retreat where? The cocks are blocking us!"

Hervor roared, shearing a draug's shield, armour, and body with her runeblade. The creature dropped to the ice and did not move. At least something could kill these monsters.

"Go!" he shouted at her. "Go, forward." He pointed off along the river's path with his sword. "Find a way out of the canyon!"

“We will never make it!” she shrieked. “You think to outrun the dead?” Another of the creatures flung itself at her, swinging a massive axe. Starkad’s blade caught it in midair, stalling it just enough it did not reach her. Hervor hacked off the top of its skull. Its blood didn’t flow.

Ivar cried out in pain. A draug’s blade had torn through his armour above his gut. Bragi fell back, pressed hard by two of the dead warriors. They would all die. Die and rise as draugar themselves, to suffer in eternal torment. Almost, he could feel the Mist’s hunger, its desire to raise them as a hateful extension of itself. A black arrow sprouted from a draug on Bragi, and the creature faltered, then crumpled into the ice. And how many magic arrows did Orvar have left?

Starkad shoved Hervor away, then moved to fight off four of the draugar. The dead worked together, a fighting unit. They tried to flank him. Starkad was faster, able to parry them all, but not attack. They fought without fear, without caring about wounds or pain. And even when he struck them, they barely slowed. “Get everyone out of here!” he shouted at Hervor once more. “I’ll buy you time.”

“Release me!” the Axe bellowed. “Starkad, go! You’re the only one who can protect them. I’m dead from this wound anyway.”

Starkad ducked an axe blow, clipped the draug on the face, and rolled away. They were on him again in an instant, but he saw the Axe had worked free of Tiny’s grasp and was standing, his axe and shield in his hand. He could not walk, but he was trying to hold the ground. And he cast a look of pleading Starkad’s way in that instant: he wanted his death to mean something. He wanted to see Valhöll.

Starkad parried a sword blow and kicked the draug into its fellows. Then he turned and ran for the canyon. Hervor had done as he had bid, ushering Afzal and the others forward. They were running, skidding over ice, her sword lighting the way.

Starkad cast one last look at the Axe. A dozen draugar blocked his view already, swarming over the old veteran. Cursing, Starkad ran after the others. They had reached a dip in the canyon, where icy rocks rose in a pile.

“Up, up, up!” Hervor shouted, pointing. Tiny was already scaling those rocks, and he yanked Bragi up after him.

Starkad sheathed his swords and scrambled up the rocks. The Axe’s death would buy them a few breaths at most. The draugar would follow them up the cliff. “Run!” he ordered. “When you reach the top, just fucking run!”

Orvar unshouldered his bow once again. Standing with legs wide on a rock halfway up the cliff, the man nocked another black arrow. The draugar were closing in. Orvar loosed. The draug it struck shuddered and collapsed in a heap. The others had already climbed up past him. Arrows rained down from above, impacting the draugar but barely slowing them. Starkad glanced up. Hervor and Ivar were both shooting from above, little though it availed them.

Starkad leapt up to the next highest rock. His feet slipped, skidded, and he had to steady himself on the cliff. No time. No chance to breathe. He pulled himself up another rock and another. The moment he crested the top, he shoved Hervor back. “Those arrows are not doing trollshit to them. Run!”

Ivar loosed again. And again. Orvar had always tried to save his magic arrows, recover them whenever he could, Starkad knew. Such concerns scarce mattered if they all died here. Now, the man launched another black arrow, grimacing as he did so.

“Die you cock-stomping troll cocks!” Ivar bellowed.

Starkad ripped the skin of oil from his belt and popped the cork. He poured it over the rocks they had just climbed. He’d used so much to trap that Niflung. Had to hope this was enough. “Hold them off a moment!” He

struck flint to steel, but it took agonising breaths to light a damn torch. When it finally caught, he flung it down onto the rocks.

Draugar had already surged over them, climbing on each other in a mad rush to add the three of them to their numbers. The flames erupted around them, engulfing several of the creatures and turning them into blazing effigies lit by unholy light.

Starkad grabbed Ivar by the back of his mail and sent him running off after the others. And Starkad fled, Orvar beside him.



HIS LUNGS BURNT, his legs ached. The others were barely standing, and still he pushed them on. Hervor stumbled, and he grabbed her by the back of the neck and forced her to rise, to keep running. The dead would not stop, not until dawn drove them into hiding, and that hour would be long in coming.

Afzal was clutching his ribs, gasping. Starkad was failing them all. They would all die, and he could do naught to save them.

The ground here held less ice and had grown rocky. Cracked red earth spread out as far as he could see before them, broken up by numerous shallow craters. Ahead, steam erupted through the Mist like a waterspout. Everyone fell short, Afzal dropped to his knees. It had grown warm, Starkad realised, warm enough sweat slicked the inside of his habergeon. Another geyser erupted farther into the rock fields. This whole area stank like rotten eggs ... Sulphur?

“Out of Niflheim ... and into ... Muspelheim,” Ivar said between pants. Muspelheim, the world of Fire, whence came the eldalfar Afzal’s people named ifrit. Caliph sorcerers evoked ifrit to drive away the Mist and *its* dangers—perils like draugar.

“Get over by the geysers,” Starkad said.

“We’re like to get burnt there,” Tiny complained.



Starkad shook his head. Better a little burnt than frozen and cleft by draugar. “Make camp as close to the geysers as you safely can.”

Ivar trembled, clutching his abdomen, so Starkad helped him toward the camp he’d selected. “My gut feels like a beetle cock.”

“I don’t even know what that means, Loud. But I don’t smell shit, so maybe your bowels aren’t punctured.” Ivar grunted at that. They both knew if the blade had pierced his intestines, he was in for a long, painful dying. From the look of him, that might yet be his urd.

Everyone collapsed, none bothering with tents or bedrolls. Nor did they have wood for fire. Orvar stumbled from one man to the next, checking injuries of his crew. Their leader was swearing under his breath. The man was losing it, wasn’t he? They’d known dangers would lurk here, but Yngvi had known or said naught of an army of the dead. What man could harden his resolve to face such horror?

Tiny sat with his hands over his knees, staring at one of the geysers. The vent blew out small trails of steam every so often, but the big man barely reacted to it. “Are you injured?” Orvar asked the big man.

Tiny snorted. “Here and there. Naught serious.” He scratched his head. “Axe took that beast right in front. It was fast as aught I ever saw.”

Orvar nodded. “Therianthropes always are.”

Starkad grimaced. “I should’ve known, should’ve ...”

“’Tis not your fault, Eightarms,” Bragi said. “We’ve all heard tales of finfolk snatching up men and women. I just always thought it mere tales, wild fancies of the far reaches of the North Realms. Story was, the Skjöldungar—the Old Kingdom, that is, not the royal Danis taking their name—they had such ilk among them. But who has seen finfolk in the centuries since the Old War, aye?” He shook his head, seeming almost wistful, despite circumstance. “’Tis a wonder to have found, aye, though terror too. Maybe the Skjöldung legend held truth, and their shamans swam beneath the waves and helped them conquer the isles of the Gandvík.”

Maybe. But Starkad had seen varulfur and berserkir, so why shouldn't other therianthropes be real as well?

"He was a good man," Tiny said. "Died well."

Starkad grunted at that. The Axe had bought them their escape; without him, they'd have not made those rocks at all. "He fought for the Ynglings from way back. Never forgave himself for Alrek and Eric Agnesons, always somehow thought he should have protected them. You can't save men from themselves."

"No, Eightarms," Bragi said. "You can't save a man from himself."

He had no interest in whatever lesson the skald thought he was trying to impart. Instead, Starkad rose and made his way over to where Afzal had fallen. The young man lay on his side, eyes closed. Asleep? "Are we safe here?" Afzal asked, not opening his eyes. "There is fire beneath the ground."

Starkad blew out a breath and looked around. "I think these were lava fields. The steam from the geysers burns away the Mist. Draugar mislike fire, so they may not come here. Either way, we can't run forever."

Afzal offered a chuckle that turned into a cough. "I cannot run another step."

Starkad patted him on the shoulder. "Then rest."

"I may sleep, Master. I doubt there is rest to be had in this place. The island is tainted, thick with ghuls, aye, and whatever evil fate created them. Something dire happened on Thule."

Could an entire island be cursed? In Starkad's experience, vile things lived in places where Mankind did not walk. Actually, so-called civilised lands were not much better. Men could be nigh to as vile as vaettir and without the excuse of coming from some alien world. Starkad should know. "You want to leave?"

Afzal groaned. "I thought that would go without saying. Only Ivar feels the need to state such obviousness." Now Starkad chuckled. "Master ...

could we get back to the ship?”

“I don’t know. The draugar block the way we came.” He did not mention the other problem. The one that had niggled him since the Niflung had first attacked. The sorcerer might well have killed the men they set to guard the ship. Even had he not, the finfolk might have attacked. Five of the original crew were dead for certain. They could sail the ship with but a few men but could not row it with a small crew. If they were becalmed, they’d be well and truly fucked. Starkad had seen that happen and it ... He’d not ever wish to repeat it. Then again, winter storms could well kill them or throw them so far off course they’d never reach the known world again.

They had no easy escape from Thule.

But the men did not need to hear that. Faced with dangers beyond mortal ken, they had already drawn nigh to their breaking point. Starkad needed to drive them forward, keep them from dwelling on their losses or the dangers. Because if they realised how far beyond hope they had travelled, they might well turn on each other. The others, like Afzal, had probably begun to doubt the mission to winter here and prepare for a colony. And that meant they needed a fresh purpose.

That, at least, Starkad could give them.

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**DAYS GONE: TYR**

800 Age of Man

*V*ölsung's castle in Xanten was a stone behemoth. Had to be built by one of the Old Kingdoms. Men didn't build like this. Not anymore. Tyr stared at it, worked his jaw. Odin and a half dozen men and shieldmaidens waited behind him, all carefully picked by Tyr. Odin insisted on meeting this king in Hunaland. Tyr insisted on not letting him die.

Other Ás warriors held back, far off. Didn't want this to seem like an invasion. Odin thought he could make peace. If not—well, Tyr didn't fancy storming such a castle. They had built this place to guard against the Mist. Had to be. Except now, it served even better against Men. A spiked iron gate opened for them, creaking on chains as it rose into the wall. Half frozen already, though the snows hadn't thickened here. Not yet. "What a monster," Tyr mumbled.

"Smaller than Castle Niflung," Odin said behind him.

Men built *bigger* than this? Why? He'd have half expected these walls to hold against a fucking jötunn.

A big man strode out at the head of a small army. Scarred, bearded, bearing an axe that could've cleft right through shield and arm, both. "You come here to die, Ás?"

"To talk," Odin said.

The big warrior sneered. "You few walking in here, alone?"

Man thought them fools. Didn't seem to know just what Odin and Tyr had become. Hel, Tyr didn't know what he'd become. But when his pulse pounded hard enough, he was strong as a draug. Hard to control, but the apple made him a god. When it counted. But this thegn didn't know, thought them fools not to ask for a hostage ere walking into the castle.

"Can we not trust in our safety as guests of King Völsung?" Odin asked.

The warrior grunted, then motioned them to follow. Tyr went first, Odin a step behind him. The warrior led them into a courtyard. Wide, and decorated with a dragon carved of ice. Massive horned serpent, coiling through the centre yard. Linnorms, legends called these two-legged beasts. Even Hymir feared such monsters, called them something from before time.

"Wait here," Völsung's man said and strode into the hall.

The men behind Tyr cursed, or whispered prayers to Njörd, Freyr, Freyja. Still praying to the Vanir. Somehow forgetting the plan to overthrow them. Tyr didn't blame them. "Who carves such monstrous things as this dragon?"

Odin drummed his fingers on Gungnir. "A sorcerer."

"What? They have a sorcerer here?" Tyr was already reaching for his sword with one hand, his other touching iron. No good ever came from seidr. Sorcerers touched powers of Hel. The Mist had already begun to gather in the courtyard, held back by the torches of their men. Barely held back.

The king shook his head. "I'm not certain. This looks old." How did Odin know such things? The man had changed much in his time with the Niflungar. Too much. He saw things, knew things he ought not. Like his

damned blood brother. “We must have peace,” Odin said, soft, only for Tyr’s ears. “Despite the Althing, not all the jarls love me as their king.”

“Most probably don’t. They don’t have to love you. Respect matters more.”

“They respected my father. Me, they fear.”

Not without cause. “Everyone respected Borr. He was a great man.”

Odin turned to him with a level gaze. “And you still think me unworthy of that legacy.”

“Bah! I said naught of the sort. Unlike your new brother, I can speak plainly.”

“I made Loki my blood brother, and I’ll hear no ill of him, Tyr. He saved my life more than once and helped me avenge my father. What more *need* you know of him?”

“Whence does he hail, for one?” Arms folded over his chest, Tyr glowered at Odin. “Who are his people? What does he wish of us? Why the secrets?”

Odin waved away his questions. “Worry more over the jarls, Tyr. I learnt recently Father had gone to meet Jarl Arnbjorn Radmundrson in Unterhagen.”

“What? Frigg’s uncle? How did you learn such a thing?”

Odin shook his head. Hel. More secrets. Tyr groaned. The Jarl of the Itrmanni had been there, then. Had known of Borr’s urd. Had shared naught of it, nor had he attended the funeral. Tyr ought to wring justice from the man’s hide.

Except, Odin needed the jarls now. And Tyr had promised he would do things right. No more playing politics in the shadows. If he could not meet Arnbjorn in open challenge, he would not fight him at all. Even if it meant letting the past lie.

Evening swept in, the Mist growing heavy. Still this king kept them waiting in the courtyard, flaunting his power. Odin stood still, leaning on

Gungnir, unoffended, or wishing to appear so. When the big thegn at last returned, the man still sneered. Tyr would welcome the chance to wipe it off his face. But Odin sought peace. Like Borr. He *had* become worthy.

“The king will hear your offer,” the thegn said, and motioned them into the central hall. This hall stood flush against the rear outer wall. Inside, a twisted tree grew from the hall’s heart, its branches tangled in the rafters, reaching out windows near the roof.

“Huh.” Quite the sight.

The king’s throne sat a step above the rest of the floor, in the back of the hall, forcing them to pass around the tree ere laying eyes on the man. Völsung had the look of a warrior. Powerful muscles. A sword rested against his throne. Young for a king, a little over twenty winters, maybe.

“So the great Ás king graces my hall.” Völsung rose and gestured around his grand home. Then he turned back to them and strode off the raised step. “Odin, the man who thinks himself a god. Already two of my fellow kings of Hunaland have fallen before you, and yet you come to me and wish to talk.”

“Your fellow kings tried to stop us from going where we must. I implore you not to repeat their error.”

“Ah.” Völsung nodded, looked to each of the many thegns and warriors standing around his hall. “Yes, I see. But you do not realise, I think, that I am not like the little men you have marched past thus far. I am the son of Rerir, and grandson of Sigi the Swift, who carved this kingdom out of the lands of his enemies.” Völsung turned and pointed to the sword against his throne. “With that. So, you see, I too come from a glorious line, risen as you have done. And I do not fear you.”

Fool, then.

Odin stepped forward to meet the Hun, hands open before him. “I don’t ask for your fear, nor have I come to take your castle. Let us pass on. That is all.”

Völsung cocked his head. “Let an army march through my lands? And then? Trust to your word that none of your immense horde will take to raping and plundering every village betwixt here and wherever you are bound? Or worse, risk that you might not intend to leave at all? Perhaps you find my lands more favourable for your people?” He chuckled and some of the other men in the hall joined him as if it were a jest. “Go back to Aujum. Your numbers are many, but so are my allies should I call a full levy, and I would trust in their honour over that of your mass of women and children.”

Tyr spat. “Brazen fool! Odin offers you a chance to avoid war and you shit on it! Any one of my shieldmaidens could take any three of your warriors.”

“Tyr.” Odin’s voice did not carry far, but it held such iron Tyr fell silent. He had spent so long representing Odin. He had forgotten that the man could speak for himself.

Odin waved his hand at the hall now, pausing to take in the great tree. “The ancient oak, Barnstokkr, has become the symbol of your house.”

Völsung shrugged. “So skalds speak of it even in Aujum?” They didn’t, not that Tyr knew. How did Odin know?

“And you speak of the glories of Sigi the Swift, carving out his kingdom. He built his riches on raids and, in the end, died to treachery from his in-laws.”

Völsung gaped. “How do you—”

“Still surpassed by his son, your father, who reclaimed this great throne. But then”—Odin looked far away—“then Rerir’s wife had no child. And he sought guidance from a witch who bought your life at the price of your father’s. Such is your glory, Völsung.”

The Hun king backed away, holding up a hand in warding. “You cannot know such things ...”

Odin banged the butt of Gungnir on the floor. A loud crack echoed through the hall. “I know a great many things. The Æsir do not seek your



people as enemies. Believe me when I say to you, you want us for enemies even less.”

The king slumped back in his throne, head in his hand. He fell silent for long enough murmurs began to spread through the hall. At last he looked up. “You wish to buy passage through my lands? Return in three days with tribute befitting such a request. Then we may bargain.”

Odin spread his hands in acceptance, spun, and marched out of the hall. Tyr’s king did not speak until they had left the fortress, walking into the deepening twilight. Then he motioned the other warriors on to join the camp. When they had gone, Odin turned to Tyr. “It is unlike you to lose control thus.”

Tyr frowned. True enough, and he did not need Odin to point it out. “The man vexes me. His arrogance grates on me like an open sore.”

“True enough. Yet, we both know these past two moons have proved challenging in more ways than simple tests of strength in battle. You find yourself working and fighting alongside a woman you might rather not.”

Tyr groaned. “You need not speak of this.”

“Zisa Naglisdotter remains a part of my court.”

“My lord, please.”

Odin held up his hand in surrender. He started to walk away, then called over his shoulder. “All Men must accept their urd, Tyr.”

Tyr scowled at Odin’s back as the king trod away. Accept urd. Even when urd became sitting beside the wife who betrayed him, the man she betrayed him *with*. Hel take them both.

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## THE DÖGLINAR

### 25 Age of the Æsir

*Deep sleep held her and, even knowing she dreamt, Hervor could not force herself to wake. She lay in darkness, the only light streaming from Tyrfinn in her hand, the only sound the pounding of her heart. The blade craved blood and, unsated, it was willing to settle for hers.*

*In the darkness, shadows moved. With the clarity of dream, she knew them for the ghosts of her kin. The twelve sons of Arngrim, whom she had promised vengeance. She had sworn an oath upon the sword in her hand, and now, those ghosts watched her, impatience burgeoning, unable to escape their torment whilst her vow remained unfulfilled. They did not speak and yet, Hervor knew—they understood her promise, hungered for its fulfilment. If she failed, if she died without revenging them, their urd would become hers. A wandering shade haunted by her failure and unable to ever cut ties fully with Midgard.*

She woke with a start, sitting up ere she had time to realise how much her body protested. The pains sleep had dulled slammed back into her. Her wounded back, her swollen ribs, and now numerous cuts from draug blades.

Her throat was raw, parched. Funny though, this place no longer seemed to reek of sulphur. She supposed she had grown accustomed to it.

“You wake,” Starkad said. She turned to find him sitting, watching her.

“Ugh.” She stretched. “What do you want?”

“I ...” He shook his head, grimaced. “You brought some of this down on us.”

She snorted. “I did not force any man to come here, nor seed this island with finfolk and draugar. You’re simply an arse who’s scared of women.”

“I fear *naught*, shieldmaiden.” Then he was a fool, too. Plenty on Thule seemed worthy of fear. With a grunt, Starkad rose and cracked his neck. “I will speak to everyone. Come, rouse yourself.”

By Odin’s balls, standing hurt even more than sitting, but she followed Starkad to where the others had gathered. Bragi and Ivar sat, the latter half curled over the wound in his gut. She could slump down again and join them. Her aching legs begged her to do it. But then, she couldn’t trust herself to be able to rise again after that. She did not think she’d ever been so tired in her life.

Orvar, their supposed leader, was now looking to Starkad as if he might have the answers. Starkad paced around, pausing to pat Afzal on the shoulder. Finally, he turned to look at everyone. “This is a place of fire, and as such, it seems the draugar will not pursue us hither. I don’t know whether we are safe from the finfolk—perhaps so. Maybe they don’t even know where we are. It little matters.” He turned, sweeping his arm out to indicate the cracked, barren landscape. “It matters naught, in fact, because we have no food, no water. There is naught here to sustain us, even if we wished to linger. Nor can we go back the way we came; the draugar likely lie in wait there, and the dead have no end of patience.”

“We can travel up, through the mountains,” Tiny said. He stood with his arms folded over his massive chest. “Avoid the canyons and they might not find us.”

Starkad nodded. "Perhaps. Maybe we could make it back to the ship."

Ivar coughed. "Assuming those cock-thumping finfolk aren't waiting for us there."

"What do they even want of us?" Tiny asked. "Do they eat Men?"

Bragi clucked his tongue. "Tales say the finfolk take men to be husbands to their women, and women as wives." At that he grinned at Hervor. She scowled at the fool skald. There was not a damned thing amusing here, least of all therianthropes abducting men or women for forced marriages.

"Wait ..." Ivar said. "You think they wanted Orvar to ... fuck a seal?" Well. Maybe there was something *slightly* amusing.

Orvar spat and glared at Ivar. "Keep it up, Loud. Maybe you can fuck one of my arrows."

Starkad cast a glance at Orvar. "I think we must discuss this land."

Orvar groaned, then nodded. "Look here, all ... I ... have an idea whence the draugar come. Ere the days of the Old Kingdoms, the dvergar had four great cities in the four corners of the World. This island, Thule, was home to the northernmost city, Nordri. And those draugar must have been their human warriors or else warriors sent against them by one of the Old Kingdoms." Orvar pointed toward the heart of the island. "Either way, their city was lost, abandoned. And filled with a dverg hoard. Gold, silver, gems—more wealth than we could carry."

Hervor worked her tongue over her teeth. Dverg gold for the taking ... Small wonder Yngvi and Gylfi had partnered on this expedition. If Orvar spoke the truth, this Nordri could make everyone here wealthy enough to claim a jarldom. At the *least*. And dvergar crafted things too, objects imbued with power. Tyrfin was forged by the great smith Dvalin. What other wonders might his brethren have made and left behind here?

Of course, with such wealth, the Ynglings would become that much more difficult foes to destroy. Well, first things came first. Hervor needs

must attend to the Arrow's Point. Even if she was willing to break her vow, she did not relish the thought of spending eternity as a restless ghost in punishment for such transgression.

"Dverg gold ..." Ivar said. "It tends to cost more than it buys. Steal from them and they may curse you."

Starkad shook his head. "No dvergar live here now. Thule is dead, long dead and nigh to lost to the Ages." That Niflung had called this place vile and had warned they would all be dragged down to Hel. He had known about the draugar. How many more of the ghosts might dwell here?

"We come back with that gold, and men will be telling our tales for a hundred years or more," Bragi said.

"I like taking stuff," Ivar said.

"Aye, Loud, because the rest of us raid out of boredom," Bragi muttered.

"We don't know what might lurk in this Nordri either," Hervor said. "Maybe the finfolk have gone there ... maybe more draugar dwell there." Still, if they went to the city, it might offer the chance to fulfil her vow. And if they managed to plunder some gold on the way back, she'd make certain to get her share. She could worry about stopping the Ynglings from getting theirs later. 'Twas, after all, a long way back to Uppsalir.

Afzal sighed and rubbed his eyes. "You really think the seven of us can face down an unknown number of ghuls and other spirits? Forgive me, Master, but our last fight with these finfolk cost the Axe. And that was against four of them, with the ghuls not expecting us."

Ivar spat. "We weren't expecting naked people to turn into seals and try to bite our faces off."

"Indeed," Bragi deadpanned. "My first time with that was a shock, as well. Happens more as you get older, though."

"Look," Starkad said. "We don't know where the finfolk are. I do have a general idea where to find the city. We can continue north, out of these lava

fields, and search for the city. Either way, we have to press on.”

Ivar groaned as he rose. “Then what are we waiting for?”

Hervor grunted. More walking, more searching. More wandering in the night.



THE CRASHING of water heralded their approach to the great gorge long ere it came into sight. They came upon it from a frozen plateau, her crampons digging into the icy shelf as the sound drew nigh. Across the chasm, steep, icy cliffs dropped down to a series of shelves, each pouring more and more waters into a rent that split the island in half, running farther than Hervor could see in the Mist. Vapours wafted out of that gorge like the forging of the World between fire and ice at the beginning of time. Maybe 'twas here where the World began, caught between Niflheim and Muspelheim.

Everything but the cataracts themselves had frozen, and even amid them, ice crusted over rocks in great mounds that looked to have been built over winter after icy winter.

The others appeared as bemused as her, staring into the abyss. Starkad, who had somehow become their leader, stood motionless, as if transfixed by the Otherworldly beauty and horror of the vista. Hervor could not blame him. Bragi mumbled lines in verse, as if trying to find words to capture the experience. Afzal had cupped his hands in what she could only assume was prayer to the eldalfar, or whatever he paid homage to. Tiny was supporting Ivar, who had turned sallow, mostlike aflame with fever.

Orvar stood at the gorge's edge. One good shove ...

“I'm going to build my palace up here,” Ivar said, though his words sounded half garbled. “Live like ... an Ás. Claim the whole damned island. Ivarsland. That's what I'm going to call it.”

“I think this place is already claimed,” Tiny said. “By Hel.”

“Hel can suck my—”

“Weapons,” Starkad said.

“Weapons?” Ivar said. “Eh? I don’t usually call it—”

Starkad drew his blades and pointed one in the direction they had come from, over the plateau. Hervor stared into the Mist, seeing naught. At first. Then the shapes emerged, clambering over rocks, advancing toward them. The dead came from the Mist, a few at first. Then more and more—more than she could easily count.

“Dead cocks trying to steal my palace,” Ivar said while unshouldering his bow.

“How many of those magic arrows do you have left?” Starkad asked Orvar.

“Uh, one.”

“Then shoot the first one,” Starkad said. “After that, those with bows try to put arrows in their eyes. Maybe we can blind them.”

Ivar chuckled. “He thinks I’m Arrow’s Point to make a shot like that.”

Hervor’s fingers brushed over Tyrfing’s golden hilt. It was humming, calling her. Gleaming, incarnadine eyes appeared, drawing nearer. “Can we flee?” she asked.

“Dawn is long off,” Starkad answered. “We’ll not make it. Not all of us.”

Tiny slapped her on the back. “Let’s see that runeblade one last time, eh? We shall make an ending to make our ancestors proud.”

Aye. Tonight, Tyrfing would feast not on the living but on the dead. She jerked it free of its sheath. It had grown warm, angry. Like her. A hint of ghostly flame arose around it.

Orvar, Ivar, and Bragi launched several rounds of arrows at the advancing draugar. The first, hit by that magic arrow, crumpled in a heap and did not rise. The others barely slowed. Shafts stuck out of their chests, shields, even skulls. And still they came on.

“I hate dead people,” Ivar grumbled. Their bowmen switched to melee weapons.

The draugar surged among them. Hervor lost track of the others as she hewed, ducked, blocked on her shield. A draug with an axe leapt at her. She juttied her shield out, smacking it in the face and sending it crashing onto the ice. Another advanced with a sword. Tyrfing sheared its weapon arm off at the elbow. Both the fallen creature and the one-armed one continued to come after her, forcing her back. The maimed one grabbed the rim of her shield and pulled. Felt like it would rip *her* arm off. Hervor let her arm slip free of the straps and the draug fell over backward from its effort. She spun, swiping Tyrfing at the other draug, which had risen to its feet. The runeblade cut through its skull. This time it did not rise.

The one with her shield did, though, and ran at her swinging it like a weapon. Hervor dodged backward and swung Tyrfing. It cracked the shield, wood splintering under her blow. Shame—that had been a good shield, well made. The draug tossed aside the useless boards and lunged at her like it meant to strangle her with its single, rotting hand. She couldn’t get Tyrfing back into position fast enough, so she dove to the side, rolling.

Another draug jumped on her. Its weight knocked her on her back. The stench of decaying flesh hit her in a wave. The draug atop her chopped down with an axe. Hervor ducked her head to one side, let go of Tyrfing, then caught its arm with both hands. It continued to drive the axe toward her face with Otherworldly strength. Those glowing eyes bored into her, as if it would consume her body and soul alike. It opened its mouth, revealing sharpened canines dripping with black saliva. That mouth lowered toward her face even as its axe pressed down.

Hervor cried out, straining to keep the rusted axe blade from biting into her forehead.

The draug’s head flew free from its shoulders, and all the strength went out of its limbs. She thrust it aside, snatched up Tyrfing. Starkad stood



nearby, already engaging more draugar. Odin's balls, he was fighting five ... no, *six* of them. And had still diverted himself to save her.

Panting, she scrambled back to her feet even as two more of the dead warriors charged her. When not chasing prey, they ambled like men in agony. But on the battlefield, they were every bit as fast as the living and twice as strong, at least. But then, Hervor was no novice. She had trained her whole life with a blade. She was the daughter of Angantyr, famed berserk and champion of Bolmsö. She was of the Döglinar, mighty warriors of the Old Kingdoms, and she would do them proud. Hervor bellowed a war cry and flew into the nearest draug. It parried, dodged, fought like a Man.

With both hands, she grasped Tyrfing and chopped straight down at the creature. It parried. Or tried. Its blade snapped in half, and Tyrfing bit into its skull. She jerked the blade free just in time to dodge the attack of the other draug. The impact numbed her arms. She gave more ground. Another of the creatures broke off from Starkad and charged her. They must have realised Tyrfing was the greatest threat. And they'd come to take it from her, to try to steal her family's legacy.

Aye, over her dead fucking body. She bellowed again, defying them. Exhaustion had slowed her, but she had left that behind. *Father* ... Let her Dögling ancestors see her this night. Let her earn her place amongst them.

One of the draugar bore spear and shield. It thrust at her. She leapt back, knocking the point aside with her sword. The other rushed her with a two-handed axe. It swung the weapon in a great overhand cleave. She barely twisted out of the way. The axe split the ice by her feet and bit a full foot down into it. The draug jerked on its weapon like it had stuck. Hervor swept Tyrfing across its neck and spun, turning to face the spearman again. Not fast enough. The spearpoint caught her left arm, scraped along her hauberk, and tore a chunk out of the iron and her flesh both. The blow spun her around, screaming. She was stumbling to her knees, but she continued to

turn, swinging Tyrfing. The runeblade lopped off the draug's leg and sent it crashing to the ground the same time as her.

Shrieking, she clambered atop it and ran it through. Blood streamed down her arm. She looked up. Tiny was hacking away with his broadsword. Starkad had gone to help Afzal who was hard-pressed, unable to hold the dead back with his curved blade.

Three of the draugar surrounded Ivar. One had caught him in a bear hug. Even over the raging battle, Hervor could have sworn she heard bone breaking in that embrace. Ivar buried his axe in the draug's skull. Another of the creatures latched onto his arm and bit down on his shoulder.

Hervor stumbled to her feet, ran toward him. The third draug drove a sword straight through Ivar's back. Loud shuddered. His head went limp. Hervor slashed across his killer's chest ere it could free the blade, and the draug dropped in a heap. The one that had bit Ivar released him and flung itself at Orvar.

The pair of them stumbled toward the waterfall's edge. They struggled, caught in an embrace, the draug crushing the life out of Orvar. Hervor glanced around. Mist blanketed everything, and no ally in sight ... This was it. This was her chance. She could feel her father, her uncles watching, crying out to be avenged. The whole line of the Döglinar bade her strike, even if striking now might cost her life.

She stalked closer. Should they survive the night, none of the others would know; they'd think the draugar responsible. She launched herself at the pair, swinging Tyrfing. Her blow sheared through the draug and sent Orvar pitching over backward.

Falling into the gorge, vanishing into Mist. Hervor's breath caught. She'd done it ...

A heavy impact drove her backward, and she fell to the ground beneath another draug, skittering close to the edge of the plateau she had just shoved Arrow's Point off. The draug had no weapon but rained blows upon her

with its hands. Even through her war-garb, those blows felt like getting hit with a mace. Blood stung her eyes.

She flailed, trying to dislodge the creature. It bit her shoulder as it had done to Ivar, its maw was at once burning and freezing, sending pulses of agony through her. She shrieked, twisted. Somehow she managed to roll atop it. It tore great gouges out of her shoulder, sending waves of pain shooting into her arm, her neck. Wailing, she managed to rise halfway. It shoved her again, and she fell onto her back. It leapt for her. She jerked her knee up to her face and kicked out. Her crampons drove through the draug's eyes and skull. The creature's arms flailed at her.

She pushed away with her leg, lifting it. "Hurts, doesn't it!" With her left hand, she patted around until she closed on Tyrfing's hilt. Awkward, but if Starkad could fight with either hand ... she rammed the blade upward, impaling the draug. It struggled a moment more ere going limp. Finally, she dropped her leg and rolled. It took both hands pushing against the corpse to free her foot from its skull.

A chilling hand grabbed her injured shoulder and hefted her aloft, heedless of her screams. She tried to grab up Tyrfing. The draug that held her kicked the blade. It skittered along the ice and pitched over the plateau, falling into the rising Mist of the gorge and vanishing into the night.

"No!" she shrieked. "No!" Father's sword. Her legacy, her inheritance! Her honour, her oath, her *life*. She slapped the draug's skull with her left hand. She might as well have punched a wall. It raised her to its face, lifting her off the ground with one hand. Those glaring, crimson pinpoints of light, reaching into her, hating her with a fire beyond imagination. Its loathing of her so eclipsed her hatred of Arrow's Point and the Ynglings, she felt like a child having a tantrum. This was the enmity of Hel, a cold hatred of all living things. Of her.

Tears welled at the corners of her eyes. Pain, fear, or some other primal emotion she could not name.

With a gasp, she tore free her eating knife from its sheath around her neck. This she buried in one of those hateful eyes. The draug flailed, spun. Shrieked in defiance of her petty attack. It shoved her free. She stumbled backward, skidding on ice. Her foot slipped.

And she pitched backward, tumbling into the Mist.

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**DAYS GONE: SIGYN**

800 Age of Man

Their camp lay south of the Hun kingdom of Rijnland, in a place called Swabia, Sigyn had learnt. The local king was beholden to Völsung, and a much more powerful monarch, and thus they had secured passage through these lands by bargaining with the ruler of Rijnland. They had camped about a hill in a lightly forested plain, with hundreds of fires dotting the landscape, warding against the Mist. This night, she had not seen Loki and thus had taken to wandering the dark paths between the fires, hunting for her lover or—at the least—something of note to pass the time.

So much flame kept the Mist from thickening here, and instead it coiled about her ankles in weak eddies, lent a rufescent hue from the fires. She took to eavesdropping on those she passed, if only for a moment, curious how the people had accepted this long march, so reminiscent of the Great March of Vingethor. Like the king of old, Odin brought them to a new home, aye, but in this case, they must drive out the *gods* who dwelt there now. As expected, fear flitted from fire to fire, thicker than the Mist, apt to

sunder this alliance if Odin and Frigg took no care of it. How could Men not fear such plans as their king made?

The march had led her to adopt trousers like a man or shieldmaiden, for it better suited the hunts she oft went out on. Too, she had cut her hair to just past her shoulders, finding it more manageable in the wilds that way. Everything was changing, her included. Warrior or no, Sigyn was determined to have something to contribute to her people on this sojourn.

As she passed further from the press, into the denser Mist, she espied Idunn, wandering toward the wood. Sigyn could not say quite what possessed her to follow the goddess. Was it the dread she could not quell that, for reasons unknown, the Vanr led them all into a trap? Or perhaps 'twas but Sigyn's incessant, oft damning curiosity. Still, that was all her Mist-mad plan, challenging her people, and Sigyn could stand to learn a bit more of the Vanr.

So she stalked her until, at last, Idunn came unto another fire—one set by Loki, who sat alone, far apart from the rest of the Æsir. What in the Gates of Hel were these two about? Sigyn crouched, watching the Vanr, who lingered a time as if warring with herself over whether to approach Sigyn's lover. Sigyn's cheeks flushed hot, her gut roiled at the unwanted fear they met for some tryst. No! Sigyn would not allow herself to doubt her beloved's loyalty to her. In the past year, never once had he given her cause to question his devotion, and she wronged him to question it now.

At last, Idunn drifted over and knelt beside Loki's fire. Sigyn's lover did not look to her. "You do not savour the festivities," the Vanr said. "They celebrate that Swabia has opened its borders to us."

"I've seen a great many festivals. One is not so different from the next."

Idunn nodded slowly, then looked off in the direction of the camps. "It is he, is it not?"

"You suspected that quite some time ago, I imagine, even ere you first came to him."

“Yeah, he’s not your puppet, you know.” There was spite in Idunn’s words, malice almost, unlike aught Sigyn had ever heard in her voice.

“Nor yours, Idunn. You play a dangerous game if you think to manipulate the Destroyer.” Destroyer? That had been the word in the dverg prophecy ...

*THE SOUND of a horn | the call of Fate,  
In Ragnarök | Destroyer wakes.*

SIGYN’S MOUTH FELT DRY, the chill that seized her having little to do with the breeze running through the wood. What in the Gates of Hel did Loki and Idunn know about all this?

The Vanr woman grew silent for a time. “I know who you are, Loki. I know why you had an apple left. You had no need to eat the one Odin gave you, not after you tasted one long, long ago.” He what? Loki had always held such mystery about him, such depth, but ... he had been immortal already? Was ancient, like Idunn?

“Longer than you can imagine,” the man said.

“My grandmother *never* forgave you for what happened to my grandfather. You know that, don’t you? I’m not going to let you do it again. Not here.”

“Chan—” Loki stopped and cleared his throat, visibly steadying himself. Had Idunn almost made him lose control? Sigyn could scarce guess what it must take for that to happen. “Your grandmother was an amazing woman, one I respected and cared about. But she saw the World as a simpler place than it really is. As someone who has lived as long as you have, you ought to realise that ... And, Idunn ... if you come between me and Odin, you shall regret it.”

Idunn rose. “Yeah, me, I’m well accustomed to regret, and as you say, it comes with longevity, piles upon us in stones and pebbles until we become buried under mountains of sorrow. We are left to wonder how we keep from suffocating beneath such a weight.” She paused. “And you? How many worlds must burn before you?”

Loki shook his head. “Fire is life.”

At that, Idunn snorted and stalked from his fire, forcing Sigyn to crouch lower to avoid discovery, though she felt certain the hammering of her heart would reveal her. As the Vanr passed, she threw a spiteful glance back toward Sigyn’s lover, and Sigyn was left to wonder what else had gone between them, unsaid. ’Twas no tryst, no, but something she never could have imagined, and the weight of what she’d seen had settled upon her chest, made breathing hard. Was he a Vanr to have known Idunn’s *grandmother*?

“You can come out now,” Loki said, and the shock of it struck her almost as a blow, left her, for a moment, paralysed with dread. She felt as though she had wandered into some dream, or a game perhaps, the rules of which she had not grasped, though all around her the players gathered.

For a dire instant, Sigyn considered fleeing, pretending—stupidly—she had not seen, had not heard. But he knew, and there was no running from truth. Slowly, she rose, made her way over to Loki’s fire, and settled across from him. She was close enough she could have reached out, touched his knee, and yet, never had she felt farther from her beloved than at this moment. “I ...” Sigyn swallowed. “I was trained by a master woodsman. How did you know I followed you?”

“Is that the best question you have?”

No, and she scoffed at her paltry attempts to redirect so as not to need to ask the others, fearing as she did, the answers that must impend. “What happened with Idunn?”



“Life, and history, are merciless, using us in ways that needs must erode the fabric of our selves as waves wearing down the shoreline. She, having suffered much, carries her anger like a shield. She thinks to ward herself with it, but sooner or later, some catastrophic event shall force her to acknowledge the agonising truth that holding that simmering ire did not protect her but rather allowed unseen wounds to fester.”

There was something wearing him down as well, she knew, though not anger, she thought. Something else, grief perhaps, or some other emotion vast beyond naming, fathomless as the sea. Aye, that was it, and now, she could have chided herself for not seeing it in him sooner and suspected the depth of his age. “Tell me what burden you carry.”

“Would that I could. Take comfort in knowing your mere presence eases all burdens.” He stared into the flames, watching the dance, the pattern.

On impulse, Sigyn scooped closer and slipped her fingers into his hand, and Loki cast a sharp, pensive look her way. His crystalline eyes locked with hers, and she felt as though he looked into her soul and there saw something of which even she was unaware. For a moment, she was certain he would speak of what he beheld, but he only crooked a faint smile.

“I saw Yggdrasil,” she said. “The first night we made love, I saw a vision of it, in my mind. Are you one of the Vanir?”

“No, Sigyn. I am ... something else.”

“A god?”

“No. Nor truly are the Vanir. The space between gods and Men is perception and arrogance, pride and foolishness. Naught lasts forever. All empires fall; all Eras burn down to cinders.”

That was but half an answer, and she needed more, always. She squeezed his hand. “I love you. I do. But I want the truth.”

“Some things cannot be given, only taken.”

She tapped her finger against her lip. “I know what you did in that tafl game, back then, but I can’t see *how* you did it, planning so many moves in

advance. But now I'm left to wonder, if you have not done the same thing here, moving pawns hither and thither, down through the Ages toward an endgame no one else has yet glimpsed."

"Tafl has a finite number of moves available at any given junction. Life offers much more intricate designs."

Sigyn sighed, held her peace a time. "Tell me what it meant, your conversation with Idunn. Try to explain."

He watched her before answering. "It means the past cannot stay buried forever. It means the future will haunt our every step. We are, all of us, set on a path that has only just begun. A spark ignites embers in the darkness that, tended well, become a flame. The flame spreads like a living being, writhing and feasting, engorging itself into a conflagration that sweeps across the land and swallows all in its path until only ashes remain."

Ere she could ask more, he reached into the campfire and from it drew forth a fistful of flame, dancing around his hand, casting his face in a reddish gleam. "The fire is lit. Now we tend it. And we wait for the inevitable inferno."



"ALL I'M SAYING," Fulla said, "is if you didn't take so much mind about the doings of others, you'd have more mind for the minding of yourself."

Sigyn rolled her eyes. Forests covered so much of Hunaland the Æsir had no real choice save to break into bands, scavenging and hunting as they passed. They walked in one such band, guards on all sides. Geri Odinsdotter wiggled in Sigyn's arms, but they had no time to let the child walk about on her own. "You seem to be intimating that the mind is some finite thing, as if my having studied some small portion of Hunaland's history prevented me from learning something relevant to the Æsir. Forgetting for the moment that, as we are now in their lands, the history of Hunaland *is* relevant to us."

Fulla huffed, no doubt more exhausted from holding Freki Odinson. The maid hadn't had an apple, after all. "There now, you see that? I'm not intimidating nobody, am I now? But you don't mind yourself, so I have to do it for you. If I left you by your ownness, you'd probably be emptying your chamber pot without warning the alfar afore you toss it. Sure as sure, a way to vex an alf is by tossing hot piss on them." The woman touched the iron pendant around her neck in warding.

Sigyn snorted. "I think that'd vex anyone. But that's just folk superstition. If the alfar exist at all—"

"Do you yet doubt it?" Frigg asked. "After everything we've seen, after tasting the fruit of Yggdrasil, how can you doubt the reality of the Otherworld?"

Sigyn shrugged. "I've seen golden apples, and I've seen trolls. Agilaz has seen draugar with his eyes. Not many"—she looked pointedly at Fulla—"not many reliable Men claim to have seen an alf. But let us say your Alfheim exists and the alfar live in it. You think they spend their time standing about, invisible, waiting to have piss thrown on them so they might have a reason to take offence? Does that seem a likely use of a vaettr's time?"

"Oh, Sigyn," Fulla said. "Sure as sure, they're not just awaiting having the chamber pot thrown. But you can't rightly know what business they may be about. Could well be a dozen vaettir in these woods, watching us carry on about them. All listening close-like to your non-respecting tongue." At that, the maid looked around the trees and frowned as if she might suddenly spot these invisible watchers, once more running fingers over her iron pendant.

Sigyn wanted to deny that, too, to deny aught could watch them, unseen and unheard, but close enough to observe them. She wanted to deny any such thing, but given what she'd seen in the runes beneath Halfhaugr, she no longer was certain of aught in the World. She had witnessed, last night,

her lover hold flame in the palm of his hand, and within that fire, she had seen the promise of a future more perilous than her people had dreamt.

Ere Sigyn could form an appropriate answer, Frigg spoke. “So these lands belong to Völsung. And you were saying Agilaz Farshot knew his father.”

“Knew *of* his father, anyway, aye. Rerir’s uncles murdered his father, Sigi the Swift, and stole the kingdom. A wanderer—some say a friend of his father’s—came to him and helped him retake that castle we saw a few days back, all in one bloody night. But Rerir didn’t sit overlong on the throne. He fell ill while campaigning against his neighbours, and he died ere the birth of his son.”

“Hmm.” Frigg didn’t seem to be truly listening. The queen of the Æsir oft remained preoccupied—hardly a surprise—but she ought to have paid attention to such details. A great many kings reigned in Hunaland, and whilst Sigyn did not have tales of all of them, they should use what knowledge they could.

“Something else troubles you?”

“Oh.” Frigg cradled Thor in her arms, looked to his face a moment. “Naught at all.”

Sigyn scoffed. If Frigg sought the solitude of her thoughts, she ought not have asked Sigyn to join her band. Sigyn could have walked beside Loki, who surely *would* have engaged her in interesting conversation, assuming she could entice him to offer more answers about last night. After his demonstration, he’d left her behind, to make her way back to her camp. No matter how many hours they spent talking, Sigyn could never quite figure the man out. There was always at least one more secret. Loki never lied to her—not that she could tell—but he cultivated mysteries and half-truths, manipulating Odin and the Æsir as effortlessly as breathing. To what end? He seemed to genuinely care for all of them, to want to save them, such that their every anguish pained him. Yet, still, her lover concealed so

many things. Loki had shown her something she could not shake from her mind. The *seidr* he demonstrated—not mere spoken curses nor sung importuning of a *landvaettr*—would have sounded a *skald*’s fancy, had she not seen it with her own eyes, but the man’s only explanations had been evasions that revealed naught.

A sharp, brief scream rang out in the woods to her left. Followed by another. Sigyn reacted on instinct, grabbed Frigg, and pulled her low to the ground. Fulla dropped down as well. An instant later, arrows thunked into nearby trees. Several of their guards fell the same moment. Shafts jutting from their chests, throats, legs. The whole band exploded into chaos, drawing weapons and racing off after hidden attackers.

Fulla had begun to shriek. Sigyn glanced back at her sister. She could help, use her bow—but she couldn’t do so *and* protect Frigg and the babes. Another *Ás* warrior fell as an arrow pierced his eye. His blood splattered them. Dripping with it, Frigg screamed.

Sigyn grabbed her sister’s arm. “Get up! Move!” They had been outflanked. Of course she had heard people moving about, but with a band this size she’d thought ... well she should have paid more attention. She shoved Frigg behind a tree, then went back for Fulla. The maid still knelt on the ground, her body shielding Freki, trembling like a sapling in a blizzard. Sigyn jerked the woman to her feet and ushered them away.

Footfalls, screaming, fighting. So many people, it was hard to tell who was on which side. But the *Æsir* had lost a lot of men already. Sigyn could run to the sound of people, but with each passing moment it grew less likely they would be *her* people. No. She had to get Frigg and the babes away from the enemy, even if that meant also getting them away from their allies. She’d trust her abilities over those of the *Ás* warriors in this forest. Agilaz had taught her well. She paused a heartbeat, filtering the sounds. The fewest people were to her right. “Follow me and stay low!”

She rushed forward, darting between trees as swiftly as she could while running in a crouch. The Huns had archers stalking these woods. She couldn't let them get a clear shot. Geri had begun to wail; Sigyn pressed the girl closer to her chest. "Shh. Not now. Please, please, not now." Fulla cursed and stumbled, and Sigyn glanced at her. Rising from a root she'd tripped on, hidden by snow. "Keep moving," Sigyn said. "Walk where I walk."

The maid's breath came in ragged gasps that, to Sigyn, sounded loud enough to draw every scout within bowshot. They didn't have her hearing, though, thank Njörd. Footfalls sounded ahead, snow crunching underfoot. Sigyn made an abrupt turn. She didn't even know which way they were heading anymore, not after the chaos, and she couldn't see the sun through the Mist and tree cover. Still, even if they wandered deeper into Hunaland, she could get them back to the Æsir eventually. Right now, she had to get the other women away from here. Anywhere was better than here. She pushed on, through the forest.



THEY HAD GONE another half hour ere Fulla toppled over. The maid tried to rise, then slumped down again, panting and sobbing. "I c-can't. I can't ... I ..."

Sigyn looked around. "I think it's all right. I haven't heard sounds of people in a while. We should be safe."

Frigg slumped down, holding Thor even tighter against her. "Places without people are where vaettir most thrive. A forest like this might house vidralfar—ash wives, some call them." She rubbed her iron brooch. "They take human sacrifices, carry them back to their heart trees and consume them." Fulla moaned at Frigg's story. "Without a sacrifice, an ash wife

might work terrible damage upon the locals. The only way to face such a foe would be to fell her heart tree, and that is nigh unto—”

“*Frigg*,” Sigyn snapped, “shut up. We’re alive for now. If your völvu knowledge can help us remain so, share. Elsewise, save it for later.” She looked up at the sky. “Twilight impends. We need to find a grove, an overhang, somewhere we can shelter for the night.”

“We don’t have fire,” Fulla whined.

Sigyn had been worrying over just that problem for some time now. A fire might give them away. On the other hand, Fulla and Thor were mortal and could not afford to keep breathing in the Mist, nor she thought would it be overwise for herself or Frigg. “All the more reason we need a secluded place, somewhere the light won’t carry as far. Now, I need you both to get up and follow me, and I’m going to find a way to get us through this.”

Frigg trembled as she rose, but her sister nodded. “I ... I trust you.” Sigyn hoped that trust would not prove misplaced.

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**DAYS GONE: ODIN**

800 Age of Man

*T*he bastard Hunalander had betrayed him! After accepting silver plundered from his neighbours, Völsung Rerirson had agreed to grant the Æsir safe passage through Hunaland. And then he had sent dozens of raiding parties against them, preying on the weakest groups in the back and middle lines.

“Where is my son!” Odin bellowed.

Tyr shook his head. “The queen’s band seems mostly fallen, but we found no sign of her or your children.”

Hel take Völsung. Odin would bring those castle walls crashing down around him. He would burn that hall and Völsung’s precious tree to cinders and leave naught for their line but ash. His grip tightened around Gungnir, the dragon’s anger feeding his own. Forged with a bit of the mighty beast’s soul, the spear always awoke such primal rage in him. Sometimes, as now, he welcomed it.

“I’ll go,” Agilaz Farshot said. “I love Sigyn as though she were my daughter.”



Odin glowered at the thegn. He'd had few enough dealings with Hadding's former hunter, though Agilaz's son Hermod had more than proved his worth according to Tyr. And Men said no finer woodsman lived among the Æsir, though Agilaz hailed from Kvenland, a land feared for the seidr of its shamans and witches. "Do not fail to bring back my children. Or my wife."

"I'm going with you," Loki said. Odin jerked. As did everyone else. None of them had even noticed the foreigner's approach. Agilaz levelled his stern gaze on Loki. If he objected to his foster daughter sleeping with Loki, he had not said so in front of Odin. Nor did he offer any comment now, save to nod. The pair of trackers took off into the woods, their pace swift.

"I ought to be going myself."

Tyr grunted. "Can't. The men need you. Already the jarls call for a Thing." A Thing. Now. Whilst his family—his *son*, his father's grandson—remained in danger. While Völsung Rerirson sat in his accursed hall, toasting the men who had slaughtered Odin's people.

Odin clenched his fist at his side. Yes, a Thing. For at a Thing, the king could declare a war. "Gather them. Call them all."



EIGHT JARLS—FOR Odin still held the title of Jarl of the Wodanar in addition to being king—stood in a circle around him. They had no hall nor tent large enough to hold them all, so they had gathered in a glade within the wood. Jarls toward the centre, their thegns around them, and others—warriors, shieldmaidens, völvur, and elders—all watching, straining to hear the inane debate as grown men bickered like children. Whined over what to do when they found themselves trapped in enemy territory.

Tyr had estimated their numbers nigh to five thousand when they had left Aujum. In the two moons since, they had lost no few of those people,

and already the numbers included the old, the young, and others who could not fight. Some of the thegns bickered among themselves as well, men from different clans spoiling to redress old wrongs, to revive feuds best left buried.

“You have no idea what we’ll face in Vanaheim,” Arnbjorn Radmundrson said. The jarl of the strongest clan of the Æsir, the Itrmanni, had stopped addressing Odin with any form of honorific not long after the Thing had begun, but Odin had stayed Tyr from acting with a raised finger. Despite his flaring temper, Odin needed these men, besides which, he would least of all act against his wife’s uncle. Though Odin would have preferred to wring Arnbjorn’s neck and demand to know why the man had abandoned his father. “You march us across unknown lands in a vain goal to seize the home of the gods. Now here we fall to *mortal* foes.”

“There is truth to that,” Odin said. “But are we to fear the unknown now? Shall we cower like babes, clutching our mother’s skirts?”

The eight jarls all bristled at that. They were warriors, all, and filled with pride enough for kings themselves. Vili snorted and looked down on the others. “Fuck no. Why are we even talking of this? Let us kick down Völsung’s gate, roast his stones over a fire, and hang his head from his fucking walls.”

“Aye!” Jarl Lodur Atridson said. “Let us send a message to all those lands ahead of us. Let them tell woeful tales of the urd of those who dare cross us.” Lodur’s Didung clan had maintained amicable relations with the Wodanar ever since Borr’s peace. They had even, at Borr’s behest, set aside their longstanding rivalry with the Friallafs, though both clans had oft competed for fishing territories along the Black Sea. Regardless, the peace betwixt the clans had not stopped the Diduni from seeking war elsewhere, raiding into Bjarmaland or Miklagard. These days, Lodur had won many battles in Hunaland and had grown rich off them. Odin had more than half a

mind to grant the jarl his wish, for he'd have relished watching Völsung and his people burn for their treachery.

Hœnir Storkrson snorted. The Godwulf jarl was the oldest among them and, despite his role in overthrowing Alci, favoured the part of caution in nigh every situation. It would be easy to condemn him for it, but he proved in the right more oft than not. "It is not courage to rush in blindly like a snow rabbit in heat."

"You would know, old man," Jarl Bedvig Magison said. "The talk is that you like your smith to ride *you* like his prized mare."

Odin barely stifled his groan. Magison and his Skalduns were also among the most powerful of the clans. They had not taken easily to Odin's rule.

Every thegn paused at the insult, save Hœnir's men, who shouted back their taunts. Accusing a jarl of ergi was apt to start a war. If unanswered, all of the Æsir would believe Hœnir guilty of the charge, and a coward; outlawry would be the result. Tyr caught Odin's eye, hand reaching for his sword. The thegn had even more reason to hate Bedvig Magison, but if Odin let his champion silence him, doubts would linger around Hœnir. Odin could ill afford to have aspersions cast on one of his stoutest allies. Thus, he shook his head, and though Tyr scowled, the man made no further move.

Hœnir sneered back at the younger jarl. "Your tongue has run away with you, boy. Now I will have satisfaction." The jarl drew his broadsword.

Now. Something he could harness, even if the timing left much to be desired. Odin rose, pounding the butt of his spear into the ground. "A holmgang is challenged. Do you accept the challenge, Jarl Bedvig Magison?" The younger jarl spat at Hœnir's feet, then grunted assent. "Then the holmgang will be fought tomorrow, at dawn," Odin said, projecting his voice so all the gathered crowd could hear him. "Not here, not now. You may appoint champions or fight yourselves. For now, silence your bickering that we may actually accomplish the purpose of this Thing."

If Hœnir killed Magison, maybe Odin could help arrange a more pliable jarl to replace the man. Freyr, he'd bathe Hœnir in a torrent of hacksilver for that.

With Hœnir and Bedvig both cowed, Arnbjorn again insisted they send a scouting party ere launching an all-out attack. Jarls Jat and Lodur, in turn, disputed him, warned they would lose the element of surprise if their scouts were discovered. Lodur was correct, of course. They needed to make an example of this king if they were to avoid facing such treachery in the future. They needed to strike so hard and fast Völsung would never recover.

All of this for Idunn's Mist-mad request that he overthrow the Vanir and claim rulership of all Midgard. As if becoming king of the Æsir was not enough. He, in his desperation and pride, had given her his oath in his father's name, without the least inkling of what she would ask. Not that he could have imagined such a desire from her.

Worse still, he could see himself on a throne, ruling over Vanaheim. Through the vagaries of the Sight, in his dreams, he could see such a reality. If he brought the Æsir to Vanaheim, they'd face no more Mist. They would be free from the cold, free from the vaettir that preyed on them in the night, and free at last from the threat of losing themselves, like Vé. But then, the Vanir would not give away their lands easily. They were immortal, ancient. If he trusted Idunn, then they could die—any that lived could die. But would he have the strength to kill them? What cost would a war with the Vanir impose on the Æsir? Would they fall by the hundreds, by the thousands? So many had died just to push through Hunaland. More would die now, whilst he claimed vengeance against Völsung.

But Lodur Atridson was right. Vengeance might pre-empt further resistance as they marched toward Vanaheim, for march they would. Even had this Mist not cost him his brother, Odin would never break an oath made in Borr's name. He would take Vanaheim. And if he had to crush Völsung's army to do so, he could not afford to hesitate.

Odin banged the spear on the ground once more, silencing the jarls. “I call for war against Völsung and his folk. As your king, I declare them our foes. Who will go to war with me?”

Annar Ótmarson, Lodur, and Vili stepped forward immediately, followed soon after by Hœnir. The older jarl preached caution, aye, but he was no coward. And other jarls could not back out now, not with half of them already pledged. So, war it would be.

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## THE VÖLSUNGS

## 26 Age of the Æsir

“So then,” Sigmund said, “how are we to breach the castle without fighting our way past so many berserkir?” Fitela sat against the wall around town, staring at the lapping waves. Whatever his nephew mulled over, he kept it to himself. Sigmund flung a rock into the sea. “Olof’s raids will not keep Wolfsblood’s forces busy much longer. These women risk undoing all we have worked for. If I cannot force Wolfsblood to face me, everything—Gylfi, killing the varulfur—’tis all for naught.”

Still, Fitela sat there, staring. And why not? Why should the boy be responsible for coming up with a plan? Much as Fitela claimed to want to avenge his grandfather, this was Fitela’s sire they moved against. It was Sigmund’s place to enact Völsung’s vengeance, and he was *failing*. Despite everything, despite all Sigmund had done to prepare, Wolfsblood somehow remained a step ahead. The king might not yet know Sigmund lived, true, but he had somehow arranged to protect himself with better than an army. Two varulfur could not overcome eleven berserkir. Where did that leave them?

“How does a wolf fight a bear?” Fitela asked.

Sigmund looked to the boy. “What?”

The young man finally turned to look at him. “How would a wolf fight a bear, assuming it had to?”

Sigmund threw up his hands, then folded his arms across his chest. “Let the pack stalk it, surround it. Wear it down. And you’d still lose a lot of wolves.”

“How would a couple of lone wolves do it?”

“They wouldn’t.”

“Right,” Fitela stood. “They’d just avoid the godsdamned bear.” Sigmund rolled his eyes. “So we go around the bears. Sneak past them. Forget openly challenging the king.”

“But—”

His nephew shrugged. “It was probably never going to work. But if you were to break into his chamber in the middle of the night, with none of his guards around, I imagine he’d fight you then. He’d have to.”

“Aye, and now we’re murderers, liars, and assassins.” Sigmund slumped down into the spot Fitela had vacated. Was this what it took to avenge Father? Was it even what the great Völsung would have wanted? Or maybe Father now looked upon his heirs in shame. Sigmund had not only failed to avenge him after so many years, but he had sacrificed his honour.

Fitela spat. “I didn’t say kill him in his sleep. By all means, let the king have a chance to fight back, if it so matters to you. But decide here and now ... Uncle. How much is your vengeance worth to you?”

How much indeed? *Kill. Slaughter. Devour.* The wolf inside him crawled for the surface, demanding he act. Too long had he lingered, waiting always for the perfect moment. That moment had never come. In a skald’s tale, he’d have marched up to the front gate, bellowed a challenge, and the two of them would have fought a holmgang at dawn. They’d have

battled for hours, perhaps, in such a telling. And Sigmund would have emerged bloody and victorious and filled with the honour of his ancestors.

Not a whit of that had unfolded.

Father's honour had cost himself, Mother, and all Sigmund's brothers their lives. All because the man had refused to back down, even when Sieglinde warned them of the trap. And now, here was Sieglinde's son, warning Sigmund against a similar course. Showing him another path. "My vengeance is worth ... everything."

Fitela nodded. "Then we have but to find a way into the castle under cover of darkness. Let us sneak into the fortress, bypass the berserkir, and kill Wolfsblood. Surely you will get your glorious battles when that is done, and at least we will have succeeded in avenging Grandfather."

And still. "You know we are like to die," Sigmund said. "Even should we succeed in bringing down Wolfsblood, those berserkir will mostlike strive to avenge the murder of the one who hired them, if only to preserve their reputations."

Fitela nodded. "Mayhap so, mayhap not. Perhaps, with their employer dead, they will hold their contracts dissolved."

"Berserkir." Such people did not walk away from battle. Fitela's face said he knew that plain enough. Sigmund shook his head. "Whether we die or no, I am proud of you, Nephew."

Fitela faltered, as if unaccustomed to any praise. "I ... thank you."

Sigmund nodded. So be it. They would find a way to sneak inside the fortress and bring down Wolfsblood. And if naught else, Sigmund and Fitela might at least find honour in the sword-sleep. He had spent long years alone in the wilderness because of Wolfsblood. One way or another, it was all coming to an end now.





FITELA POINTED to the march of people headed for the gate. Sigmund folded his arms. With summer here, the king was compelled to host a feast to reaffirm his allies and declare his foes. Of course, the greater part of his host had already travelled north to meet Olof's force, but Wolfsblood had to follow tradition.

A great many travellers followed the dirt road through the main gate to the fortress. Some laden with gifts and tributes, some whole families. Amongst such crowds they might pass unnoticed, true, but it meant gambling their success on the hope no one would recognise either Sigmund—who had fought them long ago—or Fitela, who had lived among them. In either case, Hel would have them the moment someone noticed them.

"We cannot risk it," Sigmund said. "Not if you yet hope to avoid an all-out assault."

Fitela shook his head. "I do not think to pass freely there. Wolfsblood brings in cart after cart of meat, vegetables, ale—all to appease his guests. Because we have cost him so much these last years, he has begun to look weak, forcing him to strain himself to appear the opposite."

"So?"

"So ... they bring the ale in giant casks, up from the town, aye?"

Sigmund nodded, not liking where this seemed to be heading. "I would not poison the king, much less all his guests. I will claim his life with my blade, not through some—"

"We don't *need* the ale, Uncle. We just need to be inside those casks, and Wolfsblood's men will happily escort us inside his hall."

Sigmund groaned, unfolding his arms. A plan born of Mist-madness, if he ever heard one, and yet, he had naught better to offer. Frowning, he started back toward the seaside town.



IN THE TOWN, men unloaded the ale from longships onto the pier, rolling the casks along toward carts at the harbour's edge. Sigmund stood watching, arms folded, as sailors deposited the last of their goods. The day had dragged on, and they could never reach the fort ere darkness fell, which, he supposed, might work in his favour. No one paid him overmuch mind as he drifted among the casks. Fitela had the right of it—they could fit inside. Assuming they were willing to scrunch up with their knees rammed against their faces and their spines feeling like a troll had stomped on them. Such a plan precluded carrying swords, but he could bring a knife and hope to plunder a larger blade.

Great as the risks of this plan were, it was bold. That alone spoke volumes. So be it then. Tomorrow night, he would face his foe and one—or both of them—would die. And Fitela? Well, they had already agreed on the needfulness and the cost, both. Courage the boy did not lack. Sigmund glanced at Fitela, who remained sitting on a crate by the pier. His nephew nodded at him. Aye, he knew. But their deaths mattered little, so long as Wolfsblood paid an even greater price.

Sigmund drifted amidst the town, finally picking an alley filled with discarded debris in which to rest. And to wait.



OFF AND ON HE SLEPT, dreaming of blood and death and valkyrjar. As twilight settled on, men had lit torches around town, but most retreated inside to huddle around the warmth and protection of fire pits. The Mist thickened, drove Men away with its ceaseless hunger. Sigmund felt it, sometimes, half uncertain the Mist watched him, despised him for his seeming immunity to its poisonous vapours. Not lightly did it suffer the intrusions of varulfur, and, more than once, he had fancied that those such as he could, if not burdened by the labyrinths of mortal relations, do much

to aid Mankind. But who ever found themselves above mortal woes must invariably also find themselves inured to those troubles, gone savage.

At last, he rose and stretched, working out the kinks in his aching back and neck. The better part of a day sleeping in an alley had done him no favours, nor made him more inclined to squeeze into a Mist-damned cask. Sigmund spit. Comfort mattered naught compared to the task ahead of him. By the time he returned to the carts, Fitela had already stuck a wedge into one barrel, trying to pry off the top without making any sound. Sigmund grabbed another bar and began to do the same. It popped off easily enough. The moment it did, though, the smell hit him. Strong, hearty, Hun ale, probably out of Styria or maybe Swabia. Odin's beard! How long it had been since he'd tasted ale from home?

Fitela tipped over his cask, spilling the succulent brew into the mud without hesitation or ceremony. Sigmund cringed. Damn. With a cupped hand, he sipped the ale. Gods, it was good. He shook his head. What a waste. What a fucking waste. He pushed over the cask, turning the ground at his feet into a sloshy mess.

Lid in hand, Fitela had already started climbing into his and, with a last look at Sigmund, settled down inside. Hel take this whole damn plan. Sigmund groaned as he climbed into the cask. As expected, he scarce fit. His knees jammed against his jaw, his spine scraped the wood, and, once he lowered the lid, he could see not a damn thing. The heavy odour of ale left his head spinning after even a few breaths inside.

This was going to be a long night.

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**DAYS GONE: TYR**

800 Age of Man

*I*n the predawn darkness, the campfires had dwindled. Someone always tended them, though, ensuring they never went out. Few men moved about this early, but a handful of varulfur—in wolf form—slipped in and out of the firelight. Always patrolling, searching for more of Völsung's scouts. Høenir Storkrson's varulfur had become the salvation of the clans, the few who stood guard in the night against the horrors of the Mist. After losing so many brothers and sisters to the ambush, even the most reluctant Æsir welcomed the werewolves' presence. Not that they did not fear them. They always feared them—one foot beyond the bounds of human civilisation. Too many too easily crossed that line, grew savage and wild. Forming packs as terrible as aught they would have otherwise guarded against.

A pair of the wolves, a male and female, eyed Tyr as he passed. Høenir had a large tent in the northern reaches of the camp. The Godwulfs were not one of the most powerful clans, but they were an old and proud line. Høenir was loyal and brave. But aging. Not a varulf like his predecessor. Bedvig,

though also but a Man, was youthful, quick. Any man wagering on the holmgang's outcome would choose him without a doubt.

Hermod Agilazson, Hœnir's son-in-law, met him at the tent entrance. "Tyr."

"I'll speak with him ere the holmgang."

Hermod frowned. "He's preparing."

"I will speak with him," Tyr repeated. Hermod shrugged, then jerked his head for Tyr to follow him inside. The old jarl's wife stood near the man, helping him don a chain shirt of obviously fine quality. His daughter, Syn, scowled first at her father, then at Tyr.

Hœnir spared him a glance. "Come to wish me luck, Tyr?"

"Come to offer to champion you, lord."

The jarl grimaced now, brushing his wife away so he could stare Tyr down. "You think I cannot fight my own battles now? Maybe I've grown too old and soft? When I am too old to lift my shield, feel free to toss me on a pyre. Until then, I can fight my own Hel-cursed fights!"

"I could have told you that," Hermod mumbled. Must have offered to champion him already. Of course he had.

Tyr worked the words in his mind. Words were not his specialty. Didn't want to offer Hœnir further offence. But Bedvig Magison was apt to kill the old man. And if not, if the Skaldun jarl beat him but let him live, Hœnir would suffer a worse urd. In the eyes of his men he would be confirmed as guilty of ergi. They'd oust him from his role, outlaw him, and Odin would lose a worthy ally. "I owe Bedvig a debt."

"So I've heard. It's true then? This Zisa Naglisdotter left you for him? Women can be fickle." His wife snorted at that and cuffed the jarl on the back of his head.

Fickle was not the word Tyr would have chosen. Zisa was ambitious, and Tyr was not. She'd claimed he had the skill to become a jarl of one of the clans. Tyr owed Borr everything, though, and had not been willing to

leave his side, had sworn loyalty to the man and his line, an oath to bind him all his days. As he told Zisa. And, oh, how they had fought. In the end, she had taken up with a passing jarl's son, Bedvig. Now a jarl, since Magi caught an axe in his skull. Zisa's actions were not quite adultery, since she'd divorced Tyr first. He'd had no right to stop her. At the time, she'd been a shieldmaiden and a famed hunter. As a jarl's wife, he supposed she didn't use those skills quite as oft. A greater shame, then, since his fondest memories were of stalking game through snowy woods with her.

When Tyr didn't answer, Hœnir nodded. "And here I thought you came for my wellbeing. If you owe this whelp so much, you can challenge him when I'm finished with him."

Tyr shook his head. "Such can never be." Had Zisa not gone through the völvá for her divorce, Tyr might have challenged Magison. Indeed, even so, he'd had every intention of hunting the man down, though the fault was Zisa's. And, aye, Tyr's as well. But Borr had wanted to avoid war with the Skalduns and had extracted an oath from Tyr that he would do no such thing.

Tyr did not break his oaths, least of all to Borr. But if he were to champion Hœnir, he might slay Bedvig without ever having violated his oath. It would not be his honour leading to the challenge, though he hoped seeing him defeat the man would appease his ancestors.

Now he walked close to Hœnir. "Gave my word I would not challenge him. But, if you appointed me as a champion, lord, no one would hold it against your honour. You've fought great battles in your time. All know it. You fought in the Njarar War, and you fight now in Hunaland. You and I, we know you could take that brash fool." Well, Tyr hoped it was true, though he knew no such thing. "But still, many see you, think your finest fighting days past. If you were to name me champion, I would be ... grateful, my lord."

“If anyone should champion the Godwulfs, it ought to be me,” Hermod said. “As your son-in-law—”

Hœnir forestalled the young man with a stern look. “Does your gratitude, Tyr, translate into Odin’s gratitude?”

Tyr nodded. Odin was not here, but Tyr suspected the king would have no objection. Whether he’d be grateful, who knew anymore? Odin was no longer the young man Tyr had trained. The king had spent too much time with Niflung sorcerers and strangers like Loki and turned to cunning, sometimes even before honour. At the least, Tyr had to believe he would understand. “I do not speak for the king. But he does heed my counsel.” If less so than once he did.

Hœnir sighed, then looked to his wife. She snorted. “What do I know? I’m just a fickle woman.”

“Right you are,” Hœnir snapped at her, then turned back to Tyr. “So be it. You will carry my shield into the holmgang.” The jarl retrieved it from a bench where it sat atop his broadsword. The shield was carved from ash and reinforced with iron bands. A fine arm, for certain, and its owner was obvious for the painting of the great wolf on the front.

Tyr accepted the shield and nodded his gratitude. “Dawn wakens. We should go.”



ODIN HAD SELECTED a tiny rock island for the holmgang. A small stretch of land in the middle of a river. The king stood with a handful of others from the Wodan clan. Around the island, the ranking members of the Godwulfs and Skalduns awaited their arrival. Hermod rowed Hœnir and Tyr out to the island to join the other Godwulfs. Idunn waited there, too. Waited for him. After clapping Hœnir on the shoulder, Tyr strode to where the goddess stood. “So?” he asked.

“So are you doing this because of Hœnir, or because of Bedvig? Or because of her?”

Tyr spit. “Zisa has naught to do with this.” Even tasted like a lie.

Idunn offered her too-knowing smile. “Good luck.”

Tyr shook his head and strode toward the heart of the island. Sneering, Bedvig stood before his Skalduns. No doubt boasting. Zisa was there, but her eyes were on Tyr. Did she suspect? She was a clever woman; might already wonder why he had arrived with the Godwulf jarl instead of with Odin. Too clever, times were.

“You know it ought to be me fighting,” Hermod said again, behind him.

“I am stronger.” Tyr did not look back at the man.

“You can go fuck a troll.” Hermod said it without rancour. Not much, leastwise.

Hœnir snorted. Tyr tightened his grip around his sword, suddenly filled with the urge to gut Hermod. Who did the motherless cock think he was? Tyr could and should thrash him. Maybe, when the holmgang was concluded, he would teach someone else a lesson. No ... that was his anger at Zisa. He drew his blade, hefting Hœnir’s shield in his other hand. Zisa scowled and said something to Bedvig, who turned to look at Tyr. The man’s eyes widened for just a moment, then he spat and strode forward, toward the island’s centre. Not a coward, then. Tyr smirked and met him in the middle.

“Old man can’t fight his own battles?” Bedvig Magison asked, none too quietly.

Hœnir either didn’t catch it or pretended not to for Tyr’s benefit. “I come here to champion his cause, jarl,” Tyr said. He slapped his sword against his shield. Bedvig stood similarly armed and, after only a brief moment’s hesitation, repeated the gesture. The moment the jarl did so, Tyr launched forward, swinging his sword in a wide arc. Bedvig jerked his shield up to block. The impact rang out clear over the island and sent



Bedvig stumbling backward. Tyr advanced at once, swinging again, drawing upon his supernatural strength. With every blow, Bedvig fell back, and Tyr's rage only grew. A feint. A counter. His pulse pounded. The jarl thrust his blade, and Tyr knocked it aside with his shield, immediately riposting. His blow splintered Bedvig's shield. The jarl grunted in pain and tossed his useless protection aside. Tyr allowed him the moment's respite while Bedvig wrung out his no doubt swollen arm.

"Weary already?" Tyr said. "Maybe it's you who likes to be ridden like a mare."

Bedvig snarled and lunged at him, swinging his sword overhead in an arc meant to decapitate. Tyr whipped his blade up to parry and, at the same time, stooped forward, swinging his shield along a horizontal plane. As the swords clashed, the edge of his shield caught the jarl in the gut. Bedvig doubled over, spewing his breakfast over Høenir's shield. Tyr slammed the vomit-caked thing into the jarl's face with a satisfying crunch of shattered cartilage. His foe toppled backward onto the rocky ground, barely conscious. Tyr advanced and pressed the point of his sword into the man's chest. The jarl gagged, apparently unable to speak. How easy to finish him right now. He had not yielded, had not begged mercy. So Tyr was within his rights to just run the trollfucker through here and now. *Do it.* Hel, he ought to do it. His arm shook as he slowly pressed the blade further down. Blood began to well beneath Bedvig's armour. One solid thrust to the heart. A cleaner kill than what Bedvig had done to him. *Do it.*

"Tyr!" He turned to see Zisa shouting his name. Had she been calling it ere now? She pointed to where Bedvig had raised a hand in supplication. He mumbled something, trying to yield. What if Tyr had not heard it? The man should die. His whole fucking brood ought to die. Zisa had given him two sons, young men now glowering at Tyr from outside the circle.

Damn it! Tyr raised his sword, pointing it at Bedvig's throat. "You admit you spoke falsely about Jarl Høenir?"

“I was wrong,” Bedvig managed, the words barely decipherable.

Tyr glowered. *Wrong*. Bedvig wasn’t *wrong*—he was a Hel-cursed liar who had provoked Høenir, intent on killing the old man. “You accused him of liking to take it in the arse. Most fitting atonement I see is if you kiss that arse and proclaim it clean of all wrongdoing.” Bedvig’s eyes widened. Angry shouts ran out among the gathered Skalduns, especially the jarl’s sons. The well-deserved shame he asked of Bedvig might be enough to make the man prefer death. If so, that suited Tyr.

Tyr did not look to Odin, lest the king try to overrule him or dissuade this course of action. Bedvig looked to Tyr and to the blade. Tyr could have sworn the jarl ready to spit. To welcome the end rather than bring such dishonour upon himself and his ancestors. Aye, let the wife-stealing cocksucker’s blood run dry on this barren island.

Finally, Bedvig nodded. Tyr clenched his jaw. Damn it. He couldn’t well kill Bedvig *now*. Having to live with the shame would have to be enough punishment. Høenir chuckled, then strode forward and turned around. Tyr stepped back to allow Bedvig—blood still streaming from his shattered nose—to rise to his knees and crawl to Høenir’s arse.

Ere Bedvig reached him, Høenir untied his trousers and dropped them. “Make sure you get the spot you besmirched.”

“You troll-loving son of a—” the eldest of Bedvig’s boys—Starkad, wasn’t it?—shouted, before someone cuffed him. Tyr glanced back to see Zisa silencing her son. His ex-wife stared at him with the icy gaze of Hel herself. Tyr turned from her, unable to bear it.

Bedvig hesitated, then moved in to kiss Høenir’s arse. As he drew near, Høenir farted loudly. “Had to miss my morning shit for this,” the jarl commented. Hermod and the other Godwulfs laughed. Bedvig, looking apt to retch, planted a swift kiss on one arse cheek, then backed away. Tyr opened his mouth to protest, to demand more.

Odin beat him to it. “The holmgang is concluded. Høenir is held blameless, and Bedvig is forgiven for his hasty words. We depart this island as allies.”

Growling, Tyr rammed his blade into its sheath. He returned Høenir’s shield to Hermod, as his father-in-law was busy retying his trousers. “I think that was the most enjoyment I’ve ever had ere breakfast,” Høenir said.

Tyr turned at the sound of angry footfalls behind him. Despite Zisa’s shouts, her two sons—maybe ten and eleven winters each—were storming over, eyes lit in challenge, the older one bearing a spear.

“Go home and lick your father’s wounds,” Tyr said. “And aught else he wants you to lick.”

“I do not know how, but I know you cheated. Men say you have power from the Vanir.”

Høenir shook his head and laughed. “Run home to your arse-kissing father, *boy*.” Indeed, Bedvig was chasing after his sons, shambling his way over and wailing for them to leave it be. At least that was what it sounded like—so hard to tell with his hand clasped over a broken nose.

“Want to try your luck?” Tyr spread his arms. “Go ahead, show me you even know how to use that pig-sticker.”

The elder boy rose to the challenge, thrusting at Tyr while roaring. Like any young man, he was all passion and no control. Tyr stepped out of the way, caught the spear’s haft, and twisted. His superior strength flipped the fool boy end over end and slammed him onto the rocks. Tyr yanked the spear from the boy’s dazed hands, then swept the haft down on his chest. The loud crack silenced everyone, the blow leaving the boy unconscious.

Tyr tossed the spear to the younger brother. “What? You, as well?” The boy hesitated, then backed away when Tyr advanced a step. A few men chuckled, Høenir among them. Tyr shook his head and walked toward the boat, ignoring the sidelong glances some cast his way. Oh, but he should

have killed all three of them. *That* would have been justice. He prayed Bedvig would give him another chance.



TYR RUBBED a whetstone over his blade. Take care of your arms and war-garb, both. First rule of being a warrior. He sat alone, near a dwindling fire, some hours after breaking his fast with the Godwulfs. They had welcomed him to their table. Even if some few of them now seemed frightened of him. That was trollshit, obviously. He was their ally and meant them no harm, had fought for them. For the honour of their jarl. As he had fought for all the Æsir.

The men toasted him, offered him fresh fish and some weak ale raided from Hunaland locals. Still, he saw the way they looked at him. With respect, aye, but always underlain with a hint of fear. Bedvig had gotten what he damn well deserved. Less than he deserved, truth told. Of course that was what Odin wanted Tyr to do. He'd wanted Tyr to *kill* Bedvig, and Tyr had been too much the fool to see it. He had failed his lord, but he would find some way to make up for it, to get it done.

He looked up at the sound of someone stomping over. "What in Hel's frozen fields was that, Tyr?" Zisa demanded.

Tyr rose, sticking his sword into the dirt. "Are you referring to the holmgang your ... *man* forced upon the clans with his shameful remarks?"

"What was shameful was beating Starkad with his own spear!"

"Shameful for him, indeed. If his father armed him, he declared him a man. And a man challenged me. He ought to be grateful the shame visited on him was less than that visited upon his father."

Zisa shook her head, mouth slightly open like she wanted to say something. Whatever it was, she bit it off and snapped her mouth shut. She watched him with those appraising, conniving eyes far too long. "You ought

not have done either of those things, but especially not to ... Starkad." Zisa shook her head and turned away, casting him another sad glance as she left.

Tyr watched her until she was out of his sight, then slumped down by the fire. To say he should not have done as he had was absurd, and she, a former shieldmaiden, ought to have known better. Maybe Hœnir was right. Maybe all women were fickle. And dangerous. Idunn tempted him every time he saw her. Maybe ... but no, how could they have a future? How, when the Æsir marched to destroy her people?

No. Not the time. Very soon, they would march to war. And then he'd have better things to think of than Zisa *or* Idunn.

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**STARKAD**

## 25 Age of the Æsir

*T*he last of the draugar fell into a heap. Spewing spittle, panting, Tiny hewed into the still crawling corpse, then stomped on the skull. At last, the draug shuddered and gave out.

Starkad wiped his swords in the snow. Gore and grime coated them, more than fresh blood. Vikar's sword had chipped on a damn draug's helm. Starkad stared at the blade's edge, uncertain. Were he to continue using it, his brother's blade might snap, and that, somehow, felt a further betrayal of Vikar. It needed more tending than he could do here—a proper forge.

“Master?” Afzal asked. The young man bore a gouge above his left eye and was favouring one arm.

Starkad nodded, then looked to Bragi. “Stitch up Afzal's cut ere he loses too much blood.”

“Hervor went over the gorge,” Afzal said, “and Orvar-Oddr is missing.”

“I saw her fall,” Starkad said. Orvar must have gone over as well if his body was not here.

“Is she ...”

“Dead?” Starkad shrugged and turned to peer into the Mist rising up beneath the falls. Aye, she was almost certainly dead. But they were all looking to him, wanting him to tell them they had a chance of escaping this island. Tiny knelt beside Ivar’s corpse, mumbling about Odin and Valhöll. Bragi had moved to sit beside Afzal, inspecting the wound but casting glances Starkad’s way. So it was like that. Four of them left, and they didn’t want to believe Hervor or Orvar dead.

He glanced back at that roaring fall, almost invisible in the brume. Could either have survived that? He couldn’t even judge how far down it was, but if they had fallen into water then ... maybe? If so, neither would live long in the frigid cold. He blew out a long breath, then looked to the others. “Tiny. Burn the corpses, especially Ivar. We don’t want aught getting back up. Bragi, make sure everyone is fit to move when I return.”

“What are you going to do?” Tiny asked.

In answer, Starkad strode toward the cliff and began to lower himself down, feet first. The rocks were slick with Mist and ice. Trying to climb down to the bottom would mostlike end in a broken neck. *Damn Hervor.* Bitch didn’t even have the good sense to die where they could be sure of it. Now he had to go looking for her useless arse and rescue her like some maid in a skald’s tale. Except this whole endeavour was turning out more like a ghost story around a campfire than any tale he wanted a part of.

His crampons scraped on ice. “Hervor!” he shouted down in the abyss. “Orvar!” No answer, save the raging torrent of water into the gorge. Deeper and deeper he climbed. His arms ached after swinging those swords, after too long without sleep, without rest. Without sunlight, save fleeting hours. The far north held a perilous appeal, a place where a man could take himself to the limits. Starkad had not yet found his limits, but it was beginning to look like he soon might.

Ice crumbled away under his fingers. Starkad clutched tighter, pulling against the gorge wall. Under all that ice, numerous rocks jutted from the

cliff's side. In summer—as if there were summer here—he might have climbed this with more ease. But then, the challenge was why he had come.

Still, this trek had borne a higher price than he'd expected. Rolf, the Axe, Ivar, and the others. Probably Orvar. And *now* a dead woman, too. Another dead woman weighing him down, his fault. His error. And hers, Hel damn her. She had tricked her way onto this voyage and paid for her deceit with her life. That knowledge ought to have absolved him of failing her. Ought to, yet still his stomach felt inflamed, his cheeks burning. Hervor wasn't Ogn. Bragi had said that. Still, they were both dead, both because he failed them. Had he been faster, maybe he could have saved her. The fastest man was the only one who counted. He thought he was the fastest. This night, he hadn't been fast enough.

Some hundred feet down, he came to a tiny ice shelf just above the water level. The falls crashed upon rocks, running out in a raging torrent of rapids. Those rapids would crush anyone caught in them, smash either of them like a broken toy and drag them under, never to see daylight again.

“Orvar!” Starkad edged closer. “Hervor!” Just the echoing cacophony of the waters, the rapids. “Can anyone hear me?”

The shelf didn't run far, but Starkad skirted the edge of it, back and forth. She had fallen here. Her broken body didn't lie on the ice and that meant the rapids. He slammed the side of his fist against the ice of the gorge wall. She had no chance. Even had she survived the fall, she'd have drowned; he'd never find her.

“You stupid, stupid girl.” He paced the shelf again. “Damn you!”

Hervor was not Ogn. But Starkad should have protected her. He had failed her, and he was failing the entire party. He had to do better, had to save them all.





PANTING WITH EXHAUSTION, Starkad at last threw one arm over the top of the rise and yanked himself up on the ledge. The others sat there now, staring at him. Two pyres burnt out over the ice field. They had heaped the draugar corpses together and set them alight. The smaller pyre—Ivar's. Ivar the Loud. The man had escaped servitude in Nidavellir thanks to Orvar. He was a brute, a murderer. A madman even, who enjoyed fighting even more than a man ought. Now his daughter would never see her father again.

Afzal scrambled to his feet and offered Starkad an arm, which he accepted. The Serk helped him up. "You didn't find them."

"No. There's naught down there but rocks and rapids. They're both gone."

"We're all going to die." Afzal said it without emotion. Coming from him, it sounded almost prophetic. Starkad didn't believe in prophecy. No ... No. Hel take Odin and his riddling dreams.

Starkad clapt Afzal on the shoulder. "If we die, we shall die well. But plan to live, and I think you will." The Serk frowned, looked back to the south. "You want to flee," Starkad said, "try to make it back to the ship."

Afzal nodded. "The draugar are dead, so ..."

"The ones we burnt are gone, aye. We don't know how many more are left out there. Aye, we might make it back to the coast, reach the ship."

"Is that not then what behoves us to try?" Tiny asked.

Starkad scowled, cracked his neck, and looked to Bragi. Even the old skald seemed ready to give up. The man was running his thumb over the shaft of one of Orvar's black arrows, recovered from a corpse. Like that sole missile might somehow protect him. Bragi's age had caught up to him, no doubt.

All the men wanted was for Starkad to tell them they could go home. But how could he do that? Turn away in defeat after all of this? No. Never. "I came here to find Nordri, and I damn well mean to do so. I will plunder the dverg city of its riches and so enrich our friends and allies. To do less

would be to allow Orvar and all the others to have died in vain. And I will not allow that.”

“They say lust for dverg gold has blinded many a Man,” Bragi said.

“Turn back if you wish. Go hide on the ship and await my return. If you’re lucky, I will bring a trinket for you. I for one intend to find what we came for.”

Afzal sighed. “I go where you go, Master.”

“You do not owe me aught. Do as you wish, boy.”

“I go where you go, Master.”

Starkad spat in the snow. If the Serk thought he could shame Starkad into giving up, he was sadly mistaken. “So be it. And you two?”

Tiny shrugged. “If I go away laden with gold, at least some weal will have come from this ill-fated trek. I don’t relish returning to Dalar like a whipped dog, tail betwixt my legs. I just want to make certain we *do* return.”

Bragi waved his hand to encompass the three of them. “Fools, every last one of you. But, aye, I will come with you, if only to ensure future generations learn of your foolishness. I expect to name the tale, ‘Starkad’s Folly.’”

“Skald,” Starkad said. “I find you less amusing once the mead has run dry.”

“Then perhaps we should be hunting golden draughts rather than baubles.”

Starkad snorted. He looked to the sky. Hard to orient himself in this place, but he thought north would be that way, beyond more mountains. “Let’s move.”



THEY HAD WALKED A LONG TIME, the others following Starkad, resting on occasion, especially when the sun came up. Those few hours seemed far between, and only then did they find solace. As the sun set, the night crept in, and with it, whispers and the unshakable feeling of being watched by unseen eyes, by beings almost close enough to touch. Vaettir must have inhabited every rock, lake, and mountain on this island. Long away from the influence of Man, Thule had grown wild.

But the dvergar had once tamed this isle, then abandoned it. Their wealth was the stuff of legends. As would be anyone who possessed such treasure. Aye, of course, Men already told tales of Starkad Eightarms across half the North Realms. But one could always become more famous, more known. Look at Odin. A Man who had made himself a god—in the eyes of so many now, he had always been a god. For they could not imagine a mortal rising so high.

Their group had taken to following an icy river back toward its source. Ever Starkad scanned the banks for the bodies of Orvar or Hervor and ever he saw naught. Nor did he expect to. The river ran from somewhere up in the mountains ahead, cutting a swathe through valleys. Perhaps it eventually emptied into the sea. That was where corpses would have been washed away, if not taken by the finfolk. Either the others had not considered they walked in the wrong direction to search for their companions, or they too realised the futility of it.

His gut wrenched at the thought of leaving them behind, in the Mist. But ... Be it his curse or his damned nature, Starkad could not make his feet steer away from Nordri. He *had* to see it.

Mountains such as these appealed to the dvergar. Perhaps they reminded them of their domain in the Otherworld. Though, if the dvergar were homesick, why did they come to Midgard at all? Why not leave the Mortal Realm in peace? Perhaps the motives of all vaettir were unfathomable.

Following the river into the mountains was more like to lead to Nordri. It was hard to be certain either way, of course.

The old skald coughed. “When we get back to Svjarland, I’m going to be a whole moon resting by the fire. I’ll have some pretty maid bring me the drinking horn all night long, never let it fall empty.”

“Huh,” Tiny said. “You let the maid serve you. I’ll serve her. You know? With my big—”

“Aye, Tiny,” Bragi said. “We get it. Are you certain there’s not some other reason everyone calls you Tiny?”

“Only because I’m the smallest of my clan. No other reason at all. Troll arse.”

Starkad held up a hand to silence them, then pointed to the mountains. In the valley ahead, the river disappeared underground. That meant a cave. Alongside an underground river seemed a good place for a dverg city, for even they must need fresh water to drink—leastwise, Starkad assumed alfar did drink water. Ivar and Orvar both probably knew more of the creatures, but they were gone now. Ashes.

Starkad pushed forward, the others following behind, silent now. The river did indeed run into a cave—one carved out of ice. A shelf of rock ran alongside it, covered in snow at the outside, then mere rock farther in. His torchlight refracted off the frozen ceiling, casting eerie, wavering light far down the tunnel. Deep. Very deep. And very quiet.

Starkad looked at the others. Thus far, it had only been an idea. A man had to pick a direction and start walking. Now though, it became real. “This location seems right for Nordri. A tunnel like this one—maybe this very tunnel—must lead to the city. If we push on, maybe we’ll reach it today.”

“But?” Afzal asked.

“But we didn’t find Hervor’s or Orvar’s bodies,” Bragi answered for Starkad. “Could be a chance they yet live. If we go underground, they’d never find us.”

“Then what are we doing here?” Afzal demanded. “Should we not be searching the waterways?”

Starkad grimaced. Mayhap they should, but it wasn’t that simple, not really. He *had* looked for the pair, and no sign of either. There might never be one. Either way, it had to be the crew’s choice, and a real choice. Starkad pointed down into the ice cave. “Bragi’s right. We should have found the bodies of our people. But we didn’t. We know not if they live at all, though it seems unlikely. If they do, we don’t know where they are. We lost the finfolk trail long back and who knows if we could ever find it again. So ... We needs must decide whether to leave the treasure we think we found behind to go hunting the full island for those who may be corpses.”

“You cannot weigh a Man’s life with gold,” Afzal said.

Bragi sighed. “Boy, all Men’s lives are weighed in gold and silver. A warrior wins glory and riches by raiding, fighting, and killing. Kings claim and hold power by the slaughter of their enemies, by sending their people to die. And men go gladly into the spear-din if they think it might make them rich. Wealth is the only defence we have against the pitiless World and its ravages.”

Afzal scowled. “You seek to justify your greed with fancy words.”

“I need not justify a desire for wealth.” Bragi spread his hands. “Life does that on its own.”

Tiny stepped around Starkad, inspecting the ice walls. “Stunning. The dvergar made these caves?”

Starkad shrugged. “Maybe they’re natural, maybe they’re made. Does that matter?”

“No.” The big man shrugged, then pointed down the tunnel. “Orvar-Oddr came here, led his damned mission to find this place. So, Ivar and everyone else who’s gone to Valhöll or down to Hel, they did so to find this fucking city. And now you want to turn around and go looking for him? I don’t think so. For all we know, Orvar already made it back to the ship. If

not, he's mostlike dead. Hervor too. Either way, let us get what we fucking came for!"

His voice echoed down the long tunnel, ringing out again and again, far louder than Starkad would have liked. He waved the big man to silence with an angry jerk of his hand. Hel alone knew what might lurk down there. The last thing any of them needed was to announce their presence.

"So. I think we know Tiny's vote. And Bragi?"

"I'm forced to agree. Find Nordri, claim what we can, and get off this cursed island. Too many of us are dead already. Going after Orvar only invites more losses."

"Afzal?"

The Serk worked his jaw, then scratched his head. "I go where you go, Master." The words dripped with venom, with judgment. The young man didn't want to go to Nordri nor leave Orvar-Oddr and Hervor. Maybe that made him more of a hero than the rest of them.

Either way, Tiny's and Bragi's arguments made a great deal of sense. Starkad could not and should not overrule them. They had come to Thule for Nordri. 'Twas more than that, though. Starkad *had* to see this city where Men had not walked in long Ages. He had to know and witness it for himself. Maybe that was part of his curse. And maybe that curse extended to all those around him.



THE ICE CAVES delved deeper and deeper, through glaciers and into the mountains. Ice gave way to rock, natural at first, and then clearly worked stone. They wandered long ere coming to carven stairs, ones which descended for over an hour, until Bragi complained about his old, aching legs.

“Be silent,” Starkad said. One wall had dropped away, leaving a fall into unknown, light-swallowing depths. On the other wall though, dvergar had carved a long, sprawling mural depicting Hel knew what. He held the torch closer, just out to his side, until the skald decided to come have a look as well. Starkad kept glancing at the carvings as he descended. They showed two great armies of mighty beings, gods perhaps, as they seemed to have mastered various winged beasts, serpents, even varulfur. And betwixt them stood the twisted and misshapen dvergar, forging weapons, even wading into battle. The deeper they went, the more the dvergar fell in battle, their broken corpses decorating fields, until, at the end, they seemed to cower before a shining sun. A massive crack split the sun down the middle, as though someone had intentionally defaced it.

“What does this mean?” Starkad asked.

“Oh now I can talk?” Bragi asked. The skald snorted. “Legend says the sun is anathema to dvergar, turns them to stone even.”

“And the rest of it?” Afzal asked.

Bragi shrugged. “Maybe they were fighting the Vanir or other alfar or some other divine beings from ancient times. I can’t imagine it depicts aught of Men.”

Starkad stifled the urge to correct the skald. The Vanir had once been human, after all. Even the mighty alfar, when they walked on Midgard, did so by possessing mortal hosts. Either way, the mural depicted something akin to Men, even if they had left part of their humanity behind. His time among the Æsir had taught him such things. But the Gautish skald didn’t need to know it and, of greater import, he certainly did not need to know *how* Starkad knew such things. Starkad had walked away from those self-appointed gods and never looked back. Bad enough Men seemed to have figured out he studied swordplay under Tyr. No, his companions didn’t need to know the truth.

Tiny spit over the edge of the stairs, then chuckled as his phlegm vanished into the darkness.

Starkad cuffed him on the back of the head. "If you're not interested in dverg history, fair enough. But do not draw attention to us. The dvergar have gone from here, aye. That does not mean naught might lurk here. We have already seen vaettir aplenty on this island."

The big man glared at him, sneered, then began to descend the stairs again. Starkad looked to Bragi and Afzal, who now both stared at him. He cocked his head after Tiny, then started back down the stairs.

Later, the mural depicted Mist billowing out of an island. On and on it went until it seemed to engulf all Midgard. Was that island Thule? Did the dvergar mean to imply *this* place was where the Mist first escaped Niflheim and entered the Mortal Realm? Starkad ran his fingers over the mural. The island in the mural seemed different than he thought of Thule, but who could say? It wasn't like they'd carved an actual map.

"The beginning of the Fimbulvetr," Bragi said. Starkad grunted.

"'Tis true then," Afzal said. "There really was a time ere the Mist." Such things were an obsession for Odin. Small surprise he had sent people to this island, though why he had not come himself, Starkad could only guess. Contending with the Niflungar, perhaps. The would-be god had his fingers stirring a great many pots.

Starkad swept his torch away from the mural and descended after Tiny. All this history tasted bitter, just served as a reminder of the slowly suffocating world. He would not be drawn into Odin's wars or quests. He'd left such things far behind. All Starkad wanted now was to see this world, every hidden depth of it.

The stairs ended in the middle of a great landing that spread out farther than the torchlight in both directions. The dvergar had worked the floor smooth, though they left numerous stalagmites in place. Decorations, maybe.



Afzal reached the bottom and paced around a bit. “Which way, Master?”

Starkad turned about, torch high over his head for maximum effect. No clear indication but better to pick a way than seem indecisive before the men. Without a word, he started walking in one direction. This landing was wide as any great hall. Wider, like a yard perhaps. But underground, something must bound the sides of it. He altered his course at an angle of his original one until, at last, a rock wall came into view. All he had to do was follow the walls, and he’d find an exit from this chamber.

He continued along that way rather long ere coming to an opening, the depths of which retreated away from his torchlight. Starkad stepped into it. Light reflected off a solid surface several dozen feet away. An alcove? It stank of rot, mould, and dust. Then that dust shifted. It wafted up from the floor as though a wind swept through the underground chamber, impossible as that sounded. Firelight glinted off metal. Starkad leapt backward, away from the alcove, as pinpoints of red glare opened. He collided with Tiny, shoved the big man back, and flung his torch at the rising draug.

The ghost shrieked at the flames, a sound of torment, of damnation. Flames leapt over the creature, engulfing its rotting clothes as it stumbled forward. Starkad drew his blades, and the others did the same. The draug swung a giant, rusting axe. Starkad leapt to the side and rammed Vikar’s sword into the draug’s face while lopping off one of its arms with his blade.

The fiend fell backward but did not lose its grip on the axe. Blinded, it swung the weapon wildly with one hand. The axe collided with the wall, casting out a shower of sparks. Tiny roared and hewed into it with his broadsword. Once, twice, and it toppled to the ground.

A moan echoed through the great chamber. Followed by another. And another. On and on, the tormented, monstrous cries rang out. Draugar waking, stumbling back to life—or at least into motion.

Starkad sheathed Vikar's sword and snatched up his torch from where it had fallen. "I think we know what happened to the city of Nordri."

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**DAYS GONE: ODIN**

800 Age of Man

*M*ounted on Sleipnir, Odin watched the army forming up before Völsung's castle at Xanten. The Hun king had ventured out for this and now walked ahead of his lines, inspiring them. Not a craven, Odin had to grant him that. Odin's warriors had struck back and struck back hard, though no blow could repay Völsung Rerirson's treachery. Agilaz and Loki had not returned, and thus neither had Odin's family. He tightened his grip around Gungnir's haft, then he raised the spear high, bellowing a war cry. As one, his warriors took up that cry, thrusting weapons skyward or beating them upon shields. Like angry thunder cresting the horizon, ready to break into the fiercest storm.

Odin kicked Sleipnir forward, and the horse took off with the speed of a diving sparrow. Völsung's line jerked apart even ere he reached them, shock washing over their faces. Sleipnir crashed amongst them an instant later. Rather than risk getting his spear embedded in a foe, Odin swept it in great arcs. Its undulating dragon blade tore through armour and flesh and bone, severed limbs and heads, splintered shields.

Men charged him, weapons high. Brave. Perhaps they would find Valhöll. Those that did not fall to Gungnir's blade instead found Sleipnir's numerous hooves raining down upon them. Then the other Æsir collided with Völsung's broken line. A shieldmaiden drove the edge of her shield up under a man's chin. A man—varulf, perhaps—leapt upon a foe with uncanny agility and bore him down. And there, Vili snapped a Hun's spine.

Where was Völsung? Where had that oathbreaker hidden? Odin turned Sleipnir about. In the chaos of such a melee, spotting a single man proved difficult. Gungnir's blade cut down another man, and another, until Völsung's warriors ceased to charge him. They circled round him, none willing to be the next to move in. So Odin charged, right through their midst. The horse raced straight over a man. Sickening crunches vibrated under the horse's hooves as it trampled the poor fool.

Beyond, Tyr had squared off with Völsung's champion. The big man from before. Big and strong, though not half as strong as Tyr, Odin had no doubt. Odin's thegn ducked mighty blows, dancing aside as the Hun exhausted himself with wild swings of his axe. Odin smirked and pushed forward, riding down more of Völsung's men. A spear flew through the air, headed for Sleipnir's flank. The horse reacted on its own, dancing aside with Otherworldly grace. Odin charged at the man with the temerity to attack his mount. A wide swipe of Gungnir separated the Hun's head from his shoulders. Odin turned back in time to see Tyr draw his blade along his foe's gut. Tyr, coated in blood, spun around and hacked into the man's back to make sure. The big warrior collapsed into the bloody slush that had become the battleground.

"Odin!" someone bellowed. Odin turned. There, Völsung Rerirson advanced on him. So, the man had courage enough to face death when it came for him. And for such courage, Odin would allow him a proper fight. He swung his leg over Sleipnir and slid down into the muck, then batted the

horse away with one hand. Sleipnir could fight on his own, would continue crushing anyone fool enough to draw nigh.

Völsung beat his sword against his shield. Blood drenched both. Blood of other Æsir, fallen to Völsung's blade. One more wrong Odin would need to redress.

"You betrayed us!" he spat at the other king.

Völsung grimaced. "I am beholden to others of greater authority."

"Now you are beholden to death and no other." Odin advanced, both hands on Gungnir.

Völsung circled him, not giving ground nor charging forward. Odin turned, spear ready. One slow step at a time they closed. The king must have seen him cut down so many men already. He would not act rashly—not unless Odin drove him to it. Odin feinted left, then immediately whipped Gungnir back, aimed not at Völsung's body but at the shield he had drawn up to protect himself with. His spear blade gouged the wood. His sheer strength jerked that shield out of position. Odin twisted, yanking the butt of his spear around in line with his momentum. It crashed down on the damaged shield, cracking it and driving Völsung to his knees.

The Hun king struggled to rise while swinging his sword. A clumsy blow, but it forced Odin back and gave his foe time to regain his feet. Völsung roared at him, all his former caution tossed aside—or crushed in desperation. He swung his blade in tight arcs. He had skill, true, but he couldn't get past Gungnir's reach. Odin gave ground rather than let the king close on him.

Other warriors nearby bellowed, rushing at him as well. A half dozen men intent on protecting their king, all racing in as one. But Odin would not let that happen. He lunged at Völsung with a thrust aimed at his heart. The king twisted away and Gungnir's blade instead sheared through the hauberk on his sword arm. Shrieking, the king dropped his blade and fell back. Much as Odin wanted to press his attack, a screaming man with an axe

demanded his attention. He raised Gungnir to block a descending blow, then kicked the attacker, sending him stumbling away. More men raced in, interposing themselves between Odin and Völsung. The Hun king—clutching his arm—disappeared into a mass of bodies.

“Völsung!” Odin roared at him. “I will make you suffer for your betrayal!”

Odin blocked a sword thrust with Gungnir, dodged a descending axe, and jerked his spear around to open a man’s gut. Round and round he went, slashing and impaling foes, blocking and dodging. His enemies scored several gashes on his arms and back. No one could fight so many and avoid taking a few hits. But the apple had changed him, given him endurance, strength, and an ability to fight through pain. Combined with years of hard training and the dragon spear, few men could have stood against him. Even few bands of men.

The butt of his spear shattered one man’s thigh an instant ere its blade severed another foe’s wrist. Blood drenched his clothes, his hair, his face. Some of it his, most of it not. Yet, no matter how many he slew, he could not seem to get back to Völsung. Panting, Odin broke the last of his attackers. Nigh to two dozen bodies lay around him, dead or dying, food for the ravens already circling overhead. Odin dragged his palm over his face to wipe blood and sweat from his eyes, but it too was so smeared he found little benefit in the gesture.

Many Æsir lay dead in the snow around the battlefield, but twice as many more Huns. Völsung’s army had broken. Odin needed to push the attack, to storm the walls of his castle and raze his hall. But ... The hour already grew late. If his people did not make camp and get fires going ... No. He would never repeat the mistake he had made with Vé. Never again.

Further vengeance must wait.

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**THE DÖGLINAR**

## 25 Age of the Æsir

*H*ervor's throat hurt. That was, she supposed, an argument for not trying to drink an entire river. Groaning, she opened her eyes. Her whole body was sore, but it was not the well of misery it ought to have proved. Instead, her injuries had faded to dull aches. Even the wounds on her arm and her shoulder had scabbed over, though they stank of seaweed. She lay on her back under an outcropping of ice that offered partial shield from the chill wind. In the gorge?

Nearby, a half dozen people sat in a huddle, each swathed in great bundles of fur, including lined hoods. They spoke in soft tones, their tongue strange, unrelated to Northern.

Her armour was gone, and she had lost all her weapons in the fight with the draugar. Not a good situation to wage battle in. She sat, trying not to grunt with the effort. Despite her effort at silence, one of them, a woman close in age to Hervor, looked at her. The therianthrope—for such she must be—had hair black as onyx and eyes near the same. Stranger still, her skin was dark, even deeper in tone than that of Afzal. Triangular tattoos marked

her forehead. For a long time, the woman stared at Hervor. It was impossible to read those dark eyes, but her mouth was stern.

These finfolk had saved her from the river, treated her wounds. Why? “What do you want from me?” Hervor asked. At her words, they all looked to her. One spoke in their strange tongue and received an answer from the nearest man. They argued—or it sounded like argument. The second man had Tyrfin in his lap. Hervor rose, glaring at him. “Return my sword.”

The man stood too, looked at her, then followed her gaze to the blade he held by its scabbard. He held it up, shook his head roughly, and then slipped the strap over his shoulder.

Hervor stormed toward him. “Listen you trollfucking son of a—”

The woman leapt up and closed the distance between them in an instant. With one hand, she grabbed Hervor’s hair; with the other, she raised a bone knife to her throat. “No.” Her accent sounded thick, confused.

“You speak Northern?”

“No,” the woman snarled. “No. Blade. No.”

Hervor grabbed the woman’s wrist and twisted. Tried to. The therianthrope jerked on her hair so hard Hervor fell over backward and banged her arse on the ice.

“No blade. No troll. No.”

The man with her sword said something in their language, then the woman released Hervor’s hair. She sheathed the knife, then leant close to Hervor’s face. She offered a hand. Hervor stared at the outstretched arm. This therianthrope didn’t seem intent on eating her or killing her, though she was a far cry from friendly. Still, this seemed better than being gnawed on by seal teeth. Hervor took the woman’s hand, then the therianthrope yanked her to her feet with such force it hurt her shoulder.

“No troll. Troll. Troll rock. Walk.”

Hervor jerked her arm away from the finfolk woman. “Aye, I can walk. I have no fucking idea what the rest of what you said means. But know this



—that sword is *mine*. My legacy, my family heirloom, claimed now by the Döglinar. That oaf can't keep it."

The woman's eyes narrowed in apparent confusion, and she shook her head. Hervor had mostlike spoken too fast for her. Which was fine, given she didn't really care if the finfolk understood her. After a moment, the therianthrope grunted, grabbed her shoulder, and pushed her forward out of the overhang. They walked a long time, long enough to be certain they'd already borne her out of the gorge. The finfolk carried no torches, didn't seem to fear the Mist, or breathing it in.

"Fire," Hervor protested.

"No. Fire. No."

So they didn't care if it drove her Mist-mad. Maybe they didn't even realise the danger. Hervor waved her hands through the vapour. "This is poison to me." One of the other males was carrying her travel sack. It would have a torch. She pointed at it. The woman spoke in her language, and the male trotted over, handed her the bag.

Hervor pointed again. "Fire." She made a show of breathing deeply. "Fire." She shook her head. "No Mist."

The woman banged her teeth together in a gesture that could have meant aught at all. Then she fished through the bag and tossed Hervor a torch. Hervor stared at it, then at the woman. "Flint and steel?" She pantomimed striking the two together.

The finfolk woman rolled her eyes, then dug through the bag some more. Eventually, she grunted and just shoved the whole bag at Hervor. They waited long enough for her to light a torch. At least she would not go mad now. A small comfort, assuming they did not later decide to feast on her flesh, in which case perhaps madness would have been a reprieve.

They passed over hills until the sea came into view. On the ice by the shore rested two long, narrow boats, which to Hervor seemed more like

pointed, hollowed-out tree trunks than rowboats. Animal skins were stretched over the hulls. Maybe even sealskin, to keep out leaks.

“Cousin of yours?” she asked, allowing herself a cruel smile. If she was to be a prisoner, at least not let her be cowed by these half-vaettr creatures.

The woman looked back and forth between the boat and Hervor as if trying to sort out her meaning. “Insult?”

Hervor snorted. Aye, that about covered it, though she knew flyting with one who could not well speak her tongue amounted to little more than spewing taunts at a rock.

The therianthrope smacked her on the side of the head. The blow came so fast Hervor hadn’t even braced for it. It dropped her flat, left her world spinning, eyes out of focus.

“Insult. No.” The therianthrope might have been shaking her head. Hard to tell with everything spinning. Hervor groaned, staring at the ghost lights overhead. So the finfolk did not care to be insulted. No flyting with them, then. She rubbed the side of her head, and her hand came away smeared in warm blood. Bitch was strong. Not as strong as a draug, but stronger than a Man. Not for the first time, nor surely the last, Hervor wished she had inherited her father’s berserk nature. “In boat. Get in.”

Right. Hervor rose, swayed, steadied herself. The finfolk male with her sword boarded one of the other boats, along with two other males. In that boat lay a body: Orvar-Oddr, the Arrow’s Point. His chest rose and fell in slow breaths. Son of a troll! Hervor took a step toward that boat ere the therianthrope woman grabbed her and pointed to the other one again.

Not much point in fighting them, Hervor supposed, at least not for the nonce, when she had no weapons, not even her damned knife. With a sigh, she sat on one of the planks that served as seats, glare locked on Orvar’s body. “Where are you taking me?”

“You. Kiviuk.” The woman sat across from her while other finfolk took up the oars and shoved the boat into the sea.

“I’m Hervor. I don’t know what Kiviug means.”

The woman pointed to the other boat. Hervor shrugged and rubbed her head. None of this made sense. Only one thing she could say for certain. A man on that other boat needed killing.



THEY PADDED until the sun rose, then drove the boats onto the bank. They had followed the coast all the way, and Hervor could not be certain, but they seemed to be in a fjord. Based on the sun, probably on the northern side of this island. Odin alone knew how far away from where they had first landed. Hervor couldn’t even guess how much time had passed since she’d fallen into the gorge. She’d been unconscious for a while. Long enough for them to treat her injuries. Even those on her back. Which, now that she thought of it, meant they must have removed her shirt.

A warrior couldn’t afford much modesty. Still, it made her wonder what else the animal men might have done with her while she lay senseless. She scowled at the thought, pushed it from her mind, because dwelling on it would only kindle her wrath.

The woman directed her to follow, whilst the men pulled the boats away from the fjord. Hervor did so until the woman indicated a spot by some rocks. Then she lay down against those rocks. Daylight must have meant time for a nap. If what Hervor knew of therianthropes was true, it also meant they could not shapeshift—the sun locked them in human form. Which probably meant this was her best chance.

As she sat, watching the therianthropes, the men led Orvar to where Hervor sat and threw him down beside her. He collided with the rock, a satisfying *oomph* escaping him as he hit. Slowly, the man sat, shook himself, and looked at Hervor.

“You’re here too,” he said. No hint of ire, no indication he realised she had been the one to shove him over the falls.

Hervor bit back her response. If he didn’t know she planned to kill him, she might more easily gain another chance. She glanced at the therianthropes as they settled down to rest. Soon, they might sleep, and she could escape. Until then, perhaps the best way was to put Orvar at ease as well. She turned back to him, feigning a hint of warmth. “A draug sent me tumbling over the falls.”

“Me as well.”

Hervor grunted. “So ... are not you the one they call Arrow’s Point?”

Orvar groaned. “I have not used that name in many years. Not since I gave over pirating and the like ... but I was. A long time ago, aye.”

“And how does the legendary Arrow’s Point find himself overcome by *seals*?”

Now the man grimaced and looked to her, then the sky. “Hard to sleep when it’s so blasted bright above, aye? You’d think now would be the best time to move.”

“Not for therianthropes.”

“No, more’s the pity.”

Hervor too sat up against the rock. The man had already grown comfortable with her. So let him talk. Let him damn himself one step more. Soon, he’d reach the Gates of Hel. “Bragi said your father gave you magic arrows.”

“Black arrows, true, forged by dvergar in the depths of Nidavellir, I think. Vile, toxic things, apt to kill any they pierce. Many a dverg-wrought craft works like that. Twisted bastards revel in death.”

Dverg-crafts Hervor knew only too well. Not so far away, a finfolk male held Tyrfin, her legacy. If she could claim that, she could strike down Orvar and the finfolk both. “There were nine arrows?”

“No, six. I always managed to reclaim them ere ... ere this place. My grandfather stole them from a king in Kvenland, long ago. My father gave them to me, then, when I left my homeland. I went raiding and pillaging and adventuring across all the North Realms. So many adventures. So many lost friends. And those arrows fastened that name on me, Arrow’s Point. None withstood them.”

“Was that how you killed the sons of Arngrim in that ... famed battle?”

He blew out a long breath. “Not a tale I like to dwell on, girl. But I suppose we all have ghosts behind us. After all those years of murder and plunder, I came upon a great champion in Sviarland. And so, of course, wanting to know who was the stronger of us, I challenged him to a holmgang ...”



ORVAR SPOKE A LONG WHILE, telling his version of the tale, until Hervor had to remind herself to hold to her ire. She had to cling to it, recall, 'twas her kin the man had slaughtered. Had they been villains in his eyes? Bah! All Men saw villains in their foes.

The man’s voice trailed off, clearly pained. And he mumbled something under his breath. Then he rolled onto his side. “We best get some sleep. No sense in opening old wounds.”

Hervor nodded affably until he closed his eyes. Old wounds? Those wounds had never closed. And now she must open all new wounds, as vengeance demanded. Ere she could do that, she needed to escape and reclaim Tyrfing. She waited until Orvar too seemed settled, crept past the sleeping finfolk. The moment she put some distance between them, Hervor ran. Dashed out over the ice field, ducked behind the nearest rock pile, and then scrambled from that to another.

Why could there not be a damn forest when she truly needed one? These shores seemed naught but tundra, though rocks and hills at least gave her some spots to hide. Naught as suitable as trees though. Trees she knew.

Glancing over her shoulder, she made for the nearest hill. Not over it, she would stand out too much, but around it, into the valley it created with another hill. She had to keep moving. Her people were south, and if she could somehow reach them—find them again—she'd be safe.

She almost laughed. Her people. Odin's balls! That party worked for the Ynglings, her foes ... her *villains*. Starkad might have saved her life—twice—but he'd also beaten her bloody. She owed him for the latter, but maybe she'd call it even. Still, he'd mostlike protect her from these Hel-cursed finfolk, even as he had from the draugar. He'd help her escape Thule. The island did not suit Mankind.

Something whooshed behind her, and she turned. Ere she had finished moving, cords flew through the air, caught around her legs, and sent her toppling over. Large bone weights slammed against her shins, sending bolts of lightning shooting all the way up to her hips.

The finfolk woman was running toward her. Hervor rolled over and tugged at the cords. They were some kind of sinew strands, tough and wrapt around her legs so many times she'd spend far too long unwinding them. She yanked, pulled, tried to free her leg. The finfolk woman grabbed her tunic. Hervor beat at her with her fists. That earned her a blow to the side of the head. She reeled and pitched over into the snow. The finfolk woman jerked her head up and punched her across the jaw. The blow left Hervor dazed, unable to even surrender, much though she wished to. It was enough. Enough.

The other woman hit her again. Hervor lay back in the snow and groaned, then the finfolk woman slumped back on her arse. After a moment, she cuffed Hervor on the side of the head, this time not hard enough to do real harm, though it stung. "You. Trouble."

Hervor chuckled, choked on her blood, and spit it out. “My mother would agree.” She chortled. Gods, the woman had called her an evil, spiteful child. She supposed she was. Maybe not so much had changed.

“No man. *Woman.*”

“Wait, what?” Hervor mulled it over a moment. “You’re irked because I’m not a man?”

The finfolk woman thumped her own chest with one finger. “Naliajuk. Naliajuk take you. Husband.” She roughly grabbed Hervor’s groin and shook it. Not a sensation Hervor enjoyed. “No husband.”

“Nope,” Hervor spat, as the woman released her. “No husband down there.”

“All human men. Get you.”

“Hervor.”

The finfolk woman glared at her. “Hervor. Now give. Kiviuq.” One of the males. Starkad had said finfolk abducted men and women for spouses. So this Naliajuk had fished her from the river, thinking to claim a husband. And when she had removed her armour to treat the wounds, she’d gotten an unpleasant surprise. And so decided to give her prisoner to this Kiviuq.

“So you don’t want me, huh?” Hervor laughed again. Just as bad as Starkad—no love for women. Not that Hervor intended to marry a fucking seal of any gender.

“No man.”

“Right. So you’ll give me to Kiviuq. Why, what do you care? Who is he to you?”

“Mmm.” Naliajuk looked around and gnawed on her lip, then cupped both hands around her womb.

“Your ... lover?”

The finfolk woman cuffed her again. “Mmm. Kiviuq. Naliajuk.” She pointed to her womb.

“Your son.”

Now she rolled her eyes. Again she pointed to her womb. “One. Woman. One.”

“One woman? Same woman? Born of the same woman? Your brother?”

“Br-brother.” Naliajuk nodded now. Possible she meant they were twins, but it didn’t really matter. For whatever reason, Naliajuk had not handed Hervor over to her brother just yet. Maybe there was some ritual for it since she had been the one to capture Hervor.

She rubbed the blood from her face with the back of her hand. Several painful bruises had already started to form. Naliajuk had given her quite the beating. “Why don’t you just leave us alone? I don’t want to be *anyone’s* wife.” Least of all a man who seemed more animal than human.

“Mmm. Human. Fresh human.”

“Aye, I’m human. Are you not, as well, but Men with vaettir inside you?”

Naliajuk gnawed her lip again, then shook her head. “Human. Best. Take human, win ... respect.”

Respect. She probably meant having a human bride would bring her brother honour. Hervor shook her head. She wished she could explain to the woman there was no honour in abducting a wife. Then again, even mortals had been known to do so. Men were willing to do a great many things for lust or profit. And she was no innocent to think her wishes should mean much to this animal.

Naliajuk yanked Hervor up by her arms and roughly dragged her back to the camp, not bothering to untangle her feet. The motion sent fresh jolts of agony through Hervor’s wounds, but the finfolk woman ignored any of Hervor’s grunts of pain. Finally, Naliajuk deposited Hervor back in the same spot. This time, she wound a cord around Hervor’s hands, binding them together. A man did the same with Orvar, who fixed Hervor with a level stare through the whole process.



“What the fuck were you thinking?” he asked when the finfolk pulled away again. “Did it not cross your mind to coordinate an escape attempt?”

If he only knew what she planned to do to him when she escaped. Hervor worked her swollen jaw. “You were too busy resting. I saw a chance to go for ... help. And I took it.”

Orvar sneered. “From now on, girl, you listen to me and follow my lead.”

“Why? What good have you wrought on this island, Arrow’s Point?”

Now he sat up straighter. “You will heed my words because King Yngvi funded this expedition, and the king appointed me to lead it.”

“Just how long have you had your mouth around his cock, anyway?”

Now Orvar’s sneer turned into an outright glare. “Watch your Hel-cursed mouth, shieldmaiden. The pain you endured in that beating is naught compared to what lies before us if we fail to work together.” Perhaps he might have a point at that. Hervor could avenge no one while bound by finfolk, nor was she keen to marry this Kiviuq and bear his ... pups.

So. Once again her temper had endangered her goals. She bit her tongue, as if that might help suppress the boiling rage in her gut. “You’re right. I was ... rash. We bide our time, then.”

“Aye.” Now his guard was up with her. His anger inflamed. And her chance at both escape and revenge dwindled whilst that blaze endured.

“Fine then. Tell me about this Hjalmar.”

“What?”

“If we are to pass hours like this, at least let us not be bored.”

Orvar worked his jaw as if weighing that, then shrugged. “You are a strange one, Hervor.”

“I have been called worse.”

“As have we all, I suppose. Hjalmar ... Hjalmar was a housekarl to King Yngvi, as I said. So when we proclaimed ourselves brothers, he brought me to Uppsalir and presented me at court. Yngvi embraced me and

bade me join them all for a feast, while his brother, Alf, watched, reserved. I did not ... much know what to make of either.

“Yngvi and Alf shared their kingship, determined not to turn on one another as their father and uncle had done. I thought it a strange choice, one fated to invite bickering amongst them. And yet nigh to two decades have passed since, and they remain loyal to one another thus far.”

“And Hjalmar?”

“Oh ... that feast marked the dawn of good times, when I would become something other than the Arrow’s Point. Good times, of course, never last.”



JUST OFF THE SHORE, an arching rock rose from a shelf of ice, looking like some bent-over jötunn. Naliajuk had said Troll Rock. This then was where they’d planned to take Hervor. They banked their boats right up against the ice shelf, then leapt out on it. The males dragged those boats up onto the ice, whilst Naliajuk grabbed Hervor by the elbow and pulled her toward the shore. A village neared, though not one with houses exactly. It seemed the finfolk lived in domes of ice a short walk from the sea. Little huts, really, though Hervor couldn’t guess how they built them. Maybe the ice here never melted. Even summer could not break the grip of this freeze. The breath of Hel had blown over Thule, and the finfolk had either welcomed it or made the best of it.

The woman led her past several of the ice houses, toward the centre of the village. An arch of bones rose there—whale ribs by the size of them. Naliajuk yanked her away from the bone arch, pulling her along until they reached one of the ice huts, whilst her brother pulled Orvar away.

That finfolk man Kiviuq, the very animal they wanted her to marry, had claimed Tyrting. The therianthrope probably had no idea of the value,

power, and dire nature of that blade. He had not yet drawn it, but if he did ... well. There would be murder in this village tonight. It was a twisted justice, one fit for a thief who had claimed the Dögling legacy. That still did not answer how to go from that justice upon the finfolk to her revenge against Arrow's Point.

Hervor had to stoop to enter the hut Naliajuk shoved her toward. The interior was lined with fur from a snow bear. Quite the hunter, whoever had brought one of those down. She couldn't stand upright, but the fur was soft, so that didn't matter. The interior was surprisingly warm, comfortable even, at least compared to the frigid wind outside.

The finfolk woman crawled over to where she sat, then continued to move around her, like a wolf circling prey. She looked innocent, young. But seals were predators, and dangerous ones at that. A hunter who forgot that wound up like the Axe.

Inside the hut lay several figures carved from walrus ivory. Had Naliajuk made these? Hervor reached to pick one up. Without warning, Naliajuk grabbed Hervor's hips, patted them. Checking her bones? Hervor dropped the carving and clenched her fists. She *might* be able to overpower Naliajuk if she caught the finfolk woman off guard. But running through the village she was not like to make it far. Better to tolerate the strange inspection. She'd get her chance later.

Then the finfolk woman grabbed her breasts, squeezed. Hervor stiffened. Yeah, that was too much. She shoved Naliajuk off her. "Listen you fish-brained beast. No one touches me like that without my permission."

Naliajuk gnawed her lip a moment. "You. Baby."

"So I'm a baby because I don't want to be groped? By another woman, no less?"

Naliajuk patted her womb. "You. Baby?"

“Do I have babies? No.” She shook her head. “Gods, no.” Imagine, *her* a mother. Not a pleasant thought for her *nor* the unfortunate babe.

Now the finfolk woman frowned. “No baby.”

“No.”

“Broken?”

Hervor sneered. “No. I’m not fucking *broken*. I just don’t want a Hel-cursed baby!”

Naliajuk jerked back, raising her hands in signs of defence, almost like claws. She arched her back like she was about to shift into a seal. “No Hel. No speak. No.”

Well, that was interesting. The therianthrope didn’t like anyone invoking the name of Hel. Of course, völvur and old men said the same, but she didn’t know many warriors who didn’t curse in Hel’s name. The Queen of Niflheim was the fear, the real power behind the Mist. She was death—the worst kind of death. Hervor raised her hands in surrender. “I understand. Don’t say her name.” Naliajuk nodded. “You want to know if I *can* have a baby?”

Again, that simple nod. If she said no, would they release her? More likely, finding her a poor wife, they’d eat her. “I assume so. If I wanted to. And I don’t. No baby. No husband. Give me back my sword and that other man. Let us go. We don’t want to marry you. We don’t want to fight you.” Words she’d never said to anyone in her life. She always loved a good fight. But the therianthropes were not Men, and facing them in combat was folly, even were they not outnumbered.

Naliajuk crawled for the door, then looked over her shoulder and pointed at the furs Hervor sat on. “You. Stay. No leave.” With that, the finfolk woman left her alone in the ice house.

When she was certain the woman had left, Hervor scrambled to the edge to peer outside. No guard, though plenty of the fur-wrapt finfolk wandered around in the village. Naliajuk was there too, talking to Kiviuq and others.

They had bound Orvar to the bone arch with strands of sinew and torn his shirt away from him. He stood there, shivering, as finfolk pelted him with stones of ice. Hit him in the chest, back, face. Oh, that was delicious. Here, at the end of the world—the slayer of her kin, bound, broken, his cheeks pale with impending frostbite, maybe even deathchill. The mighty Arrow’s Point rendered limp and impotent and well primed for her blade. If she *had* her damned runeblade. Tyrfing’s absence was a raw, gnawing hollow in her gut.

There was nowhere to run. Not now. She needed a plan. And she needed the rest. She crawled back into the centre of the hut, wrapt the fur over her, and curled up to sleep.



SOMEONE GRABBED her by the shoulder. Hervor jerked awake, twisted around, and snatched the man’s wrists. Kiviuq. He broke her grip with ease, then grabbed her arms. She stared daggers at him. Right. She would marry this animal when the fields of Hel melted. The finfolk man gnashed his teeth at her. She tried to pull back, but he was too strong.

After an overlong pause, he shoved her toward the doorway. Outside, several of the other finfolk stood around the whalebone arch. Orvar knelt nearby, arms wrapt around himself, his skin tinged blue. Had he given in and agreed to wed one of these creatures?

Kiviuq followed behind her, seized her by the shoulders, and shoved her over to his sister. Naliajuk caught her arms and leant close to her face. “Now you. Marry?” she asked.

“Go fuck a troll.”

“Troll. No troll. Marry human. Give baby.”

“Go. To. Hel!”

Naliajuk flinched, looked around. Some of the others made signs of warding. Naliajuk flung her to the ground, the impact jarring Hervor, if only for an instant. That moment was all it took for two finfolk to seize her, each yanking her up by one arm. They pulled her arms apart until her shoulders felt ready to pop out. Like that they lifted her off her feet and carried her—kicking and flailing and spitting at the trollfuckers—to the bone arch. Each tied one of those sinew bands around her wrist, then released her.

Hervor stared up at the woman. “Why do this to us?”

Naliajuk pointed at Orvar. “Man. No wife. Say no. No.”

Huh. “So he has to *agree* to marry the finfolk woman?”

“Marry. No hit. Husband, no hit.” Huh.

One finfolk pulled a bone knife. Hervor spit in his face. “Do your worst. I’ve been cut ere, fish rat.” The finfolk glared, then snatched her tunic and began to saw at the laces. “What in the Gates of Hel do you think you’re doing?” she demanded. She strained against the sinews binding her. “Get off of me!”

The fabric didn’t give way near as easily under the knife as the laces had. Blade was probably better suited for piercing. But her shirt did cut. He ripped it off her, leaving her shivering in her linen undershirt. This he pinched between two fingers, inspecting it as if surprised to see another layer down there. Therianthropes probably never wore undergarments. Just more clothing to remove when they wanted to shift. Finally, the finfolk began to saw through the linen as well.

“I will *kill* you one day for this.” Hervor glared at him. She’d skin this animal for his pelt. When the male had finished his work, he leant in and examined her exposed breasts, though only for a moment. He nodded in apparent approval—and wasn’t that wonderful?—and backed away.

She stood there, shivering and unable to cover herself for either warmth or modesty. Neither of which mattered as soon as the first ice ball hit. It struck between her shoulder blades and stung like she’d been hit with a

weapon. It knocked the air from her lungs, and for a moment, she couldn't breathe. Couldn't scream in pain. Ere she could even catch her breath, another ball hit. This one striking her ribs. The villagers were each gathering up stones of ice, mashing snow around them with both hands. One by one, they hurled ball after ball at her. All of them, save Naliajuk and Kiviuq, who stood side by side, arms folded in near identical poses. Watching their people torture her but not taking part.

"Why not?" she spat at them. Why shouldn't they join in? Was there some rule against beating your intended wife? Wouldn't that be the quaintest law—you could have your wife beaten. Just couldn't do it yourself. The pelting continued for some time. She tried to look up, watch the iridescent ghost lights. But after each blow, she tried to curl into a ball. To protect her face. None of the ice stones struck her there. Maybe they knew they might crack her skull like that.

And then the attacks stopped. Hervor coughed, moaned, looked up. She had long since fallen to her knees, supported only by the sinews pulling at her arms. One of the villagers approached her with a bowl, carved from bone and lined with animal skin. Water in the bowl. They didn't want her to die of thirst, at least. She raised her head more as he neared, trying to sip from it. The finfolk held the bowl just out of reach.

Hervor groaned. Oh, she'd have to arrange some special vengeance for this one. He was fucking taunting her. The man heaved his arms forward. Ice cold water splashed over her. The shock of it left her gasping.

"I will ... die ... like this." Could barely speak through her chattering teeth.

The finfolk man tossed the bowl aside. Then he punched her in the face. Her head jerked back under the force, only the sinews keeping her from falling over. Pain blinded her. That and he'd hit her over one eye. She tried to blink it away, but that eye wasn't working. A sharp slap on the other cheek jerked her back to alertness. The male slapped her again and again

and again. Until her cheek felt on fire. At last he backed away, looked to Naliajuk. The woman approached and knelt in the snow beside Hervor. With one hand, she lifted Hervor's chin, forcing her to meet her gaze.

"You. Marry. Kiviuq. Give babe."

Hervor stared at Naliajuk. Did the other woman feel aught for her suffering? No. Why should she? This was normal to her. Had Hervor felt aught when Red-Eye's Boys had raped or tortured those they'd come across? Maybe ... You learnt to block it out, to stop thinking of the other person as a person. It didn't take long. By the second or third time, it became habit. How much easier then, for these creatures that were not even human? But did the faces come to haunt them, time to time, in the dark of night? Did it weigh upon them, the things they had done?

They would beat her down. Sooner or later, everyone broke. She was strong, defiant. But no one lasted forever. She should just give in, agree. Would wedding the bastard really be any worse than this? She'd slept with men she didn't like before. Sometimes opportunity, need, or sheer lust mattered more than love or desire. Everyone broke sooner or later. But Hervor had always figured herself to be one who'd go later. Much fucking later.

"Why don't *you* marry him?" she said. "Give your brother a few pups. Make us all happy."

Naliajuk shook her head and released Hervor's chin. She backed away.

Then the ice stones began again. Hervor groaned in agony. She wanted to weep at the pain, at the frustration, at the utter hopelessness of this place. But she would not. She would not break in front of these animals. Not now, not for as long as she could manage.





THE COLD WIND had scourged Hervor more effectively than any lash. By the time they released her from the sinew bands, she could not walk, could scarce move her arms enough to cover herself. Deathchill was taking her. Even that thought seemed idle, far away. To embrace the end seemed the easiest way forward. The only remaining option.

Naliajuk carried her to a bonfire in the midst of the village and there dropped her on the ground. Hervor lay unmoving, unable to stir, much less muster the will to care. She had failed in her quest for vengeance and would now sink into the Realm of ghosts, trapped forever. It ought to have horrified her, but she could not bring herself to form an emotion, any emotion.

Her flesh stung as the fire began to infuse its warmth back into her. With surprising gentleness, Naliajuk bound her hands to a post carved from another whalebone. As if she could rise. As if she could run. There was no escape from Hel, and the breath of that goddess had blanketed Thule.



THE FINFOLK WOULD NOT LET her die. The fire eased just enough warmth into Hervor's limbs to keep her alive.

"You're awake," a man said.

Awake, aye, not by choice. Hervor groaned. Someone had wrapt one of those fur coats around her whilst she slept. Naliajuk, mostlike, with misplaced concern or perhaps simple refusal to let her prisoner escape, even into death? Hervor cracked open her eyes. Orvar-Oddr was bound to another whalebone post nearby, leaning with his back against it. A fur coat on him too. Did her face look half so bruised and beaten as his? By the feel of it, it must. Hervor shivered, forcing herself not to whimper with the pain of it. She would not let this man see her weakness. She had no fucking weakness, damn it!

“I should not have come to this place ...” he mused, and Hervor scowled at his painfully obvious observation. No Man belonged on this island, not in a long, long time, if ever they had. “I guess I was running from my past ... I felt like I failed the Ynglings in letting Hjalmar die for letting Yngvi’s daughter ... what nonsense. Hjalmar brought it all on himself, in a way. He knew what he was about. And still, I let Yngvi call me back, call in old loyalties. As if it might make up for what they’d lost.”

Gods above, the man was rambling like deathchill was setting in. Ironic, that the cold would ultimately deny Hervor her vengeance. Would her father’s ghost be appeased if he died thus? Hervor would not take the chance. She must be the one to bring about his death and so give peace to her kin. So keep him talking, keep him coherent. Wait for her moment. Every single fucking one of the Ynglings needed to pay, aye, but if she brought down Arrow’s Point, maybe it would grant Father some measure of peace.

“What do you mean, Hjalmar brought it on himself?” she asked.

“He ... We did as Yngvi had wished and raided into Reidgotaland. Moons of blood and slaughter. And after, things turned against us. They always do.

“That summer had been kind, at least to me. We had made three raids into Reidgotaland, even established a settlement on one island. The last, in particular, had pleased Yngvi who planned to inspect it now summer was returning again ...”

And so he recounted more of his bitter tale, and Hervor knew how it needs must end.

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**DAYS GONE: SIGYN**

800 Age of Man

*H*igh in the boughs of a tree, Megin flooded to her senses, Sigyn could see a long way. A very long way. Even through the Mist and the growing twilight she could spot the forest's edge, and fires beyond it. Those fires might belong to either Ás camps or those of Huns. Either way, they couldn't reach them ere nightfall. Spending another night in the woods would not please any of them, but she could see no alternative. Instead, she turned about, seeking any form of shelter. Hundreds of ruins of the Old Kingdoms littered the North Realms—Hel, maybe even some of the South Realms—but never one when you needed it. Any shelter would do, though of course, things worse than Men oft sought the same havens. Beasts, trolls, mayhap even vaettir, if Frigg had the right of it. Sigyn's improved sense of smell had let her avoid a pack of cave hyenas this morn—not something any of them wished to stumble across by any measure.

Footfalls crunched on snow in the direction of the camps. Men or scouts, searching the forest. It could well be her people, but she couldn't know for certain unless they drew closer, risking discovery. She scrambled

back down the tree. With her bow, she'd brought down a pair of squirrels. The meat helped them keep their strength up, but the longer they delayed in the forest, the more chance of one of the children falling ill. Winter was deepening, and even children could catch Mist-thickness. Gods, Sigyn's father would have died of that had he not fallen—saving her—to the trolls. It was not a death she'd wish on anyone, least of all Frigg's children.

She tapped a finger against her lip. "There are people coming in our direction." Frigg groaned.

"Always with the running," Fulla said. "And then the hiding and the running, both. Best thing, I tell you, is if we had some help. A few strong men to protect us."

Sigyn hefted her bow. "*I* can protect us."

"Sure as sure you can, if it be squirrels and deer come to rape and kill us dead."

Sigyn was about to point out that she'd killed trolls as well, but then again, that day had not ended well. Not well for her and Frigg's father, worse still for Fulla.

"You're not a shieldmaiden," Frigg added.

Maybe they'd respect her more if she started spitting and cursing and carrying a sword. Instead, glowering, Sigyn trod off in the direction she'd heard men coming from. She kept low to the ground. To her ears, she made a great deal of noise—though not half so much as Frigg or Fulla. Sigyn waved them back. With no experience in woodcraft, they were apt to get them discovered in a heartbeat. Alone, she pressed on until she drew up close. Peering around a tree, she spied a small party, five men—none she recognised. Huns, mostlike.

Damn it. This close, they'd see a fire as soon as the sun finished setting. Even torchlight might draw them. Slowly, she unshouldered her bow. She was a damned fine shot, but five men ... No one shot that fast. It took time to nock an arrow, draw it, take aim. At this range, a man with a blade could

kill a woman three times over ere she got a shot off. Besides, killing trolls was one thing, but these were just Men, out scouting the woods for their enemies. She had never slain another Man, and the thought of seeing one of her arrows sprout from a person's chest, seeing his eyes go cold, it turned her gut and left her shaking her head. And if she did naught? If she allowed these men to find her and her sister, find Fulla, then she had done worse than kill. She'd allowed harm to come to those she loved.

Which left but one choice. She nocked an arrow. Slow breaths, steady. Let everything else fall away, just as Agilaz had taught her. Her new senses made that easier. Her vision could narrow until naught but her target even existed. Bow drawn, she stepped around the tree trunk. Aimed at a man. He turned in her direction. Maybe he heard something. She loosed. Her arrow punched straight through his thigh, jutting out the other side. The man toppled over, clutching his wound and screaming loud enough to draw every wandering vaettr in the whole damned forest.

Rather than draw again, Sigyn took off running, dashing between trees, away from Frigg and Fulla. Without her, they might get lost in the woods, wander into a cave bear or a pack of dire wolves or Freyja knew what else. But she had to draw these men off. On and on she ran, the shouts of pursuit ever close behind. The apple gave her stamina, so maybe—*maybe*—she could outrun them. Heart racing, she jumped upon a root, then onto another, disguising her footprints in the snow. She leapt up, caught a branch, and climbed onto the bough of an ash tree. From there, she climbed further out.

Her foot slipped, and she slammed against the branch. An instant later, men raced by beneath her.

“Where did she go?”

“Find the bitch ere one of us catches an arrow like Roelof!”

“The footprints just disappear.” The speaker circled back, pausing beneath one tree over, where she had first started climbing on roots. Damn it. She'd planned to move further, jump from one tree to the next. But any

sound she made now would draw their eyes. And shooting her bow from this position was impossible.

The man knelt, inspecting the roots. Sigyn stifled a groan. Think fast. A drop from this height would slow her for a moment, long enough for them to catch her. She could sit up, *try* to shoot one of them, but those men had bows as well. “She must have climbed a tree.”

Taking care to make no noise, Sigyn pushed herself to a sitting position. The arrows jostling together in her quiver sounded loud to her, but none of them looked in her direction. They had, however, begun scanning all the trees in a haphazard pattern. Sooner or later they’d get lucky, espy her, and then she’d have nowhere to go.

So. *Slow breaths*. If she could somehow take out two of them, maybe the others would flee for cover, giving her time to get down. It was a slim hope, but any hope remained better than none. She eased an arrow loose from her quiver.

More footfalls sounded from beyond the men. Sigyn grit her teeth. Last thing she needed. Reinforcements. The twang of a bow caused her to drop flat again on pure instinct. An arrow sprouted from the chest of the one of the men. The victim fell, crashing into the snow.

“She’s behind us!” As they fumbled with their bows, another arrow hit one of them in the face.

Sigyn gasped at the gruesome sight, drawing the gaze of one of the scouts. At the same instant, a shadow stepped from behind a tree and wrapt a hand over the man’s mouth. The figure behind him—Loki! Freyja be praised—drove his victim to the ground and held him until he stopped struggling. The last man broke and ran but had gone only a dozen steps ere another arrow took him in the back.

Loki—Sigyn stared open-mouthed at him. He always found her, somehow. How did he do that? Not purely by tracking, it couldn’t be, not the route she’d taken. So one more secret, deep and hidden as his

connection to the flames. As she climbed down, Agilaz joined them. Sigyn threw her arms first around her foster father, then around her lover. They had come to save her. She kissed Loki.

It was a shame, though, for had she proved more useful, maybe she would not have needed saving. When it came to it, she'd kept Frigg and Fulla and the babes alive, but not much else.

"Are you injured?" Agilaz asked.

No, not injured, but she needs must do better in the future. She would not allow herself to become a burden. She'd had an apple, same as any of them. And that meant it was past time to start doing her part.

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## THE DÖGLINAR

### 25 Age of the Æsir

Orvar's story was interrupted by the arrival of the finfolk. Kiviuq came and dragged Orvar back to the whalebone arch, and finfolk beat and cut and mocked him. Hervor watched, flinching at the worst of the blows, chiding herself for sympathising with the man who had slain and cursed her kin. The Nidavelliran rarely cried out, and she had to give him credit for courage. And almost, she could understand him following his blood brother to Samsey. Almost, had it not ended with the death of her family.

Blood demanded blood. Tyrfing must have ... vengeance. The Döglinar could not rest until she fulfilled her oath ... Though, in weak moments, Hervor began to repent having made such a promise.

Eventually, the finfolk returned Orvar to her side and flung him down. He struggled to rise until they bound him to a stake once again.

Hervor shook her head. "Odin's balls, man. Why didn't you just marry the damned seal already? Close your eyes, stick your cock in, and pretend it's a woman."



Orvar coughed, spat blood, and cast a weary glare her way. “And why haven’t you, girl? As if you can’t get on your hands and knees and take it. Or maybe for the same damn reason? You’ve no wish to be forced into a marriage, much less agree to spend the rest of your life here. Give the marriage vow and that’s an oath, aye?” He scoffed, then shook his head. “And it *would* be a woman, anyway.”

“So it would ...” Hervor admitted, once more craving she could become a bear. “Eh, maybe you’re just worried that, if you gave it to her good enough, she’d start barking like a seal.”

He grumbled something under his breath. “You’ve a lot of anger in you, shieldmaiden.”

“I think we’ve both got plenty to be wroth about.” She tugged on the sinews. They stretched but did not come close to breaking.

“Indeed. But slinging your petty insults won’t get us out of this situation.”

“No? And what would? Do you have a fucking army hidden away in your arsehole? Mayhap you’re owed a favour from Odin? If so, ’tis perhaps time to call it in. At this point, I would settle for a damned knife. But you, you’ve got naught but trollshit. If you did, you’d have freed yourself already.”

Orvar shifted against the post, groaning in plain discomfort. “I have *you*.” Not in the least, though let him think what he may. Orvar had the right of it—there was no breaking an oath, whether she ought to have sworn it or no. “I was thinking while they beat me. If we work together, we might be able to slip away, steal one of those boats.”

“How?”

“We’d have to put them off their guard. Here, in the middle of the village, everything is against us. But if we agreed to wed them—”

“Like Hel.”

“Hear me out. We agree to wed them. One of the ones who understood some Northern told me they have a sacred place, like a temple, where the weddings are held. Maybe we’d have more chance to break free from there than from here.”

She spat. “Or maybe we’d find ourselves being fucked by seals. You may be that desperate for some release, but I’m not.”

“I’d say you could use some.”

Now she spat *at* him. The phlegm landed well short, and Arrow’s Point scowled at her. “You’re naught but a spoilt child. This may be our only chance, and I find your ire toward me sadly misdirected.”

If he only knew. The words bubbled on her tongue, as ready to explode as if from one of those geysers. Arrow’s Point: murderer, slayer of all the sons of Arngrim. The man who had destroyed her house, her legacy, the entire legacy of the Döglinar. And there he sat, watching her, oblivious to his guilt, not knowing he faced down the woman who would crush him and send his soul screaming down to Hel. She clenched her jaw. He ought to know. But if she told him, he would be more on his guard. More prepared for her. She would still find her moment to strike. She had to.

“Tell me,” she said, unable to bite back the words, “did you betray the sons of Arngrim?”

He scoffed. “Because you think I’d betray you, girl? For Odin’s sake, no! I betrayed no one. We ... we came to Samsey. The longship anchored only a few dozen feet offshore, but the Mist around Samsey obscured the whole of the island. So much so, I almost found myself wondering if we had really arrived at land at all. Freyr alone knew what kind of beast or vaettr lived in such a Hel-cursed place. But the berserkir had insisted on the place, so thither we went.”

“Sometimes honour demands we act against our better judgment.”

“Right you are. And I did.

“We arrived on the island of Samsey, and there the Mist swelled like a pus-laden wound, seeming ready to burst with poison. Mutters spread among the crew, words like troll or draugar bandied about. Even jötunn. I thought the latter unlikely. Such monstrosities were said to lair in Utgard, beyond the protection of the Midgard Wall, and few came past it. That, at least, I felt confident about. The men though had begun to whisper prayers to the Vanir or the Æsir, depending on their wont ...”



AFTER ANOTHER ROUND OF BEATINGS, the finfolk threw Hervor into an ice hut beside Orvar. She groaned, then rolled over to look at him where he sat.

Everything hurt. Her eyes burnt. Her muscles ached. Breathing was agony. Her godsdamned *hair* hurt.

“Listen, girl. I’ve been thinking ... We need to agree to this. We have to say we’ll marry them without actually giving an oath.” He paused a moment, clearly in pain. “And we need to get them to bring us both at once.”

Hervor groaned again, not bothering to sit up. “Why would they do that?”

He shrugged. “Tell them you won’t marry unless it’s a joint wedding.”

“Because that’s not fucking suspicious.”

“So tell them I’m your father, and you won’t be wed until you see me wed first.”

“My fa—” She snapped her jaw closed. Her father? Her *father*! This monstrous, murderous, trollfucking bastard who had *slain* her father, and he wanted her to claim him as such! She could barely form the words through her clenched teeth. “It would dishonour my actual father to claim another as such.”

Orvar grunted in acknowledgment, then sighed. “Mayhap so, but a reasonable man will understand the extreme circumstances. Sometimes a lie is the only chance.”

She stifled a bitter laugh at that. Of all the tales she’d heard of Angantyr, all the ways her father was described, reasonable had never made the list. And this man had left him to burn in agony, writhing in torment until the end of time, had Hervor not come and claimed Tyrting. Her father’s ghost might no longer burn, but still it quivered, mired in rage and lament, maybe watching her, even now, waiting upon the fulfilment of her oath. That was his only hope, no doubt his sole solace.

Well, if one more lie—no matter how vile—was her only chance at fulfilling her oath, then she would lie. She had done worse. Would yet do far worse, if it meant avenging her family, upholding her oath. She sighed. “Very well. I will agree to the wedding on your conditions. What’s your plan?”

He grimaced. “We do not know aught about the temple or their ceremonies. I don’t have a plan, save to look for an opportunity and seize it.”

Not elegant. But then, such was, most oft, Hervor’s plan as well. After all, she was still seeking such an opportunity to cut Arrow’s Point down. Soon, she would find it, would seize it.



THE FINFOLK FERRIED them over the sea in those long, narrow boats of theirs. Behind Troll Rock rose a temple carved from ice, looking much like a hollowed-out iceberg with a peak carved into a spiral. Hervor had never seen aught like it. Glorious and ominous, jutting from the sea. The moon had risen, full, bulbous even. For these therianthropes, that was probably an auspicious time. Many seals lounged about on the iceberg’s surface, some

even within the temple. A few stood in human form in there, wrapt in those heavy fur coats.

Orvar had a hand inside his coat. The man had worked off a piece of whalebone and turned it into a shiv and had assured Hervor this would work. Problem was, therianthropes didn't die easy. Naught possessed by a vaettr did. On the other hand, maybe she didn't need them to die. Just to fall into chaos that might let her reclaim Tyrfing and maybe even strike down Orvar in the process.

The boats bumped the iceberg, and one of the finfolk grabbed her by the shoulders and yanked her onto the ice. Another did the same to Orvar, and he stumbled, no doubt still weak from the beatings and cold. He looked to her. She feigned a slight smile. *I'll send you to Hel, bastard.*

They had to duck to pass through the entrance of the temple, though the interior rose ten feet above her head. Inside, Kiviuq smiled at her like he was pleased—like she ought to welcome the forced union. Hervor inclined her head to the finfolk, forcing the hint of a smile as well.

Who could say where the beast ended and the man began? Orvar claimed they were people. If so, it meant forcing a marriage was all the more despicable. Norns wove a crooked and cruel urd for men and women. They alone had such a right. For anyone else, stealing freedom of choice made you no better than any other thief. Worse, maybe, since choice counted for more than worldly goods. Then again, she'd stolen plenty and taken more lives than she could count whilst a bandit, as did any good raider. The thought had her snickering.

None of the finfolk had brought weapons to the temple. Perhaps it would have profaned this ritual. They worshipped the moon, clearly.

A hole in the iceberg's peak allowed moonlight to pass inside, reflecting off the ice. Beside Kiviuq and Orvar's woman stood another man. A priest perhaps. The priest raised his arms into the moonlight, staring up at it and chanting in their strange language.

“Aningan,” he said, and all the gathered finfolk repeated the word. The name of the moon?

The man who had brought them began to guide them toward their would-be spouses. Orvar offered Hervor the slightest incline of his head. Then the man jerked free the shiv and jabbed it between the ribs of their guide who doubled over in pain. Hervor reacted instantly, grabbing the man by his hood and flinging him in the midst of the temple. Shouts of chaos went up at once, but Hervor was already running, ducking her head back out of the temple.

The seals outside stared at them, clearly not certain what had just happened. Hervor jumped in the boat an instant ere Orvar leapt into the other one. “Go!” she shouted, shoving her boat away from the iceberg with one oar. And he set to paddling away from the rock, down south. Hervor, however, began to paddle back toward the village. There was something she needed even more than freedom.

“What in Hel’s name are you doing?” Orvar shouted at her.

“I’m not leaving without my father’s sword!”

“Odin’s spear, girl!” he bellowed. “Your father will understand!” Hervor ignored the murderous bastard. Oh, she’d have something for him, soon enough. “Hervor!”

“Go to Hel!” She continued toward the village, only a short distance from Troll Rock, sparing a glance behind her. The seals had already begun to dive into the sea. The Man-form finfolk were shedding their clothes, preparing to do the same. Orvar too started after her. Even better.

She rammed her boat right up on the shore, leapt out, and started running into the heart of the village. Orvar’s boat would hit the ice in a moment. Hervor dashed toward Kiviug’s hut. All the finfolk had gone to the ceremony, leaving the village in eerie emptiness. The angry barks of seals drawing closer meant it would not stay that way long.

She ducked inside the hut, easily spotting the sword leaning against one wall, then crawled over and grabbed it. As she came back out, naked and screaming finfolk rushed toward them. Grim-faced, Hervor jerked her blade free from its sheath, and it gleamed with its etheric flame. She sliced through the attacking finfolk with a single mighty blow that opened him up from his neck to hip. A small army more was closing in, though.

“Run!” Orvar shouted and raced out of the village. Oh, dammit, he was going to make her chase him down. Hervor raced after him, not sheathing Tyrfing.

Orvar cast a glance back at her, at the sword. His eyes widened like he’d finally realised. Finally. “Your father’s sword?” he shouted back at her. Hervor screamed in fury like a woman possessed and lunged forward, swinging at him. Orvar skidded on ice, dropped to one knee, and rolled under the blow.

Hvor spun, swinging again. “For my father!”

Orvar rolled away, unable to claim his feet. “Stop. We have no time!” She paid him no heed, slashing and thrusting while Orvar fell back. He clearly knew a single touch would end him. “Daughter of Angantyr!” he shouted at her. “I did not kill your father.”

Now she panted, advancing with a steadier pace. An executioner moving toward the condemned. This bastard would die. “You killed my uncles. You damned them all to eternal torment. I owe you twelve deaths, though I can dole out but one.”

By now, the finfolk had caught up to them and moved to surround them. Hervor glanced at them but continued to advance on Orvar. Naught else mattered more. “You cost us everything!” Orvar cried.

Hvor cocked her head toward Kiviuq. The finfolk man’s glare ought to have melted all the ice on Thule. She didn’t care. “You were right,” Hervor said. “I *can* let a wereseal fuck me—if it means getting my revenge.”

“You’re Mist-mad, girl.”

The female finfolk, Naliajuk, stepped forward, forestalling Kiviuq. “No. No blade. No fight.”

Hervor pointed Tyrfing at the woman. “Stay out of this or you’ll be next, bitch. Arrow’s Point dies this night. I will see my father’s ghost at peace!”

Glowering, Naliajuk raised one of those corded weapons above her head and began to twirl it. Other finfolk did the same. Oh, damn it. Not now. Not this close. She roared and charged Orvar. He dove to the side, amidst the finfolk. And then Naliajuk flung the weapon. The cords wrapt around Hervor’s legs and sent her stumbling down to the ice. Tyrfing slipped from her grasp and skidded along the ground for several feet.

“Bastard!” Hervor roared at Orvar.

The man tried to rise, but Kiviuq grabbed him by his coat, yanking him off the ground. The finfolk held him eye to eye for a brief instant. And then he cuffed him on the side of the head.

Hervor wanted to relish it, until Naliajuk began raining such blows upon her as well.

A barrage of them that went on and on until darkness finally enveloped her.

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**DAYS GONE: TYR**

800 Age of Man

With Völsung Rerirson's army broken, Odin had called another Thing. Voices filled the circle, wondering why Odin did not order them to storm the castle of those who had betrayed them. Tyr wondered the same. Odin seemed only to have a mind for his family, now returned. Thanks to Agilaz ... and Loki. The man who always knew too much. Tyr tried to keep his watchful eye on the crowd but found his gaze ever drawn to Odin and Frigg. They stood in the midst of the people, Thor clutched to Frigg's breast.

Only Bedvig Magison held silent now, no doubt yet reeling from his shame. That brought a slight smile to Tyr's face. The man deserved worse still, of course.

"Why do we not push forward?" Lodur Atridson demanded.

Odin held up his hand and everyone fell silent. They had seen what he'd done in the battle. Fewer would challenge his authority now, leastwise so long as the memory remained fresh. "We could lay siege there, aye. Spend days or moons trying to breach those walls whilst winter deepens and our

supplies run low. Do you suppose, then, that we will find enough game and forage in one place to feed all those mouths?” He waved to indicate the greater portion of Æsir. “No. We will starve long ere the Huns do. Would that I could make an example of this king—and one day, perhaps, I yet shall. We do not forget the debts owed us.” Men shouted at that, a few banging weapons on their shields. “Neither, however, can we afford to sap our strength fighting every petty king between here and Vanaheim. Instead ...” Odin looked to Loki. Damn it. Foreigner had some other fool plan. “Instead we must push south, into the mountains no man lays claim to.” The Hel-cursed Sudurberks. Mountains would swallow lives like whales scooping up the sea.

“No man,” Vili said. “Fucking vaettir, though. Mist so thick you’d choke on it.”

Odin scowled at his brother. “We’ll have torches.”

Other jarls bickered. Complaining about leaving their foes behind them. About the hardships of marching their clans through mountains. Who would lead the vanguard in narrow mountain passes. Which clan deserved the highest honours. Agilaz wended his way among the Thing. Tyr watched him, arms folded over his chest. They’d lost a lot of people in Hunaland, aye. Still too many to move through mountains. Hard to say whether it would cost more lives than it saved. Roughly a third of the people were what Tyr would consider warriors. Some others could fight if pushed to it. More important were the berserkir and varulfur who had fallen roughly under the command of Vili and Hœnir. Dozens of the therianthropes guarded the Æsir against the night, against other vaettir.

Varulfur had always existed on the fringes of Ás society. By adopting those two werewolf children, Odin had bestowed honour on the entire cult. Once, Tyr had heard a legend that all therianthropes had a progenitor. An ultimate ancestor of the breed that embodied all the true, unbridled power the shapeshifters wielded. Rage and power made flesh. Born to slaughter all

in its path. What had Heidr called the ancestral varulf? Fenrir. That was it. A story the völvu had used to frighten children. To keep them huddled close around the fires. Or perhaps, the stories of epic slaughter were intended to separate ordinary men from the varulfur who protected them.

Now, though, Vili seemed keen to uphold therianthropes as the elite of the Æsir. Indeed, they made astounding protectors and guardians. Still hard to trust one half controlled by a vaettr. One that could be given over to animal savagery at any moment.

“The Mist has worked too quickly in the night,” Agilaz said. “No few of the fallen are missing.”

“Missing?” Odin demanded.

A hush fell over the circle. Agilaz scowled, took in the Æsir. “Battlefields are chaos, so it’s hard to say with certainty. But I believe some of the dead rose last night.”

“Draugar.” Odin fairly spat the word. A chill swept over Tyr, one which had naught to do with the icy wind off the mountains. Reflexively, he touched the iron pommel of his sword.

“Aye, I believe it so. And when the sun sets ... They seem already to be trying to flank us, to hem us in.”

Tyr’s groan was one of many. Men feared few things more than draugar, and with good reason. Unlike trolls, which were given to stupidity, draugar held the skills and cunning of Men. Matched those with relentless strength and stamina and hatred for the living. Murmurs passed among all gathered. The Ás leaders, clan jarls, völvur, all stirred. The looks on their faces, the tremors in their voices, Tyr watched them all. Some of these men and women would break, panic. Others didn’t seem to believe Agilaz.

“Are you certain?” Odin asked. Tyr could understand his scepticism. A draug might be expected in the wilds. Indeed, perhaps even groups of them. Entire hunting parties brought down by the cold or vaettir. Brought down and raised once again by the Mist of Hel. But hundreds ... that was an

army. *Their* army. Such things did not happen this quickly. Völvur's stories spoke of such occurrences when the Mist first covered this world. Back ere Men knew they must always burn their dead. But such times had since long passed into legend, myth.

Even Tyr could not fight such an army. Some of the other warriors looked to him, so Tyr forced his gaze to remain impassive. Courage was worth a hundred spears. It was the one weapon they could not afford to ever break.

"Can we avoid them?" Frigg asked.

The scout hesitated. "They move faster than we can transplant the clans, and they seem to know where we are bound. Their greatest numbers gather to the west." Murmurs once again filled the crowd, jarls arguing.

After several moments, Odin banged Gungnir on the ground, once again drawing silence. "Then the course is clear," Odin said, casting his voice so deep it would carry beyond the Thing to the crowd that, by now, had begun to panic. "We must take to the mountains. We cannot face mortal enemies and draugar both. I will gather my forces and head off those who may block the passes, clear the way. The rest of you," Odin said, looking to the jarls, "send your finest warriors to guard our flanks. We cannot allow this to slow us."

Slow us. Interesting choice of words. Odin implied there was no actual worry of the threat defeating them. Only disrupting their advance. Was that a conscious choice to instil confidence in his people, or was it his pride in thinking none could stop him? Either way, Tyr had to approve. Courage was what these people needed to see. And courage was what Odin showed them. Even if it was false or vain courage. Seven of Odin's people had taken the apples, but Frigg and Sigyn were not warriors. Vé was gone. That left Odin, Vili, Loki, and Tyr. Four Men-become-gods to fight an army born of Niflheim. Berserkir and varulfur might match a draug. Maybe. Tyr would bet on the draug. Men were even worse off. Truth was, many Æsir would

die for this. Tyr could not save them all, but he could help them meet their ancestors with pride. Maybe that was all a warrior could ever do.

With the Thing dismissed, Tyr moved to begin gathering his warriors. He needed the best, the bravest. A decisive victory against this threat would ensure the Ás morale held. And a failure ... Best not dwell on such an event. By the time he had finished the choosing, Odin stood beside him, a long, cloth-wrapt bundle in his arms.

“A moment, Tyr.”

“My lord?”

“In private.” Tyr nodded and led Odin back to his tent. Inside Odin crouched on the furs, so Tyr slunk down beside his king. The man’s eyes had grown dark—darker than usual, even for these days. “An army of draugar,” Odin said. “An army of ghosts ...” Tyr folded his arms, uncertain what Odin implied. “It’s the Niflungar,” Odin said at last. “The draugar are born of the Mist, and the Niflungar command this Mist. I killed their prince, Tyr.” Aye, Odin had told him all this some time ago. “My family,” Odin mumbled. “Tyr, I want you to do something for me. My children, my wife, I cannot lose them. Please, protect them.”

Children? Odin now thought of those varulfur, Geri and Freki, as his children. Apt, perhaps, given the king had slain their mother. Tyr placed a hand on the man’s shoulder. “You know I would protect them with my life, my lord.”

“No,” Odin said, shaking his head. “No, I ... I lost Vé ... I lost Father ... I can’t ...” Odin shook himself, then unwrapt the bundle, revealing a sword. Runes covered the length of its blade, woven steel that spoke of ancient times long forgotten. Ice-blue gems were set in its quillons and bone-hilted pommel. “This was the blade I took from Guthorm.” The Niflung prince. Odin had said the man carried a runeblade, one supposedly forged by dvergar. Blades of power, legends now. “Take it.”

Tyr placed a hand over its hilt but hesitated. “I have a sword, given to me by Borr.”

“Keep it, please,” Odin said. “There may come a time ...” The king shook his head, clearly once again lost in his own mind.

Tyr closed his palm around the hilt. It was cold. Colder even than the bone handle ought to be on a day like this. Rather than draw the blade, he took it sheathed and set it aside. The moment he did so, Odin nodded and rose, staring at something beyond Tyr’s vision. Beyond his understanding, perhaps. The king ducked out of the tent without another word, leaving Tyr alone with this seidr-wrought blade. Would wielding such a weapon fill him with the same bloodlust Gungnir did Odin? Would it make him savage, like a berserk or varulf? But it would grant him power—maybe the power to save lives. To protect his people. He was still staring at it when Idunn slipped into the tent shortly thereafter, a skinned rabbit clutched in one hand.

“The hunters caught it this morn. I thought mayhap it was time for some of that famous Tyr stew.”

Tyr looked to her, but her gaze had fallen on the blade. “I’ve not the time,” he said. “We go to battle soon.”

“With that?”

Now Tyr glanced back at the blade, too. “You know it?”

Idunn knelt in front of him, setting the rabbit aside. Her red dress settled around her, shimmering in the soft light that filtered into the tent. To call Idunn the oddest woman he’d ever met would be like calling a tree taller than a Man. Her skin was rich like it had been stained with mead. Her hair darker than was oft found among Æsir. At first, when she had taken to visiting him, he’d been as entranced with her as any other man in the camp had. But over a hundred such conversations she had put him at ease. Mostly. The Vanr goddess picked up the runeblade without hint of fear. In truth, Tyr couldn’t recall her ever showing fear. Idunn ran a slender finger

over the gems in the pommel, then the runes in its sheath. “Gramr.” Then she looked up at his face. “Oh! Well, I know its reputation. Weapons like this, Tyr, they have their uses. Freyr carries one. But they have dangers, too.”

“You can read the runes.”

“Immortality gives one time to learn all *kinds* of interesting things.”

Given her mischievous smile, Tyr doubted she was speaking merely of scholarly learning. He could ill afford to dwell on whatever she meant, not now. Instead, he looked back at Gramr. “Is there reason not to use it?”

“Oh, aye, for certain. But you never seem too interested in hearing stories about the Otherworld, dear sweet warrior.”

An understatement. Given the choice, Tyr might not have eaten the apple at all. Though it had made him stronger, faster, and more resilient than any Man. He would not now be marching on Vanaheim nor waging war against draugar without it. But Tyr had sworn his oaths to Borr and his sons, and he would never turn his back on those vows. Where Odin led, he must follow. Even into the Mist, into Realms Man had no business treading. “I know not what path I ought to tread.”

Idunn snickered. “I’m not that kind of goddess. I don’t answer prayers for guidance, Tyr. Really, I’m just a woman.”

“I never knew a woman afraid to tell a man what to do.” The words slipped out of his mouth ere he realised he’d said them, and he immediately flinched. Perhaps he was a bit *too* at ease with this woman.

But her smile grew wider for a moment before she looked away. “You still miss her?”

Now Tyr rose, leaving the sword resting where it lay. It had been another moment of weakness, telling Idunn of his wife. “No.” Did he miss Zisa? He missed the memory of her. “I’ve preparations to make.” He slipped from the tent without another glance at Idunn. He had no desire to dredge up the past, not with the Vanr woman. Not with anyone. Practical

matters were, more oft than not, a reprieve from the torments of days gone by. His only reprieve.

He needed to kill something.

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**STARKAD**

## 25 Age of the Æsir

*T*he tunnel opened into a great cavern where the roof vanished into shadow and countless pits dropped into chasms far below. There, nestled between stalagmites and crevices, rose blocky stone buildings, each probably home to a family of dvergar. Starkad crouched at the threshold, looking for a way in. Battlements crested not only the houses, but towers spread through the city. Arching bridges connected these rooftops and towers, creating a lattice-way of paths from which archers could rain death down on would-be attackers.

A river encircled half the city, one sent into tumultuous rapids by numerous rocks spread around it. This left few approaches to the dvergar save for the tunnel he'd just come from. None of those defences seemed to have saved Nordri: no dvergar walked the streets, but neither were those shadowed paths empty. Numerous pairs of glowing red eyes lurked in darkness, patrolled ancient byways, or stood watch atop those towers.

At the city's heart rose a circular palace, each tier slightly smaller than the one below, creating the appearance of steps. Atop that palace stood a

statue of a dverg. If he could see it from here, it must have stood thirty feet tall or more. The palace would hold the great dverg vaults, for certain, aye. But how to reach it? If they brought torches into the city, the watchful draugar would spot them with ease. The Mist had not seeped this deep underground, so they could breathe without fire's blessing. They could not, however, see in the dark. Not like a draug or dverg could.

"Ideas?" Starkad whispered to Bragi.

The skald rubbed his beard. "Make an offering to Odin and pray for aid."

"Useful ideas?"

The rubbing continued. "Keep just one torch, low to the ground, and stay hunched over it. If we stick to the lower paths, maybe they won't spot the light."

Tiny extinguished his torch and drew his sword. "We do that, we walk among the thickest of them."

"We can't fight them all," Starkad said. "And we've come too far to go home empty handed." Moreover, on Nordri's threshold, he would not be denied. He would look on the fallen wonder of the once-great kingdom. "Afzal, keep your torch as Bragi has said. Bluefoot, you stick close to him and help shield the light. Tiny and I will go first, blades ready. Don't fall too far behind, and don't get too close either." Starkad drew his blades, then traded glances with Tiny. The big man nodded grimly. They might not all walk out of here, and they both knew it. But anyone who did make it ... dverg gold would change his life forever.

In a crouch, he crept forward, a few feet ahead of Tiny. He trusted his stealth more than that of the giant back there. Tiny was useful once they were *already* discovered. Otherwise, less than ideal. For that matter, they were lucky Ivar the Loud wasn't with them. The man would have no doubt announced their whole party to the draugar. Starkad grimaced. No, they

weren't lucky he was dead. He'd been a nasty arse with a foul mouth, but no worse than the rest of them, for all that.

He pushed into an alley and crept along until it connected with a main street. Scuffling footsteps sounded from that main byway. Blades hovering a hair off the ground, Starkad slipped further forward. Just another step. A draug shambled by, dragging a maul behind it—a hammer big enough to crush a troll's skull. Or to turn a Man into a bloody puddle. Starkad waited for the draug to pass, then rose, dead silent. He fell into step behind the draug, timing his footsteps to its shuffle to disguise their sound. When he drew close enough, he slashed with both swords. The draug's head flew clean off. It twisted, writhing. The hammer flew into the air, kicking up dust as the creature spun with it. Starkad dropped to his knees and let the maul soar over his head. The draug's clumsy attack had spun it around, so he was behind it again.

Starkad thrust both swords up, each punching through a lung—or where a lung would have been if they had not rotted away. The draug wiggled soundlessly on the blades, unable to shriek out fury or warning without a head. Tiny stepped up and lopped off each of its arms, then Starkad flung it down, off his blades. It landed on the hard stone and flopped around there.

“How do we kill it?” Tiny asked. The severed hands began to crawl toward them, using fingers like climbing picks. Ever closer, as though it would strangle them itself. Afzal jerked a hand to his mouth, muttering in his own language.

“Only fire would do it for sure,” Starkad said. “And we can ill afford to get their attention with that. Move, steer wide of it.” They pushed on through the city, pausing on occasion to let one, two, once even three draugar at a time pass. The creatures seemed wakeful, tireless, though not overly alert. They must not yet know Men trod among them. If they learnt of it, their numbers would allow them to box in Starkad and his party. One misstep, one premature turn, and they would face an army of the dead keen

for their blood. The thought of it sent his pulse racing; such moments were what he lived for.

Darting from one alley to the next, they came to face the grand spire palace, the heart of Nordri, the former home of a dverg prince. Like all vaettir, the dvergar were invaders, corrupting Midgard. No doubt Mankind would have fared better had all vaettir left them in peace. But they had come here, so he might as well claim what he could of their spoils.

A pair of draugar stood on either side of the massive archway leading inside the spire. The doorway was so tall a man three times Starkad's height could have passed through without stooping, and each side of the arch was worked into an intricate design, like a dragon coiling around the whole entrance. No doors, just the two guards. Those, and a wide-open space of two dozen feet betwixt the alley and the draugar. Starkad was fast on his feet. Very fast. Probably not so fast he could close the distance to the two draugar and kill them both ere either one raised the alarm. Once they did so, he'd have draugar climbing atop one another trying to reach him and his people.

They were so *close*.

Afzal tapped him on the shoulder, then pointed up at the spire palace. Each tier above the first had a balcony where the inhabitants could walk the walls. A balcony meant an entrance. The problem was the lowest balcony was probably twenty feet up, and those dverg-worked walls would be smooth as silk. No climbing them. He looked back at Afzal, who now pantomimed pushing up with his palms. Lift someone to the ledge ... Starkad beckoned the party back down the alley, and around, so they could approach the palace from the rear. With no sign of approaching patrols, they ran for the palace wall.

"Tiny's the biggest," Afzal whispered. "He can heft you."

"What's the boy on about?"

Starkad glanced around. If they were doing this, they needed to do it fast. “Brace yourself against the wall, then lift me onto your shoulders. Then I’ll lift Afzal until he can reach the ledge. Afzal, you scramble up there and lower a rope down.”

Tiny scoffed. “Did you eat trollshit for the day meal? You think I’m lifting the both of you?”

“Now!” Starkad spat through gritted teeth. “Ere they see us all.”

Grumbling, Tiny did brace, then set his hands, fingers locked together. Starkad sheathed his swords and used the step to climb atop Tiny’s broad shoulders. The man grunted and growled as Starkad set his feet and turned. “Hurry up, you troll lover,” Tiny said to Afzal.

The Serk next stepped into Tiny’s laced fingers. Tiny vaulted him up to where he could step into Starkad’s. Tiny gasped, grunting at the weight as Afzal climbed onto Starkad’s shoulders. From there, the boy leant back. Starkad grabbed his ankles, trying to steady him.

“I’ve got it,” the Serk said. “Help me.”

Starkad pushed up on his ankles, and suddenly the weight lessened. He glanced up. Afzal had supported himself under his arms. An instant later, he rolled over the lip of the balcony.

“How about you get off of me, you oaf,” Tiny said.

Starkad hopped down, even as Afzal threw a rope over the edge. He looked up. “Are you braced against the side?”

“Yes.” The boy’s whisper came out in a hiss that might have been fatigue or fear. Probably both.

Starkad grabbed the rope and began to climb up, hand over hand. It took longer than he’d have liked. He was tired, he supposed. He reached the lip and rolled over. Then he took the rope from Afzal. “Tiny, get up here. Bragi, take cover in the shadows.”

“No way,” the skald snapped. “I’m getting my share.”

“Fine. Tiny comes up first.”

Tiny began to climb. Even with his feet braced against the balcony's edge, the weight of it threatened to rip the rope from Starkad's hands. Behind him, Afzal grabbed the end to lend support, slightly easing the burden. Once Tiny was up, pulling up Bragi proved an easy enough task.

"We still have to watch ourselves," Starkad whispered. "Find the riches, take what you can, and get out. And keep your voices down."

With that, he pushed forward, following the wall until it led to an opening. The outer balcony was mirrored by an inner balcony looking down at a landing on the first floor. A winding staircase led up to this balcony and onto the floor above. A mortal king would have hidden his greatest riches in the tower, but the dvergar were creatures of earth, stone. Starkad peered over the side. In the centre of the room sat a pair of low thrones on a raised dais. A great hall. A single draug reclined against the back of one of those thrones. Guarding something?

Starkad pointed the creature out, then stalked over to the stairs. The others followed close behind. He crept down, moving a few steps at a time, then checking to see no draugar had moved. Not those guarding the front door nearby, nor the one behind the thrones. He motioned for the others to remain on the stairs, then continued down. He descended a few steps, then paused, checked. His racing heart sent his pulse pounding in his ears. Starkad had not felt this alive in a long time. Perhaps Thule was cursed, perhaps the Mist had spawned here. Either way, it proved the most extreme reaches of Midgard. And that meant only the greatest Men in history could survive it.

He needed to be one of those Men, craved it to the pith of his soul.

He edged forward. The draug lived—so to speak. Starkad had seen the gleam of its eyes from up on the balcony. So it was at least wakeful, watching. Perhaps watching either side of the dais for sign of an enemy approach. The sides, aye. But above? Starkad slipped onto the front of the dais, then—careful to make no sound—onto the stone chair of the fallen

dverg king. He climbed onto the back of that chair and peered down at the draug. It didn't move. Watching for foes from the wrong direction. Starkad would almost have felt sorry for it ... were it not an abomination of the natural order of life.

Swords in hand, he leapt off the throne and plunged a blade straight down into the draug as he fell. The clang of metal on metal rang out as his weapon scored armour. Starkad jerked his sword free, tearing out ribs and flesh in the process. Then he cleft into the draug's skull to be certain it lay still. As with the others, it continued to writhe. Dead already, it could not die, save in flame. But headless and impaled, it posed a bit less of a threat.

Starkad looked to the main entrance. No draugar came rushing for him. They hadn't heard his little scuffle. He supposed he was due some luck, after all.

He motioned to the others to join him, then knelt before the area the draug had guarded and ran his fingers along the stone. The seam was so fine you couldn't even see it, but he felt it. A block that did not quite belong with the mould of the rest of the floor. He pushed on the slab. It didn't move.

There had to be some way to open it. "Check the thrones," he whispered when Afzal neared. The boy did so, running his hand over one throne whilst Bragi examined the other.

"What is it?" Tiny asked.

"The vault, I think."

"You think? After what we just went through—"

"'Tis my first lost dverg city," Starkad snapped. "Now cease your whining and lend your aid."

Tiny grunted, then began pushing and prying on the floor. "Gold so close I can taste it. And here this big fucking rock is in the way."

"Try tasting the rock," Bragi offered.

"Is this ...?" Afzal began. A slight click came from the throne he inspected. Without further warning, stone began to grate on stone. Tiny

scrambled off the slab as it started to slide into a hidden alcove beneath the floor. This opened up a gloom-drenched pit with a short ladder leading to the base of it. The roof below was smaller than a man's height, such that even Afzal would have to stoop to walk.

Starkad leapt down into the pit. His feet skidded on something. "Afzal. Torch." The boy tossed the flame into the pit. Immediately, the whole tunnel began to glitter. Gold and silver coins ran the length of the space. In their midst sat gem-encrusted goblets, dverg-wrought blades, and a gilded hauberk fit for a king. There were emeralds and rubies and lapis lazuli and opals, gems enough to buy a kingdom.

"Thor's thundering cock," Tiny said when he looked down.

"We have reached the Otherworld," Afzal said.

Bragi snorted and jumped down into the now crowded tunnel. "Nope, boy. Just the best of this one."

Starkad pressed on, back into the tunnel, to examine the golden hauberk. From what he knew of dverg work, they made naught without practical use, so he had to assume—appearances aside—the armour would turn a blow. Maybe as well as Orvar's famed alf shirt. He lifted the mail to inspect it, admiring the way the light glittered off it. Not the most practical for stealth, perhaps, but elegant, and imposing for a warrior.

Coins and gemstones clattered as he tugged the mail free of them. As they did, they exposed a hand. Taut flesh failed to fully cover the skeletal fingers beneath it. That hand flexed.

"Back!" Starkad barked. The others grumbled, then saw what he saw and ceased filling their satchels with plunder. Starkad had taken but a few steps toward the ladder. The tunnel was too tight to properly wield his blades. They needed to face this creature out in the open. "Up! Out of the pit, now!"

A sword burst free from the treasure hoard, scattering priceless wealth as it rose. A series of runes ran the length of the blade, each radiating a faint



iridescent light. A pit opened in Starkad's stomach. 'Twas not just a blade their foe wielded, but one of the nine runeblades of the Old Kingdoms. And that meant its owner was no ordinary draug.

Afzal had already scrambled back up the ladder with the torch. Starkad shoved Bragi toward it, then began pulling himself up the wall. It wasn't so tall, after all. Seeing his reaction, Tiny did the same. They crested the ground level just ere the draug finished freeing itself from its hoard. The creature's eyes glowed crimson, like any draug, yet a bluish flame seemed to waft off its head and spread from its mouth. It bore a crown around its helm, one set with a gleaming ruby reflecting the same unholy light as its eyes.

Starkad jerked both swords free. "Flee! Take out the ones guarding the entrance and find a way out of here."

Tiny stood shoulder to shoulder with him, broadsword in hand. "We can take one more."

As it stepped from the pit, the draug rose to its full height, at least as tall as Tiny. It looked to each of the party. And it continued to grow. Its mass rippled outward, its war-garb inexplicably expanding with it. Those indigo flames only intensified as the draug grew.

Starkad fell back a step. And another. In the back of his mind, he knew Afzal and Bragi had broken, run for the entrance as he'd told them. The fiend had now grown to twice Tiny's size. It was not a mere draug. It was a dark god of the dead, fit to challenge a jötunn. They had awoken some ancient power that ought to have been left sleeping. Perhaps the reason the Niflungar had not come here to try and claim this runeblade for themselves.

Starkad had wanted a challenge. He'd wanted to know who the best was. But if he fought this fiend now, fought and lost, his people would die. Without him to protect them, their deaths were nigh to assured. He swallowed. "Tiny, go. Help them!"

The big man made no further objection, breaking for the exit.

The draug plodded toward Starkad with great lunging strides. The runeblade—it had grown too, hadn't it?—hefted above its head. A shield as tall as Starkad protected the monster. At the last moment, Starkad dove forward, rolling between the draug's legs. The runeblade sheared into the floor and gouged a great swathe of stone. Starkad rose and swung at the draug's legs. His sword clanked off a chain greave. He dared not remain, instead immediately leaping away again. Even as he did so, the draug spun on him, slamming the edge of its shield into the floor where Starkad had stood a breath prior.

Without looking back, Starkad scrambled to his feet and made a break for the entrance. Tiny and Bragi had already felled the two draugar there and were waiting for him, beckoning him forward. That entrance was so tall even the giant draug could pass through.

Great crashing footfalls rang out behind him. It would overtake him in a few strides. Now he did look back, just in time to see the runeblade sweeping down on him. Starkad skidded to a stop and fell over backward, sliding just under the blade's arc. He scrambled forward, helped up by Tiny's swift grab. The big man shoved him out of the palace, and they all dashed for an alley.

A bellow erupted from behind them, a sound like all the damned of Niflheim shrieking in agony, on and on, shredding their minds, affronting their souls with its blasphemous cry. Starkad passed into the alley, then guided his men around it and around another. Running blind, just to keep that thing from spotting them, from tracking them. A draug voice answered the hellish scream with a mind-rending shriek of its own. Another and another draug joined that profane chorus until the whole city echoed with it. Hundreds of them, no doubt.

All screaming for the blood of Men. All hailing the wakening of their king.



THE SHUFFLING GAIT of draugar boots filled nigh to every street in Nordri, the sound occasionally overshadowed by the thundering footsteps of the giant draug king. Starkad and the others crouched in an alley at the city's edge, watching a patrol of five draugar amble by. They might have been able to ambush the patrol, take them down. More like than not, though, the noise of battle would draw others. And far too many draugar clogged these unholy streets for Starkad's small party to overcome, saying naught of the king. No, they could not fight. And the draugar knew they must have come from the main entrance, and so they now patrolled the thickest around it. Starkad had scouted that alone, searching for any way through. None presented itself, no matter how long he looked.

So they had skirted the edge of Nordri, hunting for any other way out. 'Twas hard to be certain in the darkness, but it looked like other tunnels did run out of the main cavern. Unfortunately, those all lay on the far side of a freezing river. Mayhap the dvergar had once used boats to cross, but if so, none remained now.

When the patrol had turned a corner, Starkad scampered forward, keeping low to the ground until he reached the next alley. The last such refuge before the open rocks in front of the river. The others dashed after him, Afzal creeping closest behind. "Master?"

Starkad stared at the river. Numerous rocks jutting out of the water turned the river into icy rapids so swift even a draug would face destruction, smashed to pieces under that force.

"Planning to fly?" Bragi asked.

Starkad scowled at the skald, then shook his head. Well he knew how desperation made even good men arseholes. "Those rocks look just close enough together a man might leap from one to the next."

Bragi's mouth dropped open, and he sputtered a few times ere he spoke. "You got trollshit between your ears? Ice and water coat every one of those rocks. You'll break your ankle on the first one and find yourself swimming for just long enough to die of deathchill."

The skald had a point. It would prove difficult, especially for an old man like him, but Starkad had no alternative to offer. "The choice is yours, Bluefoot. All of you. Take your chances against an army of draugar—out in the open where they can surround you—or balance on the rocks and find another way out of Nordri." He rubbed his face. He was chilled, starving, his eyes wanting to close on their own. The others mostlike fared worse still. "We cannot linger here. If we fight, maybe valkyrjar will carry our souls to Valhöll." Starkad had his doubts such a place even existed. Besides, he preferred fights with a chance of victory. "Or try the river and at least strive for a hope of life."

"I'm for chancing the rocks," Tiny said. "Let the dead alone to rot."

Afzal nodded at the big man's words. 'Twas decided then. The others looked to Starkad, so he glanced up at the nearby buildings and the bridges that connected them. No patrols. Now or never then. He scrambled to the river's edge and leapt out to the nearest rock, three feet from shore. As Bragi predicted, his foot slipped on the slick surface, and his knee slammed down onto the ice. That hit jolted him like a bolt of tiny lightning. He managed to throw his arms around the rock's point. His effort kept him from plunging into the river, save for one foot. Stifling a groan, he scrambled properly onto the rock and rubbed his knee. They were looking at him, of course.

He offered his reassurance. "'Tis no more than children's games," he lied.

The next rock was a bit closer but angled away from him, and he'd have to make a standing jump. Swinging his arms back and forth, he built some momentum. Then he leapt forward. He landed on the surface, his feet

skidding along it, nigh to tossing him into the river. Arms wide, he caught himself, flailed, then immediately jumped to the next surface ere he fell. This one was bigger, sticking up like a swollen knuckle. He wrapt his arms around it, turned to the others, and beckoned them on.

Afzal came next, making that first jump with a bit more grace than Starkad had. Of course, he'd seen the danger and could prepare for it. Obviously. Starkad held up a hand to stall him there.

He hadn't been able to stand on the next platform, and neither would Afzal. Which meant Starkad needed to be clear of this one. Unfortunately, Bragi held their torch on the backside of the river. Starkad could scarce make out the next rock, much less be certain of his footing. He had convinced them to try this way, though, so he had to see it through. He leapt once more. This time he landed on a low rock, fell to his knees, and skidded forward. He scrambled to his feet. There, the far side of the river—maybe six feet out. Making a standing jump as far as he was tall didn't seem practical, meaning, he'd need to run on this icy platform. That sounded marginally less suicidal than taking on an army of draugar. Grunts behind him told him Afzal was already making the next jumps.

So.

Time to do this. Starkad backed up to the edge of the rock. Deep breaths. Always had to keep one eye on where you wanted to land and one on the ground before you. Good. He could do this. He'd made farther jumps than this. Three running strides forward and he flew through the air, cleared the gap with room to spare. He landed in a roll, banging himself up on solid ice. That would leave a bruise.

But this led to another ice cave. From what he knew of dvergar, they always had another way out of their homes. They'd never let themselves get trapped or pinned. So multiple ice caves must have led down to Nordri.

Afzal made the last jump, falling just short. His feet pitched into the water.

Starkad lunged at him, caught his wrists, and jerked him ashore. “We’ll warm ourselves by a fire soon.” The Serk nodded and clapt Starkad on the arm in thanks.

Tiny was making his way closer, and Bragi too, bearing their light. A twang sounded, barely audible over the rushing river. Bragi, standing on the first rock, jerked. Then he pitched forward, an arrow jutting from his back. He seemed to fall with agonising slowness. Starkad’s mouth opened to shout a warning that came far too late.

The skald tumbled into the river. His torch went out, leaving them in darkness. Absolute darkness, save the pinpoints of red light across the river. Tiny, glowing eyes, more and more of them, clustering, readying for pursuit.

“Thor’s thundering cock!” Tiny bellowed, standing on some rock in the middle of the river.

Starkad dropped to his knees, fishing through his satchel for another torch. “Get down, Tiny! Low! They can still see you in darkness!”

Where was it? Where was the damn—there! He pulled the torch and then his flint and steel. Clank.

A spark. No flame. Spark. Spark.

“Fucking do something!” Tiny shouted.

“Be silent,” Afzal snapped. The Serk’s voice came from low to the ground. Smart man, staying down. Not so smart staying nigh to where Starkad tried to light a torch though.

Spark.

*Twang.*

The sound of a shaft hitting ice.

“Trollshit!” Tiny shouted. “I have to jump.”

Spark.

“Not in the dark, you imbecile!” Starkad shouted at him.

Spark.

*Twang.*

“Gah!”

A spark caught on the oil-soaked rag around the torch. Flames sprang up.

“Stay down,” Starkad said to Afzal, whilst rising and moving away from the Serk. Standing, he gave Tiny more light. And made himself a better target. Maybe he ought to have taken the time to wear that gilded dverg hauberk.

An arrow whooshed by Starkad. Tiny leapt and leapt again, landing on the shore beside Afzal. Blood was trailing down his arm. The Serk grabbed him and jerked him up.

*Twang.*

Starkad jumped back an instant ere an arrow struck where he had stood. He raced for the ice tunnel, not bothering to order the others to follow. They would follow. They all wanted out of here. So had Bragi Bluefoot. The man had fastened his name by plunging into frozen waters. He had ended the same way, poor bastard.

Another shot clattered against ice behind them, but they were out of range. Still, the draugar knew where they had gone. Sooner or later, they’d find a way across. Starkad ran on and on, pushing past exhaustion and fatigue. He could do naught for Bragi. Just one more friend dead, one more ally he’d failed to protect.

Giant slabs of ice narrowed the cave, forcing them to squeeze through one at a time. No worked ice, this. The dverg must have simply taken advantage of the terrain they’d found. Past the ice slabs, Starkad climbed steeply upward until light beckoned ahead. Real light, not the flicker of a dying torch refracted off ice facets.

Lungs burning, Starkad pushed onward. A little more. Just a little farther. The cave opened out not far from the shore. Daylight! The Mist had thinned, revealing a glimmer of the sun and a dusting snowfall. Starkad

stumbled several more paces ere collapsing in the snow. The others did the same. Gasping, he glanced back at the cave. Daylight would buy them time. A little time. But they didn't know how long since the sun had risen, and it would last at most maybe four hours. Mostlike less.

A thin strip of land led to a mountain rising up out of the sea. Steep, which probably meant treacherous, narrow passes. In narrow passes, numbers amounted to a lot less, and he could hold his ground against a great many foes. "Get up!" he struggled to follow his own advice. "Get up, make for the mountain."

"Master," Afzal complained. "Please. A little rest."

"We cannot afford it."

The Serk groaned but did rise, stumbling in the process. "Then let us make for the ship."

Starkad glanced at the shore. Based on the sun, it ran east to west, and their ship lay south. They might follow the coast to the ship, but it could take days. "We wouldn't make it. They'd be all over us long ere we got there."

Tiny pushed up and started walking toward the mountain.

"What hope is up there?" Afzal said.

At that, Tiny glanced back at him. "Don't you get it, boy? The mountain is the only hope we have left. The hope for a glorious last stand. This is the last time you'll see the sun. Tomorrow, you'll be dining at the table of Hel or else in Valhöll, feasting and fucking valkyrjar if you're lucky and brave. I aim for the latter urd."

Afzal looked to Starkad as if hoping he would contradict the big man. But he couldn't. Tiny had the truth of it. Moreover, Starkad doubted Valhöll existed. Hel, though, everyone knew she was real. And she was sending her vile servants after all of them.





AS STARKAD HAD HOPED, they had found a narrow pass on the mountain slopes. There they had felled a tree and built a bonfire. He had considered forbidding it. The flames would announce their location. But then, the draugar would find them sooner or later in any case. Better that he and the others should get warm and face their end with strength. Darkness had settled in once again, save for the ghost lights dancing across the firmament, beckoning them toward Valhöll.

Starkad warmed his hands by the fire. He'd have thought their foes would be upon them already. Afzal was smoking the last of his herbs and blowing out great puffs of the strange-smelling stuff. Tension had seeped out of the Serk the moment he sampled his foreign poisons. Perhaps those herbs truly did open his mind, allowing him uncanny insight, or perhaps they merely muted the cavalcade of worries that plagued the young man. But then, time to time, Afzal's suppositions had proved truth.

"What do you see?" Starkad asked him.

Afzal let out a long breath ere answering in a raspy voice. "Shadows stirring, beneath the ground."

Tiny snorted. "I salute your wisdom, boy. A blind babe could have guessed that much. Perhaps next you will tell me we will face snow? And ice, maybe?"

Starkad glared at him, waving him to silence. "What else, Afzal?"

The Serk rubbed his eyebrow with his index finger. "Men are searching for us, wandering the Mist."

"Men? Or draugar?"

"The Arrow's Point ..."

Tiny straightened at that. "Orvar lives? Where is he?"

"He lives ... I think. Not for long; none of us have long left. The Mist is closing in, coiling around us like a serpent. It hungers, takes umbrage the living have dared to tread so far into its domain."

Pleasant image. Starkad pulled Vikar's sword and set at it with the whetstone. A man had to keep his weapons in order. Even in times like these. Especially in times like these. His sword and Vikar's sword—they were all he had of an old life. If he died here on Thule, that life would be lost, forgotten. Still, Afzal claimed none of them had much time left, and Starkad could not argue with such a prophecy. Sooner or later, the draugar would come for them. That they had not yet done so perhaps meant they could not cross the river and needs must travel the long way around. But come they would. Starkad had woken that vile king, and he could not imagine such a being would suffer living Men in his domain. Perhaps, given Afzal's claim about the Mist angering at their presence, the draug prince was but an instrument of a greater evil, of a colossal will spread across Midgard and beyond, bent upon the slow suffocation of Man.

“What do you see of the draug king?” he asked Afzal.

Afzal shut his eyes and breathed deeply. “Old ones ... forgotten. Heirs of fallen glory wake for vengeance.”

“The fuck does that mean?” Tiny demanded. “How about something useful?”

Starkad stared into the flames. “I think it means he was a prince of one of the Old Kingdoms. Each of them bore a runeblade. If so, he's waited here for centuries.”

“So ... he bears a runeblade.”

“Indeed.”

“Such a prize ...” Tiny said. “Such a prize would well please Gylfi.”

Starkad scowled now. He had come here for that, aye, even had he not known specifically he sought the blade. But treasures ... “What claim have you to this, big man?”

“As much claim as any, and I have asked for naught else thus far in Gylfi's name.”

Starkad spat. “I lead this party now.”

Tiny shrugged. "Because we lost Orvar? Such matters naught. All are equal on a raid, and Gylfi holds as much stake here as Yngvi. They've had oaths on the matter."

Starkad sneered. "It matters naught, in any event. Had we not lost Hervor and her runeblade, maybe we ... well, that no longer matters. I suppose like any other draug, the prince will burn. Cut his legs out from under him, chop off his head, and set him alight."

"You going to do all that?"

Starkad shrugged. "You seek to claim the damned blade. I thought you were offering."

"If I must."

Starkad chuckled. "You're a brave man, Tiny. You know ... I don't think I even know your real name."

The big man spat and shrugged. "Does it matter?"

"Very soon now, we will fight a glorious battle side by side. And then we will die. I ought to at least know what to call my brothers-in-arms in such a fight. And if I should fall ere you, then I will know whom to tell the valkyrjar to look for."

Tiny grunted. "Aye, well ... 'tis Ecgtheow of the Wægmundings."

Starkad offered his hand. "I'm honoured to fight by your side, Ecgtheow."

The big man clasped his arm. "No, the honour is mine, Eightarms. Men call you a god of war." Starkad shrugged at that. Men said the same thing about Tyr, and Starkad did not care to be tied back to that bastard. "If we can kill this prince ..." Tiny said.

Starkad waved it away. Whatever point the big man made, Starkad was not willing to cede such a prize. Not after all it had cost.

Finally, Tiny cleared his throat. "We have a choice before us. We can stay here and wait for them, allowing our strength to wane from hunger. Or we can skirt the shore as your thrall suggests."

“Afzal is not my thrall.”

“The point remains. You expected them to be upon us long ere now. We have gained what rest we can already. Biding longer but saps our strength. On the shore, we might find food—fish, game, something.”

Starkad sighed. Tiny was right—he had come up this mountain to die. If they left, they surrendered the most favourable location he’d found to face an army of draugar. If they remained, though, still they would lose. Not so unlike being back by the geysers: they’d gained a measure of safety in exchange for any hope of survival. But the others didn’t wish to vote on the matter. They wanted him to decide, to save them. Afzal, Tiny, they were watching him now, Afzal’s eyes clouded with his poison, yet still aware enough. Intent, awaiting the word of his master, not wanting to die.

Fair enough. Starkad had never been one to linger overlong in a single place. “We’ve rested. If Orvar is alive, is looking for us, he’d mostlike make for the ship. So shall we. We follow the coast and make as good a time as we can whilst hunting for food. None of us want to die hungry.”

“I don’t want to die at all,” Afzal said.

“Everyone dies, eventually.” He clapt the Serk on the shoulder. “But maybe ... maybe we can at least make it off this island.” Afzal sighed and rose. And then he hurled his pipe off the side of the mountain. “What was that?” Starkad asked.

The boy rubbed his eyebrow again. “You’re wrong about one thing, Master. I won’t make it off this island. Of that I’m certain.”

More prophecy at the end of a pipe. Starkad gripped him by the back of his head and drew Afzal close to his face. “Listen to me. Your urd is in your own hands. Make the most of it.”

When the boy nodded, Starkad released him and set off, back down the mountain.

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**DAYS GONE: ODIN**

800 Age of Man

“*T*he pass is the shortest route and the safest,” Loki said. “They’ll know that.”

Snow flurries obscured Odin’s view of the rocky, snow-crusted path Loki indicated. Odin hadn’t wanted to do this at night, when it was too easy to slip on the mountain slopes. Yet, Loki insisted their enemies would not show themselves in daylight.

“You’re certain that qualifies as a pass?” Vili asked. At Loki’s appraising stare, Vili shrugged. “I mean we have children, elderly. Rough trek, that.”

“It will be rougher if we don’t clear the draugar ere the others reach us,” Odin said. He nodded at Tyr, who in turn motioned a dozen of his best men forward. The so-called pass was a route through these ancient mountains, and one Odin prayed would offend no vættr dwelling within such a timeless place. Jagged peaks jutted at irregular angles in all directions, each covered in ice and snow, bare hints of the rock beneath poking through. The path was barely wide enough for two men to walk abreast—or a single man

in Vili's case, as Odin's brother pushed his way forward. Not to be outdone by Tyr and his warriors, of course.

Off the side, that drop had to be as tall as ten men. More, perhaps, for he could see no end through the Mist. A misstep, a patch of hidden ice, and a man could know what it was to fly—for a moment, at least. A sudden brisk wind whipped the snow flurries into Odin's eyes.

"Fuck me," one of the men ahead cursed, the lot of them throwing themselves against the rock face to avoid being blown off.

"Vaettir don't want Men here," Vili mumbled, hugging the mountainside.

For a moment, Odin considered looking past the Mortal Realm, seeing if any such spirit showed themselves. But what would he do if he espied one? He had not the means to offer sacrifice nor other propitiation. Instead, he rubbed his iron brooch. As there was no getting around a man of Vili's size, Odin shoved his brother forward. "Keep moving."

Let the vaettir spew their wrath, if such this wind was. For the nonce, Odin had more fear for draugar. Those things were here somewhere. Their small party was all that stood between the embodied ghosts and the Æsir who had followed Odin into these mountains, all that stood between the monsters and Odin's family. If they didn't deal with these bastards ere—

Metal creaked on bone from above. A shriek that sent a shudder down Odin's spine ripped out of a black form overhead, then the creature fell upon a man in the middle of the line. The man's scream was brief. Odin tried to push forward, but through the press of bodies and the Hel-damned snow he couldn't ... Grunting and shrieking, both man and draug tumbled over the side. Odin spun, rushing to the edge, though he knew himself too far and too late to help the fallen warrior. Even as he watched the forms disappear into the darkness of the gorge, the snow beneath their party erupted. The impact tripped Odin and sent him careening over the edge, his grip on Gungnir lost.

Rocks snared his furs and caught on his hauberk, tearing both as he tumbled downward. For a heartbeat he was breathless, plummeting. Then all wind blasted from his lungs as he impacted a rock outcropping some fifteen feet below the pass. Odin struggled to catch his breath, staring at the icicle-laced overhang above. Like the jaws of a dragon hovering above him. How was he going to get back to his people? Gods above, his people. How many of the fucking draugar had been waiting under the snow? Odin hadn't even considered it ... The draugar didn't breathe.

A dark form dropped from above. Odin rolled to one side, barely avoiding his attacker and almost flinging himself off the outcropping—a ledge not much larger than he was. The creature landed in a crouch where Odin had lain, fist embedded in the ice caking the rocks. It lifted its head up, revealing a red gleam in its eyes. Black, corroded armour concealed its gaunt arms and sallow flesh. A helm hid much of its face beyond the eyes. When it smiled, it revealed a missing tooth. With a grunt, it yanked its fist free of the ice, spiderwebbing cracks all across the ledge. The ground shifted beneath Odin's feet, and he slipped, banging his knee on the ice. It was all the time the draug needed to bear down on him. The creature moved with uncanny speed, leaping atop Odin and driving him to the ground with its sheer weight and Otherworldly strength.

The creature's hand on his throat was cold as hoar. Cold as the grave. The hatred of all life filled its eyes, trying to swallow up Odin's soul. He had but to give in, to accept the rage and the curse ...

To give up. The one thing Odin would never do. The edges of his vision faded from lack of air. But Odin had been practicing the use of his apple-granted boons; they came at will now. Strength flooded his limbs—the strength to match even this Hel-spawned monster. Odin's grip tightened on the draug's arm, and he at last pulled it away from his throat. Gods-blessed air rushed back into his lungs in gasps that left him even more lightheaded.

The draug yanked him upward with its other hand, pulling them both back to their feet.

It shoved Odin, trying to hurl him from the precipice into the gorge. Odin flung himself forward, driving them both toward the mountainside. He rained blows against the draug, heard its bones breaking even beneath the armour. Odin's knuckles split, his blood caking the ghost. If the draug felt aught, it gave little indication. Instead it countered, catching Odin with blows first to the ribs, then the face. Odin struggled to get his arms up, to block blows that could challenge his supernatural strength.

At last, he caught the draug's arm and landed a mighty blow to the side of its head. The impact knocked away the thing's helm and seemed to stagger it, if only for a moment. "Die!" Odin bellowed. Why would the cursed thing not die?

Again the draug advanced. Odin blocked its blow with one arm and scored another uppercut to the thing's chin. Once again, it staggered for an instant. Was it vulnerable to blows to the head? Ere the draug could attack again, Odin roared and slammed shoulder-first into its chest, knocking it back against the mountainside. He leapt up and caught an icicle as long as his arm. Then he slammed it straight into the draug's eye and out the other side. The monstrosity continued to twitch in the snow but gave over attacking.

"Odin!" Loki shouted from above. The man's face peeked over the ledge, followed a moment later by a rope.

Odin grabbed on and half-climbed the rope as Loki pulled him upward. He crested the ledge back onto the pass, then faltered at the sight. A draug crushed one of Tyr's men's throats with his bare hand, chuckling as it did so. Another beat a man's shield to kindling with its axe, then tore into the now-exposed warrior. Tyr spun, cut off one draug's legs, then kicked another in the chest, sending it toppling over the cliff.



Vili had assumed bear form and was mauling one of the creatures, but most of Odin's soldiers had fallen. More and more of the draugar surged forward, converging from the pass ahead and the seemingly unscalable cliff above them.

Odin retrieved Gungnir from the snow where it had fallen. The moment he held it, its ancient power filled him. His pain dulled; his fear vanished. "I am Odin Borrson! Come to me and die again!"

He lunged forward, his thrust punching through a draug's shield, its armour, and its flesh. Odin jerked it to the side, flinging it free of his spear and straight off the mountain. The creature did not scream as it plummeted into the gorge, leaving Odin to wonder if even such a fall would break these accursed things. Völur said one had to burn them. Odin turned on another draug, driving it too toward the edge. Dead or not, from the chasm below, they were a lot less worry.

A sudden bellow from Vili stole Odin's attention. A draug stood atop Odin's brother, having driven a sword straight through the bear's shoulder.

"V-Vili?" Odin stammered. The draug Odin had engaged leapt at him. An axe soared through the air and impacted the creature, driving it over the edge. Odin barely glanced at Tyr, too distracted to even acknowledge the man who had saved him. Gods above and below. Odin had lost one brother because of his pride, because he hadn't been strong enough. He'd lost one of Father's sons, failed both brother and father. He couldn't lose Vili.

Odin roared and charged forward. He saw naught but the draug atop his brother. He barrelled into the thing and bore it down, then proceeded to beat his fist into its skull. Again and again he pounded the fiend, crunching bone and decayed brain beneath. And finally, finally it lay still.

Loki yanked him away. "We have to get him to a vólva."

Vili. Odin nodded, unable to form words over the lump in his throat.

Tyr charged another draug, now fighting with a mere dagger. He'd lost his sword somewhere. The draugar's numbers were growing, and so few of

the Ás men remained. “Fall back, my lord! Your brother is beyond saving.”

“No!”

Loki glanced between Vili and Odin, then knelt beside the fallen bear, who still weakly tried to crawl toward the fight. “I have to remove the sword so you can shift back. We cannot carry you in this state.”

If Loki pulled that sword out, even a berserk might bleed to death. But if Vili lost consciousness and shifted back to a man with it still in him, the injuries would prove even more dire. Loki waited for no further answer. With one hand he jerked the sword free, then cast it aside. A wet rumble sounded in Vili’s chest, then he collapsed into the snow. Slowly his body began to shrink, the fur retreating back within his skin. Odin moved to carry Vili, but Loki lifted his brother ere he got there.

“Clear the way,” Loki said. “We must move with haste. They will pursue us until the sun rises.”

“How long?” Odin asked.

“Two hours,” Loki said.

Even with his apple-granted endurance, that was a long time to flee these creatures. Calling on supernatural strength and stamina gave him energy but would drain him all the more afterwards. And would Odin lead the ghosts back to his people? There was no choice. He had to get Vili help now. Odin rushed forward, batting another draug off the mountainside as he did. It didn’t matter what it took or how long he must fight. He was getting his brother out of this. He was *saving* Vili. He owed it to Vé, owed it to Father.

## INTERLUDE: THE NIFLUNGAR

800 Age of Man

Shrouded in Mist, Guðrún watched as Odin and his people fled Völsung's castle. The Ás king had the Sight now and, had he thought to look, might have spied her even through her concealment. It only made her use of the Art that much more reckless. A sorceress drew such powers from the spirits bound to her and, every time she used them, those spirits gained a stronger hold over her body and soul. Many a careless sorcerer had lost themselves in the powers of Niflheim and given in to the Mist. And yet, Guðrún had to see Odin off—she could not pass over an opportunity to look upon him.

So close she could almost have touched him. Could almost feel his arms around her back, feel her legs wrapt around his waist. Because she knew the truth—he might blame the philtre she'd given him, but it had only made him more pliable, allowed him to forget a woman he'd never loved at all. It had freed his heart to do what it really wanted. And Guðrún knew he wanted her just as much as she did him. He had told her he loved her, and he had meant it. And if she were to reveal herself now, to step into the light,

would he take her back? Wrap her once again in his embrace and offer her the peace she had *almost* found with him?

Gudrún ground her teeth. The Ás belonged to her, had always been meant for her, whatever Grimhild may have thought. If only she could make Odin see that, make him realise how much he needed her.

Maybe soon he would see. The Sight had opened him up to knowledge she would not have expected—certainly more than Grimhild would have predicted. He'd known or intuited that Rerir Sigison, desperate for an heir, had turned to a sorceress, never imagining the price might prove his life. Sorcery always had a price, exacted from the body, mind, or soul of both the caster and the recipient. But had Odin known that Grimhild had been that sorceress, that Völsung owed his existence to the Niflungar? Perhaps not. Had he known such truths with any certainty, he might have struck out against Völsung more directly, instead of cowing him with tricks of the Sight.

Rerir's oath to Grimhild bound his son as well. Favours owed were sometimes the most valuable treasure one could collect. Like most Huns, Völsung came from a line of the Niflungar's enemies, descended from the Budlungar, a kingdom Gudrún's people had crushed centuries ago. The Budlungar had retreated east, only to return, centuries later, as the Huns. Now, though, his once-glorious ancestry stolen by the Mist of history, he had come into her service, having no idea her ancestors had slaughtered his. And she would use him to drive Odin back to her side.

Gudrún slipped back inside Völsung's hall, giving a slight nod to a raven perched atop it. Father watched her. Maybe one day he would help her. Not against Grimhild, though. Never against her.

Fires inside kept the Mist at bay and prevented her from relying on magical concealment. Just as well, given hiding behind an actual wall protected better against one with the Sight. Like all mortals, the Huns rightly feared the Mist of Niflheim blanketing Midgard. The Mist could

steal away memories and transform a Man from within, leaving him ripe for possession by spirits or hollowed out as a draug. Or they could bring out the darkest parts of those with jötunn blood, transforming them into trolls, as had happened to Odin's brother. The Elder Races, the alfar and the jötunnar, on occasion, had sired children with Man, and their descendants bore forever traces of greatness within.

But Gudrún was a Niflung, a Child of Mist, and the Mist spirit bound to her, though it came with its own risks and agonies, meant she need not fear Mist. The nifalf—Snegurka—was one of two vaettir she kept bound. The less loathsome of the two.

Völsung rose from his throne as she approached and inclined his head in respect. He may not have liked the oath that bound him, but he was not fool enough to deny it. Grimhild would have had Völsung destroy Odin and the Æsir in her rage over Guthorm's death. The queen never forgave any slight, and the murder of her favoured son counted as more than a slight. She might not have loved any of her children—probably was not even capable of the emotion—but she had valued Gudrún's half-brother.

To save Odin from her wrath, Gudrún would have to get him to declare himself for the goddess Hel of his free will. Only then might Grimhild be forced to stay her hand. Because Hel *did* want Odin, of that Gudrún was certain, though not why. Her father still sent his ravens to watch the Ás king. Her father wanted Odin, which meant Hel wanted Odin. And whatever Hel wanted, Hel got. Her power had swept over Midgard and given rise to the Fimbulvetr. Nifalfar and draugar, jötunnar, and even wraiths all trembled before the Queen of Death.

Odin would be far better off as Gudrún's lover than Hel's enemy. He had to see that—she would make him see it. But not just yet. The time was not right. Gudrún would have to wait. Hel rewarded patience. The Queen of the Dead had waited for long millennia to spread her reign over Midgard. Deathless, she knew naught *but* patience. There would come a time when

Odin would need Guðrún, and then she would be there. Too many horrors lurked out in the Mist, dangers the Niflungar alone understood. And when Odin faced those dangers, when his people began to fall in droves, he would gladly cast aside his frail völva wife. He had to. Guðrún needed only to find a way to expedite the process.

Guðrún clucked her tongue. She was not some lovesick maid to sit here fawning over a man—even one such as Odin. She was the princess of the Niflungar. This king would come to her. As Völsung's armies broke the Æsir, Odin would have nowhere left to turn.

“Princess,” Völsung said. “You heard the Ás's words?”

“I heard.”

“And what does the queen wish of me?”

Guðrún struggled to keep emotion from her face. Queen Grimhild wanted every last Ás erased from the face of Midgard, wanted them left naught but frozen memories, if that. But Guðrún spoke for her here, even if she did not speak the words Grimhild would have wanted. “Let the Æsir pass—whatever they offer, accept the tribute.”

“So we will not war with them?”

Guðrún ran her tongue over her teeth ere shaking her head. “My dear king. Once they have crossed your borders, they will remain trapped with a strong enemy behind them and fresh enemies ahead. Trapped, they may grow desperate.”

“So you would have me break faith with them?”

As Odin had broken faith with her? Perhaps. “I would have you heed my advice lest advice become commands. Let Odin and his people through your lands. And await my further ... advice.”

The king glowered, sullen, helpless before bargains made ere his birth. They were, all of them, forever bound to their urds.



AMBUSHING the Æsir had turned against the Huns, and Gudrún's puppet had returned seeming more dead than alive. In the dark of his chamber, Völsung stared at his convulsing hand a moment, looked up at Gudrún, then back down at his hand. At first, she thought he might ask her to ease his pain or try to heal his injury—neither of which lay within her Art—but he held his silence. Perhaps he had not even imagined the Art could do such things. Perhaps he had simply become accustomed to pain. Gudrún could empathise, though her wounds did not show as obviously as Völsung's.

“The stories are true,” the king said at last. “Odin is a god among Men.”

Well, that was unfortunate. Gudrún ground her teeth a moment ere spreading her hands. “’Tis rather more complex than that.”

Völsung leant forward, lips curled back in what almost looked like a snarl. “I count us fortunate he has not yet laid siege to this castle. It leaves me time to send word to our allies in case he does so. However, should the Æsir choose to leave us be, prudence demands we return the favour. Let them be gone from our lands, and good riddance.”

“That is not your place to decide. You have an oath to the queen.”

Völsung slapped his throne with his good hand and rose suddenly enough that several of his men turned on her, hands on weapons. Gudrún kept her hands at her side, careful not to further incite these people. They had lost lives and honour both, and Men in such situations could act rashly.

Scowling, Völsung stalked to the great tree and stroked it. “My father's oath means naught if we lose our kingdom and still fail.”

The men's gazes lingered on her, afraid. What would Men do if they witnessed the Art? Those sensitive to it might feel unnerved, even ill, when a sorceress began to call a bound spirit. But if they actually saw her *do* something? Would they break, flee screaming about witchcraft? Perhaps not. Perhaps they would attack. She drew close to Völsung, but slowly, trying not to seem a threat. “Queen Grimhild does not tolerate failure.” She spoke softly, pitching her voice for the king alone. “And she answers to a

greater power still—one for whom we can truly say there is none greater. Fail in your oath, and you may find even death offers no respite from the agonies you will suffer.”

Völsung groaned, leant heavier against the tree. “I need time. I needs must gather every ally, call every levy. If we hope to overcome them, we’ll need vastly greater numbers.”

“Then move quickly, ere they pass beyond your lands. For if they do, Grimhild will still expect you to pursue, even unto Valland, if needs be. She cares naught for whatever tenuous peace you hold with Karolus and the indulgent South Realmers.”

Völsung raised an eyebrow at that. Maybe at learning the Æsir were bound so far, maybe at her implying she would force him to invade a foreign empire. Either way, Gudrún spun and stalked out of the hall. She needed to gather her information about Odin and his whereabouts, and she would not try such things here, not surrounded by these skittish men.

Instead, she left the castle and wandered the woods. The same Mist that choked and poisoned the land also offered succour and answers to those willing to bend to it. Gudrún paused, the hairs on the back of her neck standing on end. The Mist was congealing, sorcery in the air. She spun to see the vapours forming up behind her, taking the shape of a skull ... or a bone mask, as Grimhild wore when she conjured. Gudrún forced herself to stillness. If the queen wished to speak with her, there was little point in running. None of Gudrún’s Art could hold a candle to Grimhild’s.

Grimhild had been queen of the Niflungar for centuries at the least. And through all that time her hair had retained a lustre as blonde as Gudrún’s, her face blemish free. What secrets she used to maintain her youth, Gudrún had never been able to uncover. And Grimhild gave naught away for free. Everything with her had a price. That was one lesson Gudrún would *never* forget. She rubbed the spirit glyph on her arm as if to remind herself.

“Where are you?” The vapours hissed as her mother spoke.



“The Myrkvidr, close to Völsung’s hall in Xanten. His people died in droves, and still the Æsir march on. They may reach Valland within another moon.”

“It will be enough time.” Though the words were but a whisper in the wind, Guðrún heard them clearly.

“Time for what?” Did Grimhild now sanction her attempt to win Odin back?

“For your army to catch them.”

“My army?” Guðrún had many talents, but she was no general. Her brother Guthorm might have been able to lead Men, but Guðrún had other ways of getting what she wanted.

“You are the closest. You will serve, directing the troops to harry Odin’s warriors. Cut them off—do not let them reach Vanaheim.”

Vanaheim would be beyond the Niflungar’s reach, true, but Guðrún doubted she could stop the Æsir through any direct confrontation. She caught herself about to shake her head. One didn’t deny Queen Grimhild. Not ever. To do so was ... Guðrún had to suppress a shiver that threatened to overcome her. Some mistakes a woman made only once. “How will an army catch them, much less get ahead of them?”

She could have sworn her mother snickered, the sound like the crunch of snow underfoot. “Because, Daughter, your army need not sleep.”

The Mist shifted again, revealing an image of a snowfield nearby. Across it trotted the shadow of a man, its gait uneven but steady. Its flesh had turned sallow and wan, though remnants of armour concealed most of the wretched thing. But not its eyes. Eyes filled with hatred of the living, lit with a red gleam. More and more of the creatures trudged forward, never faltering, never slowing.

Draugar. Revenants of the dead, animated by the Mist, craving Man-flesh to sustain their existence. Warriors not fortunate enough to have had a funeral pyre, now bound in service and trapped in eternal hatred, become

ghosts possessing their corpses. Stronger than any Man, tireless, relentless. An army of the dead that could match even the so-called Ás gods. And where had her mother gotten an army of the dead?

Deep down, Gudrún knew. A whole battlefield of fresh corpses lay strewn about, men fallen from both sides. The Æsir and Huns alike would set pyres, but perhaps they had not moved quickly enough. And Hel granted Grimhild the strength to raise those fallen tainted with the most hatred. Why now? Why would the goddess grant such a thing centuries after the Niflungar were defeated and driven to Samsey? Was Hel herself so bent on Odin she would expend such power to see him brought to ruin? Or brought to heel.

And the warriors he had just slain would rise against him again, more powerful than ever.

Gudrún hugged herself, for once not caring if Grimhild saw it as weakness. Even for a priestess of Hel, this seemed profane. A single draug possessing a corpse was enough to leave most Niflungar on edge. An army of them was like the myths of the so-called Old War. But ... but 'twas an opportunity, as well. Pushed to the brink, Odin *would* at last turn back to her. And the draugar would push him there. Odin and those who had eaten the fruit of Yggdrasil might match a draug, but his mortal warriors would fall like leaves from a tree.

Faced with the annihilation of all he knew, Odin would finally see where his true love lay. Finally embrace his destiny at her side. And if he did so ere Grimhild could reach him, Gudrún could hope to save him from the queen's plans.

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## PART IV

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*Then sought the gods | their assembly-seats,  
The holy ones, | and council held;  
Names then gave they | to noon and twilight,  
Morning they named, | and the waning moon,  
Night and evening, | the years to number.*

*At Idavöllr met | the mighty gods,  
Shrines and temples | they timbered high;  
Forges they set, and | they smithed ore,  
Tongs they wrought, | and tools they fashioned.  
— Völuspá*

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**THE DÖGLINAR**

## 25 Age of the Æsir

*T*he finfolk had dragged them back to the centre of the village and once again bound them to the whalebone arch. No one had stripped Hervor this time at least. Instead, they all stood round in a circle, staring at her and Arrow's Point. The murderous bastard sat five feet away from her. Close enough she could have strangled him, were her hands not bound.

Kiviuq paced, hands behind his back. Every so oft, he cast a glance her way, eyes lit with something beyond fury—a mix of wrath and befuddlement, perhaps, as if the man could not fathom why she had betrayed him. Simple people.

Naliajuk was another story, though. She quivered with visible rage whilst one of her people spoke softly to her. The female pointedly avoided looking at Hervor. Maybe shamed that the offering she'd brought her brother had acted thus? Well, they had tortured her, so they deserved what they got.

The night wind stung her cheeks, and she had to fight to keep her teeth from chattering. To allow that would make her look weak. She couldn't

afford to look weak.

“Your petty foolishness cost us everything,” Orvar snapped.

“Had you not murdered my kin, none of this would have happened. Even had you deigned to offer them proper pyres and set their souls at ease, we might not have come to this. So spare me your accusations.”

“You have no idea what went on back then.” He strained against his bonds like he intended to come closer to her. “Men fight, they kill, they die. I fought for my family, and yours were hardly the innocent victims you seem to imply.”

Naliajuk stormed over, cutting off Hervor’s reply. “You. Bad.”

Hervor couldn’t stop herself from chuckling at that. “Aye, I am a bad woman. He is a bad man. And your whole clan is made up of evil seals.”

“You. You kill. Lie. Mmm.” She worked her fingers and gnawed her lip. “Make ... bad. Front of god.”

Orvar sighed. “I’m sorry we profaned your ceremony. You left us no choice. We must return to our people.”

“No. No go. No free. Now you fish.”

Hervor raised an eyebrow. “Our punishment is fishing?”

“No. You fish.” She clanked her teeth together.

Oh. Oh, Odin’s balls. “You’re going to *eat* us like fish?”

Naliajuk knelt beside her and thumped Hervor’s forehead with her finger. “Bad. Woman bad. Punish.” The finfolk grabbed her ankle and lifted it toward her mouth, then gnashed her teeth in front of it. “Bottom.” She again tapped Hervor’s forehead. “Top.”

Hervor shuddered at the mental image. It sounded like they intended to eat her alive, from the toes up. “You cannot be serious. That’s horrific. If you want to kill us, do so and have done with it.”

Naliajuk shook her head. Her eyes almost—*almost*—seemed to hold pity. “Bad. Front of god. Bad woman. Bad man. Punish.”

Hervor jerked forward, pulling against her bonds until her face was a breath away from Naliajuk's. "This man destroyed my family."

"You. Father?"

"No! Odin's balls, no!"

"Lie?"

"Naliajuk, please. Listen to me!"

The finfolk slapped her. The sting of it, the strength of the blow, sent Hervor toppling back down on her arse. Naliajuk shook her head and rose as Hervor struggled back to her knees. Damn. Not a single moment of this trip had gone as planned. Niflungar, draugar ... and now it would end with her eaten alive by seals. She worked her jaw where Naliajuk had hit her.

A new man came running into the village, shouting something in his nonsensical language. Kiviuq and Naliajuk both turned to him, then strode to where he stood, panting. They traded words. Pointing. Angry shouts. Gestures she assumed were rude. More arguing.

"You ought to have talked to me," Orvar said. Hervor ignored him, keeping her focus on Naliajuk, who stood shaking her head as if to deny what this new man was saying. "This was not the time for your vengeance. Even your father knew to make a proper challenge. I shouldn't be surprised though, I guess. He too cheated in the end."

"Lies!"

"Do you really think anyone agreed to a duel involving twelve berserker against two mere Men? I wasn't even supposed to be involved—"

"And you should have stayed well out of it. If I have to come back as a draug myself, I will have my vengeance."

He snorted. "You won't come back as a draug after they eat your fucking body." Sadly, he had a point there.

Naliajuk spun on them and stalked back over, her jaw working as if she could not quite believe what the other man had told her. She looked back

and forth between Hervor and Orvar, gnawed her lip, and shook her head. "You. Your people. Bad. Wake dead."

"What are you talking about?" Orvar asked.

But Hervor knew. "The draugar."

"Draugar ..." Naliajuk seemed to work the word around in her mouth, misliking the taste of it. "Draugar bad. Draugar prince. Much bad."

Draug prince? That was new. "Are you saying the others woke up some prince? A leader among the draugar?"

"Dead. Going. All island, going. Hunting. You people. Bad."

The finfolk did not care much for the draugar it seemed. Feared them, even. Rightly so, she supposed. "Will you fight them?"

"Fight. No fight." She shook her head. "Maybe leave."

"Leave?" Orvar asked. "You plan to abandon Thule? This prince is so bad you will give up your homes?" Naliajuk sighed and rubbed her arms, looking far more like a woman than a beast. A frightened woman who knew she was losing everything. Hervor knew that feeling all too well, fought against a twinge of sympathy that threatened to rise in her breast. She owed these people naught; they had kidnapped her, tried to force her into marriage, and now threatened to eat her alive. Orvar cleared his throat. "What if I kill this draug prince?"

"You?"

"Aye, I have fought many dangers in my life. Release me, and I swear upon my bow and my sword, I'll destroy this draug or die trying. You plan to kill me anyway. You have naught to lose."

For a moment, the finfolk stood there, running her tongue over her teeth. Then she spoke to her brother in their language. He shouted angrily. Others joined in. After a few moments of this, Naliajuk grunted and turned back to him. "You. You oath."

"You have my oath as a warrior. I will slay the draug prince." She nodded and cut him free with a bone knife.

Orvar rubbed his wrists, looked at Hervor, and shook his head.

“Wait,” she said. “Wait! You can’t leave me here. I’ll go too. Naliajuk, I can fight the draugar too. I’ve already killed many of them.”

Orvar scoffed. “Do you jest? You tried to murder me whilst I was unarmed and helping you escape.”

“Naliajuk!” The wereseal looked back and forth between Orvar and Hervor. Confused. “Come on now,” Hervor said. Naliajuk looked to Orvar. No. No, not good. She couldn’t let *him* decide her urd. Thor’s thundering cock, no. “Orvar?” Hervor said. “Orvar! I swear. I swear on my sword, on Tyrfing! On Tyrfing, I swear to bury our quarrel until we have dealt with this prince.”

He folded his arms and looked around the camp. At the finfolk all waiting to eat her alive. He shook his head and sighed.

“An oath on your weapon was enough,” Hervor said. “You know an oath on mine is too. Who would dare violate an oath on a runeblade?”

The man sighed again, then looked to Naliajuk. “I will take her. Every sword will help.”

The finfolk moved to her side and cut her free. “You. I take. I take you to others. They run.” Starkad and the rest of the party. Hervor nodded. With a sudden motion, Naliajuk grabbed her by the coat. “You. Fail. Draugar do bad. You. Worse than we.”

Worse than being eaten alive? Hervor did not want to imagine any such thing. “We won’t fail.”



THE FINFOLK SAT Orvar and Hervor in the same boat, Kiviug paddling them around the shore. Toward a draug prince. Hervor did not wish to dwell on it, and yet now, thanks to another oath, she had to kill the draug ere she could finish Orvar.



“You think you know everything,” Orvar said without warning. “You think you understand what happened on that island ... mostlike ere you were even born.”

“Why should I believe aught you have to say for yourself?”

“I *told* you. I came back to my ship to find my crew, my people, slaughtered by your kin. By that sword you now carry, cursed vile thing it is. I should have recognised it sooner ... should have looked more closely at such a blade, much as I hated the sight of any dverg-wrought weapon. Angantyr bore that, the worst of the berserkir, looking much like a fiend of the Mist. Glowing and flaming and drenched in blood.

“We were desperate, you know, and nigh to mad with grief over the loss of our people. And in that state, we watched the berserkir stalking closer to our hiding place.

“‘Odin preserve us,’ Hjalmar mumbled. ‘What is that sword?’

“I spat. ‘A runeblade. Arngrim is said to wield Tyrfing. The jarl must have gifted it to his son ...’”



ORVAR HAD long since paused in his story, and the only sound came from the water lapping on the shore and gentle rhythm of Kiviuq paddling. Naliajuk sat beside her brother in the boat, staring at Orvar and Hervor. He had insisted she sit in front of him, where he could keep an eye on her.

But Hervor had sworn an oath, and on Tyrfing no less; she would not break it.

According to Orvar’s story, Angantyr had been a worse murderer than even Hervor. Did it matter? He was still her father. Besides which, how was she to believe a word the man said? Maybe Orvar would not have embellished the tale ere knowing her identity ... but now? How could he not skew the telling to cast himself as a victim? As innocent. No one was

innocent, after all. Not Orvar. Not Hervor. And probably not the sons of Arngrim. Maybe they had been raping, pillaging monsters. So had Red-Eye's Boys. And they'd been Hervor's people. Either way, Orvar had nigh wiped out the last of the royal Dögling clan. Hervor owed her people vengeance on that count.

She kept twisting around on her seat, wary lest he should plunge a knife in her back. Would his oath bind him, as well, or was he faithless? "There's not many of us left," she said.

"Us? You think you're one of us now?" If he told the others she'd attacked him like that, maybe any one of them might kill her for it. Even old Bragi Bluefoot might do her in for such treachery and name it the will of the gods. And Hervor liked Bragi.

She grimaced, not willing to acknowledge Orvar's point. "The Axe fell when we first woke the draugar. And I saw Ivar get stabbed just ere I got separated from the party."

"And you murdered Rolf yourself."

She groaned. "That was an accident ... look, Starkad must be leading them now."

"Obviously. There's no finer raven-feeder in the North Realms."

"He hates women."

Orvar shrugged. "I'm starting to see why." She clamped her mouth shut at that.

An explosion of water ruptured the silence once more, an instant ere a massive form breached the surface several dozen feet away from the boat. Sleek black-and-white skin. The orca hung in the air for a breath ere crashing back down and disappearing beneath the sea. Naliajuk had clutched both sides of the boat, eyes wide, jaw trembling. Frozen in terror. Kiviuq stared at the spot where the orca had vanished, muttering about Aningan.

The finfolk feared the orca. Maybe they hunted them, too. But the part of them that were seals, they felt a primal calling back to their nature. Their instincts, their heritage. Like Hervor. Driven by primal rage.

So then, had she judged Orvar without knowing the man? No. No, whatever twisted words he spoke, it did not change that his hand had nigh to ended her entire line. “So tell me then,” she said. “Tell me how you killed the last of my kin.”

“Hervor ... you know how it ended. And I already told you how it began. We did not start this fight ...”

“Yes. Justify yourself. Tell me.”

“What good will come of the rest of this story—”

“Say it!”

Naliajuk and Kiviuq looked over at her outburst.

Hervor ignored them. “I want to hear you say how my father died. Leave naught out, Arrow’s Point. Tell me the truth—all of it. Tell me how you murdered him.”

Orvar let his head slip into his hand. “You ... arrogant, fool child. I have something better for you. I will tell you how Angantyr murdered my brother.

“I had slain all but one of the brothers, and as the last circled me, I tossed aside the broken hilt of my sword. Rage wafted off the berserk so thick I could have almost seen it fuming the air. But the man did not charge in. Perhaps the sight of ten of his brothers dead and dying on the beach instilled the barest hint of self-control in him. Though bleeding from a dozen wounds, I must have seemed tempting prey. I knelt to pick up the axe of one of the dead berserkir. My lungs felt aflame, every breath agony. I wanted to pitch forward and lie in the sand and sleep, to rest for days. Whatever happened next, skalds would sing of this battle ...”



AT LAST HE told how he had had entombed her father and her uncles. Only, he had left out the part where he laid a curse upon her kin. Nor had he simply laid Tyrfing beside Hervor's father's corpse. No, Orvar had laid the blade beneath the man and bid him burn forever upon his once-trusted weapon. And too, he had hoped to deny Tyrfing the World. To never again let it taste the blood of Men.

Even from across the boat, the sword called to Hervor. Its anger mirrored hers. She could lunge across the boat, grab the blade, and cut down the man. But her oath ... All of this, Hervor had done for an oath.

So she would wait. The shades of her dead kindred could muster no forgiveness, trapped as they were in agony; so, too, could she afford to offer no mercy.



ON THE SHORE, three men worked their way along the coast, heading south. One bore a torch, allowing Hervor to spot the group soon, though not as quickly as Naliajuk. She had already told her brother, who steered the boat toward them, intent on intercepting them. The party on the shore must have seen them too, for they also drew up short and pulled weapons.

A man with two swords. A welcome sight in this case.

"Eightarms!" Orvar shouted through the Mist.

"Orvar?" Starkad asked. The three men approached the boat as it banked on the frozen beach. Alongside Starkad walked his servant as well as Tiny. That was it. Where was everyone else? All dead? Bragi? Hervor glowered. Poor old bastard. Never should have come here. None of them should have.

Kiviuq pulled a bone knife as soon as he dropped the paddles, and Naliajuk jumped ashore, knife in one hand, cord weapon in the other.

Despite their oaths, perhaps the finfolk did not trust them. Certainly not with such numbers.

“You don’t look so surprised to see me,” Orvar said to Starkad.

The shaggy man cocked his head at his servant ere sheathing his blades. “This one knows things.”

“So I’ve heard.”

Starkad looked to Hervor. “I thought you both dead. I searched for you in the gorge.”

Hvor grunted. “Long and hard, I’m sure.”

Tiny clapt Orvar on the shoulder whilst eyeing the finfolk. “New friends,” Orvar said. Friends—a severe stretch of the term. “We have an understanding. It seems you people went and woke the dead.”

Starkad nodded. “Quite a lot of them. Including one with strange powers. A prince of one of the Old Kingdoms, I think. He bears a runeblade.” Hervor grimaced at that. Another runeblade. An equal to Tyrfin? This did not bode well.

Orvar grunted. “The finfolk know of him, know him as a prince, so I gather you’re correct. And I ... made an oath to slay him.”

“You what?” Tiny said.

“I swore to bring down the draug prince in exchange for my freedom.” The man looked to Hervor. Would he betray her now? Tell them of her treachery and thus order her death? The thought seemed to cross his mind. “Hvor’s freedom, as well. She has also sworn to kill the prince.”

Starkad folded his arms across his chest. “And you came to us thinking we’d want in on the glory?”

“Don’t you?”

“We barely got out of Nordri the first time,” Tiny said. “Still, I cannot deny my heart longs for that blade.”

Orvar spread his hands. “Either way, we gave our oaths, and those oaths bind us. You may help us or not.”

Starkad looked to his Serkland servant, who shook his head. “It will end in death,” the foreigner said.

Orvar scoffed at that. “Life always ends in death, boy. But you people went and woke up something better left alone. So set aside my oath and forget about the treasures of Nordri. Consider—under direction of a singular power—the draugar may not be the mindless forces of death we know. Imagine what would happen if such an army marched on any of our homes.”

Starkad spat. “We’ve no reason to believe they could get off this island.”

“The finfolk have boats,” Hervor interjected.

“Besides,” Orvar said. “Sooner or later others will come here, trying to claim what we did. And the draugar will kill them and take their ships.”

Starkad waved it away. “You don’t know that. That’s pure speculation. You want to scare us into thinking we’ve no choice but to fight this monstrosity. But you don’t need such tactics, Orvar. I welcome the challenge. If we do this, we can return home as *legends*. And now, with you two back, we actually have weapons that can hope to slay the fiend.”

Orvar nodded. “You’re talking about my arrows. But I have only one left.”

“And the runeblade.”

He frowned. “I’d consider the runeblade a last resort.”

Hervor glared at him—how dare he speak ill of Tyrfing?—then turned to Starkad. “Tyrfing has never failed me.”

“Didn’t save you from being thrown off a cliff.”

Orvar rubbed his face and looked over the group. “You lot get me close enough, keep the others off my back. And I’ll put my last arrow through the prince’s skull.”

“I will go,” Starkad said. “Afzal?”

The Serk sighed and hung his head. “I go where you go, Master.”

Orvar looked to Tiny, and the big man shrugged. “We do this ... I want the prince’s runeblade.”

Starkad groaned and shook his head. “Such things come with a hefty price,” Orvar said.

“Aye, perhaps. They also bring honour and fame to a man and his line.”

Orvar looked over at Hervor. “The dvergar did not forge the runeblades for the good of Mankind. They do naught for the good of Men.” She spat in the snow, offering no answer.

Starkad folded his arms. “In any event, it’s decided. We’ll make for the city again. It will take us long to trek back to the main entrance.”

At that, Naliajuk stepped forward. “No. No main. Take river.” She pointed to the boats.

Starkad sneered at her and pointedly looked past her at Orvar. “You trust this shapeshifter? Those rapids could break a man in half. We already lost Bragi on that river.” So that was what had happened to the poor bastard. Shame.

Hervor glanced at Naliajuk. “I trust her enough. She wants the prince gone, Starkad. The finfolk stand to lose Thule completely otherwise.” Maybe they deserved to die for their barbaric actions. But if so, so too did Hervor. So too did they all.

Starkad groaned but nodded and started for the boats. Eager to be done with it, Hervor supposed. Although Starkad always seemed reckless, fey, and rushing toward his dark urd, whatever it might be.

Orvar grabbed Hervor’s arm as she passed. “Listen. Your father, your brothers were led astray, maybe by the sword you carry. It probably brought the ruin on your house in the first place. It makes a man—or woman—hungry for blood. I can see by your eyes you know it’s true. But still we need it. If I fail, you have to use Tyrfing to slay the prince.”

“I have never broken an oath,” she said. “I don’t intend to start now.” She jerked her arm free and headed for the boat. After all, Hervor had two

oaths to uphold on this island.

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**DAYS GONE: SIGYN**

799 Age of Man

Sigyn brought another bowl of steaming water from the fire and set it beside Frigg. Her sister still worked fervently over Vili Borrson, hands drenched in the berserk's blood. Sigyn had seen Frigg work miracles with her völvu healing arts, but this wound must be beyond even her sister's skills. The look on Frigg's face told her that much. Vili was no mere man, of course, which was probably the only reason he yet lived.

"Please," Odin said, his voice nigh to breaking. "Please, Frigg ... I can't lose him too. I ... I beg you." Odin seemed to stare at something beyond Frigg, as if seeing visions in the shadows. "I won't fail you again." Was he speaking to someone else? His eyes scarce took in any of the people here. Idunn and Loki lingered on opposite ends of the tent, as always, seeming to avoid each other. Sigyn had no time for their rivalry now. "I won't," Odin mumbled.

Sigyn swallowed as Frigg frantically applied herbal poultices. Men said a berserk could live through most any wound that didn't kill him instantly, aye, but even a berserk needed blood to live, and Vili couldn't have much

left. Not with the rivers of it he'd lost on the way here. Perhaps the spirit within him could save him.

"I don't know what to do," Frigg whispered, her voice clearly pitched only for Sigyn.

Sigyn bit her lip. She was no völvá. Instead, she looked to Loki. Her man shook his head but did approach. "His life energy is depleted," Loki said. "Even the spirit inside him needs more energy to recover from such a wound."

Energy? "Like Megin?" Sigyn asked.

Frigg looked at her, then back at Vili, as though she'd caught the same idea. Her sister placed one hand on the berserk's head, the other on the wound. Sigyn looked to Loki, but his eyes gave away naught. Could this really work? Frigg had begun to tremble, beads of sweat building on her forehead. She drew a ragged breath, and Sigyn heard Idunn encroach close behind her. Everyone, even Odin, now looked at Frigg. Then Vili spasmed, his body lurching forward. On instinct, Sigyn grabbed one of his arms to hold him down. Even with both hands she could barely hold it in place, though Odin had pinned his brother's other arm with little apparent effort. Vili roared in pain.

Frigg moaned, swaying in place, her eyes locked on Vili's shoulder. Her skin had gone pale, and Sigyn wanted to touch her, to comfort her, but she dared not let Vili up. It took her full weight to hold the man's arm in place. Frigg trembled, her breath coming in gasps. And then she screamed and fell.

Sigyn scrambled to her side, no longer caring as Vili lurched upward, sputtering blood. "Frigg? Frigg?"

"She's a healer," Idunn whispered.

"Obviously," Sigyn snapped. "She's a völvá."

"But she managed to transfer her Pneuma, her life force, into another. Even among the Vanir, such healers are rare. Freyja can do it, a few others. I

can do ... more with plants than people.” Pneuma must be a Vanr word for Megin, Sigyn decided.

Sigyn frowned. *Her* boon from the apple appeared to be superhuman perception. Tyr, Vili, and Odin *all* got enhanced strength, Frigg held power over life itself, and Sigyn was stuck with the stunningly useful ability to hear a mouse fart. Her half-sister was nigh to as pale as Vili had been. “What does that mean for *her*?”

“That she passed some part of herself into Vili.”

Sigyn’s frown deepened. The werebear would live, which was good, but she couldn’t say she liked the sound of what Idunn had said. If Frigg had passed part of herself into Vili, wouldn’t there be some long-term ramifications? Would Frigg’s Megin recover? Would Vili forever hold part of her inside?

“Thank you,” Odin mumbled. As if he didn’t care what cost Frigg might have paid to save his brother. Frigg nodded weakly.

“Loki,” Sigyn said, “can you help her?” Her man immediately lifted Frigg and carried her to a fur where she could rest. Sigyn knelt beside her half-sister and rubbed her forehead. Frigg had grown clammy, like a woman fighting a fever or losing to deathchill. Sigyn could only pray she wouldn’t be tempted to use this ability often.

Loki walked back to where Odin knelt beside his brother. “We cannot linger. Those draugar in the pass will move on us come nightfall.”

Odin sat with his head in his hands, not looking up as he spoke. “If we retreat, we allow those behind us to box us in, trap us in the valley. There has to be another way.”

Loki was silent for a moment. Sigyn knew that look on his face—he would offer them a choice of damnations. “There might be. A river flows under these mountains, through ice caves carved beneath them. It could carry us well past Völsung and the draugar both.”

“Please tell me you’re not thinking of the Ylgr,” Idunn said. “The river is cursed, born from the chill on the edge of the World and saturated by the Mist of Hel. ’Tis no place for Mankind. My people, even *my* people, would not challenge its rapids.”

“Your people?” Loki said. “Those same people grown complacent on the blessed isles of Vanaheim? People content to bask in five millennia of spring whilst Mankind freezes and scrapes by out in the Mist? *Those* people, Idunn?”

Odin paced around the tent. “Last night told us we are ill prepared to face the foes ahead. We needs must take whatever route we can to press forward, to reach Vanaheim.”

“Then we must chance the river before twilight finds us,” Loki said.

Sigyn frowned, misliking the sound of this. She trusted Loki to protect them, always, but if this river frightened even Idunn—and naught had ever had such an effect on the Vanr that Sigyn had witnessed—it was probably no place for the Æsir.

Odin sighed. “So be it. I’ll tell Tyr. Loki, move Vili to his tent. We have to give him at least a few moments of rest.” The berserk had regained a hint of colour, but his breaths remained shallow.

Loki nodded and lifted Vili with little apparent effort. Sigyn’s mouth hung open. Son of a bitch! Did Loki have superhuman strength too? *All* the men got that? How was that fair?

As soon as they left, Idunn chuckled. “Oh, don’t fret. The apple awakens all the potential within you, you know. You just have to learn to harness the Pneuma.”

Had Idunn just read that off her face? Sigyn closed her mouth, not answering. The Vanr goddess was more perceptive than she seemed. Most of the time she played at innocence, but Sigyn had heard the way she’d spoken to Loki, a conversation laced with ancient animosity and ulterior motives. Sooner or later, Sigyn was going to unravel that puzzle too. First,

she had to tend to Frigg. If Odin thought to march soon, Sigyn's sister was going to need her strength.

Idunn left, and Fulla entered, Thor in her arms, the two varulf children scampering about her feet. "These adorable babes wanted to see their ma, they did."

"She's too weak to hold them right now," Sigyn said, cutting off Frigg's attempt to grab Thor. "Just sit down, Fulla." The maid clearly didn't want to be alone, hadn't even wanted to be left outside while Frigg tended to Vili. The woman did as Sigyn had bid her, settling down on a fur and ushering the varulf twins over to her skirts.

"I worry for him," Frigg said a moment later, though she didn't even sit up. For Frigg to show such weakness must have been a testament to her exhaustion.

Sigyn looked back to her sister. "I'm certain he'll recover now."

"Not Vili. Odin."

Sigyn frowned. More weighed on him than draugar, that much a fool could see, but her sister spent too much time thinking of a husband who, so far as Sigyn could tell, thought little on her. "What is it you want to say?"

"I think Odin never truly mourned the loss of his father."

Sigyn folded her arms over her chest. "His time of mourning is long past."

"Rage carried him far ... His desire for vengeance, his pride ..."

"Rage?" Sigyn frowned. "Odin Borrson certainly has more than his fair share of that. But then, so should we."

Frigg shook her head, then pushed herself into a sitting position. "Our father's death was not truly Odin's fault. And we, at least, took our time to grieve."

Sigyn grunted, then leant forward. "And you, despite yourself, you truly love him." Odin might make a fine king, but Sigyn doubted he was an ideal mate.

“Should I not love my husband?” Frigg asked.

“That’s not an answer.”

Frigg frowned. “What answer would please you, Sigyn?”

Sigyn shrugged. “Same as always. The truth.” Loki was right: you could help another to the truth, but you couldn’t give it to them. To hold meaning, some answers must be gleaned on one’s own.

“The truth is ... Aye, Sigyn, I think I do.”

“Well, that’s half the truth.”

“Sometimes I think you spend too much time in Loki’s company.”

Sigyn laughed. Was she that obvious? “Oh, but I love him, and well I know how much he loves me. I can see it in his eyes.”

Frigg sighed. “Fine. Aye, Sigyn. I do fear Odin doesn’t truly love me. Is that what you wish to hear? Is that—” Frigg paused, almost choking on a sob. “Is that the truth you dance around?”

Sigyn took her sister’s hand in hers. “’Tis half of it.”

Frigg sighed. “Please. Just have out with it. I’ve no strength for your riddles—save them for your lover.”

“Let us say you hold only half Odin’s heart. What should you do? Accept reality for what it is? Be grateful for what Urd has offered you? What would you do if you thought a jarl not loyal, not confident in you as a leader?”

Frigg had helped Odin win over the jarls. She’d sent Fulla among their maids to tell the tale of her rescue. She’d sent gifts of plunder Odin had recovered as a promise of future riches. She’d even called out a particularly recalcitrant jarl, forced him to openly challenge Odin. Oft enough, she’d asked Sigyn how best to manipulate her opponents. “So I should bribe or manipulate my husband into loving me?”

Fulla snorted, then immediately went back to pretending not to listen.

“No, Frigg,” Sigyn said. “Those are just tactics in a larger plan, a plan to fight for what you desire. If it is something worth having, is it not worth

fighting for?”

“Whom am I supposed to fight, exactly?”

Sigyn shrugged. “I guess that’s what you have to figure out. Know your enemy. Either way, Frigg, eternity is a long time to spend unhappy.” Sigyn paused. In truth, Frigg needed more time to convalesce and probably needed a bit more sisterly advice. Unfortunately, circumstances didn’t allow for either. “Just try to rest.”



ALREADY, the camp had begun to move, heading deeper into the mountains, toward a river even Idunn feared, one that apparently could carry them under the land itself. Had Sigyn not seen all she had, she might have dismissed such a claim as fanciful. She woke Frigg with a hand on her shoulder. “Can you walk?”

Frigg groaned, then nodded. Sigyn helped her to her feet, then guided her outside. Even as they exited the tent, Loki was already on his way over, a bit of roast rabbit in his hands.

“You need to eat,” he said, pushing the rabbit into Frigg’s hands. Frigg bit right in, and Sigyn had to stifle a giggle. Gods, she’d never seen Frigg eat like that. Hel, she ate like a berserk. Where had that dainty völvá gone? And maybe more to the point, how had Loki known healing would so drain her?

Sigyn’s man nodded at her, as if acknowledging her unspoken question. “Odin waits for you in the front.” He pointed toward the gorge, then swept up Geri and Freki in his arms.

Sigyn started down the gorge, Frigg at her side and Fulla and Loki trailing behind them. As if the mountain passes had not been bad enough, now they *descended* into Misty darkness that looked much like she imagined Niflheim itself. The Ás camp was largely packed already,

everyone prepared for another march. Most probably didn't know where they were bound. Frigg leant on her shoulder while they walked, and Sigyn said naught. She'd seen the gorge when they entered this valley. The chasm was deeper than even her enhanced eyes could see the end of, but there was a path down into it. If Loki was wrong, if they went down there and there wasn't a way forward, they'd be trapped. The draugar would hem them in and pick them off, one night at a time. But then, Loki never seemed to be wrong.

"It will be all right," Loki said from behind her.

"Y-you don't think there's trolls down there?" Fulla asked.

"There's no trolls," Frigg said without looking back. Of course, there damned well could be trolls in such a place, but Sigyn supposed telling Fulla that would only make things worse. So they continued downward, entering the gorge. A steep slope led into a frozen canyon, the walls covered in icicles jutting out at every possible angle like countless spears ready to impale the fools who entered. The Mist wafted over the gorge, creating a sort of ceiling that left the canyon looking cavernous. Thousands of Æsir all marching to the Gates of Hel? The further down they went, the colder it grew.

Idunn had spoken the truth—the curse of Hel settled upon this place. Sigyn's skin prickled and, though she saw naught, she could have sworn she felt the brush of the damned, moving invisibly beside her and welcoming the living to join in their torment. Aye, the gorge seemed exactly like a passage to Niflheim. Her footing grew slippery. It wasn't snow down here, it was solid ice, matching the shimmering walls of this place. From the way Frigg stumbled about, Sigyn realised her sister couldn't see well enough. Ahead, other Æsir held torches, but Sigyn hadn't thought to light one. How easy to forget her eyes could see better in the dark than the others'. She glanced back. Fulla was watching her feet carefully, but Loki stared ahead, meeting her gaze. Could he see, or did he simply trust her to lead the way?



A long, long way down into the gorge they walked. Hundreds, thousands of footfalls sounded behind them. Frigg shivered beneath Sigyn's arm. And if they were cold after having eaten the apple, how would the mortal Æsir fare? The answer was as simple as it was abhorrent—many would fall to the deathchill. The young, the old, the sick. They would freeze tonight.

Many of the group ahead had paused. The bottom of the gorge opened into a cave, its maw like that of some enormous dragon. Stalactites and stalagmites of ice jutted all around it in a circle, the dragon's teeth, ready to swallow any foolhardy enough to pass. At the cusp of the cave, Odin stood, watching the Ás line collect, giving the long camp time to catch up. "You're certain?" he asked Loki when the man walked up to his side.

"Unless you can fly," Loki said, "this is the surest way to bypass the creatures that pursue us. We have a few scant hours until sunset, then they will be on us. You cannot afford to hesitate."

"We've come this far into the gorge," Sigyn said. "There's no time to turn back." Even if it did look like Hel waited for them within.

Odin nodded at her, then looked to Frigg. "Be strong." The king hefted his torch higher and wound his way between two stalagmites. Sigyn could have sworn a fell Mist wafted off the ice as he passed, incensed at the presence of flame. Odin led the way, followed by Loki. Sigyn grabbed a torch from one of the other Æsir, then followed with Frigg, who now seemed able to walk on her own.

The walls inside were solid ice, a blue-white hue that only reinforced the stomach-clenching sensation of passing beyond Midgard. Ere they had gone far, she heard the rush of water, its rumbling echoing off the ice cave walls, growing louder with each step they took. It must have been the river, but gods above, it sounded like a waterfall. How fast was this current? The path sloped downward, the ice slick and moist, each step threatening to send them all sprawling. Sigyn tried to move cautiously, but Odin and Loki

were getting too far ahead. Rather than heft her torch high, Sigyn kept it low, watching their footing.

Exhaustion wore at Sigyn's legs when at last the ground levelled out. The sound of rushing water now filled the entire cave, drowning out conversation. She rounded a bend and saw why. The underground river cut a path through the ice cave, flowing so quickly that ice floes—some ten feet wide or more—passed out of her view in a few breaths. An endless stream of those floes poured forward, perhaps cut loose by the currents, or perhaps hurled straight out of Niflheim itself. Idunn had called this river cursed. Sigyn believed her. It swept round bends, splashing against the ice walls, the floes smacking into the sides and each other.

"How do you propose we get boats down here?" Odin asked. Or guide any boat through that? No waterman could avoid smashing his craft to tinder in such a tumult.

"I don't," Loki said. "We'll have to ride the ice floes."

"Has the Mist taken your wits, Brother?"

Sigyn was forced to agree with Odin. "There are thousands of people behind us, Loki. Some carrying children, all laden with supplies."

"Tell them to leave aught they can spare," Loki said. "If the draugar catch us, we will have no use for extra tents or food, much less trinkets or treasures. Some of those floes are nigh a hundred feet across. We can make it."

Some of them would, perhaps. Others would die—many of them. And Loki well knew that, Sigyn was certain—gods, they *all* knew that now—but her lover must've known ere suggesting this place. A chill settled on her heart. Perhaps this was the least of all the evils, perhaps he thought it the only way to preserve them from the relentless dead in pursuit.

Others came forward, helping Vili along. The berserk gasped at the sight ahead him. "Not really in the mood for swimming."

"We cannot steer the ice floes," Odin said.

Loki shrugged. "You won't have to. The current will carry us past the Sudurberks, beyond Hunaland and into Valland. From there we can follow the Middle Sea toward Vanaheim." If they survived the river Ylgr itself. Perhaps it truly flowed out of Niflheim.

Odin indicated a massive ice floe flowing quickly toward them. "All of you, on there as soon as it passes close. Do not miss this chance."

"What of Thor?" Frigg asked. Fulla still carried her babe, but Frigg would never allow her to do so in such circumstances.

"I'll ride Sleipnir and carry him myself."

Sigyn looked at Loki, who nodded. Sigyn shook her head, trying not to smile. Gods, this *was* madness. But she'd wanted more adventure in her life. Loki watched as a large floe, this one perhaps thirty feet across, slipped into view, then took off at a run and leapt for it, the twins still cradled in his arms. Her man landed on his knees, unable to use his arms for balance, and skidded along the ice ere coming to a stop. Well, damn. If he could do it whilst holding two babes, she was damned well going to do it too. Sigyn sprinted for the edge before she could outthink herself and leapt.

The floe didn't tremble under her weight, but it was impossibly slick. Sigyn had to extend both arms, going with the slide as her feet skidded. "Come on!" she shouted behind her.

But rather than Frigg, it was Vili who next jumped onto the floe. And the berserk's weight did pitch the ice to one side. Odin's brother scrambled toward the centre of the floe. Sigyn reached a hand toward Frigg. If she hesitated any longer, this floe would pass out of reach.

"Go!" Odin shouted at her. "I will guide the others. Go!"

Frigg took off running and leapt onto the ice floe. She barely caught the back edge as it passed and teetered backward. Ere Sigyn could even get to her, Vili threw his arms around Frigg's legs and pulled her to the centre, then wrapt his arms around her. "You're safe," Vili said. "Thank you for what you have done, völvu."

Frigg wormed her way free. “You’re welcome. It’s my duty as—”

The ice floe slapped against the cave wall as it wound around a bend. The impact sent shudders ringing along the platform. Freezing water splashed over their perch. Frigg lost her footing and slid along the ice, shrieking as she fell toward the river. Vili’s massive hand clenched Frigg’s wrist and yanked her back toward him. Vili once again pulled her into his embrace and guided her toward the centre of the floe.

With every twist and turn, their position slid, forcing all to constantly shift. And every time they hit the side, more of the ice floe cracked off. Maybe Hel would claim them all for coming here. But as the floe rushed around another bend, splashing up more icy water, Sigyn let out a whoop. Frigg looked at her like she was mad, and Sigyn had to laugh. Everyone else had crouched to keep their balance, but Sigyn remained standing, arms outstretched. She screamed with delight as the wind whipped her hair back.



FOR HOURS, they were at the mercy of the river Ylgr, but Sigyn didn’t fear. Not much, at leastwise, for Loki knew what he was about. In truth, Sigyn desperately wanted to know *how* Loki knew such things. Because of Idunn she had learnt Loki was far older than the rest of them, that he was, perhaps, one of the Vanir. Though he claimed otherwise and shared no love with Idunn. The goddess spoke as though she knew *of* him, rather than knowing the man. Still, Sigyn had no real explanation for his control over fire.

Sigyn crouched on the ice floe, watching the endless cave rush by, all of it like a dream. At last the floe carried them out of the cave and into the night air. Loki held her, wrapt in one arm, the other holding a torch. He had hardly moved in hours, but as sky once again covered their heads, he eased her to her feet. Others followed his lead.

On the back of Sleipnir, Odin had ridden up to check on them several times. Seeing the horse run as easily on water as ice was like an impossible dream. How did the monster manage it? What seidr coursed through its veins?

“The ice will pass close to the shore,” Loki said. “Jump when it does.”

Well, that should be exciting. Easier than jumping onto the ice had been, at least. Sigyn tried to keep her breath slow and calm, tried to use the hunting training Agilaz had imparted to her. The icy wind stung her cheeks and the Mist made it hard to see more than a few feet ahead of her. But Sigyn could feel the shore as it drew nigh, feel it with some sense she couldn’t explain or quantify. Almost see it, through the Mist. Two deep breaths, then she took off running toward the edge.

“Sigyn!” Frigg shouted. Sigyn dared not slow now, nor allow fear—hers or Frigg’s—let her falter.

She leapt. For a brief instant she was flying, speeding through the air. Then she slapped onto the shore, the impact stunning her. She rolled once, back toward the river, ere she caught her foot against a rock. *Graceful, Sigyn. Very dignified.* “I made it,” she shouted to the others, grateful they probably hadn’t been able to see her landing.

One by one, other Æsir made the jump, Frigg right after Sigyn. A sudden splash and brief scream were the only sign Sigyn caught of one who failed. She scrambled to the river’s edge, eyes searching the rapids for whoever had fallen. There was naught to find. Whoever it was must have gone into shock from the cold, pulled under in an instant.

“He waited too long,” Frigg said beside her. And more would do the same, as the other ice floes drew nigh. Gods, how many would be pulled under, drawn to Hel or caught in the icy net of Rán? They probably couldn’t even see the shore. How could they be expected to make a jump when they could barely make out their destination? They had escaped the draugar only to find death at the bottom of the river.

“A fire,” she said.

“What?” Frigg asked.

“Everyone!” Sigyn said. “Start the biggest bonfire you can! There, close to the shore. Burn aught you have but get it going!” It would drive away the Mist, give the others a chance.

The Æsir rushed to follow her command, not stopping to ask who she was to give orders. After such an ordeal, Sigyn supposed they welcomed anyone taking charge. They threw their torches in a pile, lit more, and began piling on timber, spare clothes, aught that remained of their scant supplies, just to bring the blaze higher. Only fire protected them from the Mist. Only fire would save them now.

Fire is life. Loki always said so.

More Æsir jumped from floe after floe, guided by the bonfire. When it had grown into a massive blaze, Sigyn ordered the others to make another and another. Perhaps the flames would guide the draugar or even other vaettir toward their location. Would her actions bring fresh doom upon them all? But they had to survive this doom to care about the next.

For hours she watched as the Æsir piled upon the shore. Hours more as they warmed themselves beside the fires she had lit for them. Few thanked her, but she didn’t need them to know what she’d done for them. Most of the tents had been lost—along with what seemed hundreds of lives—so men and women simply lay beside the fires, huddling together for warmth and comfort against the night.

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**STARKAD**

## 25 Age of the Æsir

*S*cy waters splashed over the lip of the boats as Naliajuk and Kiviuk threaded between rocks. The rapids ran through ice caves lit only by the flicker of Afzal's and Tiny's torches, one in each boat. Perhaps the therianthropes could see, but to Starkad, the rocks rushed by faster than he could pick them out. Wind whipped his hair out behind him, tugged on his sodden clothes, stung his face. And he loved it. His curse had made him a madman, but he lived for it.

The boat almost careened into the ice wall, despite Kiviuk's frantic attempts to turn it. Afzal shouted something in his language. All their years together and Starkad had never managed to pick up more than a few words of that strange tongue. Starkad glanced at the Serk, who had turned ashen faced. Starkad grinned and looked forward again. Aye, he'd gone mad.

Round the bend, and the dverg huts began to draw nigh, rising up from the ground like square hills. One hand on the boat's edge, Starkad reached for his sword. The draugar would see the torches.

*Fire is life.* They might catch the dead by surprise, coming in this way. But that advantage would not last. They had to move fast—very fast. The fastest man was the only one who counted. As the bank neared, Starkad leapt from the boat onto it, landed in a crouch, and took off toward the nearest building.

With the light behind him, he could not see much, but Afzal would follow. The Serk always followed. The others too, though the finfolk planned to watch the boats. A pair of draugar rose up from the rooftops, bows raised. Not good. Starkad increased his pace, readied his sword.

*Twang.*

He whipped his sword forward, and it hit the arrow midair, knocking it aside. Damn—he couldn't believe that worked. He rushed forward. An instant later, one of those cord weapons flew over his head and crashed into a draug. The dead man pitched forward off the roof, tangled in the finfolk projectile. Starkad leapt on the fallen draug, swinging his sword and twisting. His blade sheared through the creature's skull, and it collapsed.

Firelight raced closer toward him, illuminating the alley. The other draug still stood on the rooftops and would shoot down his companions. Starkad glanced around the alley. The buildings were close together and not too high. Maybe ... Starkad ran at one building, kicked off it, and caught the lip of the other building under his armpits. As he pulled himself atop the building, the draug turned to him, met his gaze with those gleaming eyes. It knew it didn't have time to nock an arrow, so it tossed the bow aside and pulled a knife. Starkad thrust his sword up as he gained his feet, using the draug's momentum to impale itself. With a twist, he flung the creature down off the roof. Tiny charged into the alley and set to chopping the creature to pieces with his broadsword.

With the torches below him, Starkad couldn't make out much. But glowing red eyes were converging on their location. Many pairs of eyes. He drew his other sword. They'd get swarmed unless he could find a choke



point. Like the palace itself. Only one way in, and they'd have to face him a few at a time.

He jumped off the roof and landed in the alley. "Orvar! You and the shieldmaiden make for the palace." He pointed with his sword. "You're the only ones that might down their leader. The rest of us will hold them at the entrance. Afzal, follow!"

Not waiting for an answer, he rushed through the city, cutting down three draugar as he went. One stood before the palace gate. Ugly bastard with its face half rotted, exposing bone. Starkad charged him, one sword high, one low. The draug held its shield out before itself, spear raised high. Starkad leapt to the side at the last moment, causing the draug to thrust uselessly in the space he had just occupied. He chopped down with one sword, knocking the spear wide, while scoring a hit on the thing's legs with the other. The draug wobbled, and Starkad kicked its shield, sending it toppling to the ground. An instant later, Tiny was on it, cleaving into the fallen creature.

Orvar raced to Starkad's side, bow readied. "You're sure about this?"

"Make legends of us all." Starkad turned, both swords readied.

Hervor charged in first, followed by Orvar. Starkad looked over to Afzal and Tiny and nodded at them. One by one, they retreated into the palace foyer. The big man tossed his torch to the ground so he could pull his shield. Afzal stood there, breath shaky, torch in one hand, shamshir in the other. "Stay to the left side of the gate," Starkad said to him. "They can only make it through a few at a time. We have to keep them from overwhelming us."

"We will die this day," Afzal said.

Tiny grunted. "Die bravely, then. Maybe Odin will take even a Serk like you."

Starkad grimaced, couldn't tell them what he knew of Odin. "Tiny," Starkad said. "Take the right side. I'll hold the centre."

The big man shrugged and took up position. “The dead do not tire, but even a man like you has limits.”

Starkad smiled, flexed his wrists. “Long have I sought after those without having found them.”

The first draug surged through the door, sword high over its head. Starkad whipped both his swords forward, hewing through the creature’s abdomen and halting its momentum. It fell forward, and he stepped around it, hacking at its back. No time to see if it were truly dead. Another draug came in, charging with a spear. Starkad knocked it aside with one blade and hacked into the thing’s face with the other.

Afzal slashed at the creature’s hamstring with his shamshir, and it fell forward. Starkad left the Serk to finish that one, facing the next. A draug with a slight limp in one leg, hefting a mighty axe. Torn and battered flesh had lost much of its colour, but as the draug met his gaze, he knew it. The Axe.

“No ...” Tiny said.

“Fucking Mist,” Starkad spat.

He moved in on his former companion. The way it stared at him, with hatred even beyond that of other draugar. It *knew* him. Some part of the Axe lingered, corrupted by the Mist and consumed with rage. Like all draugar, he sought revenge against every living thing. Most of all those it had known in life, those it—in its twisted grief—blamed for surviving it.

“Stop,” Tiny said. “I will face him.” The Axe sneered and turned toward Tiny, shield high. The big man faced him the same, his jaw trembling, shaking his head.

More draugar raced into the gate. Starkad surged forward to meet them. No time for caution. No time for tactics. All that mattered now was speed. Just move faster, so fast they could not keep up. He parried, twisted, thrust, hacked. Parry, riposte, parry. Slash. Instinct raging to give ground, but he could not. Could not afford it. Four of them, five. Keep them tied up here,

buy Orvar time. Everything would fall to Orvar, in the end. If the draug prince died, maybe the rest would panic. Or maybe they would all share the Axe's twisted, vile urd.

Starkad grunted and roared in defiance. Parry, parry, parry. Slash. He lopped off the head of one draug.

Afzal used every chance Starkad bought him. The Serk severed arms, legs, necks. Starkad forced every draug's attention to remain on himself. One or two tried to turn away for a moment, face Afzal. Those fools found Starkad's blades cutting them down from behind. The bodies had begun to pile up. Nowhere to move, to turn. Now they *had* to fall back. The draugar scrambled over their fallen to engage him.

Seven, eight of them at once. No more chance to attack. Just parry, parry, dodge. Keep their attention. Force them to stay on him. None could pass. Not a single one could be allowed to distract Orvar. From the corner of his eye, he saw Tiny approaching, one hand clutching his side. Shield discarded. And the Axe had now died twice on Thule.

Starkad roared at the draugar. They had taken so many of his people. And they just kept coming.

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**DAYS GONE: SIGYN**

800 Age of Man

*T*oo exhausted to sleep, mind too turbulent even to sit, Sigyn wandered the Mist-choked shore, drifting betwixt one campfire and the next, taking stock of their people. 'Twas hard to have an accurate count of all they had lost with this plan, and hard, too, not to hold some bitterness toward Loki, in thinking his calculation a callous one. Aye, Sigyn well knew they had avoided an army of draugar that would have ravaged them, perhaps wrought the extinction of the Æsir. Still, the river had claimed many lives, and Sigyn grieved them, and more for those who had lost loved ones. Skalds tales claimed those lost at sea were seized by the net of Rán, drawn into the saealf queen's power. What urd lay before those drowned in an icy river out of Niflheim?

Sigyn espied Tyr, sitting on a log beside a small fire, poking at it with a stick. His hunched shoulders made him seem smaller than the hulking brute he could be, if he stood tall.

"Queen send you?" he asked, not looking up.

"Not exactly, though she is concerned. We heard about the holmgang."

Tyr scowled. “You are no warrior nor shieldmaiden. What know you of a man’s honour?”

Sigyn shrugged that off, as if it did not chafe, this sense she could not be all that a man could. Men like Tyr, they could at once fight side by side with a shieldmaiden and at the same time think women knew naught of honour. Not that Sigyn had been allowed to train as a shieldmaiden. “I know ’tis not worth shattering this alliance over.”

“Honour is worth everything. All we have in this bitter world.” He spat. “Not something I suspect you or that foreigner you bed down with to understand.”

Sigyn rocked on her heels barely biting back her angry retort. Did Odin’s thegn think he knew so much of her, of Loki? “I’m not your enemy, Tyr.”

“Nor are you really my friend.” He cracked his neck. “My loyalty lies with Odin and his family.”

“You mean my with brother-in-law,” she said, flatly. The thegn stiffened, looked to her then as if for the first time apprehending what it meant, her being sister to the queen. Dolt. In the end, he grunted and looked back to the flame. She ought to walk away now, but she could not bear to let him off unscathed now, not after this. ’Twas, Sigyn found, oft so hard to control her tongue. “You’ve so much anger inside you. I heard about your past.”

Tyr grew yet stiffer, giving the impression of a snow leopard almost ready to pounce. “Did you now?” He spoke through clenched teeth.

Before she could speak more, she spied the woman, Tyr’s ex-wife, drawing nigh, back stiff, face set. “Zisa ...”

The woman stormed over then, hands on hips, stared at Tyr, daring him to speak.

“What?” the thegn finally demanded.

Zisa Naglisdotter worked her jaw. “The things we’ve seen these past few moons ...” Tyr held silent a moment, then grunted in answer. “That’s it? That’s all you have to say? I shouldn’t be surprised.”

Tyr looked at her. “You came to me.”

“More fool me, then.” Zisa glanced at Sigyn. “Your new woman?”

“No,” Sigyn said at the same time as Tyr. Not even if Sigyn’s heart had not belonged to another. Tyr was coarse as tree bark, and so unbending a stiff wind seemed apt to snap him in twain.

Zisa snorted, shook her head. “You ought not to make an enemy of the Skalduns. Odin’s mad quest has cost him enough support already, Tyr ...”

The thegn rose, towering over the woman. “You saying your cock-loving husband might turn on his king?” The man wrapt a hand around the bone-hilted runeblade he bore.

“No! Gods, Tyr! You just don’t ...” Zisa waved her hand as if in dismissal, then turned and walked away.

Sigyn watched Tyr, as he stared after Zisa, knuckles white from gripping his blade so. The thegn seemed primed to erupt into violence, a simmering volcano that could burst at any moment. It would not do to allow his resentments to fester. “You know ...” Sigyn said, and he looked to her, face blank. She waited for him to calm, to make the choice to converse rather than tend toward wrath.

“Fine,” he said, when he could clearly bear the silence no longer. “Out with it, woman.”

“She wanted to talk to you.”

“Didn’t have much to say.”

Sigyn shook her head and waved a finger. “She did, but you were not listening.”

Tyr faltered. “What are you saying?”

Sigyn shrugged. “You think she hates you.”

Tyr's eyes widened, his breath quickened. He was dense, perhaps, but not a complete fool. He shook his head a moment later. "I have someone to see."

Sigyn smiled and rose. "Then go see her."



FOR A LONG TIME after leaving Tyr, Sigyn sat alone by a fire. She couldn't say how long it was ere Loki came and sat beside her, ere she could rest, his arm around her shoulder.

"Was this truly a thing done to Midgard?" she asked. This Mist covering the Realm, blanketing it in chill and giving rise to draugar, trolls, and gods-alone-knew what other horrors ... Was this never the way this world was meant to be? "Does Idunn speak the truth?"

"As she sees it," Loki said at last.

"And what do you see?"

"More than I'd like, sometimes. Or perhaps, not enough."

She leant closer to him. Would he tell her now? If she asked again, would he finally reveal his secrets? Gods, but he was one puzzle after another. Maybe she didn't even want everything revealed. Maybe it would take the fun out of figuring him out. "Idunn said her grandmother blamed you for something, Loki. How could her grandmother have known you? Wasn't that five thousand years ago?"

"Almost."

"Who *are* you?"

"I am yours." Sigyn smiled at his words, despite herself. It wasn't an answer to her question, not really. But she liked the answer all the same. As she liked his mystery. Let him keep it, then. She'd unfold his secrets, one layer at a time. They had eternity together, after all. "I have to leave soon," Loki said.

Sigyn jerked. Damn. He'd said that almost as though he'd known what she was thinking. Could that be his power? Many of the others had superhuman strength. Sigyn had uncanny senses. Had the apple granted Loki the ability to read minds? The thought left her flushed, and more so when she considered all the intimate, sultry things she'd thought about him. And how would he react to those thoughts? Rather than answer, she concentrated on him.

*Can you hear me?*

"Sigyn?" he said. "Forgive me, there are things I must tend to." Ignoring her direct thoughts. Fine. Sigyn drew up a mental picture of them making love. Loki offered no reaction other than to lean in. "Don't be angry, my love."

So he was either the greatest actor in history, or he didn't actually read minds. Sigyn blew out a breath, then shook herself. "I'm not angry. Just curious."

"I must push ahead," Loki said. "Prepare the way. We cannot afford to tarry, not with what pursues us."

"Prepare what?"

Loki shifted, turned his gaze to the west, whither they were soon bound. "We'll need a way to cross the whale-road to reach Vanaheim. On the far side of Valland lairs an ancient power bound to that sea."

"Then I'll go with you."

"No. I won't risk you, Sigyn. Stay with the others and keep true the course. Idunn will be able to guide you there."

She folded her arms. Why was everyone always treating her like some delicate flower, some fawning maid? Gods above and below, her mentor Agilaz had trained her to hunt, then constantly urged her not to wander from town. She did not need it from Loki as well. Nor would she let him push her to the side the way Odin did to Frigg. She'd had a damned apple too, for the gods' sakes.



He scowled. Reading her mind. No, he was reading her *face*. Sigyn looked down, then stared at the fire. Let him see her pout, then. “You don’t trust me. Fine. Be off, then.”

“Sigyn ...”

She shrugged him off, then stalked away, toward the fire where she knew Frigg sat with her husband and child. But she did not sit at the fire. Instead she watched them whilst keeping an eye on Loki. At last he slunk off into the Mist, carrying no torch. He wanted her to stay behind. He wanted to keep her safe. Maybe she should appreciate the gesture. But Sigyn wasn’t the sit-by-the-fire-and-knit type.

She stopped to grab a bow and quiver, then slipped out of the camp.



THE MIST WAS NO LONGER a threat to those who’d had the apples, and her eyes could see even in the darkness. Keeping to the shadows beyond the edge of the firelight, she followed Loki into the hills. A moderate wood soon surrounded them, but after so long trekking through the Sudurberks, this was a journey Sigyn could relish. So they had truly entered Valland. A place so far beyond Ás lands to become mere legend. What people called this land home? More pleasantly disposed ones than those of Hunaland, she hoped.

Beyond the camp she knelt in the snow, pausing over Loki’s tracks. A long stride. He was moving quickly. The man knew exactly whither he was bound and was in a hurry to reach it. As he’d made no effort to conceal his tracks, she could follow just as quickly. Aye, a good night’s sleep would have gone over better than a run at night, but then she might never uncover this piece of the puzzle that was Loki. One needed all the pieces to solve a puzzle, and all puzzles needed solving.

She ran after him, trying to soften the crunching of snow under her feet. He was probably too far ahead to hear her, but she'd not take that chance. Loki's tracks passed into a valley between the hills. Without a torch Sigyn might never have been able to follow his tracks at night, at least not ere the apple. Now, her eyes drank in moonlight and illuminated every footprint Loki left. She pressed on, her heart surging. She could do this. Track him no matter how far he fled. The apple had made her a hunter with no rival. Her senses were—

A low rumble echoed from the valley on the other side of the hill. Had Loki found some sort of trouble? Sigyn wouldn't let him face it alone. She nocked an arrow to her bow. A few well-placed shots and maybe he'd see just how much he needed her. However ancient he might have been, she still had a lot to offer. Gods, he knew that, it was why he'd chosen her. Leaving her behind was just fool male pride.

She crouched atop the hill, spying three shapes in the valley beyond. They hardly moved at first, then one raised its head and sniffed. The monsters were nigh to eight feet tall and covered in mossy, rock-like protrusions, oversized mouths, and ugly tusks. Trolls. Hel's frozen underworld! Sigyn skidded back down the hill. Speaking of foolish pride. Now was not the time to be spotted.

A bellow filled the valley, echoing off the hills. Followed by another and a third. Damn it! They'd heard her. The ground shook as the trolls charged up the hill, ice cracking and rocks tumbling down hill.

"Hel's crotch," Sigyn mumbled, then took off at a mad dash. Rocks bounced along the ground as the trolls chased after her. One was so close she could feel it behind her. Sigyn dove to the side, rolled, and came up drawing the bow. She loosed a shot, but it was too close. The arrow bounced off the troll's chest, then the beast batted her bow away, its blow sending her tumbling along the ground. Sigyn rolled with the impact as Agilaz had taught her. Pulse pounding in her ears, she scrambled to her feet

again. She tried to run, but a single shove from the beast sent her stumbling back down.

The troll straddled her, grabbing at her tunic.

“No! No!” she screamed. She was not going to be a troll-wife. The other two had caught up and began letting out whoops. Sigyn struggled against the panic as the troll tore her shirt. These had been Men, once. Men taken by the Mist and transformed into things of rage and lust. And pride? “Stop!” she screamed. “Stop, I’m only for the strongest! I belong only to the strongest male!”

At that, the troll did pause. So it did understand her. One of the ones behind whooped and bellowed.

“Him?” Sigyn called, pointing at that troll. “Are you the best?”

The troll howled like a wolf and closed the distance to her in three strides. It reached for her, as if to yank her right out from underneath its fellow. Instead, the first troll spun and punched the challenger in the face. Sigyn scrambled backward as the two collapsed into a wrestling heap. The third troll watched her a moment, glancing at the fight.

Sigyn motioned him toward the others. Still, it hesitated.

The Hel-cursed monstrosities thought with their stones. Sigyn gave over any attempt to cover herself with her rent tunic, even pulled it away to reveal a breast, and winked at the troll. At that, the thing flew into a frenzy, leaping atop the others and pounding both fists down onto them.

Sigyn snatched her bow as she rose, then ran for the next valley, weaving in and out of the trees. Too much to hope the three trolls would kill each other. She had to put distance between them. With their great strides, she couldn’t outrun them, but maybe she could lose them. Ahead, the trees cleared in a circuitous route through the valley. Only a river would cause a break like that. Sigyn rushed down to its frozen banks, then gingerly stepped out onto the ice. It creaked beneath her weight.

Fall through that ice and she was a dead woman. She backed away and looked to the trees. She could climb one, but they might still smell her. Even if they couldn't climb the tree—and she wasn't sure about that—the trolls could probably knock the damned thing down.

Another bellow erupted from behind her.

“Hel take you,” Sigyn cursed and glanced back to see the third troll rushing toward her. One tusk had been broken, one eye bruised shut. It loped along the ground, using its arms like legs.

Sigyn looked back to the river, then to the troll. Freezing to death would still be better. She took off at a dead sprint across the ice. It groaned with each step she took. Faster. Faster!

Her foot slipped out from under her, and she skidded, then fell. Her shoulder slammed into the ice, sending jolts of lightning spurting along her limbs. The surface cracked and began to spiderweb where she'd impacted it. Grunting against the pain, Sigyn crawled along the river, toward the opposite bank. More and more cracks spread beneath her.

Fuck! She collapsed into the snow on the other side and rolled over to see the troll hesitating on the riverbank. Stupid as the beasts were, it must still realise what the cracks riving the ice meant. It couldn't follow.

Sigyn rose. Was she safe? Maybe. At least until the troll found another place to cross and came hunting her again. How long would she have? Long enough to get away? Maybe not. Nor could she take the chance—she needed to keep on Loki's trail.

Sigyn nocked an arrow to her bow. Focus. She let everything blur around her, focused only on the vulnerable flesh of the troll's throat. She loosed. The troll raised an arm to block the arrow and it clattered off the rocky protrusions on its forearm.

“I'm going to kill you,” Sigyn whispered. The troll began to howl. Had it heard her? Deep down, part of it was still a man. Men could be easily tempted. “Come on! Come and get me!”

It howled again. Damned thing would bring a whole horde down on her. She had to silence the monster.

“You want to plough my trench? Come get it!” she shouted. The troll leapt up and down and beat its chest. Sigyn almost laughed. Would have, if its display wasn’t likely echoing across half this country. “Fine,” she mumbled. “You need some enticement, fine.” She pushed her tunic off one shoulder and shrugged her cloak back, exposing herself. “You *know* you want this!”

With a final bellow, the troll charged forward. Not three steps onto the river the ice shattered, pitching it into the frozen waters. The troll flailed, waving its arms and only serving to smash the ice it tried to climb up on.

Sigyn grabbed an arrow and moved to the edge of the river. “Hope you like the sight. It’s the last you’ll ever see.”

She nocked the arrow, letting everything else slow, fall away. Her enhanced senses had one incredible side effect—her archery would now have put Agilaz to shame. She loosed, the shaft burying itself in the troll’s eye. The monster disappeared beneath the river, even as Sigyn shrugged her tunic back on.

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## THE DÖGLINAR

### 25 Age of the Æsir

*H*ervor charged ahead of Orvar, Tyrfin's ghostly flame pushing back the palace's gloom until darkness seemed to well in the corners, awaiting its chance to surge back in. A pair of draugar guarded the great hall, and she flung herself at them in a fury, engaging both. She'd claimed a shield from a fallen draug outside. This she used to block one draug while driving the other back with Tyrfin. Even the draug seemed cowed by the runeblade's gleam, and its fear worked against it. Hervor scored a hit on its arm, and it hissed as though it felt true pain. She whipped the sword around, cleaving through the other draug's shield and shield arm both.

A knife-wielding draug surged out of the shadows, launching itself at Hervor. She turned, already knowing she was too slow. Then a black arrow punched through its mail and flesh, knocked it out of the air and it fell, lay still. Hervor glanced back at Orvar, who was already nocking another arrow. She spun back to dispatch the last draug, then scrambled over their fallen foe without a word, charging into the throne room.

Tyrfing's light did not reach the recesses of the room, nor the ceiling, but it did illuminate those thrones. Dverg thrones, from ere they abandoned this place. Glorious work and terrible, the inhuman carvings of vaettir who preyed on Men. Hervor took a few faltering steps, angling Tyrfing this way and that in the vain hope its light might reveal her foe. Behind her, Orvar reclaimed the black arrow from the draug he'd slain.

Where was the prince? Had he already left, gone hunting them across the mountains of Thule? Curse the Norns if they had come all this way to kill him and would now die having never found him. Sword before her, Hervor stalked closer to the thrones, casting glances around the room. "Where is this trollfucker?"

As if summoned, a draug flung itself over the thrones, its gleaming blade in hand, its attack coming so fast she scarce had the chance to parry. Under its relentless assault, Hervor stumbled backward, giving ground, struggling to defend. The draug's runeblade sheared through her shield. She tossed it aside and slashed downward with Tyrfing. The draug parried on his blade, stopping her momentum dead. And before her eyes, the ghost began to grow, the blade expanding with it. It grew to tower over Hervor, pushing its runeblade against hers with one hand. Its strength drove her back, caused her feet to skid along the floor.

More than twice her height, eyes lit with the glow of Hel. Hervor grunted under the strain and slipped to one knee.

A bow twanged behind her. Orvar's arrow slammed into the draug's helm. The creature stumbled backward, hissing, shrieking mind-rending sounds. Hervor scrambled away from it, but it lunged forward, caught her with its free hand, and raised her up off the ground.

It hadn't died. He'd shot it with a magic arrow and still it walked. Still it—

The draug flung Hervor at Orvar. She slammed into his chest, and they both collapsed to the floor, skidding along it. His bow careened away. All

the wind blew out of her lungs, and her head struck the stone floor. White spots flashed; the room spun, darkened.

She groaned, sought to rise, couldn't. Everything whirled, the palace convulsed. Before her, a bear walked through the shadows, eyes locked upon her. It waited for her, awaited her proving her mettle. *Father?* Or was it but her fylgja, revealing itself at last, now she stood upon the precipice of destruction. Panting, Hervor stumbled to her feet and ambled back toward the prince, Tyrfing out before her. Her vision blurry—the bear keeping pace alongside her—she closed with the draug.

“Fuck you ...” she mumbled. A blink—the bear was gone. Hervor hacked at the ghost, but it parried her with ease using that giant sword, gave her no opening to reach its body. The draug looked past her then. At Orvar. Then it jumped over Hervor and landed between the man and his bow. Orvar stared dumbly at the fiend. Damn it. Finally, Orvar pulled his sword, moving like a man dazed. An ordinary iron blade, naught but human strength behind it.

They were doomed. The Arrow's Point bellowed a war cry and charged the draug. It leant down, roaring at him, exposing fangs and the hellish abyss of its maw. The ground shook as it raced forward to meet him. Sword high. Orvar dove forward, rolling between its legs. Its blade scored the ground where he had stood, shearing through stone and sending up a cascade of rubble.

Hervor faltered an instant. Orvar was damned fast with a sword, too. She raced to his bow and snatched it up off the ground. “Orvar!” He glanced her way, and she flung the bow through the air. It spun, and he dropped his sword to catch it. The man rolled over and scrambled to his feet, even as the draug prince turned.

Hervor raced past him hewing into the prince's leg, Tyrfing biting deep. *That* got its attention. The ghost's leg gave out, and it fell to one knee,



wailing that soul-twisting shriek. Hervor had to dive away from its counter with that runeblade.

Orvar half ran, half crawled to put distance between himself and the prince. Bows were not nigh as fast as swords, after all. Hervor had to let the man get some space to nock an arrow ... but an ordinary arrow would do naught when the bastard's magic arrows had failed. So now what?

"Prince trollfucker!" Orvar shouted at it. Hervor and the draug both glanced at the madman. So the dead thing had understood the Northern tongue? "I'm going to ram that runeblade right up your arse, trollfucker!" Orvar shouted.

The prince raced forward in shambling bounds. Its sword scraped along the floor for an instant ere surging into the air. The prince whirled it around in a wide arc. This draug was about to steal Hervor's vengeance away from her.

Hervor ran at the prince at an angle, leapt onto the throne and stepped on the back of it. Then she flung herself onto the prince's back as he passed her. The prince spun, flailed, trying to dislodge her, but she clung to it like a raging bear. Berserk she was not, and yet ... Hervor shrieked, cleaving Tyrfing down on its skull. The runeblade cleft through the helm and tore into the skull. The helm fell away in pieces, but the prince did not topple. The flailing draug sent Hervor flying through the air ere slamming into the ground. The impact blew the wind out of her lungs and sent darkness clambering in at the edges of her vision. She gasped, trying to rise. Trying to even get a breath.

Tyrfing had skittered away from her. She tried to push herself up. Her arms gave out, and she collapsed back to the floor.

The ground trembled as the monstrous draug ambled toward her. The draug bellowed at Hervor as she tried to rise. Black filth spewed from its mouth. It cursed her in the Old Tongue. Hervor did not need to understand the words to feel the wrath of Hel behind them.

“Prince trollfucker,” Orvar shouted again. The draug turned toward him, roared. Dead, perhaps all left to him was pride and mountains of regret. Orvar had reclaimed the black arrow from the fallen helm. He loosed.

The arrow struck the draug on the bridge of what remained of its nose. The shaft punched through the unarmoured skull and exploded out the other side, spraying gore. The draug stood, trembling for an instant, ere pitching over backward; it fell with a tremendous crash that shook the throne room.

Orvar panted. “Go back to Hel.”

Gasping, Hervor forced herself to her feet and stalked to the prince. Then she slammed Tyrting into its chest. It convulsed, its gaze settling upon her. “Dögling ...” it rasped. “My blood ...” What? What in the Gates of Hel? Was it, did this draug belong to her bloodline?

“We make a good team,” Orvar said, clutching his sides as he walked toward her, seeming not to have heard the raspy voice—or pretending not. But Hervor had heard; this had been a Dögling prince, and she had helped slay it. “Let us bury the past, aye?”

Still struggling to breathe, she jerked Tyrting free and cast a glance between the dead draug and Orvar. Then at Tyrting. Its light shone beneath the black ichor now coating it. She blew out a long breath. So her oath was fulfilled. One of them. From the shadows, she heard a bear growl, its voice for her alone. Orvar had saved her life at least twice in here. But her oath ... An oath could not be broken. Vengeance, declared, must be sated. He had all but wiped out the Döglinar—and she had just helped him do more!—denied them their chance to rise again, save through her. And she had *sworn* to avenge her kin. What matter the faltering of her unsteady heart next to the weight of that. Another growl of the bear, bidding her strike.

Hervor lunged at Orvar. The man tried to step back, to twist aside, but was not fast enough, and the runeblade punched through even his alf shirt with ease. It scraped along his ribs and exploded out of his back. He looked

down at it. At her. He tried to speak, but only blood gurgled out of his mouth.

“I held my oath ...” Hervor said. “I forestalled vengeance. Now the prince is dead and I offer you the same mercy you offered my father.” Her voice quivered. Hel take her for daring to regret this. She owed her father, her uncles, the whole Döglinar line! “Burn in eternal torment, Arrow’s Point.”

She yanked the blade free, and he fell to his knees without her supporting him. And then he pitched forward and died. Her oath was fulfilled. Hervor felt apt to retch.

A moment she hesitated, then sheathed Tyrfing and stared at Orvar’s corpse. “My father and uncles are avenged. And you ...” She grimaced, shook her head. “Neither blood nor Urd permitted any other end between us.” She knelt beside the other runeblade. When it had left the prince’s grasp, it returned to the size of a normal blade. Her hand hesitated over the hilt. Tyrfing was her family’s legacy, and still, this blade must have been her bloodline’s treasure. Still, Angantyr’s runeblade had brought about death, suffering, woe—as her father’s ghost had warned. What curse would hold this runeblade? It scarce mattered, she supposed. They had promised it to Tiny, for good or ill, and she could not violate that oath, extracted though it was before she knew of her claim to the second blade. She snatched the blade and headed out of the throne room.

Beyond, draug corpses littered the foyer. Still more of the fiends swarmed in. Starkad whirled from one to the next with uncanny speed and ferocity. But his chest heaved. The man could not have much left in him. And they had no way out of this palace. But the draugar all served their prince, and he was dead. Did they know that?

She ducked back into the throne room. Pieces of the shattered crown lay strewn about the floor. She grabbed the largest chunk, the one displaying

the great ruby. With this, she rushed out among the growing horde. “The prince is slain!” she shouted. And she flung the crown among the draugar.

The ghosts faltered, many turning to stare at the crown. An opportunity, if a brief one. She ran for the door. Tiny met her halfway. “Where is Orvar?”

“He helped bring down the prince but fell to his injuries.” She thrust the prince’s runeblade at the big man. “Take it. We have no time.”

Tiny grunted, looked to Starkad. “Best be off, Eightarms!”

Several of the draugar lunged at the crown. They fell to fighting amongst each other in an explosion of chaos and Otherworldly shrieks. Starkad shoved past them to join her and Tiny at the door. Afzal was already there, struggling to find a way out, but more and more of the draugar sought to jam themselves into the doorway. Tiny bellowed, charging into their midst runeblade first. The mass gave way before his flashing blade. Hervor drew Tyrfing off her shoulder and joined him, cutting her way free. Starkad and Afzal would follow as best they could, she knew, and she must clear the way for them.

The draugar shouted at each other in their forgotten language, more now trying for the crown than any of their mortal prey. Still, other draugar—perhaps unaware of the prize—continued to move on her. Hervor raced back toward the river, cutting down three different draugar as she did so.

The occasional shout behind her was the only indication the others followed. An arrow whooshed past her head. Reflex twisted her around to look. It had hit a draug archer in the chest, caused it to drop its bow. She turned back and ran. Kiviug, her would-be husband, held a bow, nocking another arrow.

Her arm felt like lead, her chest like ice. *Just a little farther.* A draug leapt from the shadows at her. She tried to turn, to bring Tyrfing to bear. Not fast enough. The ghost bore her down, the sword slipping from her grasp. Ice-cold fingers closed around her throat. She grabbed its wrist but could

not pull the creature off her. Its grip closed. Breath refused to pass into her lungs. Her vision began to dim at the edges. She slapped at the thing, but her strength already ebbed and her weak blows didn't even faze the creature. Its luminous eyes bored into her mind. Like it knew: her crimes, her murders. Betrayals.

Even now, she had betrayed Orvar-Oddr, honoured only the letter of her oath. Hervor deserved to be dragged down to Hel by this creature.

The draug burst into flames and fell back off her. Afzal thrust his torch into its face again, then slashed it with his curved sword. It fell, shrieking.

Gasping. Pain. Trying to breathe. Air wheezed through her bruised throat. Someone was dragging her to her feet. Shoving her toward the boat. Kiviuq? She tried to speak, not even certain what she wanted to say. It didn't matter, since her words came out a garbled mess. Naliajuk grabbed her from her brother, guided her into one of the boats. Afzal jumped in a moment later, and Naliajuk kicked the boat off.

Leaning on the rail, she could make out Tiny and Starkad fighting their way toward where Kiviuq stood at the other boat. The sudden twisting of the boat made her slip down, and she clutched on both rails for support. The boat smacked against ice, throwing a shower of it down on her.

"Starkad!" Afzal shouted. "We cannot leave him."

"No. No leave." Naliajuk glanced back. "Kiviuq bring."

Not that they could have stopped if they wanted to. The rapids had them now, yanked them forward. Draug arrows clattered against the ice walls as the boat whipped around a corner, out of their line of shot. Water splashed over the side, drenching her. So cold. Couldn't breathe.

*Murderer.*

She clenched her eyes shut. She'd always been a murderer. Ever since she'd run with Red-Eye's Boys. Now she was something better. She had avenged an unforgivable wrong. The first vengeance. She had slain mighty

Arrow's Point, though no one knew. No one save her father, who maybe now could at last find respite from his pain.

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**DAYS GONE: ODIN**

800 Age of Man

*Heidr had commanded Borr remain outside for the birthing. Borr always listened to his völvá. Always, save now. Bestla's screams rent the night air until Borr shoved aside the warrior who tried to block his way and charged into the tent.*

*"Push!" Heidr urged, casting a wrathful glare Borr's way. Borr dropped to his knees beside his wife, grasped her hand in his. It had grown clammy as a woman in deathchill. "One more push," the völvá said. "One more, Bestla."*

*Odin moaned. How was he seeing this? He knew what would happen, his father had told him of it, though he hadn't been old enough to understand. Didn't want to see it now.*

*Borr rubbed Bestla's fingers, trying to massage warmth back into them. "Come on, love. Come on, you can do it." Bestla screamed, her grip on Borr's fingers first tight, then weakening.*

*"I've got him," Heidr said. "'Tis a boy, Bestla."*

*“You hear, love? A third son,” Borr said, trying not to choke. Gods above and below, she had lost so much blood. The furs were drenched in it. “Are we not blessed?”*

*“Vé ...” Bestla said. “Call him Vé ... Y-you’ll protect him?”*

*“With my life. Vé is our blood.”*



ODIN SHOT awake at the sound of a bellow. His mind reeled at being jolted out of the vision and back to the waking world. But he knew that sound, treacherous, monstrous. Blood—his blood—Father’s blood. Vé was here, wasn’t he? Odin shook himself, trying to clear his vision-addled brain, but not bothering to pull on his trousers. He snatched up Gungnir. The Æsir now slept beneath the stars, huddled under furs and cuddled close to the fire.

They had enjoyed but a few days’ reprieve from the draugar, and now trolls turned on them. And could it be Vé? His father’s son, the last part of his parents ... Come for Odin’s son? Trolls ate children and Men ... No! No, Vé was blood. If he could just get through to him ...

“Take Thor, run!” he told Frigg. Trolls, coming for the women and children of his clans. The ground shook as a troll charged forward, kicking dirt over the campfire. Headed straight for Odin’s family. Borr’s grandson. “Never!” Odin shoulder-charged the beast and flung it backward, then whipped Gungnir around, slashing its throat.

Gurgling on its black blood, the troll tumbled to the ground. Odin rushed forward, ran it through, and kept running. More and more trolls stomped across the camp. In the distance, Odin could already see so many with women flung over their shoulders. No! He would not allow this.

Fulla had fallen to her knees, the twins forgotten before her. Eyes wide with shock, frozen as a troll advanced on her. Odin charged that troll,



ducked a swipe of its meaty fist, and slashed open its legs with Gungnir. He came up spinning, drove his spear through its belly. “Go!” he shouted at Fulla.

Still the woman just whimpered. Just beyond, a troll slammed its hands into another warrior, crunching his skull and helm into a bloody pulp. Freyr! Mortal Men would not be able to fight this. Was this Vé? Was he here? Odin’s blood, come for his own?

Tyr’s battle cry drew Odin’s gaze. His warrior leapt upon the troll’s back and rained ineffective blows with his sword. As the troll reached for him, Tyr drew a dagger and slid it through the monster’s eye socket. It fell with a crash. Growling, Tyr tossed aside his sword and drew the runeblade Odin had given him from his back. Odin turned at another bellow as yet another troll killed more of his people. In a single motion Odin reversed his grip on Gungnir and flung it. The dragon spear soared through the air like an arrow from a bow and punched right through the troll’s rocky chest.

The others had no magic spears to aid them. And the trolls were tearing his people apart. One troll stomped up and down on a corpse while another swung a man around like a flail. More and more of the monstrosities charged into the camp from the southwest—the same direction they had wanted to head. There were too many to fight—an army of trolls. Far too many for this to be coincidence. Somehow this had to be connected to the draugar. Could the Odling ghost’s curse have meant this? Every vaetr across Midgard was converging on Odin. Or was this the Niflungar, still seeking vengeance for what he’d done among them? Too much to hope killing Guthorm would have ended it. No, it would have only further incensed them against him.

Odin yanked Fulla to her feet, shoved the twins into her arms, and pushed her into a run. “Fulla! Go to Frigg. She will protect you.”

He couldn’t watch over her now—he had to retrieve his spear. Odin dashed for it, snatched it up, and spun to take in the carnage. The battlefield

was littered with hundreds of dead—men and shieldmaidens giving their lives to protect their loved ones, and, more oft than not, to little avail.

Tyr whirled back to face another rampaging troll. He leapt into the air, sword first. It punched through the beast's hide as easily as Gungnir had. Tyr's momentum and weight bore the troll down. Ere it had even finished falling, Tyr leapt off and rushed another, cutting its legs out from beneath it. Whatever price that runeblade might exact for its power—and Gungnir affected Odin, he knew it did—it would be worth it to save as many people as they could.

Odin whipped his spear around to hunt down another target. More trolls closed in on Frigg and Thor. Odin once again flung his spear, ending the fiend that would threaten his family.

He closed the distance to them at a sprint, then wrapt both in his arms. "You have to flee."

"There is nowhere to go," Frigg said. "The trolls are ahead of us and the draugar behind."

Gods, they truly had been outmanoeuvred. These trolls were raiders, but their attacks would demoralise and weaken his people, cost lives. If Vé was here, if Odin could only stop this ... He shook himself. The visions were driving him mad, weren't they? Even if Vé was here, there was naught Odin could do now to reason with him. "There!" Odin shouted, pointing to a hilltop where warriors had begun to form a protective ring, trying to guard the weak.

As Frigg ran off, Odin called to his jarls, shouting at the top of his lungs for a retreat. He would cover them, he and Tyr. Even if it cost his life, he'd protect his people. That was his duty. One look at Tyr's face and Odin knew the man understood it as well. Together, they fought troll after troll as men and women and children rushed past them.

"Vé!" Odin shouted. None of the trolls answered.

"He is not here, my lord," Tyr said.

For at least an hour Odin fought, his muscles burning, time blurring. Odin drew upon his Megin-fuelled stamina just to keep moving. Ás warriors fell by the dozens to the onslaught until, at long last, the rays of dawn peeked through the Mist. And with those rays, the trolls began to retreat, disappearing back into the woods and burrows. No sign of Vé.

Odin slumped to the ground. As soon as he let go of his Megin, his exhaustion hit him tenfold. For a moment, all he could do was breathe. Try to think through the haze of fatigue and lost blood.

There were far too many of these creatures for this to be a mere raid. *Father, forgive me.* This had all been for naught. He'd lost Vé, and this was his punishment. What a fool he'd been to think to challenge the gods—he couldn't even reach the damned gods! The Niflungar were hemming him in because they knew exactly where he was going. They could not fight the seemingly endless horde of trolls. Now he had to do whatever it took to protect his people. It's what his father would have done. Protect the clan and protect his son.



ODIN WADED THROUGH HIS PEOPLE, laying a comforting hand on each as he passed. A shallow, empty comfort as they wept and wailed for stolen wives and slain husbands. Njörd, but he'd thought he'd learnt to move past his pride. Instead, he had continued this vain quest to overthrow the Vanir, to return Midgard to spring, all because he could not bear what had happened to Vé. No, not just Vé, but their father, and Heidr, and all the others, lost because the Vanir had left Mankind out in the Mist to suffer.

Odin shook his head. 'Twas not vanity, and more than just his oath to Idunn bound him. It was necessity. It was Urd. He *knew* that, and he had no time to doubt, least of all in front of his people. They needed his strength

now. He had chosen to embrace his urd, and now, because of that, he had to take whatever steps Urd required of him.

He worked his way forward to find Frigg and laid a hand upon Thor's head. Frigg didn't speak, but she must have seen the decision in his eyes. He would give his son a better birthright than this. Thor was his blood, as Vé was his blood. As they were all the blood of Borr. There had to be a way to save them all. To reach Vé through the madness that had crept so deep inside his brother.

Idunn stood nearby, apparently trying to comfort Fulla.

"We cannot continue south," Odin said. "The trolls block our way."

"You have to," Idunn said, turning sharply. "Vanaheim is southwest of Valland, off the coast of Andalus, beyond the Straits of Herakles."

"Did you not see what just happened?" Odin roared. "Hundreds of our people are dead, Idunn! Is this the future you want for the Æsir? Is this the future I have brought my son to?" Ere he knew what he was doing, he had her by the shoulders, shaking her. "Is this your dream, Vanr?"

"Odin!" Frigg protested.

For a heartbeat, the gravity of Odin's arrogance settled on him, accosting this goddess. But only for that heartbeat—he planned to make war on her people. Why should he not manhandle one mere Vanr woman? "I will not lose my son! I will not lose my people!" He had started this quest to make his father proud and continued it in some hope to save Vé. And for what? To lead all the Æsir to ruination? "We cannot defend against the trolls like this."

Idunn's face fell, and she stammered. "I ... I'm sorry, I ... I didn't expect this. Trolls don't normally act like that, you know? But, but ... Fleeing north only takes you farther from your goal. And if these trolls and draugar truly hunt you, they will catch you. They are relentless, especially if someone is driving them forward. And that does seem to be the case. So ...

so you have that hard choice that's not even really a choice at all. I think that's kind of like what my grandmother said my grandfather faced."

Odin released her at last. "What are you talking about, Idunn?"

Idunn took a step back, clearly shaken. "Well, you can fight a losing battle, or you can run from it and wait for it to find you, right? And by then, you may risk losing even more."

"Are you saying I must stand my ground against the hordes of the Mist?" Fight a battle sure to claim innumerable Ás lives ere they even reached Vanaheim to challenge their real opponents?

She shrugged. "Odin ... I don't think they're apt to give you a choice about that. Your choice is *where* you fight, and when."

A wise warrior chooses his battleground, Tyr had taught him as a child. Hel, if only Loki and his woman had not wandered off. Odin needed his blood brother now more than ever. Loki always seemed to have options no one else saw. But Idunn was ancient and had to know Midgard as well as Loki did.

"Give me an alternative, Vanr," Odin demanded. "If we needs must make a stand, so too must we have a place to keep the defenceless safe—or safer, at the least."

Idunn shook her head, looking around, then up at the sky as though it might hold some answer. "I ... I don't ... There's Idavöllr, it's northwest of here, I think. But Odin, that's in the wrong—"

"What is it?"

"An ancient castle of the jötunnar, from back ere the Vanir drove them from these lands. Maybe you could defend it, I suppose."

Jötunnar. The thought soured Odin's stomach, and he reached for Frigg's sword's comforting weight, though, of course, it still lay by the fire. The dwellers of Utgard. Ymir's people, the being that came down from his mountain abode and destroyed Odin's World. And now a castle built by those monsters was their only hope?

A fragile, shallow hope. But it was a hope, and that was all they had to cling to. If they fled, if they turned away, it meant making a stand against the Niflungar. But Idunn was right—they would never reach Vanaheim without doing so. First, he had to protect his people. Then he would hunt down Gjúki Raknison and make the Raven Lord pay for all that had been stolen from the Æsir, from Odin.

“Prepare the people,” Odin told Frigg, then grabbed her arm as she turned to go. “Wait.” He placed a hand on Thor’s head. The redheaded child had Borr’s hair, his eyes, his nose. Odin’s blood.

“Odin,” Frigg said. “Daylight is fleeting.”

Aye, that it was.

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## THE VÖLSUNGS

## 26 Age of the Æsir

Every lurch of the cart sent Sigmund's gut swirling until it took all his concentration just to keep from retching all over himself inside the damn cask. If that happened, he'd *have* to open it for air ... and ... no. He could ill afford to indulge such thoughts.

The road to Wolfsblood's hall had never seemed so damned long. He needed to think of something else, aught else, really. Wolfsblood's head cut from his shoulders. His hall burning down to cinders. Father, avenged.

The wolf did not like being so restrained. Sigmund's fingers twitched. At long last, he would have his revenge. Naught else mattered. Still, the wolf wanted to howl. To rage.

To kill.

Soon.



THE TRADERS DEPOSITED the casks one by one, in great clattering heaves. Though muffled by the wood, curses reached him, men whining over the weight of a few of the containers. The one Sigmund waited in landed with a thud that jostled him and slammed his head against the wood. He barely stifled a groan. More clatters rang out, more casks dropped in what—he hoped—must be a larder inside Wolfsblood’s main hall. At last, when no further sound had reached him in some time, Sigmund pushed open the top a hair. No light filtered into the room. Slowly, he lifted the lid higher. Rising out of the cask proved more difficult, however, for with neither room to stand nor leverage, he was forced to work against the side of the cask, edging his way up one painful hair at a time.

When he managed to stand erect, a jolt of fresh aches and pains coursed through him, and he had to steady himself on the cask’s rim. His varulf eyes began to adjust to the darkness—not total, as he had first thought, for a hint of torchlight spilled in under the door, adumbrating the larder.

One of the other containers rocked back and forth. Fitela. Sigmund stepped out of his, almost fell, and then stumbled his way over to Fitela’s cask. After his nephew cast aside the top, Sigmund helped him first to stand, then to climb from the cask. Fitela groaned, arched his back, then cracked his neck. “It seems it worked.”

“Be that as it may, still I take objection with this plan.”

The young man snickered, then made his way through the room, as if searching for something. After a moment, he turned about. “This is the outer room in front of Wolfsblood’s hall. We could burst in and attack, but Odin alone knows how many men he’ll have with him. Best we wait for full darkness, when they’ll have grown drunk.”

Sigmund had waited long enough. The wolf inside him whispered hints of rage and slaughter and revenge. “Drunk on what? You mean the ale in this room?”

Fitela clucked his tongue. “Well, if we rush out like this, we risk—”



Footsteps fell just outside the door, followed by voices. Sigmund spared a single glance to Fitela, then they both scrambled into the recesses of the room, taking up positions behind more ale casks. Sigmund slipped his dagger free. Maybe the time had come for blood at last. The door opened, letting in a rush of light that, after so long in darkness, seemed nigh to blinding. Sigmund blinked, trying to adjust his vision.

“Bring up nine casks now,” a woman said. “And do not dare think to taste them ere the feasting begins. These are for the guests.” Sigmund knew that voice ... Sieglinde. Of course, as the mistress of this house, she would command the thralls, ordering the feast. A pair of men stepped around Sigmund’s twin to grab the nearest container of ale, hefting it, and then waddling back out the door. Sieglinde turned to follow them.

“Psst,” Fitela hissed. She froze, then turned, hand on a knife that hung around her neck. “Mother.”

“F-Fitela?” Sieglinde advanced through the room, clearly making out little in the shadows. Sigmund too rose, caught her eye, and embraced his sister at the same time Fitela threw his arms around his mother. “You’re here,” she mumbled against Sigmund’s chest.

“The hour has at last come to avenge all wrongs done to our family.” Sigmund stepped back from Sieglinde to look her over. The years had proved less kind to her. Even in the darkness, he could see the lines creasing her eyes, her mouth. His twin had borne the worst hardships of all, married to the bastard who had murdered her kin.

She sighed and shook her head. “He has too many warriors here, bounty-seekers, raiders, even berserkir women. If you are to do this, you must strike him down as he sleeps.”

Sigmund scowled. Like mother, like son. “I will do no such thing. I shall reclaim Gramr—”

“It hangs above his throne.”

He waved that away. “If needs be, I will kill him first, then reclaim her. But I shall not sacrifice my honour in any event.”

Fitela groaned. Despite their years together, the boy had never learnt. Odin had chosen Sigmund. He must always make his actions worthy of that.

Sieglinde sighed but did not argue further. “Leastways bide here until nightfall, then. If you face them all drunk, perhaps you have a chance, however slim.”

“Agreed. And sister, we need weapons. We cannot face armed men with ourselves bearing but daggers.”

Sieglinde pointed back to the shadows. “Hide then. I’ll return as soon as I’m able.” Sigmund nodded and moved back behind the casks.

“Mother?” Fitela said.

“Not now.”

“But surely he deserves—”

“Not *now*.” Sieglinde spun and fled the room as if chased by a draug.

Sigmund frowned. What in Hel’s frozen underworld? “Who deserves what?”

Fitela returned to his place beside Sigmund. “It matters naught. Leave it for now.” Scowling, Sigmund folded his arms and settled down to wait.



THE THRALLS CAME AGAIN and again, hauling casks of ale for the impending feast. And then they shut the door, and the day dragged on. Until, after many hours, it opened once more. Sigmund started to rise. Finally, Sieglinde would have brought weapons and ... Instead, two boys—maybe six or seven winters—rushed into the room, giggling and chasing after some ring clattering along the floor. Sigmund froze in place, willing

them to turn away. One of them looked up though, caught his gaze, and then took off running.

Fitela leapt up, surging at the boy, but Sigmund caught him by the arm. “Those are your brothers, like as not!”

“And they will betray us!”

The younger boy chased the elder from the room. Already, shouts rang out through the hall. Hel take all Wolfsblood’s brood!

Fitela jerked his arm free and raced out of the room. Damn it. Damn it! Sigmund dashed after his nephew. As he swung around the door, Fitela had snared the elder boy by the neck. He dashed him against the wall, pulverising the boy’s skull. The other boy tried to duck around Fitela, screaming and wailing for his father. Fitela moved faster than the boy could hope to react, caught him, and snapped his neck. As the body hit the floor, the boy’s vacant eyes stared at Sigmund, his neck twisted around so far his head looked attached backwards.

“What have you done ...”

“Did you not kill my elder brother with your hands?”

Sigmund had fought and killed an armed young man who knew what he faced. He had not slain a small child playing with a toy. Ere he could further berate Fitela, a pair of warriors came rushing in from the main hall, armed with axes. Fitela caught one by the throat and throttled him. Sigmund dashed forward, dodged the swing of the other, and slammed his fist into the man’s face, dropping him.

More men rushed around the corner. More than Sigmund had time to count. He reached for the wolf, tried to let it out. But the sun yet hung in the sky, denying his beast. He ducked an axe swing, his fist shattering a man’s jaw. A blade bit his shoulder. He drove his dagger through someone’s eye, coating himself in blood. Another blade tore through his thigh and sent him stumbling. He slammed his dagger again and again into the chest of a man

trying to pile atop him. A spear butt caught him in the face and sent him falling onto his back.

Everything spun. Red and black warred for control of his vision. Someone kicked his ribs. Sigmund caught the leg and twisted, heard bones break though he could not see. Screaming.

More blows rained down and slashes and pummelling. Until all went dark.

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**DAYS GONE: SIGYN**

800 Age of Man

Loki's tracks led Sigyn all the way to the coast. For the better part of a moon she followed, passing through a few towns here and there. Few of the locals spoke the North tongue here. Indeed, Valland was part of the South Realms. Still, she had traded rabbit pelts for supplies. Too, Sigyn had avoided draugar and trolls, wading through endless Mist until she had become an expert in sneaking around dangers. This must have been how Idunn had travelled this world. What difference was there between them, really? Both were women who had eaten the apples, and if the Vanr woman could walk from one end of Midgard to the other, so too could Sigyn.

Idunn had once spoken of a lush island chain in the far southeast, one from which her ancestors had come. Sigyn would have loved to have seen that, though it must lay in Utgard, beyond the Midgard Wall. Instead, she followed Loki all the way to the great ocean, and it, too, left her breathless. The land at last gave way in a great, glacier-like cliff and dropped down to ice-topped rocks on the frosty shore she guessed waited at least sixty feet beneath. Mist poured over that shelf, obscuring much.

But not all, not from her. She saw the spires rising so far above the Mist they seemed to scrape the clouds. A castle rose up out of the sea, topped by a half dozen of the great towers. Each tower was filled with innumerable windows, each of which had to be twice as tall as she was. Other separate towers rose out of the sea as well, making it clear some portion of the architecture must actually be underwater.

Sigyn had to hug herself at the sight. Like something out of a dream, a palace of another age. And Loki had gone down into it. And if he could do it, she could too. She shook herself, then set out for the edge of the cliff. Looking out over the lip of it, she swayed with dizziness and sank to her knees.

This was probably the stupidest idea she'd ever had. Of course, the hour was late for such worries. She might not even be able to find the rest of the Æsir at this point. Forward was the only way. Loki was down there, probably getting in trouble and almost certainly revealing yet another mystery.

Situations like this, one just had to do it. Just one foot in front of the other. She couldn't afford to think too much—that was her weakness, of course. She swung one foot over the edge and felt around for footholds. She was a goddess, wasn't she? Just how immortal was—

The ice cracked beneath her foot and she fell, skidding down the cliff side. Ice and rocks ripped open her palms as she scrambled, desperate for any handhold to slow her descent. Mist blurred everything, but her hand caught on some rocky protrusion. The sudden stop yanked at her shoulder and sent jolts of pain throughout her body. And she felt her hand slipping, too slick with blood. Sigyn shrieked as she fell again, something scraping her shins and what remained of her tunic.

Focus. Focus!

She forced her eyes to look through the Mist, to see the fall ahead of her, then twisted to land on another protrusion. The ice cracked beneath her,

slowing her fall only briefly ere pitching her downward again. Sigyn tumbled into the snow at the base of the cliff, rolled, and slammed into a rock. Her whole World blurred and spun. Pain shot through her entire body until she couldn't tell head from foot nor even guess how many bones she had broken.

Immortal. And she'd still almost managed to kill herself. A feat worthy of song.

For a long time she lay where she'd fallen, unable to even consider moving. Inside, she could feel her bones knitting back together. If she'd stayed with Frigg, her sister could have used her newfound healing powers. Of course, if she'd stayed with Frigg like Loki told her, she wouldn't *need* healing. But Sigyn had never been good at doing what she was told. Or at being left behind. Loki had shown her a new World, a new reality where she was no longer the outcast, no longer shunned for intelligence and enthusiasm. He'd showed her a World where someone would look into her eyes and see her soul.

That was worth eternity. It was sure as Hel worth risking her life over.

When she rolled over, a fresh lance of pain shot through her arm. She screamed, or tried to, but it came out as more of a whimper. Broken arm, broken ribs. Gods, she was a fool, wasn't she? Maybe some sleep. Odin had said the apple allowed him to heal from almost any wound. It meant she was going to be fine ...



THE FEELING of being lifted jolted Sigyn awake. She squirmed in a man's arms, her body still aching. It wasn't Loki who had lifted her, but a blond man with a bushy beard. He was brawny and bare-chested, covered only by a cloth wrapt around his waist like a skirt.

"She thinks she is a bird," the man said.

Sigyn glowered at him. Was the man rescuing her? Abducting her? It must be someone from the sea castle. “Put me down. Who are you? What do you want?”

The man clucked his tongue. “She sings like a bird, too. I am Fimafeng, little bird.”

It was a start. Sigyn had to take control of this situation, ere this Fimafeng got any ideas about her. “Do you know who I am?”

“A pretty bird.” The man continued carrying her, his gait steady, toward a massive stone bridge that stretched out to the castle. The bridge didn’t reach far above the sea, and now, with the tide in, a few inches of water lapped at his heels as he crossed.

Sigyn twisted in his arms, trying to worm her way free. “This pretty bird wants to walk on her own.”

“Birds don’t walk so well. I will carry you, Bird, until your wings heal.”

Sigyn couldn’t be sure whether the man was truly simple or just mocking her. Either way, continuing to struggle against him in her current state would not avail her. Instead, she took the opportunity to check out the castle. The archway leading inside had to be fifty feet high. Massive columns supported a vaulted ceiling carved with all manner of sea creatures—animals Sigyn had heard of only in tale. When she looked down, however, she spied things that should have only lived in myth—saealfar. Though human from the waist up—and naked—these people had long, twisting fish tails.

Alfar, here, before her eyes. Not invisible—unless she had passed into their world?—not concealed, and not children’s fancy. Sigyn’s pulse quickened, her mind reeling in disbelief.

The central bridge continued through the great entry hall, but to either side the floor dropped away, revealing great pools of clear water. Inside swam schools of saealfar, some passing right under the bridge and disappearing into underwater chambers.



“By the gods,” she whispered. “Those are the people of Rán?”

“Yes, little Bird. The queen is with her husband.”

Wait ... What? “You mean this is ... ? The sea goddess Rán actually lives here? This is her castle?”

Fimafeng chuckled. “Bird would rather be a mermaid? Maybe they will let you choose. This is the palace of Ægir the Benthic, husband to Rán.”

Ægir—the name sounded familiar. Old legends had spoken of a sea jötunn by that name. Had Loki come here to barter with the jötunn? He said he wanted to prepare for the Æsir to cross the sea. Had he come to negotiate passage? Sigyn shook her head. She’d been a fool to follow, but if Loki was here and a guest of Ægir, then she’d be saved.

“Don’t I get to meet the lord of the castle?”

Fimafeng shrugged, the movement causing Sigyn to shift uncomfortably in his arms. “That depends on what my lady wants for the Bird.” He turned down a side path that connected to the bridge and descended a short staircase that left him waist deep in the waters.

Then he dropped her. Sigyn plunged into the water, and though it was only five feet deep, in her shock she sucked down a lungful of water. Strong arms hefted her upward and squeezed her abdomen, forcing the icy water out of her.

“Silly Bird. Not a mermaid yet.” His legs had transformed into a fish tail. A saealf, as well. Damn, she had to be dreaming. Except already her hands shook from the cold. Mere moments of this and she’d be taken by the deathchill. And what on a troll’s stones did he mean by *not a mermaid yet*? Was that possible? Gods, did he think to put a vaettr in her?

Sigyn tried to stumble away, but her limbs would barely respond.

Fimafeng hefted her up once again, keeping her head just above the waterline, and this time swimming through an open archway. Whatever he intended, she couldn’t help but cling to him, if only for the fragile warmth he radiated.

Almost as soon as he entered the next chamber, the waters warmed. Near-continuous bubbles burbled up from underwater, filling the chamber with such warmth that a curtain of steam rose off the surface. Fimafeng lowered her into those waters, and luxurious warmth filled her, easing her aching body. For a time she sat there, eyes closed, feeling the waters aid in her healing. She'd guess a few hours of this and she might be able to use her arm again.

What was this place? A hot spring in the middle of the ocean? Sigyn was no sailor, but it sounded impossible to her. Of course, she supposed the king and queen of this sea could do as they wished. Only when her body at last began to warm did she take the chance to open her eyes and look around.

A dozen or so young women lounged in and around the waters, all naked or garbed only in sheer dresses that concealed naught. And birds—swans—swam around the spring. One of those swans drifted toward her, then rose. As the swan did so, her feathers fell away in a cloak, seamlessly revealing a naked woman before Sigyn. The girl brushed a hand over Sigyn's cheek and winked at her.

"More birds," Fimafeng said. "Birds have to ask Rán for their new friend. Maybe she'll be one of us. First, the bird must get warm."

Sigyn swallowed, her head swimming from the dizzying events of the last few moments. 'Twas as if she had passed out of Midgard and into the Otherworld. Perhaps this place was indeed something on the border of two Realms. Liminal places could be thick with vaettir and dangers—or so völvur said, and Sigyn, for her part, was suddenly realising she should have better heeded Frigg's völvu nonsense.



AFTER SIGYN'S body had healed, Fimafeng carried her to a mercifully dry chamber. As he rose, he shifted back into legs, and Sigyn realised the skirt-like covering he'd worn had drifted away when he first changed form.

"Oh gods," Sigyn mumbled as she caught a glimpse of his manhood. That was not something she'd needed to see. The saealf set her down, then pulled at her clothes. "No!" Sigyn shrieked.

Fimafeng just chuckled and gave over the attempt. "Little Bird," he said and clucked his tongue. "Shy like a human. Bird's shirt is ruined." He turned away and approached a wardrobe. Sigyn's heart wouldn't stop racing. Instead, he pulled out a white dress, held it up to her, then clucked his tongue again and put it back. Next, he withdrew a dress the colour of the sky on those rare days when the sun broke through the Mist. Fimafeng held this one against her, cocked his head to the side, then nodded. He pressed the dress into her hands. "Wear this."

Sigyn accepted the offer. The truth was, between the troll attack, weeks in the wild, falling down the cliff, and being dunked in the sea, her tunic was *beyond* ruined. "Fine. Turn around."

Fimafeng frowned. "Bird must get over human modesty." He folded his arms.

Sigyn glowered. She should pick her battles. Gods, she'd been willing to expose herself to outsmart the damned trolls. If that was what it took to make this alf complacent, let him ogle her breasts. Oddly enough, as she stripped out of her shirt, his face remained expressionless. Other than a quick—and blatant—appraisal of her body, he showed little interest. Sigyn yanked the cerulean dress over her head but kept her trousers on. Maybe Fimafeng preferred mermaids over humans. Or other mermen. If so, she was probably safe, at least from him. Other than the fact she was pretty sure he intended to force a spirit inside her, leave her a vessel to a saealf, or one of those swan girls, or some other vaettr. Which meant not so safe at all, considering she'd just as soon remain in control of her body.

As soon as she had dressed, Fimafeng guided her by the shoulder into another hall. This place was massive, so easy to get lost. A left, then a right. Twenty paces, another left. She could not afford to lose her way. If this Fimafeng tried to force a mermaid into her, she was going to need to make a hasty retreat.

They passed into another chamber, this one similar to the entryway, with a central bridge Fimafeng walked along. Around it, saealfar swam in pools forming an exotic school with tails of every kind of fish imaginable. Some she had *never* even imagined—yellow and blue stripes, orange and white frills. A dazzling display of beauty. Once, back in Halfhaugr, she'd have given aught to see this. Once, back when such things were fancy, or puzzles to unravel.

About forty feet up, water poured from a groove cut in the walls in a horseshoe shape, creating a waterfall curtain on three sides of the circular chamber. As Fimafeng neared the back of the chamber, a shadow drifted forward from behind the waterfall. A woman's form stepped through, the water parting around her, seeming to *be* a part of her. Her stunning beauty left Sigyn no doubt this was the goddess Rán. Her black hair shimmered like inky liquid itself, flowing in air as if in water.

Like most of the others in the room, she was naked save for golden jewellery, but water streamed over her in a curtain that seemed to create a kind of sheer, sparkling gown.

The woman smiled, a wild mischief in her eyes that sent Sigyn's heart racing. "What is this?" she asked. Her voice seemed to come from everywhere, from the waters all around Sigyn.

"A lost traveller, my lady, and my gift to my queen. Do you wish her for a mermaid? Or for a swan maiden?"

"I'm not lost!" Sigyn blurted. Maybe this queen could be reasoned with. If Rán had been with Ægir when Loki came to meet him, this could be her

chance. “I am the consort of Loki, who has come to call on your husband, my queen.”

Rán’s smile only deepened. “I like her. Mermaid, I think.”

“No! I already belong to someone.”

“Indeed you do, little girl,” Rán said. “You belong to me. And I have many a daughter in need of a vessel in this Realm. Once, long ago, this Realm housed thousands of us. Did you know that? Once, our waters covered near all of your Realm and the glory of Mu spread through the seven seas, my mother queen of the South Sea. When the Worldsea ebbed, I myself raised this bastion from the fabled ruins of Kêr-Ys, thinking to preserve the glory of bygone days. But slowly, time has played its bitter game and stolen from us that which was once our due. Now ’tis so difficult to find willing hosts of sufficient beauty to be worthy of my kind.” The goddess chuckled, smiling and bobbing her head. “For Kolga, I think, this one shall serve, though she would have chosen one dark of hair, given the choice.”

“Wait! You said willing hosts. I’m not willing.”

Rán shrugged. “Of course you are, for why else would you venture here, if not to offer your flesh for our needs, even if your mind yet rejects the truth of your heart. Fimafeng, prepare her. My daughter will be eager to grace this world once more.” The goddess laughed again and disappeared back through the waterfall.

Fimafeng’s grip tightened on her shoulder and he yanked her from the room. Now Sigyn fought in earnest, straining against the merman’s impressive strength. He pulled her through the hall.

“Stop! Please, I don’t want to be a mermaid.”

Fimafeng clucked his tongue. “Very insulting, little fish. If you wanted to be a swan maiden, you ought well have spoken up earlier. Now it’s too late to choose. Besides, a mer spirit is a greater gift than a swan cloak.”

“I don’t want to be any—”

“Release her!” Loki’s voice boomed through the hallway. Sigyn turned to see her lover. She’d never heard him shout ere now, had never seen such anger in him, such darkness in his sapphire eyes. A surge of hope filled her heart like the break of dawn, so airy she felt lightheaded.

“I cannot do that. Queen Rán has given the command—this one belongs to her now.”

Loki strode purposefully toward them. Sigyn’s heart raced, surged with relief not only that he had come for her, but at seeing him again. Maybe she would have to start doing what she was told. One day. “Sigyn is mine.”

Loki’s words made her feel surprisingly warm inside. Part of her wanted to see him beat the saealf who’d dragged her here, though she wondered how a Man might battle a vaettr. She had not seen Loki fight, but he oft travelled with Odin’s warriors, and she’d felt the incredible strength in his limbs, the fine muscles of his body.

Fimafeng shoved Sigyn and she fell into a pool of icy water, once again overcome by the sudden shock of it. She tried to put her foot down, but the water was too deep. She splashed around, flailing, trying to keep her head above water. A few short dips in the river with Agilaz had not made her an apt swimmer. Sigyn slapped for the side of the path, missed, and went under. Not like this. She wasn’t going to drown like this, not after everything.

Loki splashed down beside her, then she was wrapt in his arms and hefted toward the surface. He surged upward, flinging them both onto the path. Sigyn gasped, trying to catch her breath. A few feet away, Fimafeng lay on the stone, blood pouring from his mouth and nose.

How long had she been down in the water? It had seemed but a few heartbeats—though it felt longer to her—and yet the saealf was rendered helpless.

“My lady,” Fimafeng shouted—or rather, sputtered loudly. Loki dashed over to him and landed with a knee on his chest. Then he punched the saealf

in the throat. Sigyn choked on the sudden violence of it, aghast, seeing the spirit, vibrant with life one moment, now choking down his final breaths.

An instant later, Loki was pulling her to her feet again. “Sigyn, are you harmed?” She shook her head, not trusting herself to speak. “We have to move. Ægir will learn of this, and that alf was a favourite of his. He will be displeased.”

Then why did Loki have to kill the man? “What does that mean? The jötunn won’t help us now?”

Loki frowned. Aye, fine, ’twas a fool question. They had just murdered the sea jötunn’s right-hand man. *Help* was out of the question. Just how much *harm* would they be talking about instead?

Sigyn shivered from the cold. She missed the hot spring. The spring where those swan maidens swam ... “There are women here. They have cloaks that let them turn into birds.” Women or spirits or whatever they were.

Loki glanced about. “Swan maidens ... Show me.”

Stupid, stupid maze of a palace. It was left first, then ... Sigyn shut her eyes. She could do this. “That way.” She took off running, Loki right behind her, leading the way back to the hot spring. The girls inside shrieked in surprise as the two of them burst into the room. Ere they could recover, Sigyn sprinted for one of the numerous feather cloaks lying around beside the spring.

“Stop!” one of the girls wailed. The girl ran over as Sigyn tried to don the garb. Sigyn punched her in the face, then grimaced as the girl pitched over, grasping her bloody nose. “Sorry.” She flung the cloak around her shoulders and watched Loki do the same. She pulled up the hood. “How do I—”

A wild energy rushed down from her shoulders. The cloak began encircling her of its own accord, and a shock rushed out her fingertips. She’d heard it pained varulfur and berserkir to shift, but she felt only elated.

Instinct took over, and a beat of her newfound wings hefted her upward. Another beat and another, and she was flying, soaring.

Air rushed over her feathers, filling her with such a profound joy she would have wept, could she have done so in this form. Loki, a black swan now flying beside her, flew for one of the giant windows high above. Sigyn followed him outside, out above the sea and into the night sky. Above the Mist and up, up toward the clouds. Naught bound her anymore. She was free of all constraints.

A fell roar rumbled from the castle, and the waters outside it began to swirl. And then he rose out of the sea. A man's torso stretched into the sky twenty feet, a long white beard streaming around him. His arms were thick as tree trunks and knotted with muscles, but it was the glowing runes covering them that drew Sigyn's eyes.

Loki passed in front of her, then beat his wings even harder, drawing her to follow. They were racing for the cliff beyond the sea. Almost immediately, the sky darkened and the winds picked up. A sudden gust flung Sigyn back out to sea and nearly sent her toppling out of the sky. She dove, trying to cut under the air currents. Streaks of lightning lit the night sky. Loki circled back again, clearly seeking some way to aid her. But this was on her.

Sigyn banked in one direction, then quickly turned as the winds shifted to block her. Her manoeuvre allowed her to cut through the prior gust and soar above the cliff. Loki skidded onto the ground and yanked off his cloak. Sigyn did the same, another gale threatening to fling her back out to sea even as she shifted. Instead, she stumbled to the ground.

Loki leapt to her side and caught her, then pulled her to her feet. "Run! We have to get as far from the sea as we can, beyond the reach of their power." His hand wrapt around her wrist, they ran.

Lightning coursed through the sky behind them. But they were free, had escaped the grasp of vaettir! Only when they were well away, when her



pulse ceased to hammer in her temples, did Sigyn paused to dwell on the bitter truth: whatever Loki had aimed at here, this day they had won for the Æsir not friends but new foes.

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**STARKAD**

## 25 Age of the Æsir

*T*he river let out from the ice cave and cast them under a sky lit by the iridescent ghost lights once more. As the rapids passed, their rate slowed and, finally, so did Starkad's raging heart. He slumped down in the boat. The most profound fatigue of his life had settled over him, left his limbs feeling like unresponsive water. Keeping track of time on Thule had become impossible, but certainly he'd had little sleep in many days. An entire moon, perhaps. But they had done it. Orvar—rest his wandering soul—had slain a prince of the Old Kingdoms. Starkad would not have minded that glory for himself, but holding off a draug army would win him his share, he supposed.

Even Tyr ought to be impressed with such a feat. And maybe Starkad had found his limits after all. Had Hervor taken a few moments more in coming, he'd have given out. He could not now swing his swords against the meekest of foes.

He had seen Thule, had walked in Nordri, and now lived to tell of it. Whatever else Odin may have wished from this island, Starkad was done

with it. Thule had cost them all far more than they had counted on. Maybe the Ás had known what they would find and failed to warn them. Mostlike so, in fact.

Starkad shut his eyes, let the rhythm of the paddles soothe him.



THE BOAT JERKED as it ran aground, waking him. Starkad opened his eyes to see numerous finfolk gathered on the shore, all watching the two boats. Kiviuq climbed out of their boat and joined his sister, who stood nearby. Some of the finfolk held bows, some knives, some those cord weapons. None had raised them threateningly, but neither did their eyes bespeak friendship.

He groaned. So that was how it was. Sitting up hurt. Having to fight off an army of wereseals would hurt more.

Rubbing her throat, Hervor approached Naliajuk and nodded at the other woman. “You,” the finfolk woman said. “Prince you killed.” Hervor nodded again in answer.

Starkad stumbled over to where the two women stood, leaving Tiny and Afzal behind. “We upheld Orvar’s bargain. He paid for it with his life.”

Naliajuk gnawed her lip. “You. Mmm. Good you. Prince dead.”

Encouraging. Starkad stretched his neck. “So? Take us to our ship, and we’ll leave Thule to you.”

“Island. Mmm. Mmm. Danger, still.”

“They’ll choose another prince.” Hervor’s voice sounded raspy.

Starkad almost pitied her, nigh strangled back there. But Hel, Hervor had brought her woes on herself, lying to join this expedition. And ... and she had helped save them all. Were she not there, had she not brought the crown, they’d have all died in Nordri. Maybe she was worth more than he had given her credit for. Maybe, though the thought had him glowering.

Tiny shrugged. “Aye, a new prince. Mostlike not so strong as the last. We have his sword. Either way, we upheld our deal.”

Naliajuk looked to her brother, then at the other finfolk. “Deal. You deal. Good. Fix prince.” Now she pointed at Hervor. “Still. Still first thing. Wedding.”

Hervor snorted or tried to. Sounded strained. “I am not marrying. Not anyone.”

Naliajuk frowned and worked her mouth. “Human. Human marry. One human. Least.”

“Go to Hel,” Tiny said. “None of us are staying here.” The big man drew the stolen runeblade.

Starkad frowned at it. That should have been his. With Orvar dead ... Starkad gritted his jaw. The spoils of Thule were his to claim. Tiny—Ecgtheow—had insisted on claiming what did not belong to him.

“No!” Naliajuk stomped her foot and took several threatening steps toward Tiny. The big man held her at bay with the runeblade, but Hervor stepped between the pair.

“They don’t like it if you invoke that name,” she said.

Tiny cocked his head. “And I don’t like being told to marry a fucking seal. So we beat the draugar. We can cut our way through these bastards too. Let the dead claim Thule.”

“We are in no shape to fight again,” Afzal said. “Much less against such odds.”

Starkad was forced to agree, though he let his hands drift toward his sword hilts. If this was the end, he would go down fighting. The finfolk would pay dearly for this treachery. That, at least, he could promise them. Kiviuq met his gaze now. The wereseal’s hand went to the bone knife at his belt.

“Wait, wait!” Afzal said. “Master ... I will stay.”

Starkad spun on the Serklander. “No, you shall not. You don’t have to do this.”

“I promised to repay my debt to you.”

“Trollshit. Where I go, you go. Remember?” It had been that way for years now. Afzal was his constant companion. Whatever dire adventure he was on, the Serk was there to hold the torch, offer wisdom, and occasionally talk Starkad out of his worst ideas.

“I could never have repaid my debt with a blade. But this will save your life, Master. I would have Naliajuk ... if she wishes me.” The finfolk woman looked to Hervor, then to Starkad.

“Don’t do this,” Starkad protested.

Afzal smiled. “You know it is the way. You call it Urd. I told you I would never leave this isle ...”

“Fuck Urd. Return with us to Svjarland. We have some treasure from Nordri, gold, Afzal. You want a woman, we’ll find you a real one.”

“You,” Naliajuk said. “You insult?”

“No,” Hervor said ere he could respond. “He doesn’t mean it.”

The finfolk woman gnawed her lip. Looked to Afzal. “You. You choose me?” Afzal nodded. “Mmm.” Naliajuk looked at Hervor, then frowned. “Oath. Weapon oath.”

Afzal hesitated a bare moment. “I swear upon my father’s sword.”

The therianthrope nodded then and pointed to the boat. “You. We take you ship.”

Starkad ground his teeth. This wasn’t supposed to happen like this. Afzal Ibn Hakim. As a boy, he’d lost everything. Dragged to the North Realms by his father only to have the man slain. Starkad had never asked him to follow as a servant, but he had. He always had. He could not be gone now.

Starkad felt numb as he settled back into the boat. Afzal nodded at him again. This was what he wanted, his choice, his sacrifice. His honour. And

Starkad had no right to steal it from him.

And yet ... A long time ago, Starkad had lost his little brother. And then, somehow, without seeking it, he had found another. And now that brother was being taken from him as well.

On a bench before him, Tiny sheathed the runeblade. Starkad's hands twitched at his sickening desire to strike down the man and claim his prize. Instead, he gripped the boat's side. This was his curse, making him think this. He ought not to ... ought not to even consider betraying Tiny.

The man had fought bravely ... And still. Still, Starkad had to have the blade. He had to. It was a physical ache in his gut, demanding he claim the greatest treasures for himself. Even *knowing* his curse might cause him to lose that in turn.

Afzal's hand fell upon Starkad's shoulder. Maybe the boy knew. He'd been with Starkad for so long, he understood the curse. And he understood courage ... maybe more than even Starkad. He was staying here, making his life here, so that Starkad, Hervor, and Ecgtheow could be the few to escape Thule.

The only way to honour that was to maintain peace between them. So fuck the blade and fuck the curse. Starkad would not dishonour another brother. He breathed out a long sigh and cast a nod of acknowledgment at the boy.

In the end, the Serk *had* saved him.

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**DAYS GONE: TYR**

800 Age of Man

*T*he fortress of Idavöllr watched over a seemingly endless plain Idunn called by the same name. The stones were clearly ancient. Cut from blocks so large no mortal man could have built this place. Even Hymir, the jötunn Tyr had served, would have been hard pressed to construct it, though Odin had said Ymir stood much larger. Tyr had not gone with Odin on his quest for vengeance. He'd wanted to. Instead, Odin had taken Loki. Damned foreigner always knew too much and yet was never around when needed. As now. Not for Men, this place, no. Chains as thick as Tyr's chest ran along the length of the drawbridge, leading up to a fortress that passed through the Mist. Couldn't even see the top of the castle through it.

The gates stood mercifully open. Otherwise Tyr couldn't imagine how they would have opened a door tall as ten Men. He ran his fingers along Gramr's bone hilt. Touch of it gave him some small comfort. It was all that could defend him against the Otherworldly. All he could trust in these days. He'd not ever let it leave his side. This sword could slay trolls and aught else that might come for the Æsir.

“Tyr,” Odin said, “Idunn, with me. We’ll scout ahead. Such places can house”—Odin ground his teeth—“vaettir.” He would clearly never forget the Odling ghost. Shade had driven Odin on his mad quest to the Niflungar. A people the World would have been better off without. Sorcerers.

Tyr drew Gramr, touched iron on his baldric. He advanced at Odin’s side, Idunn trailing behind. The sword weighed less than a normal blade, at least when drawn. It wanted to fly, he knew. Wanted to hunt, to claim the lives of foes. Tyr had fed it well of late.

All three of them bore torches that kept the Mist at bay and cast the entry hall in shadows. Dancing shadows. Torches were too meagre a light to reach the ceiling or walls of Idavöllr, but any light was better than none. Odin waved him toward a hall to the left, whilst he headed farther down the main hall. Idunn, for her part, glanced between the two men ere drifting after Tyr.

“What?” she asked. “I’m no warrior. You don’t think I should go wandering off on my own?”

“Did not you cross Midgard alone?” Tyr asked, keeping his eyes forward. This hall led to a staircase which clearly led onto the battlements. Each stair, however, was nigh to three feet tall. Meaning every step climbed was awkward, tiring. If he’d had a free hand, he’d have helped Idunn up, but she climbed with surprising agility.

“That’s going to be a long way up,” she mumbled after they had crested the fifth stair. Indeed, probably another two dozen to reach the upper landing. But if his people could reach the battlements, they could rain arrows down upon attackers. The fortress was surrounded by the great plain on all sides. Meant trolls could not approach them unawares, even at night.

“Place is a marvel,” he mused.

Idunn chuckled. “If you say so. Freyr mentioned it, on occasion, mentioned what an ordeal it had been to drive them from here.” Freyr?



Idunn spoke so casually of the greatest warrior of the gods, but then, why not? She was one of them.

“So you ... knew him?”

“Still do.”

“He—does he truly bear a flaming sword?”

She chuckled. “Aye. ’Tis his prized possession, one taken after the fall of the Lofdar, you know? Hmm. Sort of the way you hold on to that icy blade of yours, addicted to its call. I did warn you, right? I thought I had, but sometimes I get flustered and forget what I told people, and what I just think I told people. And what I think I *should* tell people and maybe I have ... you know?”

“Idunn?” Tyr said, hefting himself up another stair. “You recall asking me to tell you if you started babbling?”

“That I do remember.” She climbed up after him. “Oh! You mean now? Damn, sorry.”

Comforting as the runeblade was, he needed a free hand to help him climb. Tyr sheathed Gramr, then continued up the rest of the steps to the landing. In a pair of alcoves at the top stood two great iron wheels, vertical, each with multiple spokes. A jötunn might have been able to grasp them and raise the bridge. Tyr suspected it would take a half dozen Men on each wheel to operate them. Assuming they could first be cleared of the coating of ice. But if they could close the bridge, it would cover the main gate. Then assailants would be forced to climb the walls whilst defenders pelted them with arrows, stones. Sadly, such tactics would only delay trolls. But delay might be enough. If the trolls held true to form, they would retreat with each dawn. Tyr needed only harry them until then.

Tyr gazed out from atop the battlements. He was deep in the Mist here. Torch kept it off him, but he couldn’t make out much. They wouldn’t have much warning, but this had to be their best option.

“May I ask you a question?” Idunn said. Tyr grunted in acknowledgement, then turned to look at the Vanr woman. Couldn’t see the plains anyway. “Do you ... fear me?”

“What?” What need had a goddess to worry over such things?

“Well, some of the others do. Not Odin, of course, but many of the Æsir do. I can feel it, their silent regard fraught with apprehensions that leave me forever alone, though standing in the midst of your people. Aye, and of mine, as well, though among them ’tis not fear but disdain that opens the schism between us. They look to me and see one who is different of thought and presume difference as defect.”

Tyr leant back against the battlement. He hadn’t taken Idunn for someone who should care what others thought. Maybe he didn’t know her as well as he had thought. She was easy to take in at a glance. To believe she was just this beautiful, intoxicating goddess. Full of life, joy. How odd that she should worry over what impression she gave. “Should I?” he asked. “Is there reason to fear you?”

Idunn frowned, apparently unsatisfied with his answer. What did she seek, then? Approval? A chill ran down his spine. That was it, wasn’t it? She had come to Odin, acting certain of her mission, driving him onto this path. But she was not certain at all. Had she doubted all along? Or had the many deaths at the hands of draugar and trolls and the frozen river shaken her convictions?

“You no longer think we can win,” Tyr said.

“I—no! No, of course I don’t think that! Of course you can.” Her voice held all the confidence of a snow rabbit facing down a cave bear.

“You cannot allow the others to see your doubt, Idunn. It would break them. You set us on this path—”

“I know! Damn, but I know. There were so many Æsir, and you were such great warriors, and I thought ... I mean, I thought about it for years and years. I thought this was what she would have wanted.”

“She?”

“My grandmother, Lady Chandi. I sought to ... to honour her wishes, her memory. But now it feels like a facade, a self-imposed mummery, and thus I yearned for someone I could be honest with, someone I could ... I don't know.”

“Trust?” Tyr shook his head, then pushed off the wall, put a hand on her shoulder. “You have that, Idunn. But then, you must tell me everything from now on. Whatever dangers we face, I must be prepared. Must protect Odin, the others. That's my role, my purpose.” His way to honour a memory of one who meant all to him. Idunn shook herself and looked far too deeply into his eyes. Judging whether he was serious? At last she nodded. Tyr grunted. Good. Good. “I uh ... never asked. Why are you doing this? Why would gods want Men to rise against them?”

Idunn blew out a long breath and flipped her hair from her face. “That's a complicated question. It's filled with so many half-truths and misunderstandings. Where do I even start? I went over this conversation in my head so many times over the years, waiting, wondering if it was really the right thing to do. They never approved of me going out into the rest of Midgard, you know. As though I couldn't take care of myself? I mean, I failed at that, a time ... The real issue was, deep down, they knew they should be ashamed of what they let people like your clan suffer. Whilst they lounge in a land of spring, most of Midgard freezes and withers, dying in slow anguish. So I guess that's the answer—most of them *don't* want you to rise against them. Just me, mainly.”

He had assumed as much. Tyr groaned, cracked his neck. “People will die. Lots more people. Freyr ... He as good with a blade as legend claims?”

She shrugged as if such things mattered naught. “I think that ...” Idunn paused. Turned to the battlements, paled. “I don't have much of the Sight ... but I have some intuitions, Tyr. I feel something moving, nigh to here. Old dverg tunnels may run close to this castle.”

Huh. Would explain where the trolls went in daylight. Also meant they might close on the fortress soon.



THE SETTING SUN dipped below the horizon. Still, Tyr stood on the ramparts, Gramr resting atop them. Stroked her hilt. If Idunn's intuition spoke truth, this night would be long. With help from Vili and a dozen others, they'd lowered the gates. Wells deep under the fortress meant they'd have water. No food, though. Couldn't hold out long without food. Archers lined the walls now, braziers burning behind them, but with the Mist, they couldn't see the ground. Couldn't see even if massive forms moved out there.

He ought to be out there. Gramr hungered for the black blood of trolls. Men gone savage. As if in answer to the thought, troll bellows echoed through the Mist. Very close to the fortress. They had snuck through. Tyr snatched up a torch and held it over the lip of the wall. Still couldn't see a fucking thing.

Great clangs sounded against the iron gate. Trolls beating on it. He'd set warriors down there, with spears, to keep them off the gate. It would be a long night.

A great many long nights.

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## THE DÖGLINAR

### 25 Age of the Æsir

*H*ervor sat in the boat, across from Naliajuk. Beyond her sat Afzal and Starkad. Hervor could draw Tyrfing, lunge across the boat, and kill Naliajuk, but the young man mostlike wouldn't appreciate it—and it would break his oath. No, there were people out there who had earned her wrath, and she would focus it on them. Naliajuk was ... different. Very different, Hervor supposed. But the woman had shown a hint of a smile when Afzal had asked for her. Maybe the finfolk had grown so used to having to abduct human spouses, they did not know how to react, how to feel, should one choose them. Since then, the woman kept smiling, casting glances at the Serk.

“Part of me will almost miss you,” Hervor said to her. In the distance, their ship rose up out of the Mist. Still waiting for them. A more loyal crew than the one she'd sailed to Samsey with, no mistaking that.

“You. You miss me?”

“Hmm, aye,” Hervor said, “I think so.”

“Why?”

Hervor chuckled. "Odin alone knows."

"Odin?"

"King of the Gods?" she said, to which Naliajuk shrugged, and Hervor laughed. How could she even explain that? "This island will not be safe for you, for your kind."

Naliajuk gnawed on her lip, nodded. She stuck her hand inside her fur coat, then came out holding an ivory carving of a walrus. She thrust it at Hervor. "You. No miss."

Hervor took the carving and ran her fingers over the smooth surface, not quite certain what to say. No one had ever given her such before. A gift without an ulterior motive, without bargain. All because Naliajuk wanted her to remember her. "I ..." She sighed and tucked the statuette into her coat. "Thank you."

Naliajuk continued to row until the boat drew up along their ship. The remaining crew shouted greetings and helped them on board. Hervor looked back to where Afzal remained sitting beside Naliajuk. The Serk had mostlike saved all their lives. She raised a hand in acknowledgment. No words could do justice to the sacrifice. She hoped he could understand that.

"You are the bravest of us," Tiny said to Afzal.

Afzal chuckled. "All I have to do is marry a beautiful woman. That's not courage—it's wisdom."

"Boy, you plan to live on an island filled with draugar. A frozen pit of misery shat out of Hel's own arse."

Starkad cuffed the big man, and Hervor frowned. "Afzal," Starkad said. "Say the word."

"I already gave my word, Master."

"Don't call me that."

The Serk nodded. "Then goodbye ... Starkad."

"Farewell. Little brother." Afzal smiled at the term, and then Naliajuk shoved the boat away from their ship. Starkad stood watching them go,

glowering.

“Get us away from this cursed place,” Tiny ordered the crew. “Make for Faeroernes with all haste.”

Over the sea, the sun had begun to rise, banishing the Mist, glaring off the waters. Hervor shuddered and followed Tiny to where he collapsed on a bench. The wind was up and in their favour; the men set the sails. Just as well since she suspected none of the three of them could have manned an oar. She prayed the wind held steady until the Faeroernes. Sailing in winter was a horrific risk ... just not as bad as staying on Thule.

Hervor sunk down in front of Tiny. “So. You have a runeblade.”

“So do you. Nine runeblades in all the World, and two are on this ship. How strange is Urd.” She shrugged. Fate was a concern for gods. She had to chart her own course. She had always done so, though little good had come from it thus far. Arrow’s Point was dead. That was a good thing. It *was* good. Though his face, his eyes had held the shock of betrayal. As if he could not imagine she would have avenged her kin. More fool, him. What else was Hervor to do? Break faith with her kin out of temporary comradeship with another pirate? No, she had done what she must and would not let it grieve her. Enough mead, and that look in his eyes would fade.

“You are deep in thought,” Tiny said, and she glanced at him, bearing her bloodline’s sacred blade. She never ought to have agreed to let him claim it. Should not have, but had, and she could see no way to fix it now. An oath was an oath.

“Huh? Oh. Wondering what you will do now.”

Tiny grunted. “I must return to King Gylfi. He will want to know what we found and that no colony is like to thrive on Thule.”

Hervor snorted. “Thrive? Not unless they plan to cut down an army of draugar first. And send several men and women to marry seals.”

“Indeed. Brave boy.”

Aye, Afzal. Back to Afzal. Starkad remained by the gunwale, knuckles white from clutching it so hard. “They knew each other a long time,” she said.

“I think so.”

She sighed and rose, then drifted to where Starkad stood. “I’m sorry about your ... little brother.”

He didn’t look at her. “All men make their own choices.”

“Women too.”

“Indeed. And you ... well, you fought bravely.”

She leant on the rail, trying not to smile. “Must’ve been hard to say.” The man mumbled something under his breath. Hervor sighed. “So. You will tell King Yngvi we failed here.”

“Failed?”

“We didn’t take Thule.”

“Yet reclaiming that runeblade might well have been all Odin cared about. I find it doubtful the Ás wanted the island itself. Especially if he had an idea what lurked in Nordri.”

“Hmph.” She stared at the glittering waters. Aught beyond her ken might dwell in those unknown depths. Much as such hidden dangers had lurked beneath Thule’s surface. Maybe Odin could predict such things. But Starkad spoke as if he could understand any of the Æsir. “You find it easy to guess the mind of a god, do you?”

Starkad spat in the ocean, then sank down onto a bench. Not going to answer then. Fair enough. They all had their secrets, didn’t they? Especially her. “What will you do now, woman?”

A difficult question, after all, given her many secrets. Her many enemies. Her reckless oath to bring down the whole Yngling dynasty. That meant destroying Yngvi and his brother Alf, whom Starkad may or may not have held special loyalty to. She blew out a breath and sank down beside him. This was a man she little wanted as an enemy. And not only because of



his prowess, great though it was. No, he had saved her life on several occasions. The man may have the personality of a troll's arse, but she couldn't hate him. Could almost even ... what? Want his approval? After all, to hear him say she had fought bravely was high praise. And who didn't like praise?

"After this winter? I guess I'll be seeking more glory. Wealth. You and Tiny claimed treasures from Nordri, but I didn't. I have naught to show for this whole endeavour." Naught save for one dead enemy. The first, clearest step on her journey, accomplished. Now she faced the more difficult task. How to destroy a kingdom, one well loved and strong. She lacked the wealth to raise an army against them. But there were other ways to kill men than war. As Orvar-Oddr had learnt, sometimes growing close to an enemy offered greater advantage. Hervor's duty was to see the Döglinar restored; but first, vengeance for their murder.

"You earned a share," Starkad said. "You'll not return home empty-handed."

She nodded in thanks without really looking at Starkad. Orvar had learnt a hard lesson from her. But he had learnt it. That she had seen in his eyes, the glare of hatred. Of betrayal. Not a look she relished. And yet, he had earned it. Now he would know the suffering he had heaped upon her kin. And in the end, she hoped she'd see that look on Yngvi's and Alf's faces too.

But not on Starkad's, no. Not if she could avoid it.

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**DAYS GONE: ODIN**

800 Age of Man

*A*t night, they weathered the barrage of trolls, hiding in the fortress and praying for daylight to send the monsters scurrying back into their holes. By day, Odin allowed his people some sleep while sending others out to forage for food. Agilaz Farshot reported local Vall farms and towns had been smashed to bits by the trolls, the animals and women taken. And night by night the Æsir's supplies dwindled, almost as quickly as their resolve.

Odin stood at the gate, beside Tyr, waiting. Another night was fast approaching. The trolls would try to climb the walls again. A few had gotten inside last night, and a score of men had died to bring them down. When would it end? Vé was out there, Odin knew he was. Unless Odin did something, this would continue until the Æsir at last broke, having never even laid eyes upon Vanaheim. So really, only one choice remained to him now.

"Tonight, we open the gates," Odin said. Tyr grunted in response. "Choose the finest warriors among us but leave the archers to man the walls. You and I, your chosen, we will head into the Mist."

“To what end?”

Odin clenched his fists at his side. Indeed. What could he do? “Trolls don’t act with such deliberateness. It means a leader drives them, and we both know who that leader must be. I have to go out and find him, face him.”

“And if you do?”

Odin glowered. Vé. Son of Borr. Odin’s blood.

Urd was cruel.



A FELL WIND swept through the mountains and into the hills, washing over Odin’s army as they clashed with the trolls. Odin was done with hiding. He would take the fight to the trolls and end this threat, avenge the fallen, find a way to save his brother, to get through to him. They had headed out to a valley between two hills, knowing the trolls would follow, thinking them easy prey.

But tonight, the Æsir were the hunters. Tonight, these Mist-spawned trolls would be the ones to fear Men.

From atop the taller hill, Odin reared Sleipnir, fully conscious of the silhouette he created for his people. He hefted Gungnir into the night sky behind him. The trolls would not come out to fight during the day, and his people dared not chase them into their burrows. And so, now, on this night, he was going to end this.

“Tyr!” he shouted, then indicated a cluster of the trolls trying to charge up the hill. The Mist had taken his brother. They would not take his son, nor any more of his people. Odin levelled Gungnir like a lance.

Vili, as instructed, rampaged among the trolls, lining them up. The bear’s claws could score a troll’s hide but wouldn’t easily slay them. He would, however, drive them into position.

Odin's chest shook, a rumble building in it. These creatures had slaughtered hundreds of the Æsir, the people who looked to him for protection, for guidance, for a champion. And, by his ancestors, he would give them one. Men needed something to believe in, a symbol. And Odin ... he needed to keep his family and his people safe. Whatever the cost. A war cry erupted from his throat, and Odin charged down the hill. Sleipnir's hooves kicked up snow and rocks as the horse flew forward, Men and trolls rushing by in a blur. Odin slammed into a troll, Gungnir punching straight through its chest. His momentum lifted the troll off the ground, the beast's bellows now turned to whimpers.

The weight already threatened to yank Gungnir from his grasp, but Odin held on, and Sleipnir turned just enough. A heartbeat later another troll was impaled on Odin's dragon spear. This time, Odin didn't fight the momentum. He let it carry him off Sleipnir, then flipped over the trolls and used his weight to yank his spear free.

Odin landed in a roll and immediately launched forward. He could not slow. These trolls were animals. And animals feared those more savage than themselves. He whipped the spear in a wide arc, cutting a gash through a troll's nose and another's chest. The beasts recoiled, clearly stunned by a human not only charging into their midst, but able to pierce their rocky hides. Odin used the distraction to ram Gungnir through a third troll's face, roaring as he did so.

"I am Odin Borrson! Fear me, beasts!" He didn't know whether these creatures could understand him, but they did begin to draw back from him. He cut out a troll's leg with the undulating blade of his spear. Other trolls buckled, at least two actually turning tail and running.

"Not ... your subjects." The voice was rough, like gravel. Odin turned to face the speaker. The creature before him no longer resembled Vé, but Odin knew. The Troll King was much like other trolls—an elongated nose, tusks, and a hide like moss-covered rocks. Scraggly hair hung past his

shoulders. But his eyes held more than animal cunning. They held wisdom and hatred beyond the capacity of a mere beast.

“Brother ...”

Vé rose up to his full height, now half again as tall as a man, and raised arms as thick as tree trunks. “You ... kneel.”

Odin swallowed. That had never been an option. The trolls would like as naught eat his men and claim his women as troll wives. He just had to reach his brother, find a way to bring out his human side. Vé was still in there, he had to be. “Are you working for the Niflungar, Vé? Why? Why betray me?” Why, after Odin had spared Vé’s life in the Járnvidr? There had to be some semblance of his brother left behind in the Troll King. A remnant of the young man Odin and Vili should have done better by.

“I am ... king. I ... work for ... no one. We work with ... Mist.”

“Vé! *Please*, Brother. Heed me.”

Vé snarled, his hands balling into massive fists. Left without choice, Odin levelled Gungnir at Vé. His brother knew the dragon spear, knew its power. Even through the haze that now seemed to blanket his mind, he had to know he could not win against such a weapon. “Send your ... *people* away, Brother. Don’t make me do this.”

Indeed, how could Odin fight his blood? Fight another son of Borr? He wouldn’t—he couldn’t. Vé would come back to him, Odin just had to figure out how to reach through the Mist that occluded brother’s mind. Vé grinned, revealing the full horror of his tusks, then bellowed, beating his hands upon his chest. The sound of boulders cracking together like an avalanche. And Odin felt all the other trolls look to their leader.

The same symbol Odin had tried to be to the Æsir. A god among them. And if Odin allowed Vé to rally the trolls, the Æsir would pay the price. They would die in droves, carried off by the trolls as breeding stock or feasts. Odin could not allow that. He had to protect his son. His father would have done it for him. His father ... Vé’s father. But if he did not

fight, the trolls would take them all. Father ... How could he fight his brother? How could he kill his father's son?

"I'm sorry, Vé," Odin mumbled, shaking his head. "Father ... forgive me." He charged Vé, spear thrusting forward.

Vé leapt forward, slamming both hands straight into the ground. Odin dove to the side and rolled to avoid the blow as it shook the earth. Odin rose quickly, but Vé was faster, flinging a giant fistful of snow at him.

The snow caught Odin in the face, blinding him. An instant later, a mountain slammed into him, flinging him back. The impact slapped Odin into the snow, and he sunk at least an arm's length beneath the surface. Odin gasped, struggling to suck air into his lungs, fighting the pain of cracked ribs. Gods, where had he dropped Gungnir?

He flailed, trying to dig himself out of the snow. Calm, he had to be calm. He needed to call on his power within to fight the pain. If he could just focus for a moment—

A giant rocky hand yanked him out of the snowdrift and flung him through the air. Odin crashed against rocks poking out of the snow. He heard his arm break, the sickening sound registering even over the shock of another impact. When at last he managed to get a breath, he coughed up blood. Gasping, unable to rise from the pain, Odin tried to crawl to where Gungnir lay in the snow, ten feet away. Vé covered the distance between them in a single bound, his landing blanketing Odin in a fresh dusting of snow. Ere he could even clear his vision, Vé hefted him up again. A fist like a hammer slammed into Odin's face, and everything blacked out. Merciful unconsciousness threatened to swallow him. Vé was—his brother was going to kill him.

Odin's mind clawed at his power, trying to pull it up and block his pain.

"Odin!" Tyr's voice sounded far away. "Where are you?"

Odin forced himself to focus, to look up. A solid wall of Mist had encircled him and Vé, cutting off his view of aught else. "Here," Odin

croaked, knowing his voice would never carry. Vé lifted him again. His grand quest ended here. And Odin had failed, had led his people to their destruction.

*All you build will turn to ash, your children shall die, and your dreams shall burn.*

The ghost's words echoed in his brain over and over. His children. His child, Thor. His blood, the blood of Odin's father and forefathers. Rage cut through his pain, and he grabbed Ve's wrist. Finally he caught his power, allowing him to match—or at least challenge—Ve's strength. Odin tried to yank himself free of Ve's grip.

"That will be enough," a voice said. "Release Odin." Vé snarled, then looked at the speaker.

The Mist parted to reveal a man with long black hair, a raven perched on his shoulder and a golden crown upon his head. Gjúki. Odin tried to speak, but blood burbled out of his mouth. The Raven Lord seemed to drift over the ground, a faint wisp of shadows trailing off him. A mere hint in this Realm of the endless shadows he cast in the Penumbra. Gjúki placed a hand on Odin's head, and Odin's vision began to dim. His power slipped from his grasp, and with it, consciousness fled.

"Fret not, Odin," Gjúki said. "You will have your chance to say all you wish."

Everything went dark.



IRON MANACLES BOUND Odin's wrists to the obsidian altar whilst others held his feet. He struggled to lift his head, unable to make out much in the darkness. A few candles lined the shelves, but otherwise the stone room was thick with shadows. He was underground, he suspected, given the total lack of windows. A ruin, perhaps another place of the Niflungar. They had

removed Odin's shirt and painted a glyph on his chest, covering many of the runes that marked his flesh. Or maybe it wasn't paint—it looked an awful lot like blood. Odin strained against his bindings, but they did not flex, even when he flooded his limbs with Megin.

No mere iron, no matter how well wrought, was that strong. Was this some new metal, or had the Niflungar placed magic in the chains? Either way, Odin suspected he couldn't escape by brute strength alone. Which meant he ought to save what strength he had. He embraced the Sight, and, though the World grew hazy, it also filled with a pale luminescence. Shadows twisted and writhed about the room, slithering serpent-like, the chamber filled with ghosts. Unsent victims of the Niflungar, mostlike, trapped here in torment. *Necromancer* ... came their etheric whispers, calls somewhere between accusation and plea. The damned forever sought unreachable respite. Ah, but given his present circumstance, Odin ought perhaps to count himself among kindred souls, now.

The door creaked open, and Odin's vision shot back to normal, the ghosts vanishing, though he yet found it hard to focus on the shadowy figure that drifted in. "Release me," Odin demanded.

"No." Gjúki's voice, though soft, carried the utmost command, a surety that brooked no further discussion. "Not until you are ready to serve your true mistress."

Odin snorted. "Serve Hel? Not in this lifetime."

Gjúki drifted over to the altar, so Odin could finally make out his face, lit by the candlelight. As always, a raven perched on his shoulder. "Perhaps, Odin. But you have many lifetimes now, don't you? Our mistress will wait as long as needs be."

Odin set his jaw, refusing to let this man see him squirm. The Raven Lord spoke with complete certainty, and Odin could not deny his words, for, given a long enough time frame, anyone would break. How long could Odin hold out against Gjúki? A moon? A year? A century? But then, maybe



that was exactly what Gjúki wanted him to think. The moment Odin began to see his failure as inevitable, he lost. “I’ll watch the stones crumble in this place ere I serve you.”

Gjúki laid a hand over Odin’s bicep and squeezed. “Your body is strong, Ás. It helps feed the strength of your mind, of your soul. But all three can falter, given time and appropriate techniques.” The Raven Lord drew an unseen knife along Odin’s arm, opening a long shallow cut from elbow to shoulder. Odin clenched his teeth, refusing to cry out. This sick fuck wouldn’t get the satisfaction. Odin had been mauled by a snow bear. If Gjúki thought this was pain, he would be sadly disappointed.

The Raven Lord repeated the cut on Odin’s other arm. “Pain, blood loss, hunger, thirst, fatigue—they will sap your body. Eventually, your will, too, must begin to waver. A weakened mind and body lead to a vulnerable soul, and that is when the denizens of the Realms beyond can truly find a way in.” He drew both hands along Odin’s bleeding arms, then slapped his bloody palms against Odin’s cheeks. When the Raven Lord next spoke, Odin could not make out many of the words—an incantation. Sorcery.

Whispers built from the shadows, sounds that plucked at Odin’s nerves, seeming to dig at the strands of his mind. The rasps of the damned reached a fever pitch, driven to paroxysm by the sorcerer’s cants. Odin tried to focus, tried to shift his vision back to the Spectral Realm, but the pounding of his heart drowned out his concentration. A burning built along his arms, like Gjúki had poured acid into his cuts. It spread, like a thousand sharp claws digging into his flesh.

*Necromancer* ... Again those whispers, now grown malicious, ravenous, perhaps wrathful that he heard their cries and could not aid them. Through gritted teeth, Odin glared at Gjúki. The Raven Lord smiled, the malevolence of the damned reflected in his torchlit eyes. “Shall I give you some time alone with your guests?”

Small cuts began to appear on Odin's chest and arms, tiny tears ripping through his trousers. Like a swarm of rats crawling all over him. Despite himself, Odin grunted in pain. The Raven Lord chuckled and left. And still the clawing and biting went on and on. Most of it left no visible mark, but Odin was covered in sweat and blood. Unable to bear it, he shifted his eyes again, embracing the Sight. A blanket of shadows clung to him, eyes in the darkness, invisible to normal sight. Tearing at his body, siphoning away his blood and life force. And as he looked at them, he swore a dozen sets of eyes met his gaze, laughed at him. Driven to fresh frenzy by the thought he could see them?

*Necromancer ...!* A chorus of discordant cries assaulted his senses, mingled into a maddening choir. A shade crawled along the length of him, from knees upward, slithering, wriggling. Baring needle-like teeth wide, in a gaping maw of writhing darkness. A bloated, overlong tongue darted betwixt those needle-teeth, lanced out, lapped against his wounds. A lump of flesh coarse as sand scraped raw his skin, opening fresh abrasions.

Their hateful whispers wormed into his ears, inside his skull, echoing.

Odin moaned, then cried out. Did they feast on his soul? What had Gjúki said? That as his mind and body weakened, so too would his soul? Why? Did Gjúki plan to ...? Odin shook his head. The Raven Lord was right; it was already growing hard to think clearly. Possession. They'd weaken him until a vaettir could enter him, take him over. Hadn't Guðrún said something about vaettir only being able to take those with weak, damaged souls? Or was it more complex than that?

Odin shut his eyes, unable to bear seeing the creatures feasting on him anymore. Think of aught else, anywhere else. He was falling, letting his visions take him, offering him blessed relief as they drew him back to times forgotten. To a snowfield somewhere in southern Aujum, where three boys trained with wooden swords. Odin had not remembered this, but then, these weren't his memories—they were Borr's.



*TYR BESIDE HIM, Borr watched as Odin bested Vili once again. Though Vili was larger than his older brother, he was all fury and no control. Sometimes it allowed him to get the upper hand and simply overpower Odin. Mostly, though, Odin outthought his brother, leading him into traps, feints, and poor footing that oft as not ended with Vili sprawled on his arse. Borr beamed with pride. They would all be great warriors one day, even little Vé, chasing his older brothers around and waving his wooden sword in the air.*

*“Give Vili a new target, would you?” he asked Tyr.*

*Tyr, now seventeen winters, had been with them long enough, and Borr trusted him to teach his sons well. Tyr was a natural, as though born with a blade in his hand. Considering the way Tyr had come to the Wodan clan, that was probably not far from the truth. Besides, after losing Zisa, Tyr needed something to focus on. Borr could give him that. Tyr did as Borr asked, and Borr motioned for Odin to come to him.*

*“You’re the eldest, Son,” Borr said. “One day you’ll be jarl. You have to protect your brothers. But you’ll need them too, for all your cunning. Family is everything, Odin.”*

*“I will protect them,” Odin said. His son, a mere nine winters old, said it with such conviction that Borr didn’t dare laugh.*

*He just smiled and nodded. “Then show me how.” Borr picked up a stick and allowed Odin to demonstrate all he’d been practicing. Back and forth he and Odin danced, Borr unable to keep the smile from his face. Odin had Bestla’s spirit, more than any of them. The boy overextended and Borr tripped him into the snow. “That might have worked against an opponent your size, Odin. But from time to time you may face foes larger than yourself.”*

*Borr offered his son a hand up, pulling the boy to his feet.*

*At once Odin felt both his father's strong hand grasping his and the feel of his own weak grip. Pride moved his father, so much Odin almost choked on it. He'd been there every moment of their lives, teaching, guiding, helping. A hero to his family as much as his people.*

*Odin wailed, not at the pain in his body as much as the loss of the vision. He replayed it over and over in his mind, desperate to dive back into his father's memories. But he couldn't reach them; memory, like time, flitted through his fingers and became dust amid the moil of shadows.*



“ODIN.” Gudrún’s voice drew Odin’s consciousness back to the surface, and with a start he realised the vaettir had withdrawn when she had entered the room. “Oh, my love. It doesn’t have to be this way.” Gudrún. Odin hadn’t seen her since he’d leapt from her window. It seemed so long ago now. Her smile was like a breath of spring, her features soft, golden hair hanging down and brushing his cheeks as she leant in to kiss him. Smiling, though he swore he saw unshed tears in her eyes. Her lips were soft and warm on his cracked and parched ones, but their touch was almost painful.

“Oh.” Gudrún clucked her tongue and drew a wineskin from her belt. “Come, drink.”

Odin turned his head away. “Another philtre?”

“’Tis but water.” Water. Gods above and below, he’d kill for water. But how could he believe aught Gudrún offered him now? She’d enchanted him, tried to control him, made him believe he loved her. It was her Art—that’s all it had ever been. He was married to Frigg. He had no need for ...

Odin didn’t resist as Gudrún drew his face back to her and poured a slow trickle of water over his lips. He almost choked on the sudden moisture.

“You’re lucky ’twas my father who found you.”

Odin snorted. “Aye, I feel blessed at this moment, Gudrún.” He felt, in fact, ravaged inside and out, his blood, his soul feasted upon by the disquiet dead who had swarmed over him. In this place, he would die of a thousand unseen lacerations even as his essence withered to a husk. And she would name him fortunate for it.

“It would have been worse if Grimhild had found you.”

The sorceress queen of the Niflungar. “And you think she could do worse than Gjúki.”

“She can do worse. Much worse.” Gudrún climbed onto the altar and straddled him. She poured water over her hands, the excess dribbling onto his chest, then wiped her palms over his cheeks. Odin couldn’t bring himself to speak as she cleaned the blood off his face and shoulders. No more than he could bring himself to hate Gudrún. But such was just the lingering effects of her potion. He didn’t have real feelings for this woman. Did he? He couldn’t. She worshipped Hel. She was a princess of these corrupt sorcerers. The enemy. He *should* hate her. He should have killed them all. Gudrún planted a gentle kiss on each of his eyes. “My king, heed me. There are much easier, much more enjoyable ways to the same end. Things will be better if you choose of your will, and ere Grimhild returns.”

“You call your mother by her name.”

“She gave birth to me. Since then, she’s lost the right to the title *mother*.”

Odin frowned and shut his eyes. Of all the horrors he’d seen and heard, that one should vex him least of all. His mother had died giving birth to Vé—the brother Odin had failed—but what Odin remembered of her was a warm embrace, an easy smile, a quick laugh. She had loved his father, and she had loved her children. Odin could only picture her face when he thought of her laugh. Except he’d seen her in his visions ... He could almost hold on to his parents ... They were gone, and now Thor would know the same emptiness. Odin’s son would never know his father.

“I don’t want to talk of Grimhild,” the sorceress said, her voice quivering.

Odin opened his eyes, glowering at the woman atop him, then had to look away. He was drunk on her beauty, and the warmth of her eyes threatened to swallow him. “Let me go, Gudrún. Release me from these chains.”

“I-I can’t do that. But I can help you.” She turned his face back to hers again and leant in, then planted another kiss on his lips. He tried to look away again, but her eyes trapped him. Again and again she kissed his face, her hands tracing down his abdomen and over his hips. Odin wanted to tell her to stop as she unfastened his trousers, desperately tried to, but his voice wouldn’t work. It caught in his throat and wouldn’t let go. This was wrong. He was wrong. What kind of man would let this sorceress seduce him again? But his body responded to her every touch, to her delectable warmth as she pulled him inside her. Her gentle motion drove all other thoughts from his mind until he strained against his chains in an attempt to wrap her in his arms.

And when she shuddered her release, it drove him to his. Her Megin slammed against his soul, settling in his mind. Bits of her power lodged itself inside him, as part of him, too, passed into her. A cascade of confusing images flooded across his vision. *A woman in a bone mask, the feared queen of the Niflungar. She spoke to Gudrún through the Mist as Gudrún spied on the Æsir. And Gudrún hated the woman—an icy loathing that would have made Hel herself proud.*

It all flashed over him in an instant, most of it making no sense. Gudrún’s sorcerous nature meant she shared so much of herself. As Odin no doubt shared pieces of his soul with each woman he took. With Gudrún.

And the one thing that burnt clear through the haze of pain and confusion, through the blurred memories of the woman atop him, was that she *did* love him. In spite of all that had passed, in spite of what she’d done

to him, she had true feelings for him. And that only made it worse. It meant that, one day, even if Gjúki failed to turn him, Gudrún would succeed.

Odin's urd lay bound to the Niflungar.

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## EPILOGUE

800 Age of Man

Long had the Niflungar sought the most guarded prizes of the Vanir. And Odin, in a fool's attempt to save his doomed brother, had given an apple to a man already lost to the Mist. The so-called Troll King had spread his influence outward from the Járnvidr, taking all the lands the Æsir had now vacated. They didn't know, Gudrún assumed, that most of Aujum now fell under the sway of Odin's brother. And indeed, beyond, where Vé had begun uniting the trolls throughout the mountains. They could pass beneath the peaks, relying on ancient dverg tunnels where available, or digging their burrows when necessary, hidden from sunlight and moving faster than Men could hope to. Under the leadership of a troll with the power of gods, with some remaining semblance of human wit, they had swept across Midgard, taken thousands of troll-wives as if they thought to outbreed Mankind. Petty kingdoms in Hunaland and Bjarmaland too began to fall before Vé's hordes and, if left unchecked, perhaps they would soon challenge the great empires of the South Realms. Ironical that, in his way, Odin had taken great strides toward the annihilation of the lands of Men.



Odin had escaped her and her draugar, and it had ill pleased Grimhild. The Man had, against all wisdom, chanced a river that ran beneath the Mortal Realm, a river that might well have borne the Æsir into the Otherworld. Well, but if they survived, Grimhild would not tolerate failure, and so Guðrún needs must seek out new allies, loathsome though trolls proved.

Her father's ravens kept the Niflungar informed as to the actions of the Troll King and his brethren, enough to know he was a danger if not curtailed, or a weapon if properly controlled. Never in history had a troll held so much power. One day, Odin would look back and see every kingdom in Midgard fallen to the Troll King. The Men who did not become trolls would become their food. The women—thralls to their lust, raped unto death, or worse, until they conceived their troll spawn. Such a birthing, oft as not, tore the woman to pieces and left the trolls to feed her corpse to the newborn. Trolls were born of Hel, and they looked, and acted, the part.

Guðrún stepped gingerly into the cave-turned-troll-burrow. Not that she feared the trolls so much as the troll droppings. Hel would protect her. In some primal way, trolls knew the Mist of Hel had given them rise, and they knew to tread with care around the Children of the Mist. Jagged roots sprouted from the cave ceiling, turning the place into a warped mirror of the Járnvídr itself. The trolls' power, no doubt, unconsciously shaping the land to match the twisted torments of their existence.

Countless trolls watched her, a few looking up from rutting with human women like dogs as she passed. Guðrún sympathised with the troll-wives, but she could do naught for them. And yet ... Almost unbidden, ice coalesced in her palm, summoned up from the nifalf bound to her. 'Twas draining, coalescing Mist into solid ice, and not otherwise compared to calling Mist to hide her—given it brought one closer to becoming possessed—but the strongest in cryomancy could do so. Ere she could think better of

it, Gudrún flung the chill like a bolt at one of the trolls. The creature dropped his woman and wailed, fleeing into the darkness.

Gudrún ground her teeth. She deluded herself if she thought she did any service for the woman other than a moment's reprieve. The greater mercy would have been to kill the woman herself. She had done no good but calling on such power had raised a chill in her heart. Snegurka, her bound nifalf, coiled tighter about her insides like an ethereal tapeworm.

A fool's move ... Besides which, if she sought help from these trolls, she could not deny them their prizes. And though every troll she passed looked on her with undisguised lust, none made a move on her. Yes. Keep your mortal wives. Gudrún was no maid to be carried away—she was a princess of the Niflungar, and even these trolls could feel it. The power of Mist was deep in her soul. These sick creatures were born of it, but they were not the essence of Mist.

Gudrún cursed the trolls and cursed Grimhild and cursed herself for not being strong enough to do more. Instead, she jerked her torch in front of her, sending trolls clambering away from the flame. Like aught else born of Mist, they feared flame and daylight. As, in truth, did any Niflung.

Beyond, trolls feasted. Bile burnt her throat as she realised one was gnawing on a human femur. Rather than dwell on it, she pushed past the sight, feigning indifference so as not to let the creatures see her disgust.

Deeper and deeper she stalked into the burrow until her single torch seemed scant illumination against the prevailing darkness. Odin's gambit might well have cost him many of his people, but it had allowed him to get far ahead of her. Now she could no longer corner him in the mountains. What better ally than the fallen brother of the man himself?

The Troll King reclined upon a throne that seemed to erupt from the ground, roots grown out in the wrong direction. Outward-facing thorns jutted from the throne's arms and base, no doubt responsible for the countless shallow scrapes covering the naked women who sat beneath the

throne. Guadrún forced herself not to meet their hollow gazes. These women were already lost. Too long in the Mist, too long serving the lust of the trolls, their bodies and minds and souls broken by the torment ...

And she would not look upon the one on the left ... By Hel, the girl couldn't be more than fifteen winters. Her eyes still pleaded, begged for a saviour that would never come. Guadrún could not be that. Despite the sudden shortness of breath in her chest, she forced her gaze to remain locked on that of the Troll King, hunkering in the shadows against the back of his throne.

"Your brother has fled beyond these mountains, beneath them," Guadrún said.

Though the Troll King shifted on his throne, naught more than a shallow grunt escaped him. Guadrún loathed using such savage beasts to her ends, but Grimhild had insisted, demanding Guadrún turn to the trolls, who might know the deep routes beneath the mountains. Guadrún doubted Odin's quest against the Vanir would have succeeded, and given patience, she could have easily shown up in time to save him from his arrogance. But now she had to deal with trolls. And maybe Vé *could* head off his brother, leave him desperate enough he would turn back to her. Except that the Troll King was no longer Vé.

"If you move quickly, you can still reach them. Take the old roads, the hidden paths the dvergar once dug through these mountains."

A rumble like a rockslide bubbled out from the Troll King. "You ... do not give ... orders. This is my ... kingdom."

Guadrún didn't think she'd ever heard a troll speak, at least not more than an inarticulate word or two. "Do you know who I am, troll?"

The Troll King chuckled again. "You bitch ... who will mouth ... my rod. Get on your knees." He shifted forward enough to reveal his erection. "Or first I let ... horde plough your ... trench?"

Gudrún set her jaw. She could not afford to let them see her fear. She had to slow her heart. These disgusting beasts *were*, after all, beasts, driven by naught but primal lust. And primal *fear*. They ought to fear her. Rather than fall back as the troll might have expected, Gudrún took a step forward. “Irpa aid me,” she whispered under her breath. The wraith’s glyph on Gudrún’s arm warmed as she called it. It was there, bound to her service through her greatest sorcery. Gudrún did not call on the ghost oft—it would invariably enact a toll, and its hatred exceeded even that of the nifalf—but sometimes a point must be made.

Almost as one all the trolls paused, looking around. They felt it—a change in the air, though for certain they didn’t understand what it meant. Gudrún let her eyes shift to see the Penumbra. Numerous shades drifted about the burrow, most probably victims of the trolls, others perhaps lost souls.

But one was different. Black, even against the oppressive vision surrounding it. A shadow, moving in the night, trailing wisps of a tattered shroud behind it. Irpa passed dangerously close to one of Vé’s trolls. The troll didn’t have the Sight, but he felt it and backed away toward the wall.

Others began trying to edge out of the Troll King’s chamber. So quick to abandon their leader when faced with such a horror. The wraith at last settled on one of the empty-eyed girls at Vé’s feet. She had been so hollowed out by the abuse, perhaps there was naught left inside. And that meant Irpa had ample room to take control.

The possessed girl rose, shoulders straight, any hint of timidity gone. “You want my mouth?” the wraith asked. Its voice was low, like a whisper on the wind, but it echoed through the cavern, and Gudrún could have sworn a troll whimpered. “You want *my* mouth?”

With uncanny speed, the girl lunged forward and grabbed Vé’s rapidly dwindling erection with one hand. From the sudden squeal, Gudrún imagined Irpa must have crushed it. Her other hand settled on Vé’s throat

and she straddled him, her mouth nearly touching his. Through her Sight, Gudrún saw the wisps of vaporous Pneuma seep out of the Troll King and into Irpa. He shuddered and trembled as the wraith fed upon bits and pieces of his soul.

The glyph on Gudrún's arm burnt. The wraith drew strength from her, the will, the permission to feed. As Irpa grew in strength, Gudrún's control would weaken. There was always a price.

Gudrún's chest tightened. Her lungs weren't working. She clutched the golden bracelet she wore on her forearm. A talisman ... replete with ... energy to draw on ...

"Enough," Gudrún said, trying not to gasp the word.

Irpa lingered over the Troll King, her will straining against Gudrún's for just an instant, ere she released him and backed away. The pressure eased on Gudrún's chest, releasing her lungs, yet Irpa's hold on her had tightened a hair more. If not for the talisman, it would have been worse.

"You may be a king here," Gudrún said, still trying to keep her voice steady, "but there are always powers greater. Believe me when I tell you, you would much rather have me as an ally than a foe. Go after Odin. Now."

The Troll King rubbed his chest with one hand, shielding his bruised genitals with the other. Both likely felt the icy chill of the grave. "We will ... make for ... the Æsir," Vé said, his voice now reminding her more of bouncing pebbles than a landslide.

Gudrún took another step toward him. "And as your ally, you will grant me a gift." Gudrún pointed to the girl at Ve's feet, the one troll-wife here still alive enough to shake with real terror.

Vé looked toward the girl and gnashed his tusks. "Why?"

"Maybe *I* want her mouth. If you prefer, I can leave the wraith in your other woman. I'm certain she can see to *all* your needs, my king."

The Troll King's rumble now reminded her of an angry snow bear. He nearly leapt to his feet as he shoved the girl toward Gudrún. "Take ...

both!” The girl sprawled at her feet, then Gudrún pulled her up by the shoulders. “We ... remember ... this.”

“I certainly hope so. Irpa, leave the vessel.”

The possessed woman collapsed in a heap as the wraith fled her body and retreated back into the Spectral Realm. Guiding the girl by the arm, Gudrún walked from the burrow, trying desperately to keep her steps slow and deliberate, despite the sickening pounding of her heart.

Hel, the trolls *would* remember her little display. Cowing others with terror might have bought her service—it would not buy her true allies. But that sick beast had thought to treat her as his whore. Her, a princess of the Niflungar, a priestess of Hel.

And as a woman willing to use terror as a weapon, did that now transform Gudrún into Grimhild’s daughter in more than blood? The thought alone left her dizzy. She could not let herself retch in front of the girl, much less the trolls.

Outside the burrow, Gudrún fell back against the mountainside, hugging herself with her free hand to still the trembling as her pent-up tension finally released itself.

Naked and shivering, the girl watched her, eyes wide. Gudrún stripped off her fur cloak and wrapt it around the girl. She could do naught for her feet, sadly. Poor thing would likely have frostbite so bad she might lose a few toes, but ’twas a better urd than letting those trolls hollow her out. How many troll babies could they plant inside her until the flower wilted and her body gave out? Gudrún didn’t think she wanted to know the answer, though she’d heard many troll-wives didn’t survive even the first birth. Most probably wound up in troll bellies.

“What’s your name, girl?” The girl’s mouth opened, but only a whimper came out. Gudrún shook herself, then pulled the girl into an embrace. “It will be all right,” she whispered. “You are under my protection now.”

“I-I’m Hljod.”

Good. Gudrún held her at arm's length to look into her eyes. "You are my servant now, Hljod. I am Gudrún, princess of the Niflungar and heir to the ancient kingdom. Serve well and you will find a life unlike any you have dreamt."

The girl nodded, and Gudrún led her away from the burrow. Best if neither of them ever looked on such a place again. Gudrún would need to find and skin a rabbit or something to wrap Hljod's feet.

"C-can we have a fire?"

Gudrún shook her head but handed the girl the torch. "We are the Children of the Mist, Hljod. We do not make fires. But you have naught more to fear in the Mist. This, I swear to you."



THE SWABIAN KING had no way of knowing who Gudrún was, but he'd been kind enough to avail her and Hljod of his hall. Gudrún would have liked to think it was hospitality, but it mostlike had more to do with the Niflung gold she'd offered as tribute. And whilst Gudrún might have been just as comfortable camping in some old ruin, Hljod needed proper clothes and proper food. Hel would likely forgive the girl for warming herself by the hearth fire. This time.

They could have returned to Völsung in Rijnland, of course, and called upon a true ally, but she needed to head toward Valland with all swiftness—and she would not risk those troll burrows. Not alone, and certainly not with Hljod.

For certain, these locals had eyed two women travelling alone—one barely clad—with suspicion and, in some cases, undisguised lust. But no one turned away travellers. After all, no one wanted it to be their turn to be caught out alone in the Mist. What would it have been like to grow up in their world? Afraid of what lurked out there?

Gudrún snorted over her rabbit stew. *She* was what lurked out there, wasn't she? So far from the shores of the Morimarusa, these people probably didn't even remember the Niflungar. They would, though; one day soon, all the North Realms would fall under Niflung sway. Maybe with Odin's help—the man had undeniable power within, the spark of greatness that came along once in a thousand years.

And whilst her father seemed more than inclined to let Gudrún control that spark, Grimhild now seemed utterly bent on extinguishing it. If the queen had her way, Odin and all the Æsir would fall to the draugar or perhaps the trolls. Fall ere Gudrún had even had the chance to show him the true wonders of her World. The Æsir were but children compared to the Niflungar—children staring up at the stars and thinking them mere holes in the sky.

But Odin was ... Odin. Gudrún had never known a man with such passion in his heart. Beautiful, in the way fire was both beautiful and horrifying. The Children of the Mist hated and feared the flame, enemy of Mist, but still they needed it. Odin was like that, she supposed—a flame she loved and feared and tried desperately to control, even as he burnt her. Gudrún would not dare go against Grimhild. Never again. Only her father could even think of such a thing, and he didn't seem to want Odin dead, least not that Gudrún could tell. He alone might aid her, buy her the time she needed to help Odin see the truth.

Hljod moaned, rubbing her foot. The poor child had lost her small toe to frostbite, and the only comfort Gudrún could offer—save a draught against the pain—was that she could have lost more than that. Well, one other comfort too—she had inspected the child's aura with the Sight, and Hljod did not carry any troll spawn in her belly.

Gudrún rose and clucked her tongue, then drifted over to where Hljod sat by the fire, careful not to draw too close. She'd told Hljod they didn't build fires, but that was a bit overstated. Of course the Niflungar had to



cook their food and required flame to see in the darkness. But the smaller the fire, the better. The Mist was a part of them, and all fires were born of Muspelheim, the domain of Fire. The flames drove off the Mist ... not the best way to please her goddess.

Still, they needed fire. As Guadrún needed Odin. “Hljod, come to my room. Bring a bowl of water.” The girl jerked at her voice but calmed quickly and nodded. Guadrún could forgive the child for being skittish after all she’d been through.

The Swabian king had given her a small chamber at the back of his hall. A fur skin served as a flimsy door, but it was enough. They’d offered Hljod a place to sleep among the other servants, but Guadrún expected she’d probably keep Hljod in her room. The girl was prone to night terrors, and Guadrún didn’t want to see any fresh abuses laden on her, including from other serving girls.

Guadrún retired to her chamber. The tiny room housed only a straw mat covered by a bearskin—a far cry from her comforts at Castle Niflung, but still better than she’d have found in the wild. From her bag she pulled a paint of smashed berries and traced a spirit glyph on the ground before her. Then she folded her legs beneath her and sat on the bearskin, allowing her eyes to shift into Sight, revealing the Spectral Realm whilst turning the real world hazy.

Hljod came in and set the bowl in front of her. Guadrún reached a hand over it, palm a hairsbreadth above the water. She could feel the flow of the water. Even in the still bowl it had motion, movement, energy. She moved her hand with the motion, tracing slow, steady circles above the bowl.

“You’re a völvá?” Hljod asked.

The sudden break in her concentration caused Guadrún’s vision to shift back to normal, revealing the slight tremble in the girl across from her. A child, really, wrapping her arms around her legs, fearful of the night.

Guadrún smiled, hoping it came across as warm. “I am a sorceress.”

Hljod nodded, so Gudrún allowed her eyes to relax again, embracing the Sight. “What’s the difference?” the girl asked after a moment.

Gudrún snorted. “The same as the difference between an apprentice and a master.”

“Oh. That was illuminating.”

Gudrún chuckled. The girl had a bit of a mouth, but then, so had Gudrún at her age. Hljod was so much like her—more than the girl could possibly realise. Gudrún almost wanted to look away. In Hljod’s eyes, she could see so much, like looking into memories she wanted to bury in the snow. Hel, maybe she ought to just leave the girl here among the king’s court. The man would likely take her in. Hljod would find work as a maid, marry some hunter, have a few brats ... And spend the rest of her life haunted by nightmares of what had been done to her. Assuming the king didn’t make her a thrall and force her to share his bed.

Or ... Or Gudrún could bring her to the Niflungar, make her one of them. Give her the power to never again fear. To heal, to be saved. If she was going to truly bring Hljod among her people, to keep her as her own, the girl would have to understand. She blew out a long breath and removed her hand from the bowl. Father could wait.

“Men call any woman who knows secrets of the Otherworld a völv, a witch. Most of those witches know little of the true Art, but they fake it with herbs and poultices, with knowledge that seems frightening to simple Men. Others possess a hint of the Art, a control of their Pneuma, or a semblance of the Sight. But sorcery goes beyond this—sorcery is the evocation of spirits, which we can bend to our will or bond to our bodies. A sorceress uses spirits to enact her will.”

At a price, of course. Spirits marked their glyphs on your body, a constant reminder of a bond not easily broken. A spirit would always require payment for its services, feeding on Pneuma or the soul of a sorceress who tried to master it. Push your limits too far and you’d wind up

a vessel for beings of terrible nature. Gudrún shifted, enjoying the stare of wonder—and perhaps even the fear—on Hljod’s face.

“Like what you did to that ... that fucker who ...”

So more than a bit of a mouth, then. Gudrún nodded, trying not to smile. Hljod would need to learn to guard her tongue ere they came among the Niflungar. “I called a wraith, a ghost—an angry ghost. Trolls are horrors of this world, but they have naught on the horrors of the worlds beyond our own.”

Hljod scooted forward. “Worlds?”

“Tell me what you know of the Spirit Realm.”

“Like Niflheim?”

“Niflheim is one of the nine lands of the Spirit Realm—specifically the domain of Mist. ’Tis ruled by our queen, Hel, and there is none greater than she. And do you know why?” The girl shook her head, predictably frightened to silence at the mention of Hel. The great queen was a name of fear, a curse among the common people of Midgard. She was the darkness they—justifiably—blamed for the state of their world and the horrors they faced. “Hel is here with us,” Gudrún said. “Even though her essence remains bound in Niflheim, she is among us, out in the Mist. She is the Queen of Death, the mistress of the cold. The Vanir, the so-called gods of your people, are naught before her.”

Hljod bit her lip a moment, then cocked her head. “And the other domains of the Otherworld? Do they have mighty rulers?”

At that Gudrún rocked back. This girl was more perceptive than she’d given her credit for. “We do not speak of such things. Not to someone as yet uninitiated in our full ways. Now I need you to remain still and silent, Hljod. Remember what I just told you of sorcery? I’m going to call upon a spirit to communicate across a great distance.” She pointed to the glyph she’d painted on the floor. “Trust me when I tell you this—do not ever interrupt a sorceress in the midst of evoking a spirit. To call a spirit and not

bind it is to risk being taken as a vessel. Spirits do not have physical form in our Realm, but they will happily take control of our bodies.”

Eyes wide, the girl fell mute. Gudrún hadn’t wanted to frighten her, but, in truth, a certain amount of terror was due to the Realms beyond Midgard. A sorceress might touch minds, beings ancient beyond mortal ken. And doing so was a risk equally unimaginable.

Once again, she reached her hand over the bowl and resumed her motion over it. A Mist formed over the water, pulling up the moisture and wafting through their small chamber. Perhaps some would drift under the fur door and alert the mortals to what she was about, but Gudrún had to take that risk. The glyph on Gudrún’s thigh warmed as she called out to the Mist spirit bound to her. The nifalf would let her bridge the gap between here and Castle Niflung. “Show me my father.” Her voice was barely a whisper. The Mist congealed into a hazy image, borne to her across the Veil that separated Midgard from the Penumbra.

Mighty Gjúki, the Raven Lord, stood stooped over a parchment, the room illuminated by a single candle. A whole unkindness of ravens perched around the room, all watching her. Almost as he came into view, he straightened, turned to face Gudrún.

“Daughter.” His voice carried as if on the wind, far away, yet clear to her ears.

“Father. I have done as Grimhild commanded. I have set the Troll King upon the Æsir.”

“I know this.”

Her father’s ravens watched all Midgard, offering him reports and secrets. But they didn’t see everything. They didn’t see into Gudrún’s heart. Maybe even Father would not understand her true feelings for Odin. He’d ordered her to seduce him when Odin had first come, but somehow, somewhere along that path, she had fallen into her own trap. And if he

knew she was putting her heart above the will of Hel ... She wouldn't want to see her father's rage.

"Grimhild would see Odin torn to pieces by the trolls," she said.

"Hel has reason to hate the man."

And what reason was it? That, neither Grimhild nor her father had ever revealed. "Please, Father. We both know she wants him dead because of Guthorm. If he was so easy to turn to us, he might not be so valuable. 'Tis because he is strong-willed and powerful that he could be such a boon to us, and well you know it."

To say naught of Gudrún's heart. With Odin, for once, she was not alone. Maybe that was what she'd wanted all along. Someone to understand her, in a way her parents never could.

The king stared at something she couldn't see for a time ere answering, perhaps reading her unspoken words off her face. "Such may be true. But Grimhild will have what she wants, Daughter. Have you forgotten what happened the last time you defied her?"

"I will *never* forget! Y-you should have punished her," Gudrún spat at her father. Hel take Grimhild and Father both!

"I am king, but even I am not as beloved by Hel as your mother."

"And will you *still* not choose me over her? Will you not come here and help *me*?"

Her father again stared off into darkness. "Would that earn your forgiveness, child? I am still bound to the will of Hel. Your beauty and philtres and seidr did not bind Odin to our will. If he is to live, he must serve. You know this. I am giving you this one more chance to win him over."

It might earn him forgiveness. There was no forgiveness for Grimhild. Not ever. Oh, Gudrún had never defied her mother again, nor would she. Some lessons could not be unlearned.

“Odin?” Hljod whispered. “I know that name ... Son of a trollfucker! You’re after the Troll King’s brother!”

“Who is that?” her father demanded.

“I told you to be silent!” Gudrún snapped at Hljod. “She is no one, just a servant. Please, Father. Aid me, I beseech you.”

Hljod folded her arms across her chest and opened her mouth, but Gudrún silenced her with a glare. Even in the momentary distraction, she felt the nifalf strain against her control. Gudrún gritted her teeth, forcing her will back on the vaettr.

He sighed and didn’t speak for a time. “Then I will come to you, Daughter.”

“Good.” Gudrún waved away the Mist and let her vision return to normal. She let the vaettr slip back inside her, trying to slow the pounding of her heart. It strained against her will, but she could take it. She didn’t want to draw more power from her talisman than she must—even such treasures oft had their limits.

“I’m no one, huh?”

Gudrún grimaced, still trying to force the nifalf into dormancy. “The next time I tell you to—”

“I’m right, aren’t I? You told the Troll King to go after his brother! You should be killing the trolls and everyone related to them.”

Gudrún’s hands trembled, ice forming around them in glittering crystals. Hljod’s eyes widened as she caught the sight, but she didn’t apologise. “You forget yourself, girl,” Gudrún said. Gudrún had not meant to call upon the Mist-alf’s power again. The vaettr itself was tempting her, like a man who could not resist his drink.

Hljod leapt to her feet. “I didn’t forget what that *thing* did to me! You ever been raped by a troll, Gudrún? You think you understand me?” The girl’s voice broke at the end, suddenly choking on her sobs.

The ice dissipated from Guðrún's fingers in an instant. Hljod shifted from mouse to snow bear and back in no time at all, her anger a gossamer veil betwixt her and the fear, pain, rage. The utter aloneness. Except she wasn't alone. Guðrún rose, opening her mouth but unable to speak. Instead she took a step toward Hljod and reached for the girl's hand, who jerked it away. "I ... do understand. Not by a troll ..."

An instant of confusion appeared on Hljod's face, to be washed away by horror as she understood. "But you were ... ? You're a princess! Who would ... ?"

Guðrún squeezed her eyes to force the water out. She was not this person who wallowed in self-pity. And she did *not* tell this story. Not ever, not to anyone. "When I was your age ..." Guðrún began, then choked, unable to speak. She slunk back to the floor. "I had a lover. And I—Grimhild didn't approve. My mother, I mean. She demanded I break it off, and I ... I was young and given to folly as the young so oft are. I insisted I loved him. So she told me ... Grimhild ordered me to murder him, sacrifice his soul to bind a vaettr she knew of, tether it to me."

*Knew of old ...* Irpa's voice hissed in her mind.

Hljod sat down before Guðrún, eyes wide, face ashen. "And did you?"

Guðrún shook her head. "Not then. I refused. Grimhild called me ... lustful. She ordered one of her guards to sate me."

"Oh, Hel," Hljod said.

"I ... I still refused." Guðrún could no longer stop the tears. Some princess of Hel she was, weeping in front of this child. A child who had known all the same abuses. Hljod was her, wasn't she? "S-she brought in more guards. Continued to let them ... Until I ... Until I did it. I sacrificed my lover and used his soul to bind Irpa—the wraith I used on the Troll King."

Guðrún jerked at Hljod's sudden embrace. Rather than force her away, Guðrún wrapt an arm around Hljod's shoulders. This child had suffered as

she had suffered, perhaps even worse. And she deserved to know she was not alone. “I used Irpa ... I had her kill all the men who ...”

“You should have killed that Troll King, too,” Hljod said, her voice cracking. Hel, the girl was right. Gudrún *should* have done so. She’d let fear of Grimhild, of facing her wrath once more, stay her hand. “Make me like you,” Hljod said. “I want to be ... strong.”

Gudrún stroked the girl’s hair. She’d thought to keep Hljod on as a servant, as if that was enough to make up for what had been done to both of them. But naught would ever be enough. Make her strong? Was Gudrún so strong, sitting here weeping, clutching this young girl for strength?

Naught could change the past ... but ... But Gudrún would control the future. Hljod would be more than a servant, more than an apprentice. She would be like a sister. And Gudrún was going to protect her, this she swore.



USING THE TROLL KING, Gjúki had brought Odin before Gudrún in chains, the Ás half out of his senses. Her father had tortured him, and Gudrún had sought to sway him with her love, and still, Odin remained obdurate as a mountain.

Gudrún’s father always liked to sit in the dark, the walls of his private chamber lined with candles whose light barely reached his face. The candles were a nod to what remained of their humanity. Fire might be an enemy of Mist, but even the Children of the Mist needed light by which to see and read. Her father probably liked the tension between the two, the darkness and the shadows broken by hints of light. Ere the Niflungar were driven from these lands, this Hun fortress had belonged to them, had been taken, in fact, from the Bragnings, in days long gone. Had her father been here back then, so many centuries ago? No one had come here in a great



many winters. Lost in the mountains, the Men had forgotten this place. Men, but not her father.

Countless ravens perched up in the rafters, watching Guðrún as she sat before her father. He glanced at her, then turned back to the decaying tome in front of him. If it had been her, she'd have lit a few more candles. Straining her eyes to make out faded glyphs was not her idea of an enjoyable evening.

"What troubles you, Daughter?" he asked at last. Unlike Grimhild, her father never tried to conceal his spell tomes from her. He had once told her she alone could decide what knowledge she was ready for, as she alone would pay the price for it. Ironically, that had proved a more effective deterrent to keep her from delving through his secrets than any threat would have.

Guðrún opened her mouth, shut it, opened it again, then sighed. A hundred times she'd run this conversation over in her mind, and now she couldn't get a damned word out. "Father," she began, then sighed again.

"Never have I known you to stumble for words, Guðrún."

"Is what you're doing to Odin really necessary?" she blurted. True, the steps he took were naught compared to what Grimhild would do to break the man. She'd done worse to her daughter, so Guðrún didn't want to imagine what the woman would do to an enemy. She couldn't cross Grimhild, but there had to be some way to help Odin. Seeing him bound upon the altar, tortured, ripped her heart out.

Her father's face remained impassive, but he arched a brow—which invariably meant she had uttered some folly. "You'd rather we wait until your mother arrives? I imagine she will be here soon."

"I don't want Grimhild anywhere near him!" The queen's methods probably would have been more effective, but all the more destructive to his soul—assuming she didn't simply kill him. "I can still turn him myself. These torments weaken him, make him less useful."

Her father shook his head. “You tried that already.”

That wasn’t fair. She’d done as he commanded, using her Art to enchant Odin. This time it was *real*. She had so much she could teach the man, and he had so much power within. With her brother gone, she was heir to the Niflung kingdom. What finer husband could she hope for than the immortal warrior? He was her perfect match, her destiny.

“I have a connection to him,” she said.

“That may be true, but we underestimated him once already, and it cost us Guthorm. Your brother died because you and I failed to properly contain that man. And if he is not contained ere your mother returns from the east, that is a failure she will exact terrible payment for—out of him and ...”

Out of Gudrún, mostlike. “You could always stand up to her.”

“She is the chosen of Hel, Daughter. Do not forget that.”

Gudrún never forgot. Through the blessings of Hel, Grimhild had destroyed the Odling kingdom and left their queen as the ghost who had cursed Odin. Another irony, since her curse might actually make it easier for the Niflungar to sway him. The things her mother would do to Odin would make her father’s techniques pale in comparison. Nevertheless, what her father was doing to Odin set her stomach roiling. The Ás didn’t deserve such tortures. If they broke him at all, they would do so by leaving him an empty shell, one ripe for possession by a vaettr. And then, he wouldn’t really be Odin anymore at all. The thought of that opened a hole in Gudrún’s stomach as deep as the bottomless pit beneath Castle Niflung. She felt apt to retch.

“Does torture so vex you?”

Gudrún sighed. “There must be a better way to turn him.”

Her father looked back at his book. “Then try it. I have never denied you an opportunity to test your limits.”

Maybe not, but Grimhild had made her pay for pushing those limits. And her father offered no promise to cease torturing Odin. Gudrún rose and

slipped out of the room, then slumped against the wall.

“Are you all right?” Hljod asked. The girl had waited outside, no doubt shifting nervously in the dark and chilly hall. And, indeed, she wrapt her arms around herself despite the fur cloak Gudrún had given her.

“Aye,” she said. “I will be fine.” Gudrún took Hljod’s arm and led her away, back down the stairs from the tower her father had claimed here.

“So?” the girl demanded. “Is he going to help you?”

“No.”

“Your parents are charming people, aren’t they?”

Gudrún glowered. “I only have one parent. And he’s ... complex.”

Hljod snickered, then laughed loudly, the sound echoing through the halls. “Complex? Gudrún, what about your life is not complex? You’ve got a man chained up in the dungeons—a man you just fucked, if I’m not wrong—who is being tortured by your father. Your mother is like the goddess of thunder cunts, and you’re in love with a man who mostlike despises you.”

Gudrún couldn’t quite suppress her snort, but she shook her head. “Keep talking like that, and someone will hear you and have your tongue out, girl. Do you remember the potions I showed you this morn? Go to my chambers and bring them down to the dungeons.”

“Wait, me?” Her voice came out as a bare squeak. The girl was all bravado one moment and timidity the next. ’Twas to be expected, Gudrún supposed.

She allowed herself a smile. Under other circumstances, a girl Hljod’s age could be inducted into the mysteries by letting her lie with one of the male sorcerers. But given what Hljod had suffered at the hands of the Troll King, Gudrún wouldn’t send her for that until she was ready, and Hel alone knew how long that might take.

Nevertheless, with a mouth like Hljod’s, the girl deserved a shock now and then. “You can trust me, Hljod. You have naught to fear in this place.

You are under my protection.”

“You’re afraid of your mother.” From the way Hljod’s eyes widened, the girl regretted the words the moment she said them.

As well she should. Gudrún gave over any attempt to hide her irritation. There *were* lines, after all. “Go and bring me the potions, Hljod. Now.”

Her new protégée scampered off to do as Gudrún bid.



GUDRÚN TROD back down to the dungeon alone. Odin was no longer bound to the altar but chained to the wall. He squinted as she opened the door. Her father had put out the candles, leaving Odin in darkness. A minor torment, compared to the others. Servants had allowed him to use the chamber pot and had cleaned him up after his ordeal.

“What now?” he demanded. “Here to fuck me or flay me?”

Gudrún knelt before him, hiding her disgust at the grime and filth that covered the dungeon floor. “Neither, my love. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You have.”

Gudrún recoiled from the venom in his words. Had she not just made love to him? “I’m sorry.” The words just slipped out. Grimhild had told her a princess of the Niflungar apologised to no one. “How long has he kept you in the dark?”

Odin snorted. “Has your father forgotten I too have the Sight? There’s starlight in the Penumbra, enough to sustain me. Or is that part of his plan? Force me to look there, to see the ghosts that flit about this place? Are they meant to be a vision of my future? I do see them, Gudrún. The vaettir, waiting in the wings, so eager to slip inside me should ever my guard drop.”

“He’ll put you back on the altar at midnight,” she said. “Please, Odin. If you choose me of your free will, I can stop all this. He’s desperate to bring you to our side ere Grimhild returns.”

“Even your father fears your mother, then?”

“He’s trying to save you, for my sake.”

“Save me?” Odin spat at her. “Save me! If you want to save me, take off the fucking chains! Release me, Gudrún, and I will spare you. I will ...” He shook his head, and his voice softened. “Please, Gudrún. You have to know this is wrong. However much Hel has corrupted your heart and soul, surely there is *some* humanity left in there.”

Corrupted her heart? Was that what he thought of her? Her stomach burnt with an empty fire, and she rose and backed away. Her heart wasn’t corrupted. She and her people had made their choices, needful ones. They had done what was necessary to survive the Fimbulvetr and the chaos that it brought with it.

“I am a descendant of Halfdan the Old!” she said, thumping a finger against her breast. “I am a princess of the Niflungar, greatest of the kingdoms born of Halfdan. My people built an empire while the Æsir hid in caves! We built the castles and monuments spread across Midgard. Do not speak to me as though you understand our ancient lineage.”

“And where is this empire?” Odin spoke through gritted teeth, his anger still driving her backward, making it hard to hold on to her own. “If Hel is so great a patron, why did your people fall?”

The fire-worshipping Lofdar and their priest, Loge, but he need not know that. Gudrún shook her head. Even among the Niflungar, no one liked to speak of the fall of the old kingdom. Hel, this man was difficult. But if he wanted to open old wounds, she could do the same. “Know you why Ymir came down off that mountain and slew your father?” Gudrún asked.

“What?” Odin now jerked forward, straining against his chains. “What do you mean, ‘why’? What are you saying?”

Gudrún shook her head. She hadn’t wanted to reveal it, had been a fool to even let that slip out, but maybe the truth alone would get through his thick skull. “Hel sent him.”

“No ... Why would Hel send a jötunn? What did she want with my father? Speak, damn you!”

Gudrún blew out a slow breath. This had been a mistake. She ought never to have mentioned this. All it would do was inflame Odin’s rage. But he’d never stop without an answer now. “It ... was never about Borr, Odin. ’Twas you—the goddess wanted to make certain you were who she thought you were.”

Odin’s mouth hung agape, his eyes begging her to admit it was a lie. “You took my father from me as ... a test?” For a moment, she thought he might actually weep. “A test?” His voice sounded so frail.

“She loathes you, Odin.”

“Why?”

Gudrún shook her head. “That I know not. But she will have you serve her, or she *will* destroy you. She will take everything from you.”

Odin launched forward, straining against the chains. “You took my father! You took my *father*!” Gudrún fell back, nearly tripping over her feet. “Who is that?” Odin demanded ere she could even recover. “Now you’ve brought another whore to tempt me?”

She followed his gaze to see Hljod trembling in the doorway. Gudrún snatched a ceramic phial from the girl’s hand, then stalked back over to Odin who still strained against the manacles. “Take this. Or don’t; ’tis your choice. It will ease your pain and protect you from the ravages of the eidolons when Father begins again.” She leant closer. “And do not *ever* call Hljod a whore again, Odin.”

“Nice to see you care about something.”

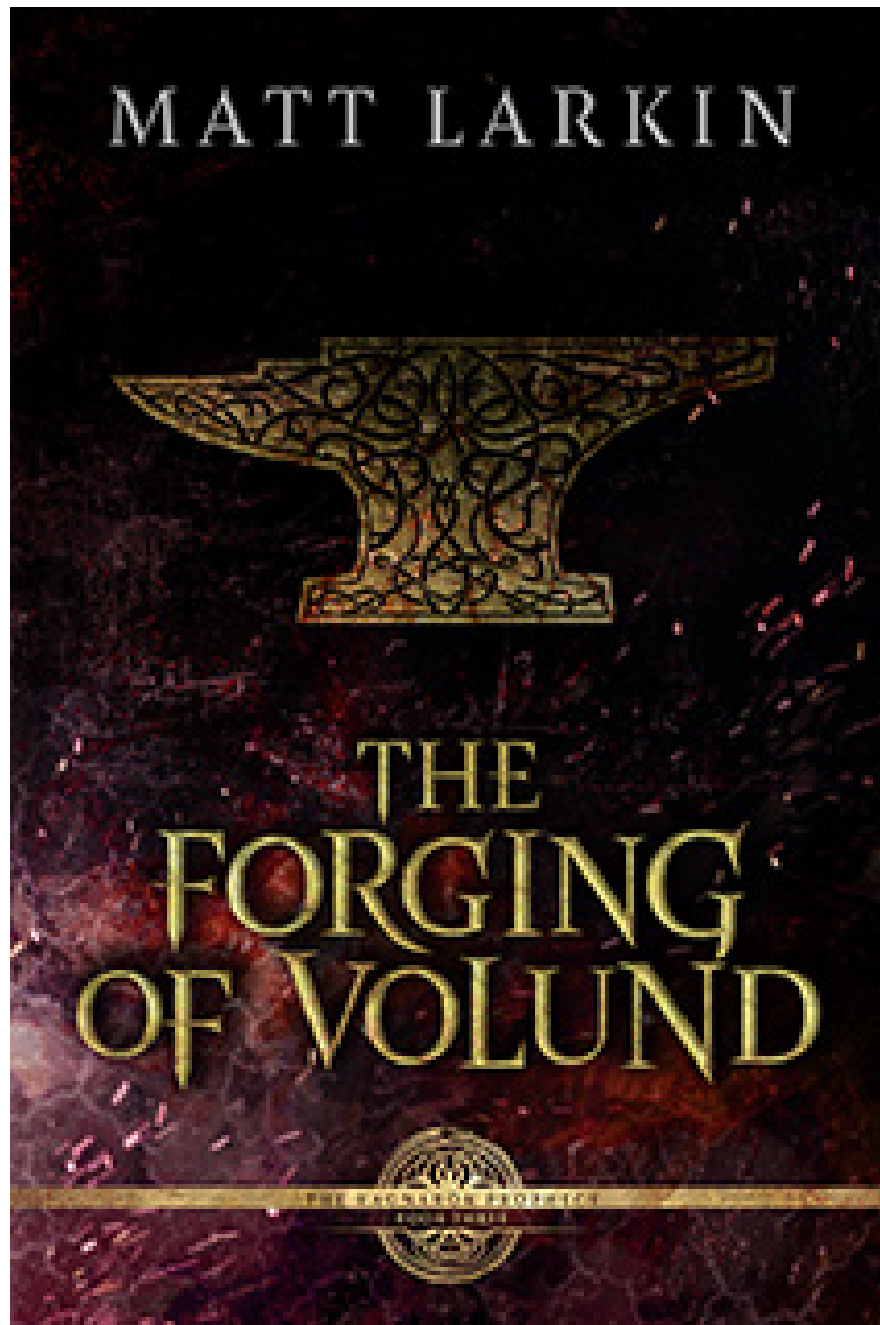
“I care about *you*! You stupid, arrogant man. *I* didn’t take your father away from you—I didn’t even know who you were back then. You think my soul is corrupt, but you don’t want to see what my parents will do to yours. Think about that ere you slap my hand away again.”

She spun to leave.

“Guðrún!” Odin bellowed, and she froze, looked back. “Why? Why would Hel care who am I? Why the test?”

But Guðrún had no answer for that.

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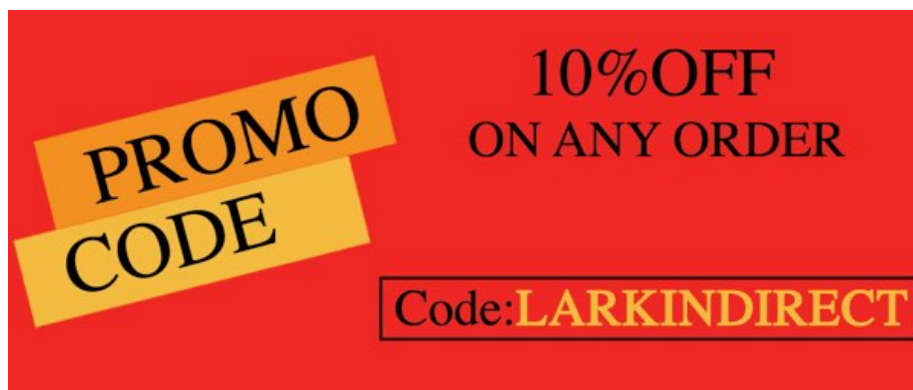
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Along with his wife and daughter, Matt lives as a digital nomad, traveling the world while researching for his novels. He enjoys reading, loves video games, and relaxes by binge watching Netflix with his wife.

Matt writes retellings of mythology as dark, gritty fantasy. His passions of myths, philosophy, and history inform his series. He strives to combine gut-wrenching action with thought-provoking ideas and culturally resonant stories.

In exploration of these ideas, the *Eschaton Cycle* was born—a universe of dark fantasy where all myths and legends play out. Each series in the Eschaton Cycle represents a single arc within a greater narrative.

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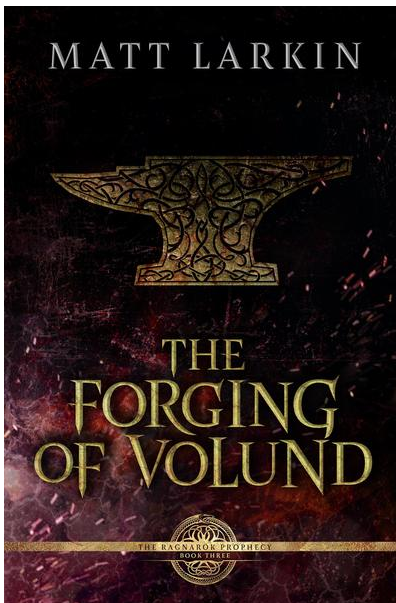
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