

MATT LARKIN



THE
DELUDING
OF GYLFI

THE RAGNARÖK PROPHECY
BOOK ONE



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Editors: Sarah Chorn, Regina Dowling

Cover: Rachel St. Clair

Map: Francesca Baerald

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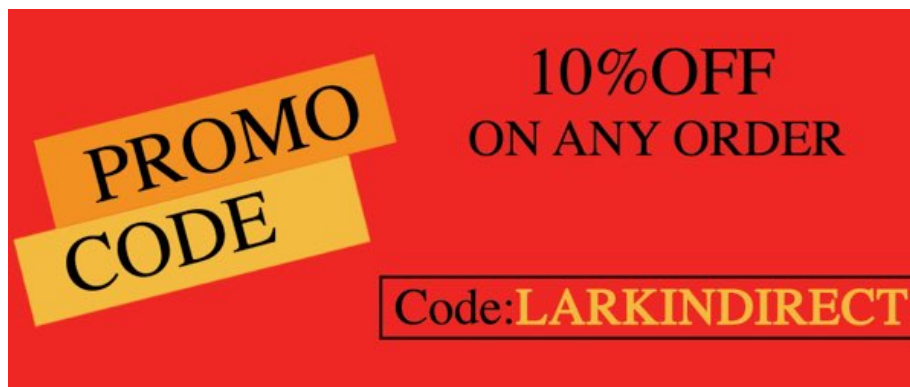
AUTHOR'S NOTE

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

Year 2 Age of the Æsir

*F*ire is life. Such were the words that sustained Men against a frozen world saturated by the soul-stealing Mist, an aphorism to buttress courage as much as to importune against allowing flames to dwindle. The words slithered through Gylfi's mind as he trod through the moon-dark wood, the Mist retreating—if only just—from the sputtering flame of his torch. Almost, he could feel the ire of the hateful vapour, incensed to find a Man daring to venture forth at night, in a time when the Otherworld waxed.

Oh, but such was the point of this sojourn, he mused, packed snow crunching beneath his boots.

Only the evergreens still bore leaves, bowed as they were by the weight of the snow that, this far north, did not always melt even in summer. The rest of the trees were skeletal obelisks reaching desiccated fingers toward the gibbous moon, as if to claim succour from its wan light. He had passed beyond the bounds of his kingdom, into the wilds betwixt there and Lappmarken, lands all but forbidden to Sviars out of fear of witchery and ill urd—fate—that could befall a man who crossed such forces.

The völvá—witch—Gylfi sought was not, so far as he knew, a Lapp, though rumour claimed she may have learnt somewhat of their arcana, forbidden to men. For a man to breathe in spirits, to allow them to penetrate himself, it was thought ergi—unmanly—by common folk who little understood the perilous cliff upon which Mankind found itself stranded, surrounded by forces beyond his ken. Lost in the dark, should not one tend toward any source of light, be it faltering flame or treacherous wildfire? Aye, Gylfi sought the wisdom of the Otherworld, though he would not let it be known that he longed to claim such Art.

Somewhere overhead, hidden in shadowed branches, a raven cawed, answered a moment later by another. The Mist coiled about Gylfi's shins, hungry for a soul, almost sensual as it teased his legs. It would, given chance, worm its way into mouth and nose, fill lungs, and choke life from him, even as it froze and choked life from Midgard. The flame held the brume at bay. Still, when a sudden, fell wind swept over him, dragging at his fire as if to tear it loose from the oil-sodden rag about his torch, Gylfi's heart clenched in primal dread. *Fire is life.*

With one arm, he sheltered the flame until the wind abated. The breeze had flung snow flurries and ice crystals into his hair, riming Gylfi's furs and crusting his beard. Aye, it was an ill night to be about. He faltered, considered turning back, finding a glade to camp and kindle a fire. Daylight proved fleeting this time of year, and mayhap he ought to have awaited summer, when the sun would linger long overhead. Caution might have been prudent, but strange dreams had come upon him, night after night, intimating peril for Dalar, and Gylfi, like any good king, must think to his people.

Ever did his cousins at Uppsalir, especially Alrek, seek to reunite the Yngling house, perhaps even at the cost of extinguishing Gylfi's branch of the clan. Maybe, they would have accepted him as jarl beneath them, even as they had made another cousin the Jarl of Jamtla. But Gylfi was a king

and to surrender such a title would shame him beyond endurance, a cave lion allowing itself to be named a house cat.

So he pressed on, into the howling wind, mindful of predators that stalked the night. Dire wolves prowled these wilds, he knew, stockier than other wolves, and more aggressive, with teeth that could rend mail as easily as flesh. A pack could take down a mammoth; he'd seen it once in his days as a hunter, ere he took the throne.

The woods broke, opening into tundra, one illumined by the ghost lights that danced in winter skies. Moonlight silvered the Mist here, giving the plain the appearance of Niflheim, of Gylfi's nightmares of Hel's frozen underworld. He'd gone not a hundred paces beyond the tree line when he came upon tracks so heavy even fresh snow had not yet filled in the impression. Gylfi knelt, examining the spoor. Not quite the size of mammoth prints. A crash of woolly rhinos, he thought, roaming free between the glacial shelf off the mountains and the woodlands. Perhaps they had migrated out of Kvenland, for in winter an ice shelf oft bridged the narrows of the gulf. His hunters could have fine game, should they choose to venture so far afield, though he knew none would. There were worse predators than dire wolves or cave lions haunting the wild places, and men would have accounted him a fool for trekking here, even to consult a völva, much less one who clearly loved her solitude.

Aye, there were völvur enough on the fringes of Dalar town, plying herbcraft, called in as midwives, or even casting runes to divine a man's fortunes. None had given him the answers he sought, and ever his dreams stalked the corners of his mind, sleeping, waking. A shadow passed in the dark halls of sleep, as of some fell vaettr—spirit—haunting him. He touched his iron brooch at the thought, warding against the Otherworld. Mayhap he found himself plagued by a mara, weaving for him nightmares as the Norns wove Urd, or perhaps by some disquieted ghost, wroth with him for a slight, real or perceived. Or, if not, if his dreams were warnings of

peril impending, be it from others of the Yngling clan or even the Gautish tribe to the south, this he must know.

For to foresee a dread future and fail to strive against it was a grave shirking of responsibility handed to those given such knowledge.

His torch guttered as he pressed onward. Soon, he would need to replace it, though he had but a handful left, and still no sign of the witch's lodge. Onward, he pressed, and again ravens cawed, promising to feast upon his corpse should he fall in these unknown lands. Considering the Mist might well give rise to a living ghost, he might account himself lucky to serve as raven-food.

In the distance, he saw a gleam, hazy through the Mist, and toward this he trekked, his steps quickening with anticipation. Firelight meant Man, for beasts and vaettir shunned such. At last, a hall came into view, its roof sagging beneath the weight of too much snow. Its fence was high, cut from solid logs, with the hints of iron spokes poking out from above the snows. The völvá welcomed vaettir, aye, but only when invited; she would not want denizens of the Otherworld coming upon her dwelling unannounced. In likewise warding, torch poles rimmed either side of the main door, belching oily smoke into the night sky.

Gylfi pried open the ice-crustéd iron latch of the fence; the gate creaked like aching bones when he eased it open. The sound must have alerted those within, for someone cracked the door ajar, though Gylfi could make out naught within the darkened hall.

"I seek the völvá," he cried from the gate. "I am a Man." He placed his palm upon its iron latch to prove his claim.

"'Tis past the middle of the night," a girl's voice answered, younger than he'd have expected. But, of course, the völvá would keep girls here, apprentices in training whom she no doubt set about work that thralls would have done in civilised halls. "Who comes calling at such an hour?"

For a moment, he considered lying, fearing his presence here might earn him the scorn of his people. But it would little behoove him to come seeking answers and refuse to reveal his purpose. “I am Gylfi, King of Dalar, scion of the Yngling clan.”

Hushed voices sounded within the hall and Gylfi shifted from foot to foot, for the first time wondering if they might turn him away after he had trekked so very far. “Leave sword and seax outside,” the girl said, after a moment more.

Taking the invitation, Gylfi removed his broadsword from his shoulder and unbelted his seax, then trudged to the house and leant both blades against the outer wall. He drove his torch into the snow, then he raised his empty hands, showing he was unarmed. The girl opened the door further. His torchlight spilled over her face, revealing ashy, flaxen hair, and a girl of no more than thirteen winters.

“She’ll see you soon,” the girl said, motioning Gylfi inward and indicating the fire pit where he might sit and warm himself. An invitation he immediately availed himself of, collapsing in a huff and shaking the rime from his furs ere tossing them aside to dry. Next he raked his numb fingers through a beard grown unkempt from too long in the wild.

With the shutters drawn tight, smoke from the pit made the hall thick and turned the light hazy, the fumes trickling through vent holes near rafters carved in the likeness of feral beasts and venomous serpents. The old house creaked with the wind. This place sat somewhere betwixt Midgard and the Otherworld, or at least such was the impression the völvá sought to engender. Nestled in the shadow of the towering glacier as her hall was, Gylfi would have named that effort a success.

The woman who appeared through the smoke-haze looked more shadow than mortal, lingering as she did just beyond the firelight’s threshold. The crackle of the flame almost covered the sound of bones clinking in her hair. As she drew nigh, stepping half into the light, he beheld her face, weathered

by time though not quite matronly. Her brow and cheeks bore runic tattoos that, in the scant illumination, seemed sinister, writhing in the flame-shattered shadows. In one hand she carried a staff, its tip carved in spirals, feathers dangling from strings wound into the grooves. In the other, the woman bore a spirit drum which Gylfi knew völvur used to enter their trances. Almost unconsciously, he brushed fingers over his iron brooch.

“Tell me, King, why come to my hearth at such a late hour, and alone, no less.” The latter, he thought a jibe, for all men who sought völvur came in supplication, be they king or thrall. To have brought a retinue would not only have damaged his reputation amongst his people but might have aroused the ire of the vaettir with whom völvur mediated. In this space, she was a queen, and he the subject of her whim, to aid or spurn as she saw fit.

“Ill omens plague my dreams, and I find myself compelled to seek a reading of the urd before Dalar. Those wise women nigh at hand have not the seidr needful to say what impends.” Witch or no, Gylfi found few men or women immune to flattery. As for the future, the cusp of summer was a time for making raids, aye, or war, if one was so inclined. Gylfi withdrew a silver arm ring from his wrist and laid it in the space between himself and the völva.

Though the woman made no move, the girl scampered forward, grabbed the treasure, and inspected it. She nodded to her mistress and disappeared into a side room. A moment later, the girl returned—the ring gone—now bearing a leather pouch, which she gave to the völva. The older woman snatched it and shooed the girl away, drawing loose the strings in well-practiced motion, before withdrawing a handful of something.

This, she cast into the space where Gylfi had left his ring. Rune-carved tiles of bone skittered along the rushes, and Gylfi leant forward, almost imagining he could see something in the pattern of their fall. When he looked up, the völva stared not at her runes but at him. Among the Kvens and Lapps, it was said, men could practice seidr, there named shamanism,

and for such, those foreign peoples were much feared among Sviars. The most feared of all were the Witch-Queens of Pohjola, and again, Gylfi caught himself wondering if this völvá had trained among their ilk. Wordless, the woman tore her gaze from his and pored over the runes, grumbling under her breath all the while. Every so oft, her tongue darted from between her teeth like a serpent snapping prey.

“What do you see?” he ventured when the silence had drawn on long enough to carry choking weight.

The woman sighed, dropped her chin to her chest, closed her eyes, yawning wide. “I see a quickening of the Mist. I see ... wolves ... ravenous, hemming in the lands of Man. A change I feel, shifting of the winds that may betoken weal or woe, though which none can say ...” She breathed a longer sigh, her eyes popping open.

Gylfi tried not to squirm, tried not to accuse the woman of working false, though to his mind, she said little with many words. He had not trekked across leagues of frozen waste and perilous wild for vagaries he could have heard uttered in his own hall, by half-trained völvá apprentices. “Surely the famed völvá can offer more light about what impends.”

A sneer crossed her face. “It gluts itself on doomed men’s lives, reddens the dwellings of gods with crimson stains, whilst sun turns black and weather vicious. Would you yet know more?”

Skalds claimed, in the days of the Old Kingdoms, sorcerers great and terrible ruled, calling upon powers now faded from the world. This woman seemed but a pebble beneath such mountains of power, and yet, something about how she uttered her last words prickled his flesh with misgivings. A chill ran through him, heedless of the stifling warmth of the fire pit.

It became hard to swallow, hard to speak. “What urd lies before Dalar?”

“Herald the change ... or be swept away in its tide.” A strangeness had settled into the timbre of her voice, only reinforcing the sense of unease that crawled up Gylfi’s spine. With a wide swoop of her arm, the völvá scooped

all the tiles away and rose, arching her back with an audible *pop*. “Rest yourself by the fire ‘til morn, if it please you.” She cast a weighty look upon him, which, though she did not speak, made plain what might befall any man fool enough to lay a finger upon a völvu’s apprentice.

Not that such a threat would prove needful; Gylfi did not take girls so young to his bed, and after this night, such companionship was far from his mind. Almost, he had thought the völvu a fraud, thought her rune-craft and ramblings theatrics to bring in silver. And yet ...

No, Gylfi did not think to spend the night here, though fire was a welcome bulwark against the Mist. Instead, with mumbled thanks, he withdrew from the hall and its yard, closing the latch behind him. By the very Gates of Hel, this night had proved weighty, no mistake, and still, he had no true answer. Only, the völvu seemed to confirm the import of his dreams, of a changing drawing nigh, and one, according to her, he must herald rather than vie against.

Instead, Gylfi took up his dwindling torch and hurried back toward the woods, uncertain whether the open tundra or the shadow-drenched forest offered more peril. All he could say at present was he would see himself well away from the völvu’s hall ere he allowed himself a moment’s rest. He knew he moved with incautious speed, but it felt as though a flame now kindled in his own breast, demanding he fly from this place.

At last, he passed back into the wood. As he crossed the threshold, his vantage changed, the trees becoming the supporting pillars of rafters high overhead. He was within a long hall, one thatched with golden shields above the rafters. The light from twin hearths cast an orange gleam among the shields, leaving them nigh radiant above, whilst coils of the smoke slithered around them like linnorms—dragons.

“I ...” Gylfi spun, looked behind himself, for he could not recall how he had come to such a place, nor had there been a hall here when he had passed this way earlier. Once more, he looked into the hall, and before him

stood a man, juggling seaxes, seeming not the least concerned to have a full seven in the air at once. “Whose hall is this?”

“The hall of the king,” the man answered, his gaze unfocused, looking neither at the blades he tossed nor Gylfi. “He waits within. If you would have his name, you may inquire it of him.” As the knife-juggler spoke, the fires within the pits flared as if stoked by forge bellows. Warm light illumined an archway leading deeper into the hall.

Uncertain why—indeed, feeling his feet were no longer his own—Gylfi plodded forward, passing into the main room. Here, the ceiling rose even higher. Another set of fire pits, larger than the last, ran along the length of the room, leading toward a high seat on a raised platform at the back. Columns with graven images of feral beasts supported the roof. Between the pits ran long benches, along which many men and women sat, feasting and cavorting.

Gylfi took a step forward, and every face in the hall turned toward him in a single motion, as if possessed of one mind. The figures had no eyes, only gaping holes of starlight. At the sight, Gylfi’s breath caught, and he turned, intent on fleeing, only to find the archway he’d come through had vanished, replaced by wainscoted walls depicting fierce battles. Once more, Gylfi turned toward the high seat and found himself obliged to trudge forward, as if he were but a karl summoned by his lord. Atop the platform, a wizened man clad in grey sat upon a throne, a wide-brimmed hat slouched over his face, concealing his features. At his feet curled a pair of wolves, and by his side leant a spear capped with an undulating blade. The old man leant forward, resting his chin upon a palm. “What will you hear, King of Men?” His voice was scratchy, rough as the hints of his features, stern, but grandfatherly.

Gylfi had thought to conceal his identity, but the figure on the throne made plain he knew Gylfi and thus obviated any need for pretence. “I came

in search of wisdom,” Gylfi said, and that much was true. “I would know the meaning of the signs and portents that haunt me.”

“Wisdom is the worthiest of aspirations,” the man on the throne said. “You needs must grasp it to survive.”

Whilst it seemed plain seidr was at work here, at work upon him, Gylfi was not given to grovel before the feet of another man. “If you claim to have wisdom, tell me then of the divine and the will of the Norns.”

“The divine ... Well asked, for those your tribes have long worshipped, the Vanir, are fallen, overcome by the greater gods, the Æsir. Aye, fabled Vanaheim lies broken, Njörd slain, gone are the vaunted ones of old. Cast down, by the lord of the Æsir.”

Gylfi struggled to swallow such a claim. He had felt a change coming. But to think of the fall of gods, that bespoke Mist-madness, inviting the wrath of the Vanir. “What do they call this lord?”

“He is called the High One, the Grey Wanderer, the one who hung from the branches of Yggdrasil until Sight before him arose. They call him Ásagrimmr, Gagnrádr, Thrithi, or Vófuthr. Some name him Valfodr.” Gylfi started at such a title, for it meant “father of the slain,” and thus did the Ás god claim mastery over death itself. “Last, they name him Odin. In his hands was the World of Man shaped like clay before the kiln. By his spear, Gungnir, did the ancient frost jötunn Ymir fall. From his corpse did the sons of Borr craft the land, from his blood the seas, from his skull the sky. From the lashes of Ymir, they built the Midgard Wall to embower the mortal world against Ymir’s jötunn heirs. Then last, from ash and elm, did Odin fashion the race of Man. And now, when ages have passed and that race has begun to wane under the guardianship of the Vanir, the Æsir returned and broke those who had failed you and your ilk.”

Gylfi shifted, uncomfortable in the stifling hall, conscious of the eyeless faces still watching him. He knew incredulity ought to have been his part.

Yet still, he could not shake the thought that the hundred faces gazing at him, peering into his soul, were but aspects of the high one before him.

Herald the change ... or be swept away in its tide, the völva had said.

The figure before him rose, no longer the height of a man but of a towering jötunn, half again as tall as Gylfi. “Carry my message to the Men of the North Realms. For a new Age of the world has begun. The Age of the Æsir has arrived.” The man waved a hand through the air, and flaming runes appeared in a circle before him, burning bright, their images seeming to sear into Gylfi’s retinas.

He screamed, shielding his eyes against the blinding pain.

Gylfi blinked awake. He lay in an open field with no sign of the hall. Yet when he sat, he saw ashen stains, as if flames in the shape of runes had burnt into the snowscape. A time he lingered, patting himself to see if he had truly wakened, asking himself if any of that had happened, or if Odin had spoken the truth of the past. There was something cunning and dire about the god, aye, but too something far beyond Man. And Odin had chosen Gylfi as his herald.

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PART I

Thousands of years before recorded history, when the Earth was cold, locked in an age of ice and Mist, then did the Æsir walk the world, and with flashing blades and gritted teeth strive against the foretold end. But the weavers' threads may be by no hands untwined, and Urd forever impends. Thus, truly it may be told, already has Ragnarök played out, and valiant though we fight, still again it creeps nigh.

—The secret histories

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DAYS GONE: ODIN

799 Age of Man

*F*lames from the pyre leapt high into the night, banishing Mist and preserving the living even as they consumed the dead, devouring flesh and dreams and hopes. *Father*. Odin stood at the forefront of the crowd, staring into the flames, unwilling to look at the mass of people who had come to bid farewell to Borr, the great jarl. All the nearest Ás clans had come. The jarls decked in their embroidered furs and golden arm rings, their thegns clad in mail or leather, and even völvur—witches steeped in secrets forever denied to men. All had come to pay respect to the greatest Ás in living memory. The World was lesser now, the flames a failing defence against the ever-encroaching cold. One day, all fires would burn down to cinders. One day, the World would die. Soon, Odin mused.

Almost, Odin thought he could hear Father's voice in the susurrations of the wind and the crackle of the flame. Almost, he could make out words. If Father had last thoughts to share with him, though, such remained forever denied to Odin. What would the man have said, could he still speak?

Odin's two brothers looked to him now, to see what he, the eldest, would do, what he would say. He had already spoken in their father's honour, his voice almost breaking, afraid to give in to the avalanche of grief lest he seem *ergi*—unmanly. But his brothers, the rest of the Wodan clan, and even the other jarls all waited for his words. As if some speech, feeble gesture, or sentiment, might preserve the tenuous peace Father had held betwixt the clans. All words would fall short, so Odin had none to offer. How disappointed they would be to learn the son could not match the father. Would not, if he could. Father's dreams of a united people smouldered and turned to ash around his broken body. Someone had betrayed him, murdered him. Tyr, his champion, had found his body rent asunder and crushed almost beyond recognition. A body left out in the Mist might rise as a draug, damned to wander Midgard somewhere between life and death. Not Father. Too little remained of the man for that. His head, torn from his shoulders, had lain far from his body.

And yet, his murderers had not claimed his spear, Gungnir. That had remained lodged in a tree trunk. The sacred weapon of the jarls of the Wodanar, granted to them by the Vanr Idunn during the Great March, fell now into Odin's keeping. When he held it, he felt both strong and unworthy, filled with righteous wrath and the implacable need to avenge this wrong. By Freyr's flaming sword and the spear of his father, he would do so! Odin would slaughter any and all who had so dishonoured Borr and he would leave their carcasses to the anguish of Mist. But how was he to fell foes unknown to him?

The logs popped, and sparks flew from the pyre to land sizzling in the snow beneath it. Again, Odin could almost have made out a lament within the sound.

Odin had borne Father's head back—it weighed so little, so very *much*—in his trembling hands, unwilling to accept a litter for it, no matter how heavy it grew over the miles. Head and body both burnt now, on a mighty

pyre just outside the town wall. Fists clenched at his side, Odin stood motionless until that pyre had dwindled to sputtering embers. The others had gone, he knew, drifted away one by one, leaving him alone with the cinders. Only the ravens perched upon the trees accompanied him in his grief. In the town, his brothers threw a feast in Father's name. Odin had no mood to feast.

Footfalls crunched on the snow behind him. A hand fell on his shoulder. Jaw tight, Odin turned to see Tyr. A powerful man with long dark hair and a trim beard, Tyr was taller than Odin—and Odin was a large man. The champion bore the scars of a hundred spear-dins, more perhaps. But he hadn't been at his jarl's side in the end. Odin fixed him with a glower and did not speak. Naught remained to say.

"Valkyrjar have taken him to Valhöll by now," Tyr said. "Borr feasts with the Vanir."

Odin shrugged the man's hand off his shoulder and turned to the pyre. If only he could believe Tyr. But surely his father's spirit did not rest easy, not while his murder stood unavenged. Thousands of ghosts dwelt in the Mist, lingering just beyond firelight, wandering in eternal torment, so the skalds said. Father would not rise as a draug, for such things inhabited their own corpses. But a restless apparition, mayhap, watching as his son did naught to end his suffering.

But then, whom could he take revenge *against*? No one in the village of Unterhagen had survived to tell the tale. When Father did not return from his secret meeting, Tyr had tracked him to the village. Odin followed with a small war band. The slaughter and savagery they found in Unterhagen suggested trolls—except trolls didn't usually kill the women, preferring to claim them as wives. Men, women, children all lay dead, battered and beaten, their corpses strewn about the village. Odin had walked there in agonised torpor, dreading what he'd find. Unterhagen lay in a small valley, only nine homes clustered together a few days from Eskgard. A storm had

swept in and blanketed the massacre, forcing Odin and Tyr and the others to dig through the snow to find many of the corpses. Find them, they had to, for no corpse could be left to rot, out of fear of the draugar. So they had dug through the snow—Odin unable to shake the sensation the dead watched, aggrieved at their state—until at last, they found a severed head.

Father.

They burnt the bodies of the freemen and thralls in three large pyres. But Borr was noble, of the line of Loridi, and thus deserved a funeral fit for such venerated blood. And so they brought what pieces of him they could find and waited. Waited while the other clans braved the winter storms to come and pay respects to the greatest of the Æsir.

“You must speak to your guests,” Tyr said. Odin scoffed. He had questioned all he could, trying to learn whom his father had gone to meet. Searching for an answer, searching for the path to vengeance. None had those answers. Not the völvur, whose useless visions told him less than naught. Not the jarls nor their thegns. No one. “You do not well remember the Njarar War—”

“Of course I don’t fucking remember it. It was twenty winters back, I was four.”

Tyr scowled at his interruption. “You may not remember it. I do. By the end, more than half the Ás clans, the better part of all Aujum ... were *drowning* in blood. Were it not for Borr, Njörd knows what would have become of this land. Your father ended the war. Brought peace.”

Relatively speaking. The Ás clans still raided each other, from time to time. Father did—*had done*—his best to direct their aggression back north, into Sviarland. Njarar was one of seven petty kingdoms. Father had spoken more than once of turning from raids to conquest, of bringing the northern kingdoms under Ás control. Might have done it, too, save that not all the Æsir cared overmuch for Father’s attempts to unite them. Some claimed the man thought he was Vingethor himself, thinking to be king. No one had

stood as king since the man, not in the five generations since the Great March out of Bjarmaland. Maybe no one would ever be king again. None of it mattered. Not compared to the weight on Odin's shoulders. His first duty was to his father's honour. Blood called for blood, and he would bathe all Aujum in it to avenge Father.

One of the other jarls must have planned this, tired of Father's attempts to direct them—the slaughter, the barbarism, a mere ruse to distract from the truth.

“Odin, you must see to the guests,” Tyr said. Persistent man, Odin would have to grant him that.

Odin spat in the snow. “Aye, I will see to them, thegn.”

“Hold the clans together. Let Borr's life mean something.”

Odin lunged at him ere he knew what he was doing, snatched up a fistful of Tyr's fur cloak, and jerked the man closer. “His life meant *everything!*” A savage paroxysm seized him, choked him, a glimpse of the surface of an ocean of grief, of rage.

Avenge me ... Almost words now, borne on wind that had begun to howl from distant mountains.

Tyr growled. “You are not the only one who loved him.”

Odin shook his head, his rage stifling. “He took you in. But he was *not* your father.”

“Never did I say he was. He was a great man. Many loved him for it. I ask you to be worthy of that legacy.”

Odin shoved Tyr away and stormed off, back toward the town and his feast hall. The guests awaited. The jarls of the Hasding, Didung, and Godwulf clans had come, though each sat apart from the others, surrounded by their own men and shieldmaidens. Smoke from numerous braziers choked the feast hall, mingling with the smell of roasting mammoth. Between the braziers and the press of bodies, the hall remained warm despite the freezing winds.

Lodur, Jarl of the Diduni, clapped Odin on the shoulder and offered a solemn nod. Naught remained to say, really. Odin's father had fostered Lodur for two winters, and in that time Lodur had tried to best Odin in every feat of strength and arms. The Didung won oft as not, too. Lodur's grief for Father was real, Odin had no doubt, but it was a candle next to the raging inferno consuming Odin.

Odin wandered the hall, finding no solace in any who had once been his friends. He sought neither friendship nor condolence. He wanted vengeance. He wanted blood. And to get it, he needed someone who knew something of Unterhagen and what had befallen it.

Decrepit Jarl Hadding Gundericson of the Hasdingi had no sons, so his daughter sat by his side, speaking to others about the great Borr. As if she might begin to imagine. Hadding's long beard and longer hair had both gone grey, and Odin guessed the jarl had seen at least fifty winters, probably more. That was an age few men reached, fewer still among warriors. A man of honour would have fallen in the spear-din long ago. Hadding didn't care for raids, always hiding behind his fortress walls, aye, but that fortress, Halfhaugr, lay at the heart of Aujum. All the clans came there to trade, share stories, and take respite from the Mist. That meant that many tales reached Halfhaugr.

Trying not to glower, Odin stalked to the table where the old craven sat. He almost tripped over one of the numerous elkhounds seeking warmth inside the hall. Grumbling, Odin ruffled the hound's ears to show he meant no harm. Father always said, trust the hounds for they smelt when aught was amiss—that's when you brought out the iron. Iron to ward against the Otherworld, iron to slay foes of this one.

Hadding Gundericson lacked the stones to have betrayed Father. Ironic that his weakness made him one of the few men here Odin had little reason to doubt. Whilst the Wodanar—indeed, all the other clans—migrated around Aujum every few years, the Hasdingi cowered behind their fortress,

trusting in dverg runes and the goodwill of others to keep them safe. They had grown fat off Borr's peace and would not have wanted that to end. Odin slumped on the bench across from the other jarl. Hadding did not rise to greet him, instead clearing his throat with a thick cough.

His daughter stood and inclined her head. "Jarl Odin Borrson. You honour us." She was young, clad in a vibrant green dress, her long, auburn hair worn in elaborate braids. What was her name again? Frigg, he thought.

He inclined his head to her. He had imagined himself bedding her, at least briefly. But a jarl's daughter would not give in easily, and he had no time for pursuing her, not with blood screaming in his head. He had plenty of thralls to fulfil his needs.

"We grieve with you," Hadding said. Again the man coughed, slapping a hand to his chest. The Mist-thickness—mucus already filling up his lungs—too much Mist breathed in over the years. Odin pitied any man forced to endure such a death. One more reason to seek the end on a battlefield and find the embrace of valkyrjar. Dying like that, Hadding had naught to look forward to save a long march to the icy Gates of Hel.

"Thank you," Odin said. The old man seemed almost sincere. Without Father's watchful eye, other clans might look to seize Halfhaugr for themselves.

"Will you eat with us?" the girl asked.

Odin motioned to a thrall to bring him the drinking horn. He took a long swig of mead ere handing it to the next man—one of Hadding's thegns, no doubt, aging himself. The whole damned clan would probably find themselves eating from Hel's table within a winter or two. Odin cleared his throat. "Jarl Borr went to Unterhagen for a reason. Someone knows why, knows whom he went to meet. I want information." He thumped his forefinger on the pine table. "I want it now. Father's ghost has languished too long already. I feel his grimace from the shadows." In the quiet, he swore he heard the shade's laments, his pleas for vengeance.

Hadding rubbed his chest. “Mayhap so. But as yet, men speak of other things. They speak of war. We face dangerous times, and when winter breaks ...” When winter broke, Hadding would no doubt have any of the other eight clans trying to seize Halfhaugr from him. Did he think Odin would do aught to protect him? Odin fixed the useless old man with a level stare. At the moment, the Wodanar themselves had no reason not to claim the fortress.

“What about the foreigner?” Frigg said.

Odin looked to her. “What foreigner?”

“A man came to us,” she said, “someone from far away. Somewhere in the South Realms, maybe; he didn’t say. But rumour claims he is a masterful tracker, wise in woodcraft, and nigh as learnt as any Miklagarder, as well.”

Hadding waved his daughter away. “The man is full of himself. You can’t trust someone who talks like a völva and fills his mind with South Realmer learning.” That earned him a scowl from Frigg.

“Tyr already searched Unterhagen for tracks. With the snows, he found naught.”

“Maybe,” Frigg said. “But this man might know something. He has a strange urd about him.”

Urd? What did some jarl’s daughter know of a man’s fate? Fate wrapt its threads around all lives, made mockery of Man’s dreams. Still, he had naught else to go on. “Then I will go back to Halfhaugr with you, meet this foreigner,” Odin said. “If he can do as you say, you shall both earn my gratitude.”

Almost as one, a number of the hounds perked up and stared at the doors to the feast hall. A moment later those doors crashed open, and every hand, even Odin’s, touched iron to ward against vaettir. Men rose to move toward the newcomer, a woman. A crowd quickly surrounded her, and she took each into her gaze. When her eyes met Odin’s, he stumbled. She wore

her long, brown hair loose, flowing around her shoulders. Her skin was rich, deeper in colour than any he'd ever seen, and now that he'd drawn nigh, he could see the flowing red gown she wore beneath her furs. The material shimmered in the light of the braziers and was sheer enough to give a hint of the delicate flesh beneath. Odin had no doubt that every man in the circle eyed her with lust, even as he pictured himself carrying her off to his bed in the back room of the hall.

"Dangerous lands to walk alone," he said. "Especially at night." Especially for an unarmed woman. Visitors from another clan were not uncommon, but no one travelled in the dead of night unless desperate. The deathchill was the *least* one needed to fear, and that could easily bring down a man. Beyond that, trolls and vaettir, especially the vilest ones like draugar, often grew more active at night. Sunlight thinned the Mist and tended to drive its horrors into hiding. Some might question whether this woman was of Menfolk. Still, lore claimed no vaettr would stride thus into a hall lit by flame, warded by iron. Alfar haunted the wild, not the places of Men.

The foreign woman smiled at him—or rather, she crooked half her mouth in a smile. "You are Odin." Her voice was light, her accent lilting and odd.

"I am," he said. "And who are you, my lady?"

"My name is Idunn." A murmur rose through the crowd. Someone scoffed and someone else gasped. Odin caught himself glancing at Gungnir where it rested against his throne.

"Idunn?" The goddess of spring? One of the Vanir here, among them? The same who had given the spear Gungnir to his great-great-grandfather, Vingethor?

"Aye," she said, flashing a bit of teeth in her smile now. "Do your people yet remember me? I'd hoped they would." How coy. Every Ás remembered Idunn—assuming she was who she claimed to be. Beautiful, no doubt, but a goddess? Since when did gods come strolling into Ás halls

in the middle of the night? Though that was exactly where his ancestors claimed Gungnir came from. Regardless, there was but one thing a jarl could do when a guest came calling.

“Lady Idunn, I extend to you the full hospitality of the Wodanar.”

With that smile, she’d have any man in the clan eager to do her bidding.

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THE VÖLSUNGS

15 Age of the Æsir

That South Realmer king, Karolus, had dared venture across the Rijn, perhaps thinking to cut around the Myrkvidr, and thence to Xanten, for no man who styled himself an emperor would long bide the boundaries of his empire. Well, Sigmund's father Völsung had disabused the Valls of such a notion, most of all the train of fettered thralls now marched back to Xanten and bound for auction, Sigmund thought as he plodded through the mud. The late frost had at last begun to thaw, well in summer as it was, and the passage of dozens of boots had turned the paths to muck that sloshed halfway up their legs.

Still, he was of good cheer, as any man who had first proved his mettle must be. His palm rested lightly on Gramr's pommel where the bone-hilted runeblade lay sheathed at his side. The blade, blessed some said by the new god Odin himself, had left Sigmund peerless on the battlefield. She cut through foes like the tide crashing against rocks, unstoppable as any force of nature. He hewed splinters out of shields, cleft in helms, and felled all

who dared stand before him, whilst Gramr took no notches, her edge never dulling.

Making haste toward the vanguard—for Xanten would come into view soon and he'd speak with his father before that—he sought out the king of Rijnland. "The three moons have nigh passed," Sigmund said when he'd found the man mounted yet oddly lost in the mire of his own thoughts.

His father cast a sidelong glance at the trees of the Myrkvidr, running along their path, though no man sought to stray close to the wood's ancient expanses. Rumours persisted of vaettir lurking behind the oak and birch, and of beasts fell and giant along the mountain slopes.

"Hmm." Völsung, whispers told it, had once challenged the might of Odin and in the Ás found a foe against which he could not stand. Sigmund did not know how much of such rumour held truth, but since his earliest days, his father had never backed down from any fight. When word came of Karolus's soldiers crossing the Rijn, Father had hidden before charging into the thick of it. Armed with Gramr, Sigmund had hoped to cross swords with famed Roland, but the paladins had never made the crossing, and Sigmund had wetted his blade with the wound-sweat of lesser men. "My thoughts tended in the same direction. I would lay eyes on your sister sooner rather than later."

Did Father have misgivings about Siggier Wolfsblood? As if Völsung had not nigh tossed Sigmund's twin Sieglinde at the Gautish king in exchange for alliance. That, and the wealth to enkindle his own empire here in Hunaland.

A howl sounded from the Myrkvidr, wolves welcoming the gloaming. He and Father would need to hurry if they were to make Xanten's gates before dark settled and the Mist thickened. Like Sigmund, Völsung again looked to the wood, though he let show none of his misgivings, save by brushing his fingers over the iron pendant he wore.

“Within three days I would set sail for Skane,” Sigmund’s father said. What he did not say hung heavy in the air betwixt them, so thick Sigmund could not have carved through it even with Gramr’s keen edge. For Wolfsblood was a Gautish king, and like the men of Reidgotaland and Svjarland, he and his ilk had long taken to raiding the coasts, Rijnland being no exception. Skane, though most oft held by the Skjöldungar of Sjaelland, had fallen to the Gautish king, and none had known whether he would press further, across the Morimarus to strike once more into Hunaland. Besides which, the man was a bore, and Sigmund had little loved him when Wolfsblood had called upon the Völsungs. Expecting trouble with the Valls, perhaps, and nurturing his own ambitions, Völsung had traded his daughter to a man across the sea.

It sat ill with Mother, and more so with Sigmund. He wondered, now, if Father’s sudden yearning to lay eyes upon Sieglinde came from the man himself or from the woman behind him: Hljod might well have made Völsung’s past three moons even longer than Sigmund’s had seemed.



DESPITE THE BILLOWING Mist and the overcast sky, Sigmund’s cheer held when they made sail. No passage across the Morimarus was free of peril, even in summer, but these were the best months to trek the whale-road, and they had made their offerings to Rán ere the voyage—a bound man, hurled into the icy depths. They had every reason to expect smooth seas.

Skane was the southernmost of the petty kingdoms of Svjarland and therefore the most accessible from Hunaland. The voyage took but a few days, first skirting the island of Sjaelland, then breaking off for Svjarland.

“I think I see land!” Vern shouted from the bow. Sigmund’s other brothers raced forward to watch as well. The youngest of the Völsung clan had remained behind with Mother in Hunaland, but five of Sigmund’s

brothers made this voyage with him. For Carr and Colborn, it was their first time abroad. At ten and eleven winters, they were not yet men, but Father thought them close enough to visit an ally. Besides, they wished to see their sister. For the first time in their lives, Sieglinde was not there when they came home to the Völsung hall, and that absence had become a hollow in Sigmund's gut, made worse by fear for *her* happiness.

A rider mounted on a black mare watched as their ship drew nigh to the shore. One of Wolfsblood's thegns, no doubt, sent to escort them to his castle. Such an escort was custom in some lands, and they were all kin to Wolfsblood now, though Sigmund thought the man a cur.

"That's ... that's Sieglinde!" Vern said. The shout jolted Sigmund from his musings. What was his sister doing down on the shore? He frowned and joined his brothers at the bow, shoving Colborn aside so he could see. As if in answer to one of her so-called foretellings, his sister *did* await them on the rock-strewn shore, astride the mare. Her horse stomped about as if in distress.

Sigmund looked back to Father, who raised an eyebrow. After Sigmund nodded to confirm it was indeed her, Father scowled. "Sigmund and I will go ashore to meet her first," Father said. "The rest of you, heed Vern's command until we return. Prepare to drop anchor."



SIEGLINDE WORE a cloak stained with blood on its hem yet insisted no injury had befallen her. Her belly seemed slightly thick; Wolfsblood had already planted his brood in her.

"What has happened?" Sigmund demanded as soon as he drew nigh enough.

His sister's gaze darted back and forth betwixt the ship and the road to Wolfsblood's keep. "I had to kill a man my husband set to watch me."

“Odin’s spear, girl!” Father said. “Why on Midgard would you do such a thing?”

“I had little choice. My husband plots perfidy. He has spent these moons gathering an unbeatable army to his side and has called his levies, even hired mercenaries from afar. I beg you return to your kingdom.”

Father scoffed. “All peoples know well I have never fled from iron or fire thus far and do not intend to do so now in my twilight years. Nor will I have maidens taunting my sons as cravens running from their foes.” Sigmund tapped a finger on his thigh but held his peace. True or not, Father had one thing right—if they fled now, they would lose face at home and abroad. Their enemies would multiply while their chances at alliances withered.

“Father, I beseech you,” his sister said. “Go and gather your levies. With more men, you might return and avenge your honour, but you cannot escape his treachery with so few.”

Father raised a finger to silence her. “A hundred spear-dins have I fought, daughter. I will not now run from one, even if it be my last. We have troops enough and my strong boys. You have not seen Sigmund fight with Gramr.”

A tear welled in her eye, and she shook her head. “Then please, Father, at least do not send me back to him.”

“You *must* return to your husband, daughter. However it goes with us, you will be secure, in his home or in ours.”

“Damn you.” She mumbled under her breath, and Father’s old ears did not seem to catch it, or so he pretended, at least. Finally, tears running free, Sieglinde remounted, cast a mournful look at them, before trotting away.

Sigmund stood still, watching her go. “You do not approve?” Father asked after a moment.

“It is not for me to judge the will of the king.”

“You will be king one day, and then may you weigh the consequences of decisions. Our honour is not merely for ourselves, Sigmund. It is the shield with which we guard our people. Broken or cast aside even once, it becomes useless forever after.”

Sigmund glanced back at their three ships. They had some few warriors with them, mainly as protection against raiders or pirates amid the Reidgotaland isles. Not enough for a war, not by far. “A shield can only protect against but so many foes.”

“That, Son, is why you also carry a sword to strike those who are not deterred by the strength of your shield.” Then Father sighed. “I thought to give you a united Hunaland over which to rule.”

“Father?” The weariness in his voice set Sigmund’s gut twisting more than the anticipation of any battle. “You will yet do so.”

“Aye, of course. Tonight we rest, and in the morn, we march to meet our foes.”



A DOZEN MEN lay at Sigmund’s feet and a stream more behind him, all sent to the valkyrjar or else cast screaming down to Hel. And still, Wolfsblood’s army pressed on, their numbers at least eight times those of the Völsungs’. Roaring, Father hewed down another man. Though aging, Völsung yet had the heart of a raven-feeder and the muscles to match it. Grim as the tide looked, Sigmund dared hope they might yet claim victory. And if not, perhaps he too would feast with the valkyrjar this night.

A man rushed him. Gramr cleft through his spear, then through his neck, sucking up his blood with an icy hunger. She needed this. It gave her purpose, and Sigmund would not see her unsated. Not when tale claimed Odin himself had granted him such a boon.

Before him, Vern toppled to the ground, an arrow jutting from his arm. Sigmund raced forward, blade flashing in the morning light as he cut a path to his brother. Two more men fell before him, then Sigmund stood over Vern as his little brother reclaimed his feet. “Fall back. You cannot fight without your sword arm!” If Vern answered, Sigmund did not catch it. Screams and the clash of metal on metal created a tumult over which naught could be heard. The whole shore was awash in wound-sweat, stinking of iron and shit and fear. They feared *him* now, and rightly so.

Father now squared off against a man bearing a sword in each hand. What the fuck? Who could fight thus?

“Starkad Eightarms,” Father said. “How much is that Mist-cursed bastard paying you?”

“My weight in silver.” Eightarms, a famed raven-feeder and the worthiest challenge for Gramr. Sigmund ran for his father, but one of Wolfsblood’s men intercepted him. Father spat and charged the mercenary. His blade dove for the man in a mighty strike. Eightarms deflected it.

Sigmund killed the man before him and shoved the corpse aside. He made it only three strides. One of Eightarms’s blades knocked Father’s wide; The other opened his gut. The mercenary’s first sword swept back with uncanny speed and sliced through Father’s throat.

All at once, the edifices of Sigmund’s world crumpled, his bedrock rent asunder. For Father had been, whilst not always in line with Sigmund’s thought, the amaranthine foundation in his life, the very shape upon which he might model his own thought and aspiration. And that pillar, that paragon of kingly virtue toppled into the mud and Sigmund could not accept it, could not fathom such an impossibility. His mind lagged, unable to form coherent thought, only dimly aware that he roared, charging at the mercenary. The man parried. And again, his blades seemed to come from nowhere, faster than any man ought to move. Sigmund bellowed at him. Struck again. Eightarms caught Gramr between his two blades and twisted

his wrists. Sigmund's sword flew free from his grasp. He fumbled for it in the air a moment. Then a pommel crashed into Sigmund's face.

Ears ringing, he fell. The World turned red. And then went black.

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DAYS GONE: TYR

799 Age of Man

Odin Borrson had taken Idunn out into the night despite the cold. Tyr assumed he wanted to speak with her without prying eyes. Keeping others from following was probably the only reason he had allowed Tyr along. Hand resting on the sword over his shoulder, Tyr followed several paces behind the pair. One of the elkhounds walked at his side. Always best to take a dog if you could. Hounds smelt foulness in the Mist. Let you know when aught went creeping about.

Like Odin, Tyr carried a torch. A man needed fire. Without it, the Mist would seep into his body, into his soul. Tyr had seen men go Mist-mad, lose themselves, have to be put down or banished for the good of the clan. Besides, the Mist sheltered ghosts, trolls, draugar. All waiting to prey on the World of Men should fires dwindle. Always hungry.

“So,” Odin said after walking through the town.

The Wodanar were spending the winter at Eskgard in reinforced old houses not used in a decade. When summer came, they’d abandon this place

for better hunting grounds. Migrating in winter was left to the foolish and the desperate.

“So,” Idunn answered. “Here we are.”

This woman was like none Tyr had seen. Dark brown hair, exotic skin like some South Realmer. Graceful movements, confidence. And she had wandered the wilds alone. Did that make her a fool, or desperate? Could she truly be one of the Vanir? Nigh to absurd. If the Vanir existed at all, they no longer walked the lands of Midgard. Not in centuries. But then ... most would have said the same of jötunnar. Tyr knew better on that count.

“Aye, here,” Odin said. “Where you would have me believe a Vanr has come to call upon my people.”

She shrugged. “Oh. Well, aye. I think so. I mean you should believe me. You still have Gungnir, don’t you?”

Odin grunted. “What do you wish of me?”

Tyr knew he ought to keep a more careful watch, but he could not tear his eyes from the two of them. The one, a self-proclaimed goddess. Beautiful, outlandish enough he could not quite dismiss her claim. The other ... Borr’s son. Borr had been a hero to many, had saved Tyr from a wretched life as a raider enslaved to a more wretched master. Had taken him in. In time, Borr made him first a thegn and then his personal champion. Had trusted him to help instruct his own sons with weapons. If naught else could be said for him, Tyr knew his way around the spear-din. Blade, axe, or bow, Tyr had mastered them all.

And Odin had grown up quite skilled, at least in weaponry. But he was not his father, not by any measure. The young man had fire. But that fire stoked his pride more than his honour. Rage consumed him. Tyr did not *blame* him for wanting to avenge his father. Indeed, Tyr himself would have gone to great lengths to do so. But Odin was allowing Borr’s legacy to splinter around him while he quested for revenge against unknown enemies.

Tyr had helped Borr forge this peace. Had waded through rivers of blood to do so. And Odin and his brothers saw none of that. Would not listen.

Idunn giggled. What kind of goddess giggled? “What a question. What do I want from you? Let me ask you—what do you think your father would want of you?”

“Vengeance.” The man didn’t hesitate.

Tyr stifled a groan. Barely. The hound cocked one of his ears, asking if he had sensed danger. He had, though no danger he could explain to the animal.

“Truly? Don’t you think he’d care about maintaining the world he strove to create? Mayhap he’d want you to continue on the path he’d begun?” Goddess or not, Idunn had the right of it. Maybe *she* could talk some sense into Odin. If she did, his brothers would fall in line. Odin was eldest; they looked to him.

Odin cast a glance back at Tyr. Tyr offered him a nod. “What of it?”

“You are jarl now. What would it take for you to be something more? To be a king?”

Tyr’s foot snagged in the snow. King? Not even Borr had held such a lofty goal, despite the claims of other jarls. Mist-madness, if he’d ever heard it.

Odin stopped, turned on her, forcing her and Tyr to pause as well. “We’d have to call an Althing, put it to a vote among the nobles of all nine clans. Which is not going to happen. No Althing, no vote, and if there was, not one man everyone could agree on to be king. Least of all me.”

“Oh? Can you think of some better way to honour your father?”

Odin folded his arms over his chest and shook his head. “What do you hope to gain from this?”

“Hmm.” She reached inside her fur cloak and pulled something out. It looked like an apple, only golden, glittering in the torchlight. “Do you know what this is?” Odin shook his head. “This is immortality, my dear Odin.

This sweet fruit tastes of the World itself. And I bring it to you, even as I once brought Gungnir to your ancestors.”

“Wh-why?”

Tyr’s mouth hung open.

Idunn withdrew the apple and stuck it back within the folds of her cloak. “This ultimate gift I could grant you. The power to live forever, to lead your people—all of the Æsir—forever. But you must do two great services for me.”

Odin licked his lips. “Live forever? How am I to believe such a thing?”

“The apple comes from the World Tree, Yggdrasil, the heart of Vanaheim, the source of all life. But then, you wouldn’t know until you tried it, would you?” She shrugged. “It’s a puzzle. Sometimes you have to have faith. Sometimes you have to take a chance.”

Tyr’s heart pounded against his ribs. What she spoke of sounded impossible, sounded like the prattling of a Mist-mad völva. And yet ... he wanted to believe. Her voice, like music, offering such temptations. And Odin had not quite leapt at the chance. Had Tyr underestimated his new jarl?

Odin released a shuddering breath. “Your terms, Vanr?”

“You must make yourself king of all the Æsir.”

Odin spread his hands wide. “I’m not fucking Vingethor. And do you really think my father intended to become king? Do you think he could have? The other jarls wouldn’t have bowed before him, and they sure as Hel will not bow before me. In any event, why do you care?”

“Mankind is dying, Odin. Slowly, aye, but with each generation the numbers dwindle. The Mist suffocates your world and the cold creeps ever closer, while petty kings and jarls fight each other for scraps. It’s why I gave your ancestors Gungnir. I thought it might prove enough. It did not. If naught changes, there will be but a few more generations of life left in Midgard.”

Her words left Tyr shivering. Skalds' tales claimed that long ago, maybe thousands of years ago, this world was warmer. Ere the Mist. Now, each passing winter claimed more lives. Men froze. Murdered each other over scraps of food. Or because they could. And out in the Mist, those who fell lingered. Grim, wakeful. Caught between life and death. Idunn spoke of the end times as a nigh certainty. And worse, as fast approaching.

Odin pressed his palms against his forehead. "And if I would or even could do such a thing, claim this throne ... what of your other request?"

Tyr had almost forgotten she had asked for two services. As if becoming king of nine clans on the brink of war were not enough burden for the brash young man.

"Once you are king, I will come to you with another task. You will owe me then, and I will have your oath you'll do all in your power to grant my final request."

Odin scoffed. "You still have not told me what that request is."

Idunn giggled again. "I suppose I haven't. First make yourself king."

The jarl held up his hands. "I will not give an oath to any task without knowing what you ask. A man would have to be a fool to do such a thing. If you care so much about Mankind's urd, *goddess*, you attend to it." With that, he shook his head and stormed back toward the feast hall.

"I am trying," Idunn mumbled.

Tyr took a few steps closer. "You truly believe that man would make a good king?"

Idunn grinned. A half smile, like a wicked child. "I think he could be the greatest king the Æsir have ever known. Beyond Vingethor, beyond even Loridi. Maybe. If he can see past his own petty desires. And stop staring at my tits."

Tyr realised what he had been doing and flushed. Maybe she couldn't tell in the torchlight. His tongue felt heavy in his mouth. What did a man say to a goddess? Particularly one as odd as this. "I ... er." He cleared his

throat. “Borr worked his whole life to win and keep peace between the clans. Everyone respected him.” Or feared him. “But Odin is right. The other nobles wouldn’t have supported Borr as king; less so, still, his son.”

Idunn scratched the hound’s head—and the animal let her. “Hmm. Not yet.”

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STARKAD

15 Age of the Æsir

*B*eyond the Pirineus mountains lay the land of Andalus, where the Serkland Caliphate held sway, ever encroaching into Midgard. This far south, the snows had melted in the summer warmth. Verdant hills greeted Starkad on his return to Guiana, along the Pirineus. Welcome warmth and yet passing strange, despite the years spent in these lands, for Starkad would forever remain a man of the North Realms, come here only because Tyr had commanded it. The man—Starkad’s father, though it still rankled to admit such—had sworn long back an oath of loyalty to Roland, nephew of the Vall emperor Karolus. The Vall sought to expand his borders, encroaching into Andalus, into Hunaland, as if to bring all lands under his domain.

For the nonce, Karolus remained an ally to the Æsir, Starkad’s people, and thus, Starkad fought Karolus’s wars, won his share of glory these past fifteen years. Still, when Odin had sent him north, bade him take silver from treacherous Siggeir Wolfsblood and fight as mercenary, Starkad had thought it a welcome reprieve from the heat and the tedium. They had taken

the north of Andalus until Caliph Marsile's last bastion had become the walled city of Salduba, which the Valls would not move on—not when the cost of its claiming would prove so high.

Starkad wended his way back through the camp outside Peregot, the Vall border fortress meant to oversee the passes in from Andalus. He'd made it not a score of paces before his brother Vikar bounded over, wrapt him in an embrace, and hefted him half off the ground. "We knew rumour of the slaughter in Skane must not have included the likes of Starkad Eightarms!" Starkad grunted at that. "Well, do come for some of Vall mulled wine this eve and tell me of it."

Starkad nodded. Odin had come to him, in a dream as was his wont, and bid him venture forth and join Wolfblood's war against the Völsungs. Starkad had not forgotten the treachery Völsung had wrought against the Æsir in days gone, but he did not think Odin's schemes simple vengeance for wrongs done, some fifteen years back. Ever and anon did the Ás king move in ways subtle and cunning, even whilst men whispered behind his back of his ergi ways. Any other man, they would have thrown down, exiled, but Odin was anointed by the Norns, and all feared him. 'Twas not the first time Odin had sent Starkad to aid or hinder a king or jarl in the North Realms, and Starkad knew it would not prove the last.

Starkad passed beyond the camp and through the gate in Peregot's palisade, for he must report to Tyr, who would, no doubt, be found with Roland. The emperor's nephew held Guiana in his stead, though Roland had little head for the nuances of rule, his eye ever trained upon Andalus and ways to crush his foes. Roland was a badger, proud and vain, and willing to fight to the last against overwhelming odds, for he could not imagine defeat. Roland's knights, paladins they called themselves, were said to be the finest warriors of the South Realms, champions all, and Starkad could not deny their valour, Roland most of all.

He trekked through the fortress, exchanging greetings with those who called to him whilst he sought after Tyr. Perhaps it was the weariness of the road, but he found himself with little interest in pleasantries. No, he thought, cresting the stairs, not the road—rather, his jaunt to the North Realms served as a reminder these lands were not his own. Valland and Andalus held beauty, aye, but the exotic beauty of foreign venues, best savoured and remembered fondly rather than chosen as a home.

Roland's steward waved Starkad into the man's sitting room, where he and Tyr sat at a low table, sipping wine. Both were clad in fine Vall tunics, the fringes embroidered with gold trace that must have taken the seamstress a moon or more alone. Where Roland was clean-shaven, Tyr wore a bushy beard much akin to Starkad's own. Both held goblets of wine, Tyr in his left hand, for he'd lost the right in the war against Vanaheim. Lost it the day he'd failed to protect Starkad's mother from the varulf, Fenrir.

Tyr had taken Starkad and Vikar in then, though he'd slain Vikar's father, the man Starkad had, ere then, thought his own father. He'd taken them in, raised them as warriors, and dragged them here, to the arse-end of Midgard, to fight foreign wars. But he'd trained them well. Ere losing that hand, Tyr had been the champion thegn of Odin, a raven-feeder without peer. That injury would have ruined most warriors, ended their career and sent them swimming down to the bottom of a horn of mead, or seeking the shortest path to Valhöll. Tyr, however, taught himself to fight with his left hand, though none had thought it possible.

Taught himself, aye, then demanded the boys in his charge learn it, too. And Starkad, for his part, he'd thought, if he could wield a blade with either hand, why not both? Men had called him Mist-mad, laughed almost 'til they pissed themselves when he'd tried it, and got himself thrashed time and again. Still, every day, every eve of their interminable exile in the South, he'd swung those blades. One day, the men *stopped* laughing. Starkad

reckoned it had happened about the time he'd put three men on their arses at once, left them nursing welts and bruised pride.

Tyr and Roland looked to him, raising goblets in salute. Before them sat a charcoal-drawn map of the Pirineus, the whole region, down to Salduba. Ever the goal; mayhap, if they took it, the Æsir could be quit of this land.

"Völsung is dead," Starkad said, accepting another cup which Roland filled for him. "His heirs were taken by Wolfsblood and, mostlike, feed the ravens now."

Tyr grunted. "Man was treacherous. Brought it on himself."

"My uncle will be well pleased," Roland commented. Odin too, Starkad had to imagine, and he cared a mite more for the goodwill of his king than of a foreign emperor he'd seen a handful of times in all these years. Odin could, if it took his fancy, bestow upon Starkad an apple of Yggdrasil, the ultimate prize of the Æsir. Those apples granted immortality, and thus, every great deed done by an Ás was always in pursuit of being thought worthy by Odin and his wife. For too few apples blossomed, and most Æsir remained doomed to perish, bound for Valhöll or the Gates of Hel, as befit their valour.

Yggdrasil's bounty had made the Æsir gods, like the Vanir before them, though Odin had convinced the men of these western lands he and his ilk had always been immortals. Either way, Starkad would not be denied his place among their ranks. Nor Vikar, who spoke of the apples so oft Starkad wearied of his brother's boasts of how he would earn one.

"Take your ease," Tyr commanded. A man of few words, Starkad's father, and fewer still for his son.

"We may have new plans soon enough," Roland added.

Starkad downed his wine in a long swig, then departed without further comment.



ODDGEIR THE DANI paced around Starkad, a sheen of sweat glistening on his brow, his sword twitching side to side as if to belie his ebbing strength. The man was an incongruity among the twelve paladins, the only one of their number out of the North Realms. Though he had long since sworn fealty to Karolus, it gave him a kind of kinship with Starkad, and the man had been keen to hear of Starkad's last trek. He was, after all, a bastard son of Healfdene, and thus of Skjöldung blood, though with no claim to the throne.

The Dani had taken it somewhat amiss, learning Starkad had aided Siggeir Wolfsblood, a Gautish jarl who had seized Skane from the Skjöldungar and made himself a king. So Starkad had bade him vent his ire with sparring, for no paladin would back down from a challenge any more than a Northman.

Oddgeir was massive, tall as Starkad and twice as broad, with strength to fell an aurochs in one swing. Power, aye, but not enough speed. The Dani watched Starkad's two slowly twirling blades, eyeing them like he would the vipers found in the marshes south of here. Tyr had not been fast enough to stop Fenrir from tearing out Mother's throat. No, but Starkad had grown fast, and the fastest man was the only one who mattered.

So Starkad had trained under Tyr, learning to fight left-handed. He'd trained with Oliver and mastered efficiency of motion. He'd practiced archery with Astolfo, Roland's cousin. He'd pushed himself on long-distance runs and tracking with Hermod, when the other Ás was about. He'd learnt southern techniques from Ferumbras, a Serk who had defected to their side. In the end, there would be no one faster, no one better. And Starkad would ensure what had happened to his mother did not ever again happen to those he loved. It was said that Starkad was so fast with a blade it was like fighting four different men. And thus, he'd fastened the name Eightarms.

Oddgeir charged in again, a mighty swing. It was probably fast, but it seemed lethargic to Starkad, every movement exaggerated, projected. With one blade, Starkad knocked aside the Dani's sword. The other, he slapped against the paladin's gut, doubling him over. An instant later, he brought the first blade round, smacked the flat against Oddgeir's arse, and sent him sprawling.

"Man moves like lightning," Oddgeir grumbled to no one in particular, as far as Starkad could tell, as he heaved his bulk up from the dirt.

Starkad chuckled, thrust his swords into the sand, and offered the man a hand. Oddgeir took it—not one to hold a grudge past the time it took to throw back a flagon of wine—and offered Starkad a mock snarl. Patting the man on the shoulder, Starkad motioned for his next contender to wait whilst he snatched up a skin of water and drank deep. He eyed the others, so many men all eager to challenge him. Shieldmaidens, too, and he'd fought some of them. Managed to get no few to tumble into his bed afterward as well.

Starkad rather liked women, no denying. Shame these southerners didn't bring their women along to battle. Starkad would not have minded having the chance to tumble with a soft southern woman and see if there was a difference.

A commotion began in the south of the camp. Shouting, a crowd gathering. Were the Serks trying the passes again? No ... no sound of weapons beating on shields, no drums of war.

Starkad glanced at Oddgeir, who scowled, then together they made their way over to the gathered crowd. The disturbance came not from the south, where the soldiers were abustle to get their camp in order, Starkad soon learnt, but north, down the ancient, cobbled roads of Valland. For the emperor himself rode in caravan toward Peregot, and such must betide a change in the war. Each time Karolus had come here, it had been with orders for Roland to push harder against the Serks, to try to seize another city of Andalus. Or once, to drive the woodfolk he named Endor deeper into

the wilds, for he coveted their lands. Starkad had slain a good many of their ilk that summer, and those strange folk had scarce left their sylvan vales in the days since.

“Will we at last move on Salduba?” Starkad asked Oddgeir.

The Dani shrugged. “Perhaps Roland knows his uncle’s mind. I, for one, only strive to serve as his sword.”

“An emperor might do with a faster blade,” Starkad taunted, though the Dani would know it for a jest.

Oddgeir fixed him with a heavy look. “I heard it that, when word came of your return, every farmer from here to Aquisgrana sought to hide his goats. Why would they feel such a pressing need to do so, I wonder?”

“I make a fair goat stew,” Starkad said, not rising to the bait.

“Aye, must be that,” the Dani agreed. “Could explain why they were keen to fit the flanks with hauberks. They were in fear of your ... blade.”

Starkad had little mood of a flyting—a duel of words—and thus scrambled to be ready to receive the emperor.



ROLAND RECEIVED Karolus in the grand hall of Peregot, if grand were the right term for a modest chamber where the main decor consisted of chipping paint on the wainscoting. Still, Karolus took his throne and gathered around him were the twelve paladins, all awaiting his pleasure. Tyr stood off to one side, with Starkad beside him, watching the proceedings, his thoughts unreadable. Too, Roland’s stepfather, Ganelon, brother-in-law to the emperor. Other than them and a few courtiers, the hall was empty, its great door shut to ward their counsels against eavesdropping, little good though such precautions were like to amount to.

“Time and again I hear tell of the unassailable mountain fastness of Salduba,” Karolus said. “Our knights foray around it, harrying towns and

villages, cracking castle walls, and forestalling the advance of Serks out of Karjuba. Yet I am told we cannot claim Salduba without uncountable loss of life.” The emperor drummed his fingers on his armrest. “So now we needs must decide whether to pay such a price and have done with this conquest or make terms.”

“Make terms!” Roland fair bellowed, his voice echoing off the rafters. “What, after long years here to drive these Utgard devils from our shores? These heathens worship *flame*, Uncle.”

Given that the Æsir had long lived by the adage *fire is life*, Starkad thought fire-worship a rather petty reason for making war. Indeed, he found the one Deathless God of the Valls stranger than those who would propitiate vaettir of the flames. But then, no Vall asked his counsel on the matter, and besides, Starkad suspected religious zeal more pretence than reason. Men like Karolus, who wielded the wills of others with as much or more skill as they wielded blades, they knew how to bestir the passions of men—with vitriol. The masses were eager to heap their loathing upon those who were different and needed but a strong hand to direct that ire. Karolus could, had the mood suited him, just as easily have pointed his people in the direction of the Æsir. How many days would it take for rancour to sour relations, then? Few, he thought. Far too few, before men who had called him brother would then thirst for his blood.

Karolus raised a hand, and the murmurs that had begun to saturate the hall fell as though cut down by a blade. “An emissary came to us, sent by Marsile, who bade us form a border and return to Valland with tribute. Four hundred mules laden with treasure, he offers us.”

“Surely even the paladins must weary of this struggle,” Starkad whispered to Tyr.

His father grunted assent, raised his missing right hand, as if reaching for a blade it would never again grasp. Starkad wondered when Odin

promised aid to the Valls here, if the king ever thought it would mean sending his people here for fifteen years or more.

“May as well have offered four thousand,” Roland protested. “We can little trust a word from the man’s mouth. How many years have we fought against him and his kin, Uncle? I won for you a dozen holds in that time. If we seize Salduba, the whole north of Andalus we would soon claim. We did not come in search of plunder, but of land.”

Well, the emperor might well have stirred his paladins with dreams of conquest and driving foreigners from Midgard, but Starkad imagined, in the end, it *did* all amount to a desire to fill Vall coffers with stolen silver. The paladins deluded themselves. As if there were not glory and honour enough in ensuring one’s people, one’s kin lived well.

Ganelon, Roland’s stepfather, sneered at his son, shaking his son. “Ever quarrelsome, Roland. My lord, trust not one who cares more for carving his name into legend than for the welfare of you or yours. What will it avail us to gain Salduba if half our people lie dead, strewn across the Pirineus? Perhaps you think it better the heretics of Miklagard should build the empire of our faith?” A grumble answered, for the Valls loathed the Deathless worshippers of Miklagard even more than they did the heathens. “If the caliph offers you his hand in peace, the man who counsels you slap it away cares little what it should cost us.”

The paladin Naimon stepped forward. “There is a weight to Count Ganelon’s words, my lord. We have enemies aplenty to the north, not least the Huns.” Starkad wondered if the court yet knew of Völsung’s fall. Either way, still the Huns did indeed remain a threat to Valland, no mistake. “Let us not spit in the face of a fair offer.”

Karolus considered a moment, rubbing his face. “Who to send, then, to accept this tribute and give terms?”

“I will go,” Naimon volunteered.

“Be still, Duke.” Karolus commanded. “Your counsel is too wise for me to send you abroad until this matter is resolved.”

“Then send me,” Roland said, head held high. “I shall do it.”

“You shall surely not,” Oliver said. Though Oliver was Roland’s closest friend, beloved as a brother, they were unlike in character. Oliver was measured against Roland’s brashness and, Starkad thought, probably the only reason Roland yet lived. There was such a thing, as he saw it, as too much courage. Valour could cross the line into vanity and some men could not perceive the difference. “I warrant you’d find yourself in a feud or duel ere you ever came before Marsile, assuming you did not challenge the caliph himself to cross swords.”

Karolus shook his head. “No, the paladins have command of Guiana, and none of them shall go. One of my court must needs speak for us, someone trusted and respected.”

“My stepfather is the man for it,” Roland said, “and why not, as the plan suits him so very well?”

Ganelon scowled but could little refuse, much less with his well-earned reputation as a diplomat. Starkad wondered if Roland sent the man for spite, or, being now resigned to Karolus’s will, in fact thought Ganelon apt for such a mission. The latter, he suspected, as Roland had not the guile for the former.

“Then will we at last be quit of this damn city?” Starkad asked Tyr.

His father grunted. “If the Serks mind their word, aye.” But something in his tone, his posture, it seemed dubious.



A FORTNIGHT LATER, Ganelon returned leading a train of silver-laden mules that wound through the hills like a serpent, if a snake could have brayed with a hundred voices at once. Karolus, who had bided at Peregot, could not

conceal the avaricious gleam in his eyes, nor could Starkad much blame him for it. Indeed, it was a princely tribute that, he suspected, would have awed most of Asgard had they looked upon it.

It was thus decided for Karolus and the main force to return to Aquisgrana. Summer waned and already snows had begun to fall once more, so the men were eager to trek before the way became too treacherous and they found themselves forced to winter here.

“I am to escort Karolus to his capital,” Tyr said when he got Starkad and Vikar alone, on the walkway above the palisade. “Paladins will hold the pass of Roncevaux whilst we arrange the withdrawal of all Vall troops from Andalus.”

“Karolus yet mistrusts Marsile,” Vikar observed, and Starkad thought there was eagerness in his voice. His brother had grumbled incessantly since hearing the peace was settled. As Vikar saw it, peace endangered his chance to win an apple.

“Long hatreds are not easily cast aside,” Tyr agreed. “The emperor leaves two thousand men under Roland’s command. Them, and you two, standing for Asgard. My eyes, here. Either side plays false, I would know of it.”

“You doubt Roland?” Vikar asked.

“Him, no.” Tyr shook his head. “Not a false bone in his body. Karolus, though ... Man doesn’t get to be emperor with too many scruples. The throne, the taking of it, it costs.” Once, in a long winter night, Tyr had spoken of how he’d helped Odin get his throne. Starkad’s father believed in the Ás king yet did not seem over proud of whatever he’d done to see the man named ruler of the clans.

“If we see perfidy?” Starkad asked. “From either side?”

Tyr stared out over the battlement, toward the rising mountains. “Mark it, only, and stay alive. I shall return when things are settled.”

One last winter to pass here, it seemed.

DAYS GONE: ODIN

799 Age of Man

*T*he snows ran deep, five feet at least, covering all the North Realms. Farther north, Men said it never melted. At least a thousand years of it, the völvur said, more mayhap. Once, long ago, they said, there was a time of warmth. A time of true summers, where green covered the world. A time ere the Mist that blanketed all Midgard and stole the minds and memories of Men. Völvur said a lot of things. Odin suspected they knew far less than they pretended.

Crossing Aujum in winter meant sledges drawn by dogs, the animals yipping, barking, surging forward as if they also knew the peril. The fewer nights in the wild, the better. Cowardice sent you to Hel's table. But if you forgot to fear the Mist, you'd find yourself dead or worse.

If they pressed hard enough, they might make Halfhaugr in three days. Three days—but the nights, oh, the nights they huddled around the largest fires they could manage, desperate to ward off not only the cold, but the Mist and the fell vaettir it brought with it. The Hasding thegn with Hadding Gundericson—Agilaz was his name—he knew his woodcraft. Each night he

found a sheltered campsite and got a blazing fire going. And then Odin and the others would gather round, trying to stay warm, trying to pretend they did not hear the fell whispers far out in the night. Shades or vaettir, no doubt, watching them, waiting for the fires to die. Waiting to consume their flesh or souls. Vaettir despised Men, even as they envied them their warmth, so völvur said.

In the shadows beyond the firelight's edge, in the Mist, he heard whispers, though mayhap Borr's voice joined their laments. No one else spoke of it; no one ever did, he found. Men pretended they could not hear such things, for to speak of them made them too real, gave them power.

This night, Tyr sat across the fire from him, roasting a squirrel Agilaz had shot. Odin had consented to bring his own thegn on this trek, had left his brother in charge of the Wodanar in his absence. No sense dragging half the clan along with him. A man had to be Mist-mad to travel in winter. A night without shelter was apt to drag a man into the deathchill, leaving naught but a draug behind. The cold could freeze a body solid in an hour—and those who met such an urd without fire would find no peace even in death. The damned wandered the Mist for all eternity, preying on the living in a futile effort to divert their agony and rage.

Odin knew about rage. About its futility. Some things which had been stolen could never be regained. He spat out into the darkness. His vengeance would not be denied. If alfar or draugar or aught else stood in his way, he would cut them down with Gungnir and send them screaming down to Hel.

“Jarl Borr called upon us several moons back,” Frigg Haddingsdotter said. Odin glanced at her. Frigg looked a few years his junior, but she carried herself with the refined elegance of a noblewoman: head high, back straight, and eyes sharp. He looked back to the fire. Father had oft called upon all the clans, endlessly working to avoid war, always making plans. Trying to save everyone. Except himself.

Head torn from his shoulders. Body mangled beyond recognition. *Father*. A corpse, rent in half.

“He was a hero to many people,” Frigg said when Odin didn’t answer. He grunted. Aye, indeed, Father had been a hero. A master warrior, a good man. Generous with his allies, implacable to his foes. And always there for his sons. Odin clenched his teeth so tightly they felt apt to crack, and still he could not release his bite. The pressure would keep him going whilst his fury kept him warm, simmering, boiling. The waiting ate at his guts. No, he need not worry overmuch about deathchill, not with such heat consuming him from the inside out.

Avenge me ... The words, distant but clear, breaking through the murmurs of the night, so unmistakable Odin glanced about, expecting to see the man, to see his kind eyes. In moments of weakness, logic failed, and Odin imagined, if he waited, he’d see him again. Borr the hero. The warrior. The father. Head torn from his shoulders.

“I understand your pain,” Frigg said. Odin snorted at that. His brothers—Vili and Vé—*they* could fathom it. Perhaps Tyr might begin to. The thegn had been closer to Borr than any man, probably looked at him as a foster father. No one else could know. “You see, I lost my mother two winters back. I remember the hollowness, the consuming apathy toward life that threatened to bury me like a blizzard.”

Apathy—Odin knew naught of apathy. His heart was an inferno, blazing with the need to act, to destroy and wreak revenge upon the entire World. So hot did he burn, he wondered that fire did not seep from his eyes, having no other outlet. He glared at the woman who dared think herself capable of knowing his loss. Apathy!

“He left a legacy behind. A very fragile hope of peace between the nine clans. In recent years, he had been arranging marriages to bind the clans. A web of alliances that ...”

Odin stopped listening to her. She meant to ask whether he was worthy of his father's legacy. How could he be? How could anyone? Father had walked with the purpose and stature of one like Vingethor, like Loridi. A legend in his own lifetime, his fame spread across Aujum like a winter storm, touching every living Ás. And Odin, a mere Man, had naught to offer next to such grandeur. Naught save vengeance. Father's ghost could not be allowed to suffer as others did, trapped on Midgard, trapped in the Mist.

Avenge ...

"And you must continue what he began," Frigg was saying.

"You fear for Halfhaugr," he snapped. "So you feign empathy for me in the hope I will protect you." Frigg stiffened and Tyr growled, poking the fire with a stick. Hadding and Agilaz had turned to him, both watching. "Was that my father's legacy?" Odin asked. "To guard those too weak to help themselves?"

"Boy!" Hadding coughed, choking on his own outburst. "I fought in the Njarar War while you were barely off your mother's tit. Agilaz fought beside me. And you ..." Another hacking fit of coughs interrupted him.

"Jarl Hadding risked travel in winter. Out of respect for Borr," Tyr said. Always chiding him. Like everyone else, he expected Odin to turn into his father. But no one could.

Still, he supposed he ought to *try*. Even knowing he could not live up to that legacy, he must come as close as he could. He was the eldest son of Borr, after all. Odin waved the others to calm. "Bestill yourselves. I will uphold any oath my father made."

"Borr did not make us an oath, exactly." Frigg laid a hand on his forearm, then jerked it away as if Odin truly were aflame. "I ..."

"Daughter?" Hadding coughed again. "Are you well?"

"The weight of Urd crashes upon us ..." Frigg's face had turned ashen, eyes staring off at something beyond sight.

Urd? Now she spoke again of Fate. She talked like ... Freyr's flaming sword! "You're a fucking völva." For the jarl's oldest daughter to be a völva—she must have had some natural gift to be chosen for such a calling. Völvur didn't marry, not oft, so the jarl sacrificed a valuable political asset. But some women were born with unnatural insight. They were always messing with strange plants, speaking to ghosts. And they could bespell a man's mind with their beguiling seidr. Let a völva get her legs around you, and she'd ensorcel you. A völva's trench was as dangerous as a troll's fist.

Frigg blinked, shook her head, then scowled as if suddenly aware of him once again. "You say that as if it were a bad thing. Do the Wodanar not rely on their own völvur?"

His father had. He had looked to Heidr for guidance. But the völva had not foreseen his death or betrayal or had not warned him of it. She had failed her jarl. Odin would not make the same mistake of trusting in such Otherworldly insights.

Hadding's daughter was dangerous.

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STARKAD

15 Age of the Æsir

*T*wo thousand Vall warriors camped in the pass at Roncevaux, warding Guiana against any Serks who might try to chance the Pirineus mountains. Whilst Roland had little loved his uncle's decision to accept tribute—and peace—from the caliph, neither would he speak an ill word against the emperor. For all that, the soldiers of Valland were of good cheer, and tales of home floated about the camp like airy songs in a smoky hall. Every man spoke of how he longed to see his woman, or to go and find one. Some regaled their mates with tales of their children, though Starkad imagined their mates' interest feigned, at best. Others spoke of places left behind, endowing them with the character their fellows reserved for people. There, a beloved oak, under which a youth had grown to manhood, or there, an aging house, the creak of each board familiar and welcome. To these men, Karolus's peace meant returning to homes that, after years here, many must have thought they would not chance to look upon again in their lives.

Eventide swept in with a thickening of the Mist, its soul-stealing vapours held back by the myriad bonfires dotting the pass. Soon, the air

grew redolent with the scent of stew flavoured as much with bone as venison or hare. Starkad heard some few scouts had shot mountain goats and, strolling along beside his brother, wondered which cauldrons held those choice bits and how he might claim one.

“How long must we tarry here?” Vikar asked, to which Starkad could only shrug. “Hel, we could be out there slaying foes and winning glory. Instead we sit on our arses in a land at peace.”

“Tyr will send for us once things are settled.” If duty here dragged on, the snow might make passage across Valland treacherous, and most of these men would be forced to winter in Peregot. The Valls did not use dogsleds as did those in the far north and had no good way to pass lands blanketed in deep winter. In his youth, he’d heard skalds posit the glaciers crept forward, ponderous and ineffable, promising Niflheim would one day claim all of Midgard. Then, so the tales held, would the reign of Hel begin. Skalds, Starkad imagined, liked any tale that reminded men to cherish life whilst it lingered. Such things got men pouring drinks and women keen to warm men’s beds.

They came to a fire on the camp’s edge where Oliver and Oddgeir sat, warming their hands, and Starkad felt rather certain he caught a whiff of mutton out of their simmering stewpot. A few hours more, perhaps, before it would be ready, but a welcome feast once time arrived. Oddgeir quirked a knowing brow, well aware of the play of Starkad’s thoughts, and beckoned them to sit.

Oliver poked at the flames, more from boredom than necessity. “My man here says some in his homeland think you gods.” It was an old jibe, spoken with the sneering disdain of one wholly convinced his deity, alone, could exist. “So they say, yet I swear I saw you visit the latrine pit, same as the rest.”

“Perhaps you ought to check that,” Starkad offered. “Breathe deep and judge whether you sup with Men or gods this eve.” In part, he thought the

paladins sought to dismiss tales of Ás divinity because they could not otherwise reconcile what deeds they had seen done by Tyr or Hermod. That some Æsir should be so-called gods, whilst the main remained Men, was a subtlety Starkad had long since wearied of trying to explain, not least because they were forbidden to speak of the apples. Besides which, mayhap when this was done, he would have earned himself one of those golden fruits. To live forever was a reward those like Oliver could not dare to dream.

Oliver opened his mouth to respond—Starkad knew the moment he engaged the man’s clever tongue he would get the worse of it, but neither could he refuse to make an answer—but snapped it shut. “That clamour came from the hills.”

“Are there hunters still about?” Vikar asked needlessly for none would have ventured in the Mist after nightfall.

Oliver shook his head. “Some few scouts only.” And scouts would never have made enough noise to catch his ear. The paladin rose. “I should check on them, take their reports.”

Vikar heaved himself up as well. “I’ll accompany you. If there’s trouble, you’ll want an extra sword at your side.”

Starkad could have gone with them, but he had little mood for trudging about the hills in the moonlight. Not when the crackling fire enticed. “Have a care, though. Some may be about who have not gotten word of the peace.” Or would pretend not to have, trying to plot a last raid or two. Such things happened, Starkad knew. When the pair had gone, Starkad looked to Oddgeir. “You’ve not been north in many a year.”

“No,” the Dani agreed. “And anyway, I count myself a follower of the Deathless One. I’ve no care for what delusion the others of my land fall under.”

The Vanir had proved, in the end, false gods, as were the Æsir, immortal though some were. Though he held his peace, Starkad could not help but

wonder if Oddgeir's faith too was but the work of Men and words, tales twisted to serve needful ends. Was it, in fact, as much delusion as the man accused the North Realmers who followed Odin of falling prey to? But then, vaettir were real enough, god-like enough. He touched the iron pommel of his sword, beside his knee. Aye, Starkad had seen vaettir for himself, much to his chagrin.



BESIDE ODDGEIR'S FIRE, Starkad dozed, his mind flitting across tenebrous landscapes, conjuring inchoate images of friends and foes. In such phantasmal spaces, he had, on occasion, found himself standing before Odin, the strange Man-become-god. There, the Ás king would speak in riddles, alluding to hoary truths long forgotten or biding, in so many words or fewer, Starkad to venture hither or thither. Starkad was, after all, very good at shedding blood, such that he dared fancy himself the sword of Odin, meting his wrath across Midgard.

There, atop a hill crowned by flickering ghost lights, he saw the shadowed figure in the slouch hat, leaning upon a staff...

A commotion drew him from his reverie and Starkad blinked, rising, to see Oliver returning with another scout. The pair held Vikar betwixt them, whilst he grumbled, making half-hearted attempts to toss them aside. What in the Gates of Hel was this? Starkad pushed men aside to get to his brother, aware Oddgeir followed. He punched a man who tried to bar his way and sent another sprawling with a heavy shove. "Explain this treachery!"

Before he could say more, Roland was there. "Aye, Oliver. Why lay hands upon an ally thus?"

"The ally disobeyed my orders and courted war!" Oliver spat, shoving Vikar forward. Starkad caught his brother in his arms and spun him to look at his face.

Vikar, though, was too far into his paroxysm and whirled back upon Oliver. "I slew our foes, and naught more! Those were Serk scouts in these mountains."

"We cannot expect them to trust us any more than we them," Roland interjected.

"Oh, aye," Vikar said. "And to watch our egress from Andalus they need an army of ten thousand fed intel from those scouts, do they? If they returned to their camp, they would have reported on our numbers!"

"Be that as it may," Oliver said, "I ordered you not to engage, and it was mine to command. One of our men perished because of you, to say naught of how the Serks will react when their scouts do not return."

Starkad folded his arms. "You cannot imagine they meant to honour our peace with such forces as Vikar reports. It is treachery, and he has given us time to prepare."

"That does not excuse insubordination," Roland said. "You and yours have submitted to command of the paladins in this, and it was not for an Ás to strike the first blow in the war, much less when a paladin forbade it. You leave me no choice but to punish such—"

Whatever he intended to say was cut off by war cries from the escarpment above the pass.

"He has brought war upon our heads!" Oliver cried. "Roland, we cannot hold against such numbers. We must withdraw to Peregot!"

"And cede them access to Valland?" Roland scoffed at that. "Never. Let them come." He drew his sword. "Durendal will send them back to their false, fiery lord so that they may see him for the devil he is." He hefted the sword. "To arms, men! For Valland!"

Starkad dashed back to Oddgeir's fire where he'd laid his blades, then tore each from its sheath.

"Shields, shields!" a paladin cried a bare moment ere a rain of arrows fell over the camp.

In the night, the shafts felt like invisible needles. Deadly, piercing flesh and bone, splattering wound-sweat in random, wild showers about Starkad as he scrambled behind a shield wall. Chaos spewed down from the hills like a flash flood, vicious, sweeping all away in a torrent of men and iron and blood. The arrows ceased, but the shield line crumbled almost at once, for the Serks were too many. Starkad flew among them, whirling, his blades hewing limbs and heads, cleaving shields. He was the fastest man, and all others fell as wheat before the scythe until a dozen bodies lay at his feet, the air reeking of their spilled blood and bowel. His boots squelched and slipped in the gore, but he kept his feet, dancing in, slaying one after another.

The Serks before him began to falter, aghast, thinking, no doubt, they had come upon some fell vaettr thirsting for their blood. One chanced Starkad, swung his blade. Starkad caught it between his two swords and twisted, hurling it away. Before the Serk could gawp, the tip of one of Starkad's blades opened his windpipe. Already, Starkad had whirled, and his other blade cleft the calf behind a man's greave.

Another man, he came upon Starkad, bearing no shield, just one of those curving swords they called shamshirs. This one ... his eyes held a fell glint, seeming almost lambent, as if something fiery seethed within his core ... a Son of Muspel? When the man moved, he struck like a lunging viper, fast as Starkad, maybe faster. Starkad jerked a blade up to parry. The impact numbed his arm and sent him stumbling backward; already, the Serk struck again, forcing Starkad to give ground. Never had Starkad been forced to engage one of their ilk ere now, but Tyr had spoken of them, claimed them almost as fast and strong as an Ás immortal. He thought them half-possessed by Fire vaettir, and from the way this one moved, Starkad could little argue the point.

The spear-din raged around him, more and more Serks pouring into the pass, but Starkad could not afford to tear his gaze from this man for even a

moment. The Serk's shamshir wove about Starkad in a vicious dance, snaked past his defences, and slashed his ribs. His hauberk blunted the impact, but he heard links rent asunder, even his mail unable to withstand such power. The sudden realisation he would die and never taste an apple settled upon him, a millstone around his neck, slowing his movements.

The Serk's blade whirred toward Starkad's neck. He used both blades to parry, intent on trapping the shamshir and disarm his foe as he had done moments before. Rather than wind and bind with Starkad and lose his blade, the Serk shoved him, sending Starkad skittering backward. The gore-drenched mud tugged his heels, and he toppled, landing on his arse.

An inhuman leap carried the Serk over Starkad and the man leered at him, unfathomable malice creasing his visage. Naught of Midgard could manage such loathing, Starkad thought as dread rose in him. Of a sudden, the Son of Muspel jerked, and as he turned, Starkad saw Oddgeir's sword wedged into his spine. Rather than tear the blade free, the Dani hewed, twisting the Serk around, even as the man—unbelievably—continued to flail.

Roaring, Starkad lunged, sweeping both blades up in a cross that cleft through the Son's knees. His foe sprawled forward, and Starkad just managed to roll aside. Then Oddgeir jumped on him, using his weight to drive his blade deeper, pinning the Son of Muspel to the sloshing ground.

Drenched in blood and other filth, Starkad stumbled to his feet and took in the battle. Or the slaughter, rather, for Roncevaux had become a charnel field. Starkad's Vall allies had fallen in droves, the dead far outnumbering the living, their ranks growing with each pacing breath. This place was lost.

Starkad needed to find Vikar.



WITH DAWN, Karolus's forces swept in from the north, his cavalry thundering down the pass. The hour was late for such a rescue, though, and Starkad had seen most of the Valls, most of the paladins, thrown down. It had taken all he had to keep himself and Vikar alive, intent only on sending as many of their foes to the Gates of Hel as he could before valkyrjar came for his soul. He had not thought to see the sun again.

No, but he saw as Tyr leapt from a horse, his blade flashing, singing death to the treacherous Serks who had played them all false. Starkad's arms had become leaden until he could scarce lift his blades. Instead, he sunk to his knees, panting, too spent even to grieve for comrades he'd lost in the night.

When the Serks were routed, Karolus took stock of the casualties and found fewer than a hundred of Roland's two thousand men survived, most of which bore wounds. Some would join their brethren in Hel's abode within a matter of days, Starkad thought. Given he himself bore a dozen gouges, he could well be among those departing Midgard soon.

They returned to Peregot, a broken train. Though they had lost the pass, no Serk had crossed the mountains, and Valland remained safe, leastwise until Marsile decided to chance Karolus now that the emperor had lost his champions. The only paladin to have survived was Oddgeir the Dani, and he bore a wicked gash across his brow and a broken arm. The great knights who had long held the Pirineus were fallen, broken, and Starkad imagined the silver Marsile had paid for his ruse a low cost to strike such a blow against the Vall empire.

Starkad sat on the floor of the room he shared with Vikar, nursing wounds, his brother pacing the small chamber despite having taken a blow to his skull. Indeed, the man's hands trembled as he worked rivets into the floor, fair bursting with nervous energy. Starkad had tried, twice, to still Vikar, but his brother refused to heed it.

They lingered thus, Starkad pressing a reeking poultice to his side that was meant to stave off infection, Vikar intent on making the both of them dizzy enough to retch. When Tyr entered, his face hung, haggard as one beaten rather than a champion who had routed the enemy.

“Roland is dead,” Tyr said. “My friend. Dead.” The Ás champion cast a glower Vikar’s way. “That’s at your feet. A Vall who so disobeyed his commander would find himself strung up. In pursuit of your own glory, you endangered our oath-sworn allies.”

“A Vall?” Vikar blurted. “I am no Vall. Does need for glory drive my actions? Aye, and what else? Deeds woven in steel and hemmed with blood, these alone are the worthy aims of an Ás man, by glory alone do we earn our right to immortality or, failing that, a seat in Valhöll. Whilst lesser men content themselves to endure until time withers them, we strive for something more, an end that will not leave us making the long march to the Gates of Hel!”

Starkad glowered. “Whether he acted rashly or no, I cannot see my brother hanged.”

“Nor I,” Tyr agreed. “Neither can I forsake our allies and allow this to go unanswered. Only one punishment befitting his crimes. An Ás punishment. He must go where the wind takes him, welcome no longer in Valland ... nor Asgard.”

“Outlawry?” Vikar blurted. “You cannot be fucking serious. All I did was kill some Hel-cursed Serklanders!”

Tyr had the right of it, Starkad knew; exile was the traditional punishment for betrayal. But then again ... fuck tradition. “What authority does Valland have over Asgard? Send us back. Vikar may have earned the wrath of the southerners, but he may also have earned an apple.”

Tyr scoffed. “You think he deserves a reward? The ultimate reward? Man shamed us. Shamed all the Æsir.” The man cracked his neck. Groaned. “No. Banishment it is, and a mercy.”

Vikar sputtered. “But ... the apples?”

“Those are for Æsir, Son. I am left with no choice but to strip you of that title.”

“And me.” The words were bitter in Starkad’s mouth and had left him before he knew he meant to speak them.

“What?” Vikar said.

Tyr spun on him. “Son, you have no idea what—”

“Do not call me *son*, Tyr. Were I your son, you would have fought for my brother. If you cast him out, I go with him.”

Tyr glowered now. “Your bravado and threats change naught, Starkad. Urd is cruel. You may yet claim the prize of an apple ... if you don’t do this.”

Starkad sneered at his would-be father. “If my brother is no Ás, neither am I.”

Grumbling about fool children, Tyr rose, shook his head, and ducked out of the room. Hel and her accursed Mist take Tyr and Roland.



THE MORN ERE STARKAD LEFT, word came Tyr had called Ganelon out for his treachery, claimed he had plotted with Marsile to see the death of Roland. Starkad didn’t know the truth of it, maybe never would. Either way, Ganelon pleaded his innocence, but Karolus seemed unswayed and allowed Tyr to challenge him to trial by combat. Which was, so far as Starkad knew, an execution.

He and Vikar had no reason to linger, to watch. Instead, they packed and took the road north. For the North Realms were ever in need of mercenaries, ever keen for men of strong arm. But as they trekked that long road, Starkad found himself faced, ever and anon, with the same bitter question: why had he chosen this? Why, when Vikar had wrought his own

urd, had Starkad felt compelled to cast himself along the same path and thus deny himself the prize he had sought more than ought else in his life? Loyalty, beyond a point, he thought, became indistinguishable from vanity. But there was no way back, not for him.

The wind whipped them, icy, merciless, even as they made for colder lands.

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DAYS GONE: SIGYN

799 Age of Man

A low fire simmered in the pit in Frigg's room, its embers nigh burnt out even as Sigyn huddled close, warming her hands. Sigyn's half-sister had returned from the Wodan town, and returned with the new jarl of that clan, no less. Like any völvá, Frigg did what she did with a plan, though she oft kept close-lipped on the details. The völvá wanted Sigyn's advice, of course, but had too much pride to ask for it or even to reveal her endgame. Not that she had to.

Whenever they played tafl—one more game sat abandoned on the board nearby—Sigyn always won, much to her elder sister's chagrin. Frigg saw the board and the pieces, thought about her turns, and yet somehow never quite wrapt her mind around the finite possibilities of such a game. A limited number of moves existed and, discounting moves made without logic, fewer still remained.

The Hasding clan teetered upon a precipice, poised to collapse and be annihilated by any other clan, be it the Skalduns, Godwulfs, or Itrmanni. Sigyn's stomach churned at the thought of such a day. Men would come

with fire and lust, burning and raping, quick to enslave whomever they could and butcher the rest. Warriors, like her foster family, they would die. Noble women, like her sister, would be lucky to find themselves forced into marriage. Even the Wodan clan, those Frigg pleaded with for succour, had become a source of unpredictability. Their new jarl might embrace Borr's peace or reject it and betray the Hasdingi to their enemies. It meant Frigg needed to sway this Odin Borrson and do so with all haste, ere he set his course. To win him to their side, the Hasdingi would need to seduce him, be it with hacksilver, political power, or a more literal seduction, and the vólva daughter of a jarl would know of all such means.

From the way Frigg sat now, eyes staring into the flames, Sigyn could guess how well those tactics had worked. Frigg's maid, Fulla, brought a bowl of soup to her lady, then offered Sigyn one as well. Unlike everyone else in the fortress, the maid had never looked on Sigyn with disdain. Truly, even from a servant, a woman had to appreciate that. "Careful now," Fulla said. The maid had fiery red hair, a face full of freckles, and an over-quick smile, warmer even than the soup. "It's plenty hot and more than fresh."

"How can something be *more* than fresh?" Sigyn mumbled, not looking at the maid.

"Really, now, that's a silly question from such a smart girl. You just have to tell the cooks, you do, you tell them 'I want this extra fresh,' and they give it to you. With a smile. Most times you just have to ask for what you want." Sigyn snorted. "See now." Fulla pointed a finger at her. "You didn't leave the alfar their offering, did you? Now I told you twice, you just need to make an alfablót, even some beer would do—in the right place, of course, in an alf-stone—and they'd help you find yourself luck in love. But you didn't try it, did you now?"

"No man wants a wife smarter than he is," Sigyn mumbled. Freyja, she was tired of hearing her father spout that nonsense! She'd think the daughter of the jarl—even the *bastard* daughter—would have prospects.

And yet, nineteen winters was already nigh past marrying age. She shook her head at Fulla. Of course, her father had long held the family Alfablót during the harvest full moon, a ceremony to which Sigyn had never once been permitted. “If the alfar exist, why would they take the least interest in whom a mortal girl married?”

Fulla opened her mouth, but Frigg answered first. “They exist, all the vaettir do, sister, just beyond the edge of our world. The Otherworld touches ours in places. Do not forget that.”

“And,” Fulla added, “they’d care about your marriage if you made the alfablót, they would.”

Sigyn rolled her eyes.

“Jarl Odin has a grander urd upon him than I would have first thought.” Frigg looked at Sigyn. There it was, wanting advice, wanting to know how to plan her next move, still too proud to ask for it.

Sigyn folded her arms. “You’ve had one of your visions.” She made a special effort to keep any disdain from her voice. “But you don’t know what it means, whether you saw some truth or whether your vision was the result of smoking nasty weeds.”

“I do not smoke weeds, sister.”

Sure. “If you are so convinced of your mystical abilities, why do you doubt them?”

“I do not *doubt* my visions. I just ... Odin cares only for avenging his father and seemed more than taken aback to learn of my status.” Sigyn raised an eyebrow. “Oh, I did not tell him I was a völva. He determined as much after I read him.”

Sigyn sighed, then poked the fire. Tending it was Fulla’s task, but Sigyn was used to taking care of such things herself. Not everyone grew up in the jarl’s fortress. Unlike Frigg, Sigyn had learnt independence from a young age. “Whatever you plan will fail, not because you’ve chosen the wrong plan, but because you’ve chosen the wrong time. When you lost your

mother, would you have received the advances of a man, political, sexual, or otherwise?”

Frigg frowned and rubbed her arms at the mention of Fjörgyn Radmundsdotter’s death two winters back. Sigyn had comforted Frigg as best she could, but Fjörgyn had always despised Sigyn as the reminder of her husband’s infidelity. Only with Fjörgyn’s death had Sigyn even been allowed inside her father’s hall, and such vitriol made it hard to mourn the woman’s passing. Her death did not make this place home, though, nor did it endear her to anyone in it. She came here for Frigg, because her sister needed her, even if the völva hated to admit it.

Fulla clucked her tongue. “Now why’d you have to go and bring that up? Here my lady was almost able to forget how her mother went and died like that. It’s a hard thing, you know, a hard thing indeed, losing a parent. Now I would know, see. I lost both my parents in the war, and here I was a tiny girl, not even ten winters.”

Sigyn fixed Fulla with a level gaze, but the maid didn’t catch the barest hint of her intent. The Njarar War had cost them all a great deal. Sigyn’s mother had died, too, and her father would have exposed her to the winter had it not been for his thegn Agilaz taking her in. She sympathised with Fulla, of course, but the woman had the unending effusiveness of a girl of three winters and the credulity to match. “If you wish to win Odin to our side,” she said to her sister, “help him avenge Borr. Then, while he is flush with victory, *then* you start making your moves.”

Frigg frowned. “Aye, I told him about a tracker who came here, one Father has housed in the fortress.”

Sigyn shrugged. “Good. How you help him doesn’t matter overmuch. If he succeeds, he remembers he owes you, and if he fails, he knows you aided him as best you could.” She rose, stretching.

“You won’t stay here tonight?” Frigg asked.

Sigyn shook her head. Sleeping in Frigg's room she'd be safe enough, aye, but not even their father seemed to want her here. She had better places to be, places where people might relish her company and where none would look on her with the contempt of Hadding's court.



MOST WINTERS, Sigyn and her foster family stayed in Vestborg, the hunting fort Hadding had long ago granted to Agilaz, but Sigyn's foster family also owned a house here at Halfhaugr. They had remained here all winter. Much as Sigyn welcomed the chance to spend more time with Frigg, she abhorred the true reason they had wintered in Halfhaugr. And, as usual, her opinion counted about as much as single snowflakes did in a blizzard.

Torch in one hand, she swung open the house gate. Their hound, Shortsnout, rushed over and licked her hand with the enthusiasm and affection a woman found only in a dog. She patted the animal and whispered to him ere ushering him back toward the house.

Her foster brother, Hermod, was in the barn feeding Snow Rabbit. Agilaz had won the mare from a man who had enough mead to think he could outshoot the master archer, and ever since, Hermod had treated the horse as a member of the family. "You return late. We already took the night meal, and the Mist grows heavy, tremulous with anticipation to claim a wayward soul."

Sigyn shuddered at his implication. "Frigg has a guest."

Hermod had six winters on her. Whereas Agilaz had taught Sigyn basic woodcraft and archery, he had taught his son all he knew, shaping him into a master hunter and a talented warrior. Sigyn had once asked Orlun to train her as a shieldmaiden, but her foster mother had refused, claiming a woman with Sigyn's mind and lineage could do more off the battlefield than on it. *Lineage*. A bloodline that damned her every which way she turned, leaving

her with no place in the halls of the nobility, nor quite one outside those halls. Just important enough to warrant respect, meaning men whispered about her only when they thought she couldn't hear. *Odd one, that Sigyn. Always flitting from one craft to the next. Never settling like a proper lady.* She knew she was beautiful—that wasn't the issue. She had long, flaxen hair even Frigg envied, though her sister wouldn't admit that. Breasts, hips—all in the proportions any man should have wanted. She loathed to believe her father had the right of it, but in truth, hiding her intelligence had become a matter of course, at least outside her family.

She tapped a finger to her lip, waiting to see if Hermod would say more, but he just nodded and went back to caring for the damned horse. He never scorned her the way others did, but then, he didn't exactly *see* her either. And soon, he'd never get the chance. Sighing, she turned to head inside and almost crashed into Olrún. The blonde woman might have passed for Sigyn's real mother—they shared similar features, save Olrún's much more pronounced muscles, taut from years of swinging a sword. The woman put a hand on the back of Sigyn's neck and pulled her into an embrace. If her foster family didn't exactly know what to do with her, at least they always welcomed her.

The moment Sigyn broke away, Olrún pulled her inside. Agilaz sat by the fire pit, that ever-solemn expression on his face. He nodded at Sigyn and then, at some look from his wife, rose and headed outside without a word. Not a good sign. Shortsnout hopped up and followed his master outside, leaving Sigyn alone with Olrún.

After dousing her torch, Sigyn sat, helping herself to what remained of a snow fox, its flesh cooling but still greasy. No matter how hard winter grew, her foster father always managed to bring home something to eat. Unlike many in Halfhaugr, Sigyn rarely had to live with hunger.

Olrun slumped across from her. Her foster parents were not nigh as old as her real father, but still, time had worn on them. Olrún did not speak of

her past much, so Sigyn could only guess at her age. She had fought as a shieldmaiden in the Njarar War, twenty winters back, so Orlun must be fast approaching forty winters herself. Old enough she probably expected grandchildren soon. And now she'd finally get them.

"We need every tie we can get to the Godwulfs," Orlun said. Sigyn stuffed more fox in her face so she wouldn't have to answer. Orlun was more perceptive than her son, it seemed. The woman had a secret Sigyn had never uncovered, and not for lack of trying. She had thought, once, to trick Hermod into revealing the truth, but he had only claimed his mother had once been a valkyrja, having a jest at Sigyn's expense.

"If the engagement fails, Hadding's brother will have one more reason to stake his claim to this place."

Sigyn nodded, doing her utmost to seem in total accord with whatever Orlun said. Hadding's brother Alci Gundericson was jarl of the Godwulfs, but as a blood relative to Hadding, he did have a claim on Hadding's lands. Especially with his brother's health faltering and Father having no male heir. Hermod's marriage to a Godwulf noble's daughter would help ease the growing tensions between the clans, or so Jarl Hadding had convinced himself. After all, the son of his most trusted thegn? Hermod was the best Hadding could offer—since Frigg was a völva and Sigyn had all the worth of a frostbitten little toe.

She swallowed a bite of chewy meat. *Don't say it.* She should not speak. Not now. "If Alci wants Halfhaugr, you think marrying Hermod to someone not directly related to him will stop him?" And she said it.

Orlun scowled. Aye, Sigyn ought to have kept her damned mouth shut, as oft proved the case. "It will *help*."

Sure it would. Sigyn tossed a bone in the fire pit. "Well, then, I want to help too. I'll ride with Agilaz and Hermod to meet the Godwulfs."

Orlun shook her head and sighed. "*Sigyn*. No weal can come from your going, and I fear a great deal of ill might follow from it."

“Njörd knows when or if we’ll see Hermod again. I will go to bid my brother farewell.”

Olrun scooted closer until her face rested nigh unto Sigyn’s, and when she spoke, she did so in a whisper. “As long as you do so as a sister only. Do not confuse my son.”

Sigyn sighed and nodded. She would not confuse anyone.

No one save, perhaps, herself.



TOWARD EVENING, the Godwulf town came into view. They had made good time, Agilaz riding beside his son and Sigyn sitting behind him, pressed against a foster brother she might soon never see again. Snow Rabbit had carried them far each day, and they had needed to spend only a few nights in the wild, to everyone’s relief. Shortsnout trotted behind them all without complaint, though the aging hound collapsed with exhaustion each night. Agilaz had already convinced Hermod to keep the animal, saying he’d need a friend in his new home.

The Godwulf lands lay on the eastern reaches of Aujum, nigh to where the Járnavidr formed much of the border with Bjarmaland. The clan wandered, however, migrating with each passing summer, never wintering twice in the same place. Always, however, they remained around that accursed forest. Though the two clans famed for their therianthropes, Björn and Godwulf, watched the wood, in south and north respectively; no Man, not even a therianthrope, would dare enter the Járnavidr. Skalds claimed trolls dwelt there in ancient burrows, and their tales engendered nightmares in every woman in Midgard. Trolls ate men, on that, every skald agreed, debating only on whether trolls cooked a man first. But they took women as wives, as some people referred to the abomination that befell such a woman.

If she survived the rapes at all, stories told she was like to be torn apart when an infant troll clawed itself from her womb.

And did trolls really exist, or were they figments conjured up to frighten the gullible and keep women in line? Sigyn had spoken to no man—at least no man not swaying from drink—who had seen such creatures with his own eyes, and she had asked. In many a skald’s tale, trolls were the misbegotten offspring of the equally fanciful jötunnar, the beings of chaos beyond the edge of Midgard. But then, she knew of no one who had seen Utgard, either.

A wolf howl rang out as they drew nearer the town of Kaldlund, drawing a growl from Shortsnout. Agilaz spoke softly to the hound, eyes locked on the direction the howl had come from. The Godwulfs claimed to guard the Járnvídr lest the trolls emerge and threaten all the North Realms. Perhaps they even spoke truth, had indeed faced perilous fiends of the Mist. Mostlike, though, they used it as an excuse for their never-ending raiding, their own rape and plunder of foreigners and other Ás clans alike. And varulfur *did* exist. They could plant their seed in a woman’s belly, and oft as not, the child would bear the traits of the father, waiting to rise. Such were the men Hermod had been sent to live among.

She had drawn a little closer to him. How could she not? Varulfur and berserkir could barely contain their aggression and lust when they *tried*, and most of them didn’t bother, from what she heard. Agilaz had warned her against coming here, but she would not let go of Hermod without seeing him safe. If he was lost from her life, he ought at least to be able to live his own, even if it was among such savage brutes as these.

“Don’t worry,” Hermod said. “We are guests here. No harm will befall you.”

“Mmm.” How was she to tell him she feared as much for him as for herself? Such a sentiment would insult his honour. And Orlun had spoken the truth—they did need peace with the Godwulfs, lest Hadding’s varulf

brother come to take Halfhaugr from them. If that happened, anarchy would fall upon the Hasding town. Frigg, their father, and everyone else Sigyn cared for would face a bloodbath.

Kaldlund had only a spiked wooden palisade around it, no ancient stone wrought in times past. Scant protection against the Mist and its denizens. A fur-swathed man met them at the gate, axe in his hand. He nodded at Agilaz, and her foster father rode up and dismounted before him.

“Agilaz Farshot.” The Godwulf man beckoned them inward with a wave. “Jarl Alci bids you join him for the night meal.”

“How did they know we’d be here today?” Sigyn whispered into Hermod’s ear.

“Scouts have followed us for hours,” he whispered back. The Godwulf had turned to stare at them. “And he can probably hear us.” Varulf hearing was *that* good? A fine blessing, though she’d not have wanted the savagery that accompanied it.

The guard pointed toward the largest hall, and Agilaz started off that way. Hermod helped her off the horse, then climbed down himself and began to lead the animal after his father. “I want you to keep her,” Hermod said when they neared the jarl’s hall.

“What?”

“Snow Rabbit. Mostlike chances to ride or hunt shall prove fleeting in the days to come, for me, and the girl deserves someone who can give her the attention she needs. When you go from here, take her with you, and I’ll count the both of you fortunate to have one another.”

Her mind raced through a dozen responses, none of which seemed sufficient rejoinder to Hermod bestowing upon her his most prized possession. “Thank you.” Brilliant. With such ingenious lines, she need not worry about outsmarting a potential husband. Freyja! Why wouldn’t her tongue work properly when she actually needed it? It certainly got her in enough trouble when she ought to have stayed silent.

He handed the reins to a thrall who had already taken Agilaz's horse. Hand on her shoulder, Hermod guided her toward the hall. Inside, thick smoke clogged the air, wafting among the rafters and choking her. None of the raucous men and women seemed bothered, all noisily boasting, feasting, drinking. Some of them wore almost no clothing, despite the chill creeping into the hall. A woman, shieldmaiden perhaps, sat on a bench, topless, paying not the slightest attention to a man sucking on her breast as she downed great swigs from a drinking horn. Two men wearing not a stitch took turns punching each other in the face while others laughed and shouted encouragement.

Even through the smoke, the Godwulf hall stank of wolves.

The bare-chested jarl lounged upon his throne, one leg thrown over an armrest, his long hair flowing like a red river over his shoulders. Maybe Hadding had looked thus twenty or twenty-five winters ago, though she found it hard to imagine him with the pompous self-assuredness of his brother. Still, they shared enough in common, the set of their eyes, that calculating look in them, that she would have known him even had he not sat upon the throne.

Alci had seen them, though he gave only the slightest inclination of his head to Agilaz and none at all to her or Hermod.

Another man rose, his own brown hair streaked with grey, and beckoned them over. "Come. I am Hœnir, thegn to Jarl Alci." And father of the woman now intent on stealing Hermod away. Agilaz and Hermod sat on the bench where Hœnir indicated, and Sigyn squeezed in between them rather than find herself wedged against any of the abhorrent warriors at the table. Hœnir pointed to a blonde woman across from him. A vicious scar ran from her forehead, split the bridge of her nose, and reached the edge of her cheek. The woman had arms thick as a man's. "This is my daughter, Syn."

A shieldmaiden. Hermod was marrying a godsdamned shieldmaiden. Of course he was. Orlun had been a shieldmaiden, won glory for herself and

her family, so why would her son want any ordinary woman?

The woman licked grease from her fingers and stared at Hermod with greedy eyes but offered not a single gesture or token of respect. A barely controlled bitch who ought to be kept with the elkhounds. Sigyn forced a pleasant smile and nodded at the scarred shieldmaiden. Not a varulf, or she wouldn't have such a pronounced scar. Sigyn ought to thank Freyja for small blessings.

Agilaz exchanged pleasantries with Hœnir and his men, introducing Hermod all around and even Sigyn, though she found herself with little to say to any of these people. How many of them were varulfur? It didn't matter, she supposed. Even could they ever have turned back, that time had passed, and they were trapped here. Whether *these* men and women were varulfur did not matter, not when dozens, maybe hundreds, in this clan clearly were. They had walked into the den of wolves, and one of them would not walk out.



HÆNIR GAVE the three of them a room in his own modest house. After long hours of drinking that left Sigyn warm and swaying, they had retired there. She had almost let one of the warriors lead her away and ease her pain and frustration, if only for a moment. But she was not quite that drunk, nor would she let herself be. Not here.

Her foster brother had collapsed on the floor and now lay snoring in front of the brazier, their hound curled up against his side. Agilaz, however, watched her, expression grave.

Fine. So he wanted to talk. She could talk. Maybe not as well as usual, but why should she care anymore? She spread her hands, welcoming whatever carefully placed shot he had planned for her.

Agilaz, however, never spoke quickly, never rushed. He believed in having a plan and sticking to it, and he had told her as much. Repeatedly. “I spoke to Olrun ere we left. She believed you should not have come here.”

“None of us should have. What good do you think sacrificing your son will bring the Hasdingi?”

Agilaz looked to where Hermod lay, then shook his head. “I am not sacrificing him. Olrun and I chose to make our lives in Aujum, with your father, because I judged Hadding a good man.”

Did he now? “A man who would have exposed his own daughter.”

Her foster father frowned. “Hadding made many mistakes, but such is life. He trusted King Nidud of Njarar, borrowed gold and finely wrought weapons to fight his enemies.” Sigyn shrugged. She knew of the Njarar War, of how it had torn the clans apart. Two and a half summers of murder and revenge, war and discord, that engulfed half of Aujum ere it ended. “Otwin Nidudson has called in those debts, Sigyn. He’s called for payment Hadding doesn’t have. And so, our enemies multiply, whilst our friends dwindle. We *need* Hadding’s brother turned to our cause lest the Svjarlander king march against us. If word reaches the king of renewed love between the brothers, he would be like to turn his eyes elsewhere.”

So it was not only the other Ás clans her father feared, but foreign kings as well. And because of that fear, he’d make any bargain, cling to any hope, no matter how ephemeral. Just as Frigg, in her own desperation, sought to call upon Jarl Odin for aid, so had her father sent Agilaz to befriend Jarl Alci. The trouble was, neither of the jarls had overmuch reason to offer loyalty. That Hermod was not betrothed to a varulf girl came as a welcome relief on one hand, but on the other, it meant Alci had given up the daughter of one of the least of his thegns. She rubbed her eyes. “If you are wrong, if Alci turns on us, who do you think the first to fall will be now?”

Agilaz sighed and looked again at his sleeping son. Did Hermod even realise the danger he had placed himself in? “Get some sleep, Sigyn. We

leave in the morn.”

Oh, but she did not think sleep would come easy this night.

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THE VÖLSUNGS

15 Age of the Æsir

*B*arnstokkr's branches scraped the roof of the Völsung hall in Xanten—of Father's hall, really, for he had become a legend throughout the North Realms. Sigmund supposed that was why Siggeir Wolfsblood had come calling during this feast. A king of Sviarland, Wolfsblood had earned his fame by overcoming a pack of varulfur, or so tale told. They said he, a Gautish jarl under King Haki of Ostergotland, had conquered the werewolves, defeated the Skanic king, and carved himself a kingdom.

Wolfsblood sat at Father's table now, his great host seated at the lesser tables, all toasting and feasting, most drunk, their clamour echoing off the longhouse rafters. With summer came the time for raids and war-making, aye, but peacemaking too, and Wolfsblood claimed to come in peace. Sigmund, for his part, leant forward and watched the foreign king, saying little, though his brothers joined in the ruckus. Their line was a testament to Father's virility—Sigmund's nine younger brothers and, of course, his twin Sieglinde, who, like him, watched the celebration without comment as she kept the horns filled with mead. She drifted among the men, spectre-like,

though she cast the occasional glance Sigmund's way—a knowing passed between them of who offered meaningless flattery and who brought true friendship.

Smoke from numerous braziers made the air thick, sweltering, and washed it with a haze that concealed the recesses of the longhouse.

A great many others had come this moon, nobles from around Hunaland all eager to see where the great Völsung would turn his eye this summer. In offering to join his raids, many of those nobles sought to keep from becoming the targets. Sigmund heard the rumours, of course, that one day Father would rule all of Hunaland.

Some claimed Odin and the new gods favoured Father, though the king never said it. Others argued the god himself had been the one to drive the runeblade, Gramr, into Barnstokkr as a sign of his support. In truth, it mattered little. If the people thought Father blessed by the gods, it was enough to earn their loyalty. And the sword yet remained embedded there, a silent reminder of the power sleeping within this hall.

Wolfsblood banged his empty drinking horn against the table and stood, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “King Völsung. I travelled far on the stories of your daughter's beauty, and I find I am not disappointed.”

Sigmund's father inclined his head, then looked to Sieglinde. Sigmund's twin sister stepped back into the shadows, feigning demureness; Sigmund doubted anyone else recognised it as affected. For none could know a person better than their twin.

“So then,” Wolfsblood said, “I would ask you for her hand in marriage and make a worthy alliance between our kingdoms.”

A few of Sigmund's brothers whooped, banging on the table. Sigmund did not.

Father inclined his head once again. “What say you, Sieglinde?”

Sigmund's twin sister glanced up long enough to reveal the daggers in her eyes. Hidden blades no other would see, Sigmund feared. “As in all

things, Father, you must do as you think best.”

Sigmund sighed. Loyal to a fault. He saw naught wrong with Wolfsblood, of course, and the man would make a fine ally. Still, he could scarce wish unhappiness on his sister, and Skane was far, across the Morimarusa, in foreign lands.

Father clapt his hands together. “Then come, let us discuss the terms of our arrangement.” He beckoned Wolfsblood over, and the two kings began arguing over the worth of Sieglinde.

Sigmund rose and searched the hall for his sister, finding her at last helping herself to a long enough swig of mead to make a shieldmaiden proud. “You do not approve?” he asked.

“It’s not for me to say.” She covered a burp, then took another swig.

Sigmund snorted. “He is wealthy, well respected, and famed across the North Realms. Even if not as much as Father, still.”

“Wealthy and famous. What more could a woman want?”

“Indeed!” He clapt her on the arm. “Indeed, I’m glad you see that. Come now, let us have some food.”

Sieglinde rolled her eyes and followed him back to the table to accept her share of elk. Clearly she was not pleased, but perhaps every girl felt so ere her wedding. She would come around.



A SPECTRE of dread stole through the torrent of memory, prowling closer.

Waves of pain hit Sigmund, waking him and warning him not to open his eyes. He did so anyway, then promptly retched, spewing filth over his hauberk. Blood from his broken nose had crusted over his lips and jaw, flaking as he moved. It took several moments of blinking to clear his vision.

“You’re awake,” Vern said. Sigmund groaned, looked around. He and his five brothers were in the woods. Chains around their ankles bound them,

attached to stakes driven into a fallen tree trunk.

Grief crept upon him, eager to swallow the cosmos with its gawping maw, yet still unreal. For who could grieve over an impossibility? *Father ...*

Sigmund groaned. No sign of anyone else. Grunting, Sigmund grasped the stake as best he could—most of it was deep in the wood—and tugged. Carr snorted. “You can imagine we tried that already, big brother.” Sigmund glowered and gave it over. He could not even get his whole palm around the damn stake.

“Our sister pleaded for our lives,” Vern said, looking sallow. “This was the result.” The arrow had been removed from his arm, but no one had bound the wound. Without aid, he would mostlike perish ere the day was out. Vern had his good hand clamped over the wound, for the limited benefit that would offer.

Seeing his brother like that ... oh gods! *Father!* The thought of it tried to overshadow him, seeking substance in his mind, though he could not even fathom the shape of something so vast. Odin help them now. Yet, his kin looked not to the new gods but to Sigmund, for he, the eldest, was meant to save them. In this, he could not fail. Sigmund braced his feet against the trunk, grasped the chain with both hands, and heaved. The damn thing didn’t budge a hair. If only he had Gramr! She’d have hewed through the hardened trunk as if through a sapling. Where was his precious runeblade? Had Wolfsblood claimed it for himself? Aye, he yearned for that blade ... Aye.



THE FEASTING WENT on for several days, stretched now to accommodate the wedding. Siggeir Wolfsblood had brought with him chests of hacksilver and trinkets of gold some claimed wrought by Volund himself in Njarar, in decades past, when the smith yet served old king Nidud. All fine prizes, and

more than Father could have dreamt to seek. Mayhap that was why Völsung took no heed of the way Sieglinde emerged from her bedding, unsteady on her feet, eyes red and swollen. Sigmund, however, could recognise the signs of a woman used harshly. Those caught during raids oft looked thus when Father's men finished with them, brought back as thralls.

Some men were like that, he knew. Maybe the man had hurt her on purpose; maybe he'd just been too fervent in his attentions. Either way, he was a bastard, Mist take him. Yet any word Sigmund might utter risked shaming Father and Sieglinde both. Still, part of him wished to call out Wolfsblood. At fifteen winters, Sigmund was well past the age of manhood and had a right to challenge anyone he saw fit. But ... if he did so, no one would thank him for it, least of all Sieglinde, more like than not. That she said naught herself meant she did not wish attention drawn to the matter.

Instead, Sigmund sat in silence, glowering at their guests. Perhaps his twin had even had a foreboding of her husband's appetites. Perhaps that was why she had little wished this. It was now far too late to renege on their agreement, though, the marriage sealed with the bedding. So Sigmund sat in simmering rage, willing Wolfsblood to burst into flame. The king did no such thing, boasting and laughing and drinking up Völsung hospitality, voracious and insouciant.

One of Wolfsblood's thegns had begun trying to loose Gramr from the tree trunk. As expected, the man failed, giving up with a huff and spew of spittle. "What is this?" Wolfsblood demanded.

Vern laughed. One of the triplets, Sigmund's next oldest siblings, Vern was a man himself, as he loved to remind others. "An old wizard left that there for the worthiest warrior in the North Realms. No finer blade exists, but no one has ever drawn it. Nor will they. Men come to try every summer."

Wolfsblood chortled. "Truly?" He strode to the sword. "We shall see." He wrapt both of his meaty fists around the bone hilt and heaved, straining

until his muscles twitched. A vein began to pop on the man's blighted head. Sigmund folded his arms, not bothering to hide his smug smile. Watching Wolfsblood fail at something this day would not be amiss, he decided. As expected, Wolfsblood flung up his arms and spat. "It is true then. None may claim this blade." And there he was, huffing, chest heaving, and glaring at the ancient sword as if it had personally offended him.

"Won't you try, brother?" Sieglinde asked.

Sigmund started, not having heard her approach. She covered any shame or discomfort she felt well enough now, though it lurked deep in her eyes, a frightened beast, skulking in the dark. "Would it please you?" Sigmund asked.

She inclined her head, so he sighed and strode to the tree. He gripped the bone hilt. It was smooth and cool and comfortable enough, as if it were crafted for his own palm. The pattern-woven blade bore runes—said to be carved by the dvergar who forged it, if you believed in such creatures—but the metal had a strange hue to it, an almost rosy-gold colour that caught the firelight and had it flowing like rich ale through the blade. For his sister's sake, he wished he could free the damn blade and shame her husband. So, one good heave and—

Sigmund stumbled backward as the runeblade jerked free of the trunk, tearing out a shower of splinters in the process. The entire hall fell silent. Father rose from his throne. Sigmund knew his mouth hung agape but could not close it as he turned to his father.

"The spell is broken," Father said. "For the worthiest warrior has come to claim the sword." Men cheered, Sigmund's brothers most of all.

"Godsdamn Sigmund," Vern said. Then his brother laughed. "Always have to be first at everything."

"'Twas well done, indeed" Wolfsblood said. The Gautish king drew nigh, staring down at the runes engraved along the length of the blade, fingers starting to reach for them. "Very worthy ..." Wolfsblood leered at

the blade like he might a woman, so much that Sigmund wanted to jerk it away from him—or thrust it into his gut. “And what price would you ask for such a weapon?”

“Price?” Sigmund glanced at the blade in his hand. The blade that was like a part of his hand, in truth. For it was his. It had always been his, waiting for him, slumbering ere now. This he knew, in the pith of his soul, from the moment he held it.

“I will gift you three times its weight in gold for this blade, and a more generous offer you will never hear.”

Sigmund looked to Sieglinde where she stood, eyes hard, still tinged red. He turned back to Wolfsblood with a sneer. “Were the sword meant for you, you could have claimed it from the tree where it stood. Now you shall never hold it, not for all the gold in your kingdom.”

The Gautish king snorted, then waved it off as if of no consequence.

After a last look, he sauntered back over to his seat. “More mead!” he snapped at Sieglinde.

Sigmund, though, could not take his eyes off Gramr. It glittered in the light of the brazier, promising him great battles and glories beyond his dreams. It was his.



SIGMUND COULD NOT BREAK the fetters that bound himself, which did not stop him from trying. His father would have wanted him to save his brothers. *Father ...* They followed his lead, save for Vern, each of them grasping the chains and pulling—and with no more avail than he had found, though neither did anyone speak against the effort. Most of them bore wounds as well, though Vern’s looked the most grievous. Finally, Sigmund gave over any attempt to dislodge the stake. He needed another tack. A long while he sat, but no idea held the slightest hope of success. Perhaps that was

the true torture Wolfsblood had thought up for them—that they would sit here in despair, waiting to starve, watching Vern expire. And when that happened, they would be unable to even grant him rest in a pyre.

Or worse ... as night fell, the Mist would thicken. It was hungry, always hungry, ready to creep inside a man like an accursed vaettr. Sigmund touched his iron buckle in hopes such would ward him against the Mist and its denizens. When he looked again, Vern seemed to have fallen asleep. “Brother! Vern!” His younger brother stirred, opened an eye, and groaned. “You must stay awake. I ... I will think of something. All is not lost.”



THE MORN FOLLOWING the night Sigmund claimed Gramr was clear and the seas calm, and thus, Siggeir Wolfsblood had claimed it a good day to sail back to Skane. Father made a half-hearted attempt to persuade the man to stay longer but clearly had no intention of compelling one who wished to be gone. Nor would Sigmund regret the bastard's leaving, save that it meant losing Sieglinde.

She came now to call upon them while others helped make ready for the journey. With the runeblade slung over his shoulder, Sigmund watched the scene, reclining against Barnstokkr, and feeling an odd kinship to the tree.

“I ... have a foreboding of misery for us all, Father,” Sieglinde said. His sister wrung her hands before her abdomen, looking from Father to Mother and back again. Was she still in pain? Sigmund ought to ram Gramr right up Wolfsblood's arse and see if he could walk straight. “I do not wish to go with him. We have erred—please, dissolve this marriage contract and free me. I beg you.”

Father glanced at Mother, who nodded. He, however, shook his head, his face growing dark. “You cannot voice such thoughts, Daughter. Breaking the contract would shame both us and him and surely make an

enemy of Skane. We cannot afford such a foe now whilst we work to unite Hunaland, and with Valland clamouring at our borders, no less. We must hold this contract or find ourselves with foes on all sides.”

Sigmund narrowed his eyes. Father, for all his glory, never quite seemed to understand his own daughter. Sigmund was never certain whether her so-called forebodings were more than her own fancy or not, but nor could he stand to see his sister distressed.

“Think of your child,” Mother said. “You cannot understand what it is for a woman to be forced to—”

“I am thinking of all my people and all my children! We cannot become known as false in our dealings with other kings! Not without just cause. If Sieglinde did not wish to marry, she should have spoken so ere the wedding.”

Sigmund rose. It was not his place to speak, but if he held his peace, he would regret it almost as much as Sieglinde. “Father. She sought to honour you and your wishes, as ever.”

The king sighed. “And now she must continue to do so. No other course lies before us.”

At that, Sigmund’s twin bowed. Always willing to submit, to do well by her family. Sigmund’s mouth tasted bitter. He’d have spit right in the hall, would it not have dishonoured his father. Even so, he was tempted.



NIGHT FELL, the Mist gathered until he could scarce see beyond five feet, and still, no tenable plan had come to him. If they kept breathing these vapours, they would fall to Mist-madness long ere starving. No matter how he turned, every path before them held naught but darkness. The sword-sleep on a battlefield would have proved a mercy.

Was Father then the one the Norns had favoured? His fall played out before Sigmund's eyes, time and again, in gut-churning clarity, mocking the feeble attempts of Sigmund's mind to deny the reality he could not abide. *Father* ... How could a mountain crumble? How a sea run dry? In the space between two heartbeats, the World was changed. Those left behind, they had little choice save to rush to catch up.

A low snarl rang out through the woods. All the brothers, even Vern, sat upright. Staring, searching for a sign of what predator had made that sound. But in the forest, at night, with the Mist, Sigmund could make out so little. It was dark as the shadows of Svartalfheim, and whatever stalked them remained well out of sight. A long howl erupted from the forest, as if fleeing from the Gates of Hel. "Dire wolf," Colborn said. Sigmund still searched the woods for any sign. As if in answer, a massive wolf trod forward, all black fur and grim fangs. And eyes, glinting with more than animal cunning.

Siggeir Wolfsblood—so named because he was said to have conquered a pack of varulfur. Or, mayhap, he had not conquered them at all; maybe he had cowed them, as one of them. This wasn't King Siggeir, though—it was a bitch. Wolfsblood himself had not had the courage to face Father on the battlefield and now perhaps lacked the stones to even come and end this himself. Instead, he'd sent a woman to do it.

"Come on, then," Sigmund said. "Come to me and let us have done!" The wolf looked to him and snarled, showing off teeth almost as long as his finger. This beast was larger even than a dire wolf. "Come to me!" Sigmund shouted. He would not fear this bitch. He would meet death proud and on his feet. He rose, straining once again against the manacles binding his feet.

The she-wolf continued to pace around the trunk, watching them, her eyes luminous.

"B-brother," Carr said. "I do not think it wise to—"

“Fight me, you wretched bitch!” They might all die this night, but if they met such an urd with courage, perhaps they could avoid being dragged down to meet Hel. Valkyrjar came for the brave, and, if naught else, Sigmund could see to it his brothers died bravely. “You think we fear you? You filthy beast, we are Men! Even bound, we shall—”

The varulf surged forward. Her teeth sank into Vern’s throat. With a savage twist, she tore out a huge chunk of flesh, showering Sigmund in blood and gore.

“No!”

The varulf jerked her head again, and Vern’s blood now flew into Sigmund’s open mouth. The beast chomped down twice ere swallowing. And then she bit again, feasting on Vern’s corpse before their eyes. Sigmund lunged forward, but the chains jerked him to a stop. She was just out of his reach. “Bitch! Fiend! Hel and Mist take you!”

Her shoulder’s convulsed as if she laughed. And then she continued the macabre feast. Bones snapped under her jaws. She tore off an arm and gnawed on it. She ripped out his entrails and flung the steaming rope of them at Colborn, who had begun to tremble and mumble in horror.

“Do not look away!” Sigmund commanded. “Give her no satisfaction of your fear! Face her!”

But it went on and on until naught but charnel remained of Sigmund’s beloved brother. The she-wolf turned to meet Sigmund’s gaze. She lapped blood off her snout with an overgrown tongue. Then she trod off into the woods, leaving them in darkness once again, now saturated with the stench of death. Sigmund fell back against the trunk. He cursed Siggeir Wolfsblood.

And he cursed himself for his failures.



WOLFSBLOOD STOOD ABOARD HIS LONGSHIP, Sigmund's sister behind him. The ice upon the sea had broken ere his arrival, though drifts of snow still lingered in heaps around the town. Summer would be upon them soon, but summer was short, and the chance for raids as fleeting. Always, the ice was creeping in, the Mist thickening. Men stood now, with torches, banishing the brume as best they could. Arms folded across his chest, Sigmund watched as the Gautish king bid them farewell. It sat ill with him, but Father spoke truth: for Sieglinde to back out of the marriage would spark war, or worse, Wolfsblood siding with their enemies against them.

"Well then, we leave with the tide," Wolfsblood said. "But King Völsung, you and your kin must come to call upon us soon, ere the summer is out. Say in three moons?"

Father cocked his head. "Come to Skane?"

"We would love to," Sigmund said. After all, it would ensure he could check in on Sieglinde. If that bastard treated her ill, maybe war would prove needful. Welcome, even. His fingers twitched, eager to wrap around Gramr's bone hilt, to draw the blade.

Father raised an eyebrow at Sigmund's presumption, but he did nod. "Very well, King Siggeir. Expect us in three moons."

"I will look for you." With that, he turned away and ordered his men to cast off the lines.

Sigmund lingered, watching. It would be a long three moons, waiting and wondering how his sister fared in the foreign land. A long three moons indeed.

DAYS GONE: ODIN

799 Age of Man

*H*alfhaugr lay at the centre of Aujum, and thus some might have called it the heart of Ás lands. It earned its name from the hill it sat on, broken as if a jötunn had cleft it in twain. A spiked wooden palisade protected the town, with a single entrance by the river. Odin had visited here already, of course, and like now, he could not decide whether he ought to be impressed at the defences or not. Aye, the strong wall and the fortress beyond probably kept the people safe within—even as it kept them prisoner in their own homes, thralls to the fears that surrounded them. Fears of the Mist, of the vaettir, of even the other clans of Æsir all too eager to claim this central location.

Odin's clan traded the security of such places for the ability to pursue game as it migrated. The Hasdingi would have to send their hunters far and wide to feed themselves. Fear reigned here, more than any jarl. It had long since conquered these people, and a people conquered once could be conquered again. Still, the fortress was built of ancient stone, marked with strange runes perhaps only völvur could read. It stood tall, with a pair of

ravens sitting atop its peak as if taunting him. Ravens fed on corpses, and taking this place would create a great many of those.

Jarl Hadding Gundericson had given his guest a room within the fortress. Odin and Tyr awaited this foreigner now, sitting in a feast hall lit by too few braziers and oil lamps hanging from chains, all bathing the hall in smoky light. The whole place was choked in shadow and stank of too many men, women, and hounds huddling too close together. And from otherwise empty corners, Odin fancied he heard the moans of the dead, who sought to deny their urd, to delay their long trek to the Gates of Hel.

“I do not understand why you think some foreigner will find what I could not,” Tyr said. “Your place is guiding your clan. Not charging off alone on such a vain hope.”

Odin shrugged. “Go back to them, if you will. I’ll not let a chance to avenge Father pass me by.”

The shadows half masked Tyr’s answering scowl. Tyr cracked his neck. “I have no intention of letting the heir of Borr get himself killed.”

They sat apart from the Hasding warriors. A few had tried to approach, to offer mead or elk flesh for the night meal. Odin had accepted the food but ushered away company. He did not come here seeking companionship from cravens.

“’Tis not my urd to perish ere I avenge Father.” Could willing a thing with strong enough intent make it so?

Tyr thumped the table with his forefinger. “I fear you haven’t given proper thought to our *own* guest. Idunn. She comes to you, asks you to fulfil Borr’s legacy. To make yourself king of the Æsir. How can you back away from such a calling? What better way to honour your father? If you were to unite the Æsir, we could fulfil his dreams and more.”

Odin rubbed the stubble on his chin ere fixing Tyr with a level gaze. Surely his father’s thegn knew better than that. Odin had a greater duty to his father. He had sworn blood vengeance, and he was damned tired of

having to remind everyone of that. A figure drifted toward them, moving in and out of firelight and shadow. The man nodded at them as he drew nigh, and Odin motioned for him to sit. The stranger did so, staring at Odin with intensely blue eyes, almost like crystal. Deep, haunted, seeming to know too much, like some damned völva. The stranger had auburn hair hanging to his cheekbones, contrasting with the darker hair of his short beard.

“You are Loki?” Odin asked.

“Aye, Odin, I am.”

Frigg must have told him about them. The man didn’t talk like a foreigner, though the völva had referred to him as such. His skin tone was a bit deeper than others here, though perhaps not so much as Idunn’s. “Whence do you hail?”

Loki laced his fingers together on the table, eyes refusing to release Odin from their gaze. “That’s not what you came here to ask me, nor would names of far-off lands hold much meaning to your ears.”

“Miklagard?” The southern empire was more legend than place, at least to most clans, but Odin had heard the Friallaf clan had fought several skirmishes against them. They sailed the Black Sea in great longships every summer, seeking plunder and glory.

The barest hint of a smile quirked on Loki’s face. “Would you not rather speak of the true purpose of your visit to Halfhaugr? Do the empires of the South Realms hold such interest for you now?”

Odin shrugged. “Hardly. I want to know about Unterhagen. So unless Miklagarders were the ones to massacre the village ... Do you know of it?”

“I know it. I walked there the day after it fell.” Ere even Tyr or Odin reached it.

Tyr leant across the table, staring at the foreigner. “Then how do we know you were not with the raiders who wrought this havoc?”

“You saw the ruins, did you not? And do you believe it the work of Men? Men are indeed capable of the vilest of deeds, of terrible savagery,

but there are forces of chaos in the wild possessed of far greater strength than Men.”

“You mean trolls,” Tyr said, the warrior’s disgust obvious in his voice. Odin had seen a troll only once in his life and had been fortunate enough not to have to fight it. The creatures were ungodly strong, larger than Men, and oft possessed of rock-like hides.

No doubt trolls could have done it, but still ... “They killed the women, too,” Odin said. “Trolls claim human women as wives.”

Loki nodded. “When you think upon the wild, upon the lands beyond the World of Man, what comes to mind?”

Odin folded his arms. The foreigner was playing some kind of game with him, one he did not much appreciate. “Speak plainly, man. If you know what else besides trolls might have ...” Beyond the World of Man. Beyond the ... He shook his head. “No. If you are having a jest with me, I warn you I’ve no mood for it.”

“Ere the snows buried the tracks, one could see footprints too large for a Man. What leaves such spoor save jötunnar or their troll kin?”

Tyr groaned. “You think a fucking jötunn did this?” Most of the jötunnar were supposed to live beyond the Midgard Wall, banished into the outer Realm of Utgard by the Vanir, Ages back. Supposed to, but then, he and Tyr knew of at least one on this side. Odin glanced at Tyr, who shook his head. “Hymir dwells far from here, in Bjarmaland,” Tyr said. “I scarce think he could have ventured undetected.” Bjarmaland lay far to the east, nigh unto where the boundary of the Midgard Wall supposedly lay, encircling the world of Man and warding it against the forces of chaos. The Æsir had lived there, generations back, ere King Vingethor had brought them to Aujum in the Great March. Tyr was right: if the jötunn had left his kingdom in Bjarmaland, word would have spread like as if borne on eagle wings.

Loki stared at Tyr now. “There is another who has crossed the Wall. Older and more powerful than his descendant Hymir. One called Ymir.”

The thegn scoffed. “I say this man is a liar, Odin. He could not possibly know the things of which he speaks. Even if he went to Unterhagen, even if he saw the tracks. You think *tracks* told him the *name* of their owner? If he speaks truth at all, it could only be because he serves the fucking jötunn.”

Odin bit back his response. Tyr would know about serving a jötunn. In service to Hymir, Tyr had raped and murdered, plundered and razed his way through half of Aujum until Father had stopped him. But Father had asked Odin never to speak of that. Loki did not immediately answer as a thrall girl came and offered them a fresh drinking horn. Odin took it, threw back a long swig of the mead, then passed it to Tyr.

In the fringes, unseen speakers moaned of their urd, and Odin wanted to curse them, to say their cowardice in lurking behind these walls had wrought their fate. What of Odin’s urd, now bereft of his father, his life rent asunder in a single night?

As the girl left, Loki quirked a hint of a smile, though Odin could have sworn the man’s own gaze had followed Odin’s sidelong glance at the shadows. “Anger is apt to cloud perception, and ignorance to narrow the possibilities you can conceive of. So burdened, one forgets, perhaps, one might take independent pieces of information and from them cobble together a clearer whole. Stories, woven together, form a tapestry.”

Tyr drained the horn without offering a single sip to Loki, then belched ere turning to Odin. “This man seeks to lure you with honeyed words. Like a skald. I cannot say what he wants and for that alone, I say we leave him be. Go back. Talk to Idunn, give weight to her words.”

At that, Loki’s smile slipped and he frowned. He did not speak, however, instead fixing Odin with that intense gaze of his.

Odin stared back a moment ere answering. “Where do I find this Ymir?”

“In the peaks of the Sudurberks, not so very far from Unterhagen.”

“My lord,” Tyr said. “You cannot consider this. Even if he speaks truth, the Sudurberks cover half of Midgard. How will you search such a massive area?”

“I can track Ymir,” Loki said. Odin nodded. Finally, progress. Father would know peace.

“You cannot fight a jötunn,” Tyr said. “They are larger and stronger than Men. Than even trolls. It is Mist-madness taking you.”

Odin slammed his fist on the table, drawing every eye in the feast hall. “Tyr! I weary of your complaints. If you are so enamoured with the woman claiming to be Idunn, go to her. And tell my brothers to meet me at Unterhagen. We shall hunt our father’s murderer.”

Tyr rose, mouth agape, stammering. “M-my lord? My place is by your—”

“Go!” Odin snapped. “Send for my brothers.”

Tyr rolled his shoulders, then cracked his neck. He toyed with the arm ring Father had given him as a symbol of his loyalty. Loyalty that ought now to bind him to Odin’s commands. “As you wish.”

The foreigner watched as Tyr stormed out of the hall, then turned back to Odin. “Your warrior strives to do right by you.”

Odin grunted. He knew that, and he sure as Hel didn’t need some foreigner to tell him. “Right now, all I care about is Father. This jötunn stole him from me, and for that I will send his soul screaming down to Hel. Anyone not aiding me impedes me.”

“Oh, I will help you, Odin. Count on that.”

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INTERLUDE: THE KVENNS

779 Age of Man

(Twenty Years Before the Rise of Odin)

The fortress of Halfhaugr was named for the hill it sat on, a lopsided slope that looked to have been chopped off with an axe. A high wooden wall surrounded the town, in addition to the fortress proper, funnelling travellers to a single gate nigh to the river. The town looked much like any well-defended settlement in Kvenland, in fact, far as it was from Agilaz's homeland. Given the spearmen watching the gate, they expected trouble sooner or later. No surprise. A day back, Agilaz and Hermod had passed through a battlefield lit with numerous pyres. The victors had burnt the dead to keep them from rising but had left skulls impaled on spears. Some of those skulls were small enough to have come from children. Agilaz could not stomach that, especially not with the way Hermod had looked at them. The local clans warred with one another, as they so oft did. The Skalduns, the clan holding northwest Aujum, had slaughtered whole families in half the outlying lands between here and the

sea. He and Hermod had sneaked past a war party leading away slaves not far from the battlefield.

The Halfhaugr men watched Agilaz and Hermod warily but made no move to bar their passage. A single man and a boy probably posed no threat in their minds. In any case, the fortress itself seemed the most obvious destination. The jarl would mostlike put up a foreign guest, and his court might hold the information Agilaz sought.

The town consisted of perhaps two dozen houses, most of which had their own snow-crustrated walls. The builders had feared raiders, who would no doubt find Halfhaugr difficult pickings. On the other hand, perhaps that very defensibility had led the Skalduns to claim so many of the Hasding lands. If the Hasdingi retreated to this haven, they were, perhaps, less prepared to stand and fight over every last river, farm, or bog they might otherwise have claimed. One by one, they were losing their lands, and their fortress was becoming their prison.

“What’re those marks on the walls?” Hermod asked, perhaps following his father’s gaze.

“Dverg runes.” Unlike his brother Volund, Agilaz could not read them, but mostlike they were intended to ward against the Mist and its denizens. At least, he’d never known runes to protect against aught native to Midgard, Man or beast.

“Did Uncle Volund make them?”

“Not these.”

Twin doors stood open at the fortress threshold, protected by a scar-faced man leaning against one wall. He stood talking to a shieldmaiden in a very unsuccessful attempt to impress her. Agilaz cleared his throat, and the man turned on him. “What do you want?”

“Information.”

The man shrugged. “And who is asking?”

“I am Agilaz, a traveller from across the sea. I bring a silver-handled knife, from Kvenland. A gift for your jarl.” ’Twas a treasure, granted him by his father, but riches meant very little without Olrun. For her, Agilaz would have traded all he owned, would have lain bleeding out in the snows. Agilaz did not know if she had come to Aujum, but she might have done, and he had little else to go on. He drew the blade, allowing the man to inspect the silver hilt. After a quick look, the man jerked his head toward the inside, and Agilaz led Hermod in. Stone pillars supported a high roof. The doors led right into the great hall, the place lit by a large brazier, in addition to a fire pit, the whole place thick with smoke and the smell of mead.

Eventide approached, and already the jarl and his men sat at a great table, throwing back horns of mead before the night meal. A few men boasted with each other about their hunts. Many, however, complained about food stores for the winter, or how much the Skaldun raids had cost them.

The jarl sat at the head of the table. He looked up as Agilaz drew nigh. “Boy,” Agilaz said. “Take the jarl his gift.” Hermod did, running the dagger over and putting it on the table before the jarl.

The man’s eyes sparkled with undisguised greed at the treasure. His wife, too, leant close to inspect it. A young girl sat in her lap and reached for the blade until her father swatted her hand. “Very impressive. I am Jarl Hadding Gundericson. Come, sit at my table.”

Agilaz did so and accepted the mead a thrall brought. He drained it. Watered down. Even the stores of honey must be running low. “Your clan faces war.”

“What care you of that, foreigner?”

“I seek after a particular warrior.”

The jarl bit deep into a hunk of roasted meat. Venison, it looked like, though certainly not enough to go around. Still, you could not blame the jarl for eating and feeding his own family first. His closest thegns seemed fed,

as well, and his housekarls. Other warriors less so, and some of the thralls looked gaunt as the dead. “Warrior have a name?” Hadding asked, juice dribbling into his blond beard.

“Olrun.”

The men chuckled. “A shieldmaiden mercenary?” a red-haired one asked. “Your wife run off to join a war without you?”

Agilaz scowled at the speaker, for the man struck closer to the truth than he realised, and Agilaz had no mood for such mockery, in jest or in earnest.

“Mmm.” The jarl spat a bit of grease. “And you? Are you a mercenary?”

Getting caught up in the war did not seem wise, but then it might be his best chance to find Olrun. As a valkyrja, she could choose to hide herself from mortal eyes. But he had to believe that, if she saw him, she would come to him. She had to. Her ring had guided him here, warming the closer he came to these foreign, war-torn wilds. Their son would not grow up without a mother. Volund had done so, and it had haunted Agilaz’s younger brother. Hermod would not suffer that urd.

“I might offer my services.”

“For what?”

“A position in your court. A share of the plunder. Food.” Those were what they’d expect him to ask for.

“Mmm. You carry a bow. You good with it?”

“I am.”

“Give us a show, then.” The jarl pointed to a shield hanging on the far side of the hall. “Right in the middle, wanderer.”

Agilaz rose slowly and unshouldered his weapon, sighing. A show. Boasting was a fool’s game, aye, but needful, sometimes, for getting men’s attention. He nocked an arrow. Hitting a shield dead centre from across a room did not exactly pose a challenge. He spun, releasing his shot. It slammed into the mug of the red-headed man who’d mocked him,

shattering it right out of his hand. Watery mead exploded over the warrior, while the arrow continued onward to thunk into a different shield.

“Forgive me. I missed the target. Shall I shoot again?”

The warrior he’d drenched rose, sputtering, while the rest of the table burst into laughter.

“Sit, Borje,” Jarl Hadding commanded. “Brought that on yourself.” He turned back to Agilaz. “What is it you think you can do for me?”

Agilaz sighed, then looked about the room. These thegns seemed like they could fight, but they had not done so. His initial judgment had been right, he supposed. The Hasdingi had become trapped in the very haven they kept to protect themselves. “From the looks of it, you have fine enough warriors. But there is something I do well. I can sneak into your foe’s camps, lead a small force. Harry them, destroy their supplies.”

Borje wiped his face with a cloth a woman had given him. “The winter storms are coming.”

“Which is why they shan’t expect it. I am an expert woodsman and I know when a storm will break. I can find shelter for us and get us in and out of their—of *your*—stolen lands ere they know we’re about. By the time summer returns, they will be desperate to leave this place far behind. Let them turn their eyes to Hunaland or leastwise some other clan and leave the Hasdingi be.” For that matter, if he killed enough men in the spear-din, maybe a valkyrja would come for one of their souls.

“You are bold,” Hadding said.

“In its own way, boldness can be wisdom.”

“He’s a fool,” Borje said. “And he’ll get anyone who follows him buried in the snow.” Agilaz favoured the man with a withering gaze.

“You can’t talk to my papa like that!” Hermod shouted. A few men chuckled, smiled.

Agilaz, too, looked to his boy. “I will need someone to provide for my son whilst I take such expeditions.”

Hadding licked his fingers clean of grease. “The boy can stay here, in my hall. My wife and her ladies are already raising our daughter.”

Good. Fostering his son with a jarl, even for a short time, might be good for the boy. A lesson learnt firsthand was worth ten lectures. Hermod needed to understand the World, and the best way to do that was with new experiences. “Who will come with me?” Agilaz asked.

After a few grumbles, a handful of men stood. Thegns, karls, and other free men, mostlike, eager for plunder. Or starving, eager to steal food. Without the lost stores, the Hasdingi faced a hard winter and were apt to lose a great many of their people.

A thrall brought him a pathetic sliver of venison. Agilaz tore the greater portion of it off and handed it to Hermod, saving only enough to maintain his strength. “We leave at dawn, then. Ere that, someone show me the lay of the land. I need to know what places you would see reclaimed.”



ONE OF HADDING’S THEGNS, a man named Erik Raggison, took Agilaz to meet his wife, Liv. She had a map of the lands and began to point out the numerous hunting forts and few farms the Hasdingi had lost. North of them lay the Gandvík Sea. Agilaz had bartered passage there not so long ago, on one of the last ships to make the crossing ere the next summer. They had landed at the Athra clan’s town, a whaling people. It was from the Athra he had learnt of the Hasdingi’s plight, a difficulty they had no interest in involving themselves in. So he had travelled south. Wherever men died valiant deaths, valkyrjar must needs follow.

Liv rolled up the map. “Did you draw that yourself?” Agilaz asked.

“I did.”

“Impressive.”

The woman beamed at him. Agilaz turned back to the thegn.

“They raided us all throughout the summer moons,” Erik said. “We didn’t realise it was so well planned until late.” Agilaz raised an eyebrow at that, and the thegn shrugged. “There are always summer raids. A man defends his farm, a thegn holds each hunting fort. Men die. They took mine from me whilst I was out on a hunt. Jarl Hadding couldn’t spare the men to reclaim it.” Erik spat into the hearth pit, his phlegm sizzling.

Sadly, death was what Agilaz was counting on. The more who died—worthy sword-sleeps, of course—the more chance he had to find Orlun. He needed his wife, and Hermod needed his mother. And if he had to kill some Skaldun raiders to make that happen, he’d do so. In truth, he would kill them all to get her back.



THEY RETURNED from the last raid mere hours ere the storm hit. Agilaz had known the storm was coming and pushed his party hard to reach Halfhaugr. Nineteen men had set out with him this time, and seventeen would return. All in all, two deaths on their side had bought nigh a dozen Skaldun corpses. More importantly, they returned laden with bags of turnips, kale, and chard. It would help see Halfhaugr through the winter. Spirits were high among the men as the gates were thrown wide.

“Four raids and four victories,” Erik said. “Freyr’s sword, man. You move like a ghost.”

Agilaz clapped him on the shoulder. “You don’t have to be any such thing. Think to move as a wolf moves, at home in the woods, unafraid of shadows.” Which was not to say that vaettir did not need propitiating. Ere each undertaking, Agilaz would pin a bird or rodent upon a tree as offering to the landvaettir and alfar, and never did he miss making the Alfablót.

Erik volunteered for every raid and, in the past two, had begun to ask about Agilaz’s tactics. Agilaz had told him hunting Men was like hunting

game, save Men did not smell you coming. Kill a man who did not see you, and you lived longer. 'Twas a lesson Agilaz had learnt early. Aye, some warriors disdained it, relished a fair fight. Such men tended to live shorter lives.

Erik snorted. "Shadows hold plenty worth fearing, in my experience. Ask any völvá, she'll tell you."

Agilaz nodded. Erik had a point, he supposed. Not every vaettr was sated with a dead rabbit. Leaving the others behind, Agilaz hurried back to the jarl's hall. Hermod greeted him as soon as he entered, followed by the jarl's daughter, Frigg. She was always chasing after Hermod these days. The girl claimed she'd grow up to be a shieldmaiden. She did not yet understand her parents would never allow her such a path—a jarl's daughter was too valuable a political tool.

Agilaz swept his son up in his arms and held him close. "Did you find Mama?" the boy asked.

"No, not yet."

"A shame," Liv said. Erik's wife stood nearby, offering Agilaz a wan smile. She had coaxed enough of his tale out of him to know what he sought. Orlun's nature he did not reveal; no one would have believed him, even had he the inclination to share. Ere he could answer, Erik grabbed his wife and carried her off whilst she laughed and sputtered.

Agilaz tussled Hermod's hair. "Go on, then. Play with Frigg."

"She's a girl."

"You may not always think that a bad thing. Be generous and courteous until someone gives you reason not to, boy."

Hermod sighed as though being put upon and rolled his eyes at the girl. This would be her second winter, and already Agilaz had no doubt she would grow up pretty. Wise too, he hoped. Until Hadding's wife, Fjörgyn Radmundsdotter, gave him a son, Frigg was his sole heir, and the man must already be pushing thirty winters. He did not have so very long left to sire

sons. Moreover, his brother Alci was the jarl of the Godwulfs, and, as a varulf, would live long enough to become a threat to the Hasdingi, should Hadding have no male heir.

Agilaz and Orlun had oft spoken of having another child, a sister, perhaps, for Hermod. The valkyrja discussed how she would raise a girl; of the things she would teach her. Agilaz could almost see such a child in Frigg.

Agilaz had not made it far ere the jarl received him with open arms. “By Freyr, man, they tell me you come back victorious again. How do you do it?”

Agilaz shrugged. “Most oft by killing men ill prepared for battle.”

Hadding rocked back on his heels, then shook his head. “Be that as it may ...” He patted the broadsword slung over his shoulder. “Next time I will go with you myself. When will the storm break?”

They always misunderstood him. Agilaz could spot signs of the changing weather, patterns of behaviour in the animals, the feel of the air. He was not some völvá with knowledge of the future, and he didn’t know when a storm was going to end, only when it drew nigh. “We should feast tonight, my jarl. The days have grown short enough already, and I am weary.”

Hadding laughed. “Fine. Keep your mysteries, hunter. You’re fast becoming a legend around here, after all. And what good is a legend without his secrets?”

Agilaz could only shake his head. All he wanted was to find his wife. The days were short, and the nights without her very long indeed. Orlun had a quietness to her, a peaceful air that drew all to stillness and let him sleep in comfort. Sometimes she would sing to him, sing to Hermod. If he held the ring close enough, he could still hear that song. He rubbed the ring with his thumb. Its warmth was all he had—that and Hermod.

She was nigh, he could feel her. Every moment seemed to bring her closer. When winter abated, the Hasdingi would face war. Pitched battles must surely summon Orlun, but he did not want to wait moons more to see his wife. He did not want to wait a single night longer.

So he took no pleasure in the drunken feasts and laughter that went on, long into the night. He did not find laughter in Erik's or Liv's jokes, nor did he care much for the praise and glory Hadding heaped on him. He did, however, note that Borje Bentson still looked upon him with disdain. The warrior, too proud to join the raids under Agilaz's command, had grown ever more bitter. He had the look of a wolf wanting to take down a bear.

Agilaz would have to keep up his guard, draw his allies closer. A wolf would not strike alone, but even a bear was no match for an entire wolf pack.



HE TOSSED and turned in the night, sleeping in a fur-lined alcove, in the room Hadding had provided to him. It was nice enough and held its own little brazier to keep the chill away. Still, he rarely slept well without her. If he closed his eyes and concentrated on the ring, he could feel her presence. That was all that ever let him rest.

The door creaked open. Agilaz's eyes latched onto the figure slipping into the room, a man by his silhouette. Followed by another. Agilaz closed his fingers around a knife under his furs. Two men, and he could catch only one by surprise, if that. It took all he had to resist the urge to leap up. Hermod slept in another alcove on the far side of the brazier. He couldn't see his son without rising. And one of the men had drifted in that direction, one toward him. But move too soon and he would lose his only advantage. The right moment was what counted.

As one man drew nigh, the glint of firelight reflected off a blade. Agilaz surged upward, flinging himself at the stalker. His weight bore them both crashing into the brazier, his victim screaming. Agilaz planted the knife in the figure's throat. Blood exploded into his eyes, half blinding him.

Hermod screamed.

Agilaz rolled away from the flames and rose in a fighting crouch while rubbing his other arm over his face to clear his eyes. The other figure slammed into him as he did so, shoving them both backward. "Hermod, run!" Agilaz shouted.

The fallen man had caught fire. Flames leapt from his body to the furs around the room.

His attacker pushed a knife forward, closer and closer to Agilaz's face, despite Agilaz's strain to hold him back. As the man leant in, Agilaz knew him. "Erik?" He wanted to ask why, but his erstwhile friend only struggled all the harder, roaring as he tried to drive the blade downward. Agilaz twisted to the side, and the blade scraped off the wall. He shoved Erik, and the man fell backward, pitching into the spreading flames.

Agilaz scrambled to the side, panting, coughing on the thickening smoke. He couldn't breathe, couldn't see. He fell to his knees. "Hermod!" His voice came out as a hacking rasp. Freyr, please say the boy had fled the room.

Half walking, half crawling, he stumbled forward. Heat washed over his face, singed his bare arms as he scrambled toward the doorway. He had only just reached it when someone yanked him upward. Agilaz blinked, coughed. Tried to see.

Jarl Hadding held him up. "H-Hermod ..." Agilaz gasped. His son screamed from inside the room. Agilaz's stomach lurched. No. No! He jerked free of Hadding's grasp and stumbled back into the room. Flames engulfed it. Smoke so thick he couldn't see a fucking thing. "Hermod!" Even shouting drew in a lungful of smoke.

“Papa!”

Agilaz crawled forward, trying to stay under the smoke cloud. Ash stung his eyes. His boy was kneeling over Erik’s smouldering corpse. Borje’s knife stuck in the man’s chest. A single heartbeat, Agilaz gawped at that, then lunged forward, grabbed his son, and yanked him through the flames. Hermod screamed. No other way. He shoved the boy toward the door. Hacking, coughing, he tried to crawl. His legs weren’t moving right.

“Papa!” From outside. Hermod had escaped, praise Freyr.

Rough hands seized Agilaz even as his vision faded.



AGILAZ HAD WOKEN in a small chamber, found it barred, guarded. The man had ordered him to wait, wait whilst Hadding deliberated. Agilaz had pounded on the door when the man refused to speak of Hermod. The ash wood did not budge. Finally, he had collapsed back to the floor. Breathing hurt. Standing hurt. Being alive hurt.

Earlier that evening, Agilaz had told Erik the key to victory was to attack like a wolf. Move silently through the shadows. Now, the man had tried to kill him in his sleep and paid for it with his life. As well he should. If aught had happened to Hermod ... Hel take both those traitorous trollfuckers.

The burns on his arm stung, a constant pain and reminder of his brush with death. Where was Hermod? The Hasdingi were lucky this place was built from stone—it must have contained the blaze, must have been old work, strong. Volund knew about that kind of thing. Damn, but Agilaz hoped his brothers had better luck finding their missing wives than he had his. They ought to all have passed the winter at Wolf Lake, huddled around a fire, roasting snow hares and telling stories of far-off places. Instead, he was a prisoner, with Volund and Slagfid gone to unknown lands.

The door creaked open, and Hadding stepped in. He did not bring in his guards, and he shut the door behind him. Good signs.

“Where is my son?” Agilaz demanded.

“His arm was burnt. My völvva attends him.”

He lived. The mountain crushing Agilaz’s gut crumbled to dust, and he breathed in full. “The wound is bad?”

“He might have a scar. Brave boy. Five winters behind him, and he’s killed a thegn.” Hadding folded his arms.

Agilaz lurched to his feet, trying to ignore the pain. “To defend his father from a murderer!”

“Peace, Agilaz. I know *why* Hermod acted such. Still, I find myself in a difficult situation. My thegn’s actions were criminal, at least on the surface. But Erik’s friends claim you fancied his wife.”

“Liv?” That was absurd. Agilaz had spoken to her, and she was oft friendly, but naught more. “I am a married man. I’d sooner cut off my own hand than betray my wife.”

Hadding frowned. “Very good. Then why do they think this?”

Agilaz rose and shook his head. Now he was to answer why aught went on in another man’s head? He spread his hands. “Borje has never liked my position here. Maybe he planted the idea in Erik’s head. We were all drunk last night.”

“Aye, indeed. I was not so drunk to not see Liv leaning on your shoulder on more than one occasion.”

That ... had happened. “’Twas not like that.”

“You want her?”

“No!”

Hadding nodded and scratched his beard. “I shan’t lie to you: it looks bad, Agilaz. Were you to take the woman, people would talk.”

“I’ve no intention of lying with her or any other woman, save my wife.”

“Good. I will keep her here, at Halfhaugr.” The jarl waved a hand at him. “And you will take Vestborg back for me. If you reclaim it, I will grant it to you and name you thegn.”

Erik’s home. They had not struck there ere now because it lay too far afield. It was on the natural boundary between the Hasding lands and those of the Skalduns. Had Erik not lost the fort early in the summer, things might have gone differently. Agilaz rubbed his brow. “That sounds like a job for an army, not a small party of raiders.”

“Not if you get in there and kill the thegn who holds it. With him gone, the others would retreat, and we could take the fort. Do that, and I’ll grant you Erik’s position, land, and title.”

Damn. Agilaz did not so much care about being a thegn, but he could ill afford to lose Hadding as an ally. He needed to be on one side or the other of this impending war if he was to find Orlun. And the chance to own a whole hunting fort, so much land ... it did have a certain appeal.

“So be it. I shall kill your enemy, jarl.”



THERE WERE a lot of tracks in the fresh snow—men hunting through the woods around Vestborg. With the clear skies, maybe they did not know how close a storm drew. Maybe they thought they could track their prey ere it hit. That was certainly how Agilaz felt. But whilst the Skaldun thegn and his men hunted a reindeer, Agilaz hunted them. They were too many—five men following one animal, and more like to scare it off than catch it. Fear kept men from wandering alone, especially in winter, as if numbers would protect them from a snowstorm. Agilaz had chosen to go alone this time. After Erik’s betrayal, it seemed hard to trust any of the Hasding men. Besides, in this sort of hunt, there was more to lose than scaring away the game.

He crept among the spruces and pines, bow in hand. Men spoke in hushed voices, their whispers carrying farther than they probably expected. Agilaz had managed to track the reindeer and get ahead of it. It seemed the thegn's hunters were at least partly competent, because they had followed.

Maybe Agilaz should have just taken Hermod and left. Maybe an attempt to find Orlun like this was a waste of time, a pointless risk. He could mostlike still walk away, slip off in the opposite direction, return and tell Hadding he'd had no chance to move against the Skaldun men. If the jarl bought it, he might let Agilaz take Hermod and flee Hasding lands.

No. Damn, but no. He had a plan, and you had to stick to a plan or you had naught. He needed his wife. He needed her song, her smile, her counsel. His son needed a mother.

Agilaz slung the bow over his shoulder, then jumped up to catch a low-hanging branch. After pulling himself up onto it, he began to climb higher into the tree. The forest was dense, even in winter. Thick enough to conceal a man who could climb well. Once he reached high enough, he swung one leg over the branch to steady himself. Then he unslung his bow and nocked an arrow. There was a definite pitfall to his plan. If his foes did spot him, he had very little ability to manoeuvre whilst in the tree. They would plant him full of arrows almost as easily as he would them. It meant he needed to make every shot count. He had a full quiver, but he was like to get no more than a dozen shots in.

The reindeer walked beneath him, but a few trees over. It raised its head as though it had his scent. That would only matter if the beast—

It bolted. Dammit! The hunting party came crashing through the trees a moment later, chasing after the fleeing deer. Running targets were harder. Not impossible though.

Agilaz lined up a shot at the farthest man. He had no idea who their leader was, but that was the one most likely to escape. He loosed. Even ere

his arrow struck, Agilaz was already pulling another arrow. His target pitched forward into the snow.

“What in Hel’s—” Agilaz’s second arrow took the speaker in the face.

“Take cover!” someone shouted.

Agilaz loosed at a man’s chest, but he moved quickly and it just grazed his arm.

“There!” And they had found him. It was a dozen feet down but ...

An arrow slammed into the trunk a foot from his face, quivering there.

Freyr’s flaming blade! Agilaz leapt away from the tree, landing in a pile of snow. He rolled with it. Still, his legs felt numb from the impact. Grunting, he surged to his feet and dashed behind the tree. Another arrow struck it a heartbeat later. Agilaz nocked again, stepped around, and loosed at the first target he saw. His shot caught an archer in the shoulder. The man dropped his bow, screaming, clutching the wound.

Two men left—one fresh, one wounded.

As he nocked another arrow, he peeked his head around. An arrow grazed his cheek and scraped the tree, flinging shards of bark in his eyes. Agilaz jerked backward. They were trying to flank him. If they caught him betwixt them—or if either of them got close enough to use those swords on their belts—the battle would not end in his favour.

He peeked again, but not with intention of seeing aught. The moment he heard a twang he took off running to the opposite side, then skidded behind another tree. He couldn’t move fast enough in the snow. Blood was running down his cheek, pooling about his neck.

One of the men shouted a war cry. Snow crunched under his heels as he charged forward. His first and last mistake. Agilaz dropped to one knee and spun on the charging man, an arrow flying even as he did so. It took the warrior in the gut. The man pulled up short, sword falling from his hand as he stared at his wound. It was the man he’d wounded before.

That left only a single healthy foe, and possibly the one with an arrow in his shoulder.

Spinning, Agilaz turned his eyes to the opposite side. His last healthy foe was slipping between trees, trying to close in for a clear shot. Agilaz scrambled to keep the nearest tree between himself and the other archer. The man did the same, slipping behind cover and loosing a single arrow. No shot from here.

The one with the gut wound was trying to rise. Tough bastard. Agilaz planted another shot in his chest, and he fell.

“Let’s settle this like men,” the last one shouted.

“So be it.”

His foe tossed the bow aside and pulled a sword off his shoulder. Holding it before him, he advanced out into the open. Agilaz stepped out too. Then he launched an arrow at his attacker. The man reeled, falling backward. He tried to rise, to charge, but Agilaz put another arrow in his chest. He collapsed in the snow.

One last man, and he might already be unconscious from blood loss. Still, he had to be found.

“You cheated ...” the man he’d just shot said.

Agilaz cast a glance over his shoulder. “Men can use bows.”

He wiped the blood from his cheek. One more man to kill, and one of these had to be the thegn. If Hadding had the right of it, this meant Vestborg would fall, the Skalduns retreating without their leader.



WINTER HAD BROKEN AT LAST. Agilaz had spent the better part of it at Vestborg with Hermod and a few thralls granted to him by Hadding, as well as a handful of freemen he still trusted. Mostly trusted.

Now, with the storms no longer threatening, he could make the trek back to Halfhaugr without much worry. They had been on the road two days already and ought to reach the town by nightfall. Hermod walked beside him. He was growing strong, and Agilaz would not deny him any chance to learn of the World.

They had made no more raids during the winter. Agilaz was content he had stirred the Skalduns into a frenzy, though. Either they would retreat and return Hadding's lands, or else there would be outright war very soon. If war it was, perhaps Orlun would finally show herself. Agilaz refused to give up hope. She was here, he could feel her still, through her glittering ring. Sometimes, he almost felt she watched him, even watched over him. Maybe his victories in the winter had come, in part, thanks to her grace. That was what he told Hermod, at least. It cheered the boy to learn his mother remained nigh, helping them.

When the boy held the ring, he'd said he also heard Orlun's song, sweet and forlorn. How did such a young boy even know a word like *forlorn*? And why had Agilaz never realised Orlun's songs held such undertones? They did; he could say that now. Maybe she'd always known she would be called back, that her respite from her valkyrja duties was temporary. Agilaz would not believe that, though. He was going to find her, bring her home.

Once, returning to Halfhaugr had been a welcome event. Once, he had allowed himself to care, to forget this place was not home. Without Orlun, no home existed. Erik's betrayal had reminded him of that. Seeing that thick wooden wall brought him no pleasure now. Still, what would Hadding do with his summer? Hide behind these walls again? Or take the battle to the Skalduns at last? The latter, with any luck. Patience was wisdom. And still, Agilaz's patience had worn thin through the dark, cold moons he'd spent at Vestborg, alone without his wife.

The men and women of the court welcomed him back as though naught had gone wrong a few moons prior. They greeted Hermod and asked how

the winter had gone out west. His son replied politely whilst Agilaz made his way toward Hadding. Liv caught his eye ere he reached the jarl. Her belly was swollen, far along. Erik's unborn son or daughter? And would she tell the child how Agilaz had slain its father? A man he called friend, burnt to death by his hand. Liv ducked away ere he could speak to her. Best that way; what could he say, in any event? Maybe she had misconstrued his intentions toward her, or maybe only her husband had. Either way, he could not change it now, much as he wished to.

It haunted him at night. Betrayal, the sickly-sweet rancour of flesh aflame, screams. Agilaz shook himself. He had not come here to dwell on such deeds.

Many of the men in the hall seemed outfitted for war, freshly so. A good sign. Jarl Hadding sat at his table, feasting a new guest. A flaxen-haired young man just past twenty winters, Agilaz would guess. The jarl waved at him as he approached. "Ah, come, Agilaz. You've not met Prince Otwin Nidudson."

"Prince?" The Æsir had not had a king in generations. No two clans could remain allied long enough.

The young man rose. "I am the eldest son of the king of Njarar." The Gautish prince spoke with a pomposity that made Agilaz instantly hate him. Nidud was one of the seven kings in Svjarland, Agilaz knew.

"You are far from home, prince."

"So speaks the Kvenlander," Hadding said. "Prince Otwin brings us an offer of alliance, of trade. Have you seen the war-garb they bring to us? So fine you'd think dvergar themselves crafted it."

"Oh?" Agilaz took a longer look at the mail Otwin wore. It was fine work, as far as he could tell, though he was no expert on such things. But if Hadding was ... "Dvergar, you say?"

Had the dvergar left Nidavellir? Or did they just have some trade agreement with Nidud? Either way, every step they drew closer to this place

was an unwelcome one.

“Not in truth,” Otwin said. “My father has employed a smith trained by them, though. His works are unmatched in all the North Realms.” The boy patted a sword hanging over his shoulder. “He made this as well. ’Tis remarkable, no mistaking.”

Agilaz frowned but nodded. There was only one smith trained by dvergar, and Agilaz did not think Volund keen to seek employment with some petty king. Maybe he was wrong, maybe his brother had done as Agilaz himself had done with Hadding. And yet, if he were crafting so many things to outfit the Hasdingi for war ... why? Why would Volund do such, and why would Nidud want him to outfit the Hasdingi? What would a Svjarland king profit from war among the Ás clans?

“Sit, Agilaz, sit,” Hadding commanded. “Someone, get the man some mead. Freyr! I will not have it said I am a poor host.”

Agilaz sank down onto the bench and lost himself in drink. It gave him time to mull over this development. Maybe Nidud wanted the Hasdingi to win a war so he’d have favourable trade partners in Aujum. Or maybe he wanted an Ás clan in his debt. If he armed them with finer weapons and armour than their foes—as aught made by Volund would be—then surely the Hasdingi would win the war.

But what of Volund? He had once claimed that working those forges was his greatest love and his greatest fear, both. That it brought something out of him, something dark he did not wish to face. If there was a chance Nidud was forcing his brother to the labour, Agilaz had to find out. He owed Volund that much.



AFTER THE FEASTING HAD SLOWED, and warriors had begun to drift away from Hadding’s mead bench, Agilaz stood. He had not wanted to be the first

to leave. He nodded to Otwin and the jarl and left.

He found Hermod outside Frigg's room. He motioned with his head down the hall. Hermod left Frigg's game and followed his father.

"You need to prepare for another journey," Agilaz said.

Hermod opened his mouth as if to protest but closed it quickly. "Where are we going?" he asked after a moment.

"North. We are going to your Uncle Volund."

"Will we return here?" Hermod asked.

"That," Agilaz answered, "I can only hope."

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PART II

Thus, even as the seas parted, did the hateful Mist of Niflheim seep into the Mortal Realm to poison the new-risen land. Casting back the rays of the sun, it binds us in Fimbulvetr, holds us with frozen chains. Vaster even than Jörmungandr, the Mist encircles and constricts, ever hungering for souls. With a thousand, thousand tendrils does it reach and grasp, seeking for its prey, even as its denizens lurk within its shroud. Only flame might hold back the brume. Fire is life.

— Lost analects of the Lofdar

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DAYS GONE: TYR

799 Age of Man

Fool son of Borr, placing his trust in some foreign wanderer instead of the goddess in their midst. Tyr knew better. You had to trust the gods. They were all that stood between Man and chaos. The Realms of Utgard pushed against Midgard. Tyr had seen it, been part of it, before Borr. Ere a jarl had saved him from the darkness, from the cold. He had seen more than his fill of both. Men were animals until someone taught them honour. Tyr had been worse than any berserk or varulf.

Vé knelt nearby, stuffing his satchel with supplies for their fool endeavour. Tyr should go with them. He'd sworn to Borr to protect his sons. And if they went alone ... Blame Loki for this fuckery. You couldn't trust a man with a silver tongue.

"You know of the jötunnar, thegn," Vé said. "You've seen them."

Tyr grunted. "One."

"How is a Man to face such a threat?"

A Man was like to shit himself and die screaming. Boy probably didn't need to hear that. "Try to catch it unawares. Strike fast. Strike hard. They

have strength many times that of a Man. Don't think to block its blows on your shield. All you'll get is a broken arm and splintered shield."

The young skald shook his head, not quite hiding his fear. A brave Man fought other Men. A fool fought jötunnar. "The tales we'll have about this one."

Aye, and skalds might name it *The Fall of the Sons of Borr*. Njörd watch over the fool brothers. Tyr spat in the snow and walked away. Odin had forbidden him to come. Had chosen that damned foreigner. Taken any choice out of Tyr's hands.

Leastwise, he had no choice about the jötunn. Still, the goddess remained in Eskgard, Odin had granted her a house here. Jarl did one thing right. Tyr trod through the town, well-packed snow crunching beneath his boots. A pair of hunters drove a dogsled past him, hauling a reindeer carcass. Good catch. They'd feed half the town with that. The best was always a mammoth, of course. But bringing one down oft cost lives, good Men. They'd lost two last moon trying for a big mammoth. Beast escaped too. After that, Tyr had helped bring down another for Borr's funeral himself. He shook his head. Idunn said Mankind was dying. All he'd seen, Tyr could believe it. Even if jötunnar and other forces of Utgard did not threaten Midgard, still, he'd believe it. You had to trust a goddess when she spoke.

He paused at her house. How did you approach a goddess? He didn't know protocol from trollshit when it came to gods and goddesses. Treat her like a jarl? Without a better plan, he rapped his fist on the door.

"Enter." He did. Idunn sat before the fire pit. Three children rested nearby, looking at him like an intruder. She winked. "Come to hear my stories too? A good tale transcends generations while knitting them closer together. It's an art, Tyr."

"Skald's work." He shook his head. "I would speak with you. Alone."

“Hmm. And as always, the children suffer. All right, go on then. I’ll continue the tale after the night meal. The best stories are told after dark anyway.” The children groaned. One, a girl of five or six winters, cast him a baleful glare as they left. “Your fame has spread through Aujum,” Idunn said when Tyr had shut the door. “Borr’s champion. Men speak as though you have no equal with a blade in all the North Realms.”

Tyr grunted, sat down in front of her. Most men didn’t know what a bastard he’d been ere he met Borr. The jarl had held that secret close, to protect Tyr. Save him from well-earned revenge. “You told Odin to become a king.”

“Oh, aye, for certain such must be the first step. He’ll need the Æsir behind him, united against greater threats.”

“What threats? Jötunnar?”

Idunn shrugged. “There are certainly ones who mean Mankind ill, aye.”

Tyr grunted again. What he knew of them, they didn’t necessarily mean Man ill. Not exactly. They were just happy to prey on Men. Take whatever they had, devour or enslave them. Fell creatures, too at home in the Mist.

“And you came here just to ask me if I meant what I said? That I wanted Odin to become king?”

“Uh, no. I wanted to know how we do it.”

Idunn warmed her hands by the fire. “He does not seem keen on the idea. One would expect a man to seize the opportunity for fame, and yet he cast it aside, unable to accept Urd. Yeah, or mayhap unwilling to shoulder the responsibility that accompanies such glory. If only Urd were so kind as to ask us our wishes, perhaps he would live a peaceful life. Thus far, I’ve not yet received such an inquiry, but I’ve waited only about five thousand years so far, so, you know, patience.”

“You know a man’s urd?”

She laughed. “I’m not one of the Norns, Tyr. I don’t weave Urd, but I can guess, read the signs. Sometimes a man chooses glory. Sometimes it is

thrust upon him by necessity.”

“Huh.” Borr’s legacy was about to crumble in Odin’s uncaring hands. While Odin was off chasing a jötunn, the clans simmered in discontent. Come summer and the melting of snows, war would mostlike tear them apart. Unless someone held them together, as Borr had wished. “You think we can force it on him? Force him to accept the responsibility of kingship? Save the peace?”

“Were you so inclined to try, what would you do, Tyr? How would you secure a throne for Odin? Hypothetically speaking.”

Tyr groaned. He cracked his neck. She was asking him? What did he know of kingship or politics? Tyr was a warrior, a raven-feeder. Better than he had been, aye, but still ... Men feared him for his blade, not his skill at tafl. “All I know is defending and attacking.”

“And how many winters did you pass at Borr’s side, watching as he held the clans together, one carefully woven knot at a time? Did you see naught of the ties he tried to forge?”

He had been there, most of the time. He pinched the bridge of his nose. Such things made his head throb. “The Athra clan in the north. Borr’s wife came from them. Odin’s cousin Annar Ótmarrson rules the clan. But he didn’t attend the funeral. Strange, that.”

Idunn grinned. “A potential ally. Family is complicated, Tyr. It’s important to know where they stand.”

He grunted. If Odin wasn’t going to choose to save his father’s work, Tyr would do it for him. That seemed to be what the goddess wanted of him. You had to try to understand the gods when you could. “I’ll go, talk to Annar. Maybe he might support Odin at the Althing.”

Idunn nodded. “Go with care, then.”

Tyr was always careful. Kept you alive longer.



THE CRUNCH of his snowshoes rang out louder than Tyr would have liked. Especially with evening drawing nigh. Still no shelter. Just the woods. On and on. Not the Járnavidr. He'd have known if he'd wandered into the twisted forest of the trolls. But woods covered much of Aujum. The Athra lived in towns in the north, by the Gandvík Sea. Whalers. Had to pass through these woods to reach them. Woods, and lands held by the Godwulfs. The only other way would have taken him through Skaldun lands, and Tyr would not go there. Not until he must.

Njörd grant him a ruin, a cave, something. Somewhere he could kindle a flame against the encroaching night, Mist. He'd never get a blaze going in this snow. The crunch of ice sounded off, and he froze in place. Had that come from behind him? Tyr spun, hand on his sword hilt. Naught back there but trees. Those, too, could house vaettir, watching. Angry at the trespass of a man in silent woods. Ash wives demanded sacrifices, and the only blood Tyr had was his own. Traveling alone, fool plan, it was.

The sun would set in moments. He couldn't keep wandering all night. In the dark, he'd become too easy prey for the denizens here, beasts, vaettir. Sighing, he stuck his torch in the snow, wedged it tight. He lit two more, placing each around the spot he'd chosen in a triangle. Then he began gathering pine leaves, branches, aught that might have a chance of burning. All those he flung into a pile, then wedged a fourth torch in their midst, low enough for the flames to touch the tinder. By now, the sun had set, leaving him in near total darkness, save the torchlight.

A howl broke through the night, seeming to come from all around him. The howl might have been a wolf. But just one made no sense; wolves were pack hunters. Even the largest ones, dire wolves, always stuck together. A lone wolf meant something fell, rabid, or possessed by the Mist. Or a lone varulf, somehow cast out of his pack. A varulf meant a foe with human-like intelligence and supernatural cunning. It would stalk him.

Tyr dropped into a crouch by one of the torches and slid his sword free. Wait here. Let the wolf come to him. Normal wolf, even a dire wolf, it might not approach the flame. Varulf, though, it would make him prey. Maybe even come back with more of its kind.

Hunt, or be hunted. He wrapt his palm around the torch haft. Carry that, and the varulf would see him coming a mile away. Without it, Tyr couldn't see five feet. Mist, tree cover, they didn't let much moonlight in. His grip tightened around his sword hilt. Make a choice.

The obvious choice. The one Hymir would have had him choose. Risk it all, and win. The jötunn was a monster, an eater of Man. And a survivor. Tyr groaned. No choice, really. He released the torch and stalked forward, staying low to the ground as he passed from tree to tree. Beyond the light of his torches, he paused. Fresh paw prints in the snow, definitely canine, and large. Large enough to be dire wolf or varulf. And it had passed close. Just outside the circle of his flame.

Another growl.

As he rose, Tyr's eyes met those of a wolf, not a few feet away. Watching him from the Mist. Tyr froze in place, caught in its gaze. He dared not look away and invite the beast to charge. The wolf growled, baring teeth far too long. Hot saliva dripped from its mouth, casting up steam as it hit the snows.

"Easy," Tyr said, keeping his voice barely audible.

The wolf advanced a step, its snarl deepening. The sudden shift of its weight was the only warning. It flung itself forward, faster than a wolf ought to be able. Tyr tumbled backward as it collided with him, barely managed to fling his arm up in its path. The wolf bit down, fangs rending his chain armour like cloth. It tore through flesh as it bore him down. Tyr screamed in pain, a flash of red. His sword fell from his grasp.

Too strong. Gnashing, growling, riving his flesh. His screams of agony ringing in his ears.

Not like this. He had fought his way out of the darkness, out of the cold. Made himself a Man instead of a monster. He would not end here in cold woods, alone.

He shoved forward, now heedless of the wounds the wolf inflicted. With his bloody arm, he pushed it back enough to draw a dagger from his belt. He thrust it upward, into the wolf's belly. The beast whimpered, releasing his arm and falling over.

Tyr flung himself atop the creature and rammed the dagger into its skull. Bucking, thrashing, though it ought to have been dead. And then stillness. The creature shuddered. Fur receded back into its skin. Joints popped as bones shifted, the corpse slowly reverting to human as the wolf spirit fled, gone from the Mortal Realm.

The pain washed over him afresh, and he spilled forward. He needed to bind the wound. Groaning, he half walked, half crawled back to his makeshift camp, grabbed his sword along the way.

Varulf had mauled his arm. Völva might have cut it off to save him. Fuck that. A warrior without his sword arm was better off dead. The kindling had caught aflame at last. Wound-sweat streaming out now. Whole World spinning. He thrust the blade into the flame. Then he emptied his satchel. Bandages. Couldn't be certain he'd stop bleeding though. Growling, he looked to the blade. Starting to glow hot. Fucking varulf.

It would hurt. A lot. But Tyr had known pain. The jötunn had inflicted it. Forced Tyr to inflict worse still.

He grabbed the sword and pressed the scalding blade to his arm. His screams echoed through the wood.



LOST BLOOD MADE A MAN DELIRIOUS, twisted, like the Mist-mad. Why wasn't he dead yet? Ought to have died from those wounds. Lost in the

night. No, no. Tyr was strong. Forged in the cold by Hymir. Remade in the light by Borr. He wouldn't die like this. Not like this.

Torch in his working arm, he stumbled, crashed into a tree and fell in the snow. Blood had seeped through his bandages and now stained the spot where he'd fallen. Die out here alone, rise again as a draug. Men said it, and Tyr had seen the vile creatures, denied death. Wakeful in eternal torment, strong as a troll.

Ahead, a lodge. A small house of logs. Delirium?

Hunter's lodge. Godwulf hunter, mostlike. Maybe even the varulf he'd just killed a few hours back. Or not. Could be another ... Men didn't turn away guests. No one wanted to be left in the cold. At night, though, alone in the woods—only a fool would let a stranger in. Vaettir could come to your door, ask a boon. Take your soul. How do you tell a Man from an alf? Couldn't, except most vaettir shunned the daylight.

He drew nearer. Plume of smoke rose from the lodge. Fire. Fire was life. And Tyr wasn't ready to die. And if the hunter wanted to turn him away? He'd not die this night. If he fell, he could never fulfil his promise to Borr.

He stumbled over to the house, pounded on the door. No answer. But shuffling inside. A simmering anger roiled in Tyr's gut. Maybe the hunter knew the varulf who'd attacked him. Maybe not. Either way ... "Open the godsdamned door!"

"Be gone!" a woman shouted from within. "In Njörd's name, I cast you out."

"I'm not a fucking vaettr. Open the door!"

"Be gone, I say! There is naught for you here."

The heat in his gut filled his limbs. A surging rage born of delirium and hate. Tyr kicked the door. It shuddered on its hinges, wood splintering. He kicked again. It flew inward. The woman inside scrambled away, sword up in front of her.

"I need shelter."

She looked to his arm, dripping blood through the bandage. Then she grasped her sword with both hands and took a step forward. Tyr growled, flung the torch at her head. She shrieked and batted it away with the sword. In the moment, he launched himself forward, caught her wrist, twisted. The blade clattered to the floor. She writhed in his grasp, so he punched her with his right hand, then used his good hand to grab her by the throat when her head flopped back. He hefted her off the ground, squeezing.

From the shadows cast by her hearth, Borr looked on with shame. Judged him for such a breach of all honour. He was doing this for Borr, for Borr's sons. Doing what? Murdering a hunter? Growling as much at himself as the woman, he slammed her against the wall then dropped her. She lay still on the floor.

"You wronged her," Borr said.

Not his ghost. No, just the delirium. Tyr snatched her sword lest she wake and attack him again. Odd. Woven iron with an over-keen edge. No modern smith could make such works. Something from the Old Kingdoms or the dverggar, maybe. But how did a simple hunter woman claim it?

"You are like Hymir."

Tyr spun at the ghost. "Hymir would have fucking raped her, eaten her!"

Of course, naught stood there. He knew that. It could not be. "And you want to do the same."

"Shut up! Silence!"

"How had you such strength, Tyr? Strength to heft her with one hand, to squeeze her unconscious. Strength like the very jötunn who forged you."

No! Anger, pain. They had given him strength. Naught more. "Go to Hel."

"She holds me because of your failure."

The words hit him like a blow, and he stumbled against the wall. "I ... I didn't ... You didn't tell me your plans ..."

"Petty excuses. No wonder your woman left you."

Tyr screamed in wordless rage and flung the woman's sword at the shadows. It clattered against the wall. He was done arguing with the gloom. It was not Borr. It was *not* Borr.

This huntress would have food, something he could use for bandages. He'd tie her up, treat his injuries. Manage a few hours' sleep. Go then, with haste. Darkness settled in the lodge.



THE GANDVÍK FORMED the northern border of Aujum. The Athra clan occupied a half dozen small towns there. Fishing, whaling, seal huting. Sometimes, they crossed the whale-road for trade. Or to raid. Borr had said all the Ás clans once lived on the Black Sea as the Athra now did on the Gandvík. Closest to the ways of their ancestors.

The largest town, Breivik, served as the jarl's home and had done so for over a generation. Tyr had come here oft enough with Borr. Once, ere she died, Bestla had come here to visit her parents. A stone wall, crumbling but still thick, surrounded the town on all but the seaside. Tyr had not reached the gate when a man skied out to meet him. Big man, thick, bristly moustache. Warrior for certain. Didn't go for a weapon, but archers stood up on those walls.

"Who comes here?"

"Tyr. Thegn of the Wodanar."

The man grunted. "Your name is known, champion of Borr. I am Geir Maurson, thegn to Jarl Annar Ótmarson."

"I need to see him."

Geir nodded and beckoned Tyr to follow. The man shed his skis once within the town wall. Tyr unstrapped his own snowshoes and left them by the gate. "You're wounded," Geir said.

"Varulf attack."

“Many of those of late. Not so many men walking away from them, though.”

Tyr grunted. Varulfur died harder than other Men, but they died still.

Geir led him past the shore where men were cutting blubber from a seal corpse. Bloody, foul-smelling mess, but it would give them oil. Make for a safer winter than most clans had. “Ever hit finfolk?”

“Wereseals?” Geir grunted. “Those are real?”

Tyr shrugged. Far as he knew.

Geir shook his head. “Not in the Gandvík. Fishermen, whalers, they claim serpents live in the deeps. Few swear to have seen one. Most don’t believe, though. Who escapes a serpent, right?”

Tyr nodded. Even jötunnar feared dragons. Such monstrosities were best left alone.

Annar occupied an old hall, one built of stone. Thanks to braziers spaced every ten feet or so on each side, the hall didn’t seem oppressive, though smoke hazed it. A balcony rimmed the main hall. Windows up there were shuttered now, but Tyr had seen them open in summer. At the moment, a cluster of women stood there, staring as he trod down the hall.

The jarl, son of Bestla’s sister, did not sit on a throne but rather paced about his hall. Every time he reached the right side, he’d spin and fling a knife at a shield hanging from a pillar. Men stood about Annar, offering the occasional bit of insight. Enough to tell the Athra did not fare well.

“My lord,” Geir Maurson said. “Tyr of the Wodanar.”

Annar paused mid-throw, looked to Tyr. Then he turned back to finish hurling his knife. It clattered off the shield and landed on the floor. Annar swung his fist in obvious frustration. Only then did he turn to acknowledge Tyr. He strode over, clapped him on the shoulder, and guided him away from the main hall, into a back room.

The jarl frowned at Tyr’s arm. “Eir!” he bellowed down the hall. A moment later, a middle-aged woman shuffled in, took one look at Tyr, and

then fled. Annar beckoned Tyr to sit on a bench. “Gone to get her healing supplies. Best völvá in Aujum, men say, though she denies it. Varulf?”

“Your völvá?”

“Freyr’s flaming sword, no! Varulf did that to your arm, I’m asking.”

“Huh. Aye, a few days back from here.”

Annar clucked his tongue. “And you’re still standing. Impressive, warrior. Always winning so much fame.”

“How did you know about the varulf?”

The jarl sat in a chair across from Tyr. “Mangy bastards are everywhere now. Encroaching on our lands.”

“Godwulfs?”

Annar spread his hands. “One or two stray wolves, even a pack, I might think them wild. Men, gone to the Mist. No, this is deliberate, a challenge. As soon as Borr died, they began pushing their borders. We can’t fight them at night when they become wolves, of course. And in day, they’re armed with the finest weapons, mail that can turn even a strong spear.”

“Huh. I saw a huntress with a woven iron sword.”

“You killed her, I hope?”

Tyr scowled and stared into the nearest brazier. Annar said naught else. The völvá, Eir, returned. She began unwinding the crude bandages Tyr had wrapt around his arm. After a moment, she hissed at the mangled mess.

“Can’t see how you warded off rot, save the luck of Vanaheim. Someone there loves you.”

The Vanr ... Idunn. Could her power have helped him in his quest? He shook the thought away. The goddess was helping, but not like that.

“About Borr ...”

Annar sighed and pressed his palms against his eyes. “I know it, man. I would have come to his funeral, given any such chance. Only, with the wolves pressing in on us ... Safe passage to Wodan lands grows scarce. Worse, I’d leave my people without their jarl. Is that why you’re here? Odin

is angry? Of course he is. Please explain to him, I had no choice, and I meant Borr no disrespect.”

Eir smeared some foul paste on Tyr’s wounds. It stung like fire, then gave way to a welcome warmth.

Tyr watched Annar. The jarl shifted, uncomfortable under the scrutiny. “We’ve lost a lot of men, hunters, fighters. Fishermen even, if they tried to bring a catch ashore too late in the day or too far from the town. Surely Odin will understand.”

Even the goddess Idunn herself seemed hard-pressed to predict Odin’s actions or reactions. Offered the chance at immortality and kingship, the fool had scorned her, favoured the foreigner. But Odin *would* be king. Would fulfil Borr’s legacy, if Tyr had to carry him to his throne kicking and screaming. For that, the man needed his cousin, needed Annar to owe him a great debt.

“I can help you,” Tyr said. “If we hunt down one or two of these raiding parties, the Godwulfs may decide to look for weaker prey. Turn their eyes away from the Athra.” With luck, maybe they’d go after the Skaldun.

“You’d fight by our side?”

Tyr grunted. “With your blessing, I will lead your warriors to victory. But you, Annar, you will owe Odin and the Wodanar for this.”

Despite the hesitation in his eyes, Annar nodded. Good. Kill a few varulfur, and one clan might already support Odin at the Althing. Now there just remained the problem of slaying well-armed men with superhuman strength and durability. Small problem.



THE CRUMBLING tower might have once watched over the Járnavidr. Now, no one maintained it. No one watched the wood from its ramparts. If the Godwulfs had been half the protectors they claimed to be, they’d have

garrisoned this place for the good of all Aujum. Instead, Tyr had found it abandoned, nigh the southern border of Athra lands. Occupying it, they'd lit a brazier atop the tower—a challenge to varulfur looking to expand their territory. Here, Men pushed back, claiming what might have otherwise belonged to the wolves. Annar had set four archers atop the tower. They all hunkered down now, hidden, trusting the smoke to mask their scents. Two nights already they had passed like this. Surely the Godwulfs could not anticipate the trap? Savage beasts were cunning, aye, but driven by instinct, fury.

Annar and a few of his men dwelt in the lower floors of the tower. In daylight, they worked to begin restoring the foundations as if they intended to stay here long. Tyr and Geir, however, and three of Geir's men, lingered in a dug-out snow drift, skin caked with mud to mask their scents. Plan had sounded better ere spending two freezing nights huddled in the snow.

“Mist is getting inside,” Geir Maurson complained again.

“A torch would give us away.” Tyr had told him that enough times it ought to have sunk in by now. Mist-madness. They all feared it. But if they didn't kill these varulfur, naught else would matter.

Grumbling, Geir stuck his hands under his armpits. “If our stones freeze rock solid, we're not like to care about werewolves either.”

“Too late,” one of the men complained, and the others snickered.

The sun was dipping low. A third night. If the wolves didn't come, they'd have to rethink their plan. They had announced their presence already, and if the varulfur didn't take the bait, they had wasted their efforts.

Sometime later, a howl rang through the woods. Another followed, and another. Tyr held up a hand to forestall any of the men from speaking. Varulfur had great ears. Like real wolves. Stronger than Men, track you by scent, hear you breathing. Best hunters in Midgard. Tyr didn't like being hunted.

A large black wolf loped toward the tower. It meant others lurked in the woods, waiting. Watching to see if men saw their scout. Tyr kept his hand up. Not yet. The wolf nudged open the main door. It didn't latch, and they had left it unbarred on purpose. A moment later, shouts rang out. Growls. Screams.

Geir tried to rise behind him, and Tyr shoved him back down. The varulfur would not send *one* wolf after them. Never just one. Then five more oversized wolves came charging from the woods, rushing for the tower. Geir pushed past Tyr and charged out, bellowing a war cry. At the sound, two of the wolves broke off and circled him.

"Up! Go!" Tyr shouted at the others. He scrambled out of the snowdrift.

"For Athra!" Geir shouted, swinging an axe wildly at the wolves. One jumped back out of the way. The other leapt forward, bearing him down. Teeth closed on his throat and yanked. Tore it out, showering steaming gore on the snow.

An arrow caught that one. It yelped, tried to fall back. Tyr charged it, slashing. The wolf ducked, moving with uncanny speed. Dodged again and leapt for Tyr. He whipped his sword back into place, and the wolf impaled itself. The impact sent Tyr toppling over backward, heavy canine form landing atop him. The other wolf snapped at him, but Geir's warriors tore into it with axes and spears. Its jaws closed around a man's knee and ripped it out. Bastard fell, wailing.

The corpse atop Tyr had become a man. Heavy. Tyr shoved him off, jerked his sword free. Archers had felled another wolf outside the tower, but more screams echoed within. Tyr raced over. A wolf charged him as he hit the threshold. He didn't have time for a proper swing, but he twisted his blade enough to shear off part of the wolf's ear. The beast fell, whimpering. Tyr kicked it, twice. Then raised his blade to run it through.

"No, wait," Annar said. The jarl was favouring one arm, blood seeping out between the chain links of his hauberk. "A prisoner."

“You want to try to hold a varulf prisoner?” The whole tower had become a slaughterhouse. Blood coated every wall, every surface. Half of Annar’s men lay dead or dying, many missing their throats. One poor bastard was clutching his guts, uselessly trying to pile them back into his torn-open belly.

“Prisoners have uses. Especially those cowed by a solid defeat.” Several of these dead must have come from the varulfur.

Tyr groaned. Annar had a point. He kicked the downed varulf again. Hard.



THE TOWER HAD A BASEMENT, one lined with rotting barrels, contents long since turned to dust. Rat shit covered half the floor. Rusted manacles on one wall served their purpose though. Not ideal—damn varulf might be able to break them. The sun had forced the man back into human form, and they had bound him in that awful place. Two archers stood, arrows nocked and readied, and in front of them, a spearman. And Tyr, sword in hand. Given half an excuse, he’d have run through this shapeshifting trollfucker. He kicked him in the gut, drawing the varulf into sudden wakefulness.

A low growl from deep inside the beast.

“Tell us your master’s plans, wolf,” Annar said.

The varulf sneered. “My master?”

Tyr grabbed him by the hair and hefted him to his feet. “We know you serve the Godwulfs. Do not waste our time denying it.”

“The Godwulfs, aye. But Jarl Alci?” The varulf spat on the floor, dangerously close to Tyr’s boot.

Tyr raised his eyes from the phlegm to the half-man before him. “Do not lie to me.”

“On my honour.”

Tyr scoffed. "Honour? What honour, varulf?"

The man strained against his chains. Rust showered down from them, where links ground together. The varulf leant his face as close to Tyr as his bonds allowed. "I serve my clan. You have no idea what it's like to have this thing inside you. Driving you to kill. *Worse*. So you can go fuck a troll. But you can't judge me."

Annar advanced now, wending his way through spearmen and archers. "What do you want from us?"

"Me? Not a damned thing. Alci Gundericson, though, he wants it all. Your lands, your tribute. Probably your life, if you're the jarl."

Annar folded his arms over his chest. "Have you a name, varulf?"

"I do. Hallr. Hallr Stonecrusher."

Annar looked to Tyr. "How'd you fasten a name like that?"

"Bit off another varulf's stones when he challenged me over a mate." The varulf smirked. "You need not kill me. You want the raids to stop? I could do that. If I were jarl."

Tyr groaned. So being a murderous beast was not enough. This varulf wanted to betray his lord. No greater breach of honour seemed possible. They ought to send the men back to Alci with word of his treachery. Let the jarl exact what justice he would. Or ... Or maybe Tyr ought to just finish things here and now. Keeping a varulf in their midst was asking for Annar to lose more good men like Geir. He pushed the edge of his sword against Hallr's neck. "Is there any reason I ought not leave you to rot in this tower?"

"Tyr." Annar's arm on his wrist. "He may have his uses." Tyr spat in disgust but lowered his blade. "Tell me," Annar said. "Why all this? Only because of Borr's death? Was that all that held Alci back?"

Hallr chuckled. "Made it easier, maybe. No, this simmered long ere the Wodan's fall. You think Alci takes it well, his weak and dying brother

holding Halfhaugr? The greatest fortress in Aujum? So when the messengers of Otwin came to us, he leapt at the offer.”

“What are you talking about?” Annar demanded. “Who’s Otwin?”

“King of Njarar, come at last to collect on the debt Hadding owed his father. And when Hadding refused him, he armed Alci with blades and armour of the finest make, forged by Volund himself, back in the war. Otwin wants his due, and he wants his vengeance. But I care not a troll’s fuck for either and even less about the Athra. If you are so keen to save yourselves, help me take the throne from him.”

“Why would anyone follow you?” Tyr asked.

“I’m a distant cousin to the jarl and a respected warrior in our clan.”

Tyr shook his head. “Not here, you’re not. You’re a traitor, betraying your oath and your kin alike. Annar, hang this man and be done with it.”

Annar rubbed his beard. Then shook his head. “Not yet. I need to know how far Odin will support us.”

Tyr glowered. Odin didn’t even know Tyr had come. He could offer no promises on the man coming to support his cousin, much as Odin did value family. Still, Tyr was going to have to tell him now, especially with Alci moving in on Halfhaugr. Besides which, he needed to see Idunn. Maybe the goddess could see a way through this mire of intrigue and betrayal. Tyr surely could not. “I’ll leave for Eskgard as soon as I’ve gathered supplies. Annar, heed me. Do not let this man out of your sight whilst I am away. I’d trust him less than an adder in my bed.”

The jarl nodded. “We’ll bring him back to Breivik. Chains stay on. Fare well, Tyr.”

And swiftly, Tyr hoped.

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STARKAD

16 Age of the Æsir

*A*n old man, his face concealed by a wide-brimmed hat, stood upon a hilltop, his grey cloak and grey beard billowing in the stiff breeze. Unseen birds cawed overhead. Wolves, eyes gleaming golden in the moonlight, stalked around the vale beneath the hill, watching Starkad. Herding him, perhaps, bidding him trek to their master, to his.

Unable to refuse—despite the chasmic dread opening within his gut—Starkad climbed the hillock. Atop it, the howling wind battered him, threatened to tear his own cloak away. Eddies of Mist defied the winds, coiled about Starkad’s heels, clung to him, hungry.

“You are vexed at being denied an apple,” Odin said. Shadows drenched the king of Asgard, crept over him even as the Mist strove to crawl up Starkad. Even knowing the Æsir had once been Men, Starkad could barely stop from balking at Odin’s presence. At his ... airs of mystery. At his touch of the Otherworld.

Starkad gritted his teeth. If he was no longer Ás himself, Odin was no longer his king, and he owed him no obeisance. “Would not you be vexed,

having fought harder than any other for a prize and to have it snatched away?”

Odin turned slowly. He was tall, but at this moment, he seemed mammoth in stature. The figure before him, though of a height with Starkad, Odin towered over him, towered over the distant mountains. Seemed, in this dream, capable of reaching up and grasping the very stars. “Harder than any other? Are you so certain no other man has suffered and fought as you have? Well, it matters naught, Starkad. You have but to abandon your brother and come into my service, and all you desire may yet come to you.”

“Abandon my brother?” Starkad snorted. “Would you abandon yours? I think not.” He resisted the urge to spit—barely. He might not have owed Odin respect, but only a fool would antagonise a man of such power, even in dream.

“I cannot allow an apple to fall to those who will not serve the will of Asgard.”

No. Starkad supposed that only a fool would willingly give away such a gift, especially when too few of the treasures remained for his own loyal servants. So the only answer he could offer was to shrug.

“And yet ... you may yet serve and earn a reward. Go to King Gylfi in Svjarland and serve him well, and you may serve me in so doing.”

Win Odin’s favour ... no. Starkad shook his head. “I serve no man, for I have no people left. And I will make my own way, King of the Æsir.”

The old man lifted his gaze enough Starkad could see a fell glint in his eyes. “Urd is cruel, Starkad. We shall see each other again in the days to come ... in the darkest of nights.”

Starkad shook his head and left the old man in the forest. He was done with such things, forever. Done being one more tool in Odin’s arsenal. Starkad’s life, his urd, they would be his own to make.



REFUSING to bow to Odin's whims, Starkad had shunned Svjarland and pressed on, instead, to Nidavellir, to Agder, a petty kingdom in the south of the northernmost lands of Midgard. He and Vikar had landed on those shores and come to the court of King Harald, sworn vassal to the dverg king, Motsognir. With open arms had the king welcomed them, declared them his friends and made them raiders. They had plundered other petty kingdoms in Nidavellir, challenged the forces of ancient Healfdene in Reidgotaland, even raided into Svjarland. And King Harald had grown rich off their efforts, rewarding both brothers in kind. The tribute he paid to his dverg master might have ruined a man less inclined to raid or one without such successful allies to carry out those raids. But despite all odds, Agder prospered under Harald. And Starkad knew why.

One arm around Vikar, the other laden with a drinking horn, Starkad strolled Harald's hall. Another raid accomplished, and the brothers' names had begun to spread across the North Realms. One day, they'd be more famous than Tyr.

Starkad liked to think he'd earned it on his own. Though ... the Ás king did still appear in Starkad's dreams on rare occasions. Appeared, whispered names, places ... sometimes those hints had led to great victories.

Vikar had earned the ear of Harald and would tell the king where to strike next. Despite all Starkad had won for Agder, all the foes he'd slain, Vikar had more way with words.

Now, they had joined the pirate called the Arrow's Point in striking out into Reidgotaland. The man—Orvar-Oddr, his true name, Harald's grandson—trailed behind, drunk on victory and mead, as Starkad led them all back to Harald's feast hall. Harald, ever generous, spared no expense in preparing the tables, now laden with mammoth and whale and shellfish Starkad could not even name. The king sat at the head of the table, a grin plastered upon his face and eyes slightly bleary with drink. He pounded on the table. "My friends return again!"

“And bearing the greater wealth of Norreyske,” Vikar said, then chuckled. “I think Healfdene will be long in recovering from the blow we dealt his thegns.”

The king grinned and slapped the table again. Then he beckoned Vikar and Starkad over. They joined him, Vikar to his right and Starkad to the left. Starkad motioned for a thrall to bring a fresh drinking horn and he drank deeply, savouring the mead’s sweet aftertaste. In the wake of the spear-din, two things were best in life: a great draught of mead and plunging deep into a woman. Starkad rather expected to avail himself of both this night.

In fact, he winked at Harald’s daughter, Alvilda, though she seemed to only notice Vikar beside her. Damn his fair-tongued brother. Ah well, there were other women, shieldmaidens aplenty, and even thralls who would not object overmuch if he asked one to his chambers.

Harald cleared his throat. Rubbed his nose. “Well, then. I congratulate you all.” He raised the horn and his voice both. “And to the Arrow’s Point, as well! Skål!”

Across the hall, Orvar-Oddr turned to look at his grandfather, nodded, and raised his own horn in salute. “Skål!”

Now the king turned back to Starkad and Vikar. “I would have liked to have gone ... but uh ... I suppose we all know the truth, eh? My days grow few, I think. Twilight creeps upon us all.”

“My King,” Vikar said.

“Bah! I am no young man, Vikar, and every man in this hall well knows it.” He sniffed, then coughed. “Aye, my son is long dead and now I have only Alvilda.” The girl frowned and stared at the table. Feigned timidity or real? Either way, Starkad found it little appealing however nice her arse and tits. Harald picked at some mammoth flesh. “When I am gone, Alvilda will need help to rule this kingdom. She’ll need a strong man by her side.” He looked to Vikar. “And she favours you, my son, though she is not bold enough to speak it.”

Indeed, the girl blushed, staring all the harder at the tabletop. Starkad frowned. It sounded rather like Harald was saying ...

“So then, Vikar. If you would have my daughter, I shall name you my heir. The next king of Agder.”

Vikar sputtered a moment, then raised the drinking horn. “It would be my honour.” Starkad looked to Orvar, but the raider seemed not the least perturbed his grandfather should pass the through to his aunt and her husband. Maybe it was that Orvar was almost as restless as Starkad.

Harald clapped him on the shoulder. “Then let the wedding feast be arranged!”

At the king’s outburst, half the hall turned to look. And seeing their king so pleased, a cheer erupted. Toasts followed and laughter. Skald’s poems and wrestling.

And so Vikar’s silver tongue would make him a king. Perhaps, Starkad mused, some things mattered more than speed with a sword ... leastwise, until it came time for the spear-din.



THE WEDDING FEAST was more impressive than any Starkad had seen outside of Asgard ... and those days seemed another life now. Events that had happened to someone else. A dream. One he’d woken from, long back.

Drunk and happy, he’d taken a pair of shieldmaidens to bed with him. Sisters, they claimed, though he cared naught one way or the other. He thought them both well pleased, and he lay back, happier than he’d been in long years.

As was Vikar, no doubt. By now he must have sated himself on Alvilda at least once—something Starkad’s brother had longed for since he’d first laid eyes on the girl. And good for him—Agder needed royal children to establish a strong dynasty. Despite the dvergar, this land might yet prosper.

It might have done better under Starkad, but that was not Urd, it seemed. No, nor was it his urd to claim immortality, though he'd been so close. Ironic, Vikar had cost him that, as well.

Though he'd shut his eyes, Starkad had not realised he'd slept. At least until the fires started.

The smoke came first, filling the darkness. Choking him. Leaving him to wander in a drunken stupor, alone.

Waken ...

Everything around him had grown empty, save for flames. Spreading fast, engulfing the woods through which he fled. The inferno chased him, ever gaining, no matter how fast he ran.

Waken ...

Starkad stumbled upon a root. The entire tree from which it jutted crumbled into ash. He rolled over on the forest floor as a shadow fell upon him. A figure of smoke and flame, smouldering, like a fiend of Muspelheim come to burn away all the World.

Wake up!

Starkad jolted awake to the sound of battle. He stumbled out of the bed shelf, fell over one of the shieldmaidens, and slammed face-first into the floor.

"What the fuck!" the woman complained. "Can't you ..." She was sitting now, rubbing her eyes as Starkad tried to disentangle their legs. "That sounds like ..."

"Because it is!" he snapped. No time for his hauberk. Instead, he grabbed his swords and blundered through the door.

Being drunk was rewarding. Fighting drunk, less so. Waging war drunk ... ill advised.

A bellowing man with an axe came racing down the hall, blade raised for a killing blow. Moving so damned fast. Starkad lurched back, just managing to get a sword up. The axeman ran straight into the blade,

impaling himself. It stole his momentum and he pitched forward, dead almost instantly.

Glorious.

Still reeling, Starkad stumbled down the corridor into the great hall. Dozens of men lay dead. Dozens more engaged a raiding force that had broken into the wedding celebration. Shirtless and unarmoured, Vikar wove his sword about, cutting down one man and then another.

With a roar, Starkad joined him. One of his blades took a man in the back of the neck. The other clattered off mail, his blow poorly aimed and ineffective save to throw the target off-balance. That was enough though, and Vikar chopped down into the man's skull, then kicked him away.

Behind Vikar, Harald lay on his back, empty eyes staring up at the ceiling. A gouge split him from neck to hip. His blood and stinking guts had spread over the floor.

The king was ... dead. The thought did not quite want to settle into Starkad's mind.

Grimacing, sobering fast, he engaged another murderer.



AT VIKAR'S SIDE, Starkad watched the burning longship vanish into the Mist over the fjord, a glowing ember in the twilight. Alvilda was clutching Vikar's arm, weeping, any sound she made lost beneath the threnody the völva and her apprentice sang. The haunting song echoed off the cliffs beyond the water, seemed to waken primal vaettir of the land. Perhaps the spirits would ease the passage of the dead.

"Those were Herthiof's men," Starkad whispered to his brother. Vikar grunted.

Herthiof was just another petty king in Nidavellir, one more subject to the dvergar and no enemy to Harald, save that Harald had rejected

Herthiof's son's proposal for Alvilda's hand. Maybe they had hoped to salve wounded pride with blood and carnage, as if pain shared might be distributed rather than redoubled.

Perhaps, though, Herthiof had set his sights on Agder and thought if Vikar was dead, he might claim the kingdom after Harald passed. Either way, only one course now lay open to Vikar.

Herthiof had slain the king, Vikar's father-in-law. Naught less than total vengeance would do. And that meant war. True war, the likes of which Starkad had not seen since they'd left Andalus.

In war, a man lost those he cared for. Starkad wearied of losing friends and allies.



THE DEAD WERE PILED up in Herthiof's hall. Blood drenched the floor, the tables, the walls. Blood and guts and shit all mingled, filling the place with a stench that almost overpowered Starkad. That, and the reek of burning flesh, from a hapless karl fallen into the hearth pit. Starkad limped through the carnage, favouring his left leg after a lucky bastard had slashed his thigh. His boots sloshed in gore and gristle as he limped.

"King Harald is avenged," Vikar said, wiping his brow, though he more smeared the blood caking his face than cleaned it.

Starkad snorted. Aye, he imagined so. Herthiof was dead, as were one of his sons, all of his karls, and many of his thegns. Some thirty men had fallen this night, not counting the seven Vikar had lost.

The rest of the men had set about looting, pillaging, some moving on to the village. Outside, screams rang out as men burnt and murdered and raped their way through Herthiof's villagers. The man's town lay nestled at the back of the fjord, flanked by snow-drenched peaks. An ice shelf had frozen most of the fjord, but a narrow channel had allowed Vikar's ships to sail

close. With the thick Mist, Herthiof's folk had not known foes lurked among them until arrows began sprouting from flesh.

Vikar wiped his mouth. "You hear them shouting about trolls and vaettir?"

Starkad nodded. A surprise attack at night would do that to Men, make them think something out of the Mist was coming for them. Very little amusing about that though. The snows were falling, growing heavier. Maybe it would douse the flames, though Starkad thought it little mattered, since Vikar's men would claim every survivor they could as a thrall. Such was the price of defeat. "So ... back to Agder."

Vikar turned about, still seeming to revel in the destruction. It had been a glorious battle, Starkad had to admit. A challenge worthy of song. The aftermath, though ... A man behind them coughed, choking on his own blood. One of their own warriors, though Starkad didn't know his name. He knelt, wrapt the man's hand around the haft of his axe. When the dying man gave a grim nod, Starkad drew his seax and slid it between the ribs, right into the man's heart. A brave man, fallen in battle. Tale said valkyrjar might escort those like him to Valhöll. Starkad hoped so.

"Starkad," Vikar said after Starkad rose and cleaned his blade. "Herthiof was king of Hordaland." Starkad looked back at his brother, said naught. "And also of Hardanger."

Huh. Starkad had not known that. Another petty kingdom already fallen to their now-dead foe. He shrugged. "So there will be lands ripe for plunder for a few moons, aye."

"Plunder ... or conquest. I have taken Herthiof's kingdom—why should I not add it to my own, as he intended to do to Agder?"

Starkad groaned, then wiped sweat from his brow. "How far do you intend to reach, little brother?" There were too many dead here, the Mist too thick. They needed to set to burning the bodies. He had seen what could

happen if the dead were not put to rest, seen it on Odin's long march to Vanaheim, years back.

"All of southern Nidavellir, perhaps. Think of it ... Healfdene has united much of Reidgotaland. Why should I not accomplish the same here?"

"To prove to Odin and Tyr that they were wrong about you?" As if it might undo their outlawry. As if the apples would not still be denied to the both of them because Vikar could not follow orders.

"I don't have to prove trollshit to them! I will build my own empire here in the frozen north, where the ice does not melt, and men are harder, stronger."

"The dvergar—"

Vikar scoffed and waved that away. "Shall get more tribute than ever and find themselves well sated. What care should they have which man's arse sits on a throne, so long as they find themselves swimming in hacksilver?"

Starkad nodded. There was no swaying his brother once he'd set his mind. "If you do this ... Herthiof's brother will surely come to claim what he believes his due."

"And will you fight for me, Starkad?"

Starkad snorted. "Need you ask?"



THE WARS WENT on and on. More oft than not, they won. Starkad did as Vikar asked, championed him time and again. They fought Geirthiof, brother of Herthiof, and Starkad slew him. They claimed Telemark and the uplands. They fought Herthiof's son Fridthjof and Starkad's handpicked crew defeated him as well, forced him to surrender all his lands. Along with such domains, Vikar earned the loyalty of famed mercenaries like Olof Sharpsighted or Svipdagr the Mighty. And the moons passed as the south of

Nidavellir fell into Vikar's hands. Some, like the pirate King Gudlög, bowed and offered tribute. Others Starkad put to the sword.

It suited Starkad well enough, he supposed. For as Vikar's fame spread, Starkad's spread faster.

All of it, Vikar took as his due. And after so long, finally, they sailed home, exhausted and on the cusp of a winter that seemed poised to be more brutal than any Starkad remembered. Then the winds had broken.

For nigh to a moon, they had found themselves becalmed and with too few men left alive to man the oars. Snows built upon the deck, were swept clean by thralls. Men grew quarrelsome with boredom, with growing hunger, as the seas became harder to fish. There was land, a silhouette of it, just visible through the Mist, at times when the sun thinned the brume. But from those shores rose ice-laden peaks, jagged cliffs, and only scattered trees too obdurate to surrender to the cold. No easy passage, no easy hunting. Besides, beyond those mountains, if they could be passed, would lie the broken, jagged glacier, where chasmic rents could swallow a whole troop of Men.

Starkad leant over the gunwale, staring into the Mist, imagining vaettir moved within, flitting across the sea. Beyond, the mountains of Nidavellir rose, towering behemoths, beneath which the dvergjar dwelt, in dark places. Tale had come to them of Vikar's many conquests and they had demanded higher and higher tributes. But to them, Vikar offered no argument. What they asked, he paid. No man wanted to cross vaettir. If saealfar were to rise against the ship, Vikar would grant them any boon they asked, even sacrifices of captured thralls. Vikar would grant it, would be right to do so.

Bones clattered upon the deck once again as the völvja made another throw. They had brought the woman to assure their victories. To help them foresee the will of the gods—and these people largely took to worshipping the Æsir, whose own fame spread like wildfire. Starkad did not bother to correct them about his people's nature. They would not have heeded him

had he tried. Odin had used Gylfi to cast the Ás immortals as gods, and Men across the North Realms saw them as such. The new gods who had conquered the old and deserved prayers and sacrifices.

Finally, he stalked over to the völvá. “Tell me, witch. When will the winds return?”

The woman looked up with haunted eyes. “There are ... unbelievers amongst the army.”

Starkad barely contained his chuckle. Unbelievers, and he was one of them. How would this woman react to hear that Starkad himself was born among the Æsir, that none of them had been gods ere they took Vanaheim? That Odin’s power came ... from a piece of a fruit? A fruit—golden treasure more valuable than any mined from the bowels of Midgard. Starkad dreamt of them, sometimes, the apples, the urd that had almost been his.

“You claim the Æsir stole our winds because not all of us believe in them?”

She shrugged. “That I cannot say. But they shall not help us unless we make a sacrifice in their honour.”

By now, several crewmen had gathered, Vikar included. The king scowled at his wise woman until Starkad half expected him to sacrifice *her*, though no man would ever dare harm a völvá. “Odin has wrought this becalming?” That, Starkad could credit, for the king was canny and possessed of dark seidr, Starkad well knew.

A warrior groaned, and several others muttered.

“Well,” Vikar said. “We cannot march the army home by land through these mountains. Least of all with winter approaching.” An icy wind seemed to emphasise his point, swirling Mist.

“We must try the land,” Starkad said. “We cannot winter here.” The glacier would claim lives, aye. The cold, the trackless expanses, the hidden gorges. The vaettir. But still, was risking passage across such forbidden wastes not better than the slow creeping agony of starvation, watching their

guts grow sunken? Waiting, hour by hour, to see who would first surrender. To see who, then, would dare raise the question. Jötunnar—perhaps alfar, as well—they ate the flesh of Man. Forbidden, hateful practice, aye, but when starving, someone would consider it.

“No,” Vikar said. “We both know Odin is a right bastard. If he wants something from us, he’ll have it, or we’ll suffer twice over until we grant it. We both know we cannot thwart his will by casting aside reason and chancing the passage overland.”

Starkad folded his arms. He’d never told Vikar that Odin had pleaded with him to abandon his brother. He had, however, mentioned the king’s bidding that they go to Gylfi. A request neither of them had honoured.

“Besides,” Vikar said after a moment, “storms could crop up any day now. We don’t make it home soon, we may not make it home at all. So, how are we to decide it?”

“By lots,” the völva said. “Each man will draw a rune, and I will hold one duplicate.”

Starkad groaned. “You will leave our lives to chance?”

Vikar shook his head. “No, brother. I must leave them to Urd.”



VIKAR MUST HAVE THOUGHT himself doing right by his kingdom. Maybe he even wanted to placate Odin. Chance, Urd, or Odin’s machinations—it was Vikar who drew the cursed rune. Starkad’s brother stared hard at it, snow crusting his hair and beard, visage grim.

So ... had the völva known, Starkad wondered? Had Odin? Or worse yet, had the king of the Æsir created this situation to punish Starkad? Could Odin, were he so inclined, influence the draw of lots?

“So be it,” Vikar said. Starkad’s brother turned to stare out at the sea. “We must make land on those shores. The völva says I must hang, as Odin

once hung himself.”

The tale of Odin hanging from Yggdrasil and returning from the dead sounded like fancy to Starkad, though Tyr had sworn it all true. In any event, Vikar would not return from such an experience.

“Hold off on this Mist-madness,” Starkad pleaded. “Await the morn, at least. One more night ... then, if there is no wind ... then ...”

Vikar gripped the gunwale. “Suppose another man had drawn the unlucky lot, brother? Would I not then demand he face his urd? Can I ask less of my people than I will give myself?”

“You are not just one of the men. You are king. Your queen awaits you, heavy with child. Do you not wish to see her again?”

Vikar spat into the sea. “Of course I do. But if I look upon her, I must do so without shame.”

“Wait until the morn, I beseech you.”

And at last, Vikar nodded.



THE OARS ROWED THEMSELVES, ferrying the tiny boat through the Mist, carrying Starkad and Tyr. No moon graced the night and but few stars pierced the canopy of darkness. Tyr's face was shrouded, only the hint of his beard, his chin visible. But Starkad knew him.

“Whither are we bound?” Starkad asked.

“To the Thing.” Tyr spread his hands ... Wasn't something wrong with his right hand? It looked fine now.

“Am I to be judged?”

“We are, all of us, always to be judged.”

“By ...”

“... By the living and the dead. Always by the dead.” Tyr's voice sounded off, scratchy and coarser than usual.

On and on the boat drifted, propelled by unseen hands. And then it scraped up on ice, banked upon a small island in the midst of the empty sea. Starkad rose. Tyr was gone ... Had not the man been with him?

Swallowing—for he could not deny the compulsion to walk forward—he left the boat and climbed the shore. Gloom hung over the land like a wooden cloak, an almost physical weight. Upon a hill sat eleven chairs, a twelfth set amongst and above them. In each chair sat a shrouded figure, hands lit with etheric blue flame. Faces concealed.

“Where am I?” Starkad asked, finding his feet had carried him to the circle’s centre.

“Perhaps you gaze upon the thrones of Fate.” The speaker was in the high chair; Starkad knew that voice.

“Odin?”

Another sitter spoke, this time to Starkad’s left. “So concerned with Odin ... and yet you think to defy the will of Asgard?”

The ground trembled. Rocks tumbled down the hill. A crack rent the land separating him from Odin, sent Starkad stumbling back onto his arse. This crack spread, bubbling darkness seeping from it, and swirling until it became a maelstrom of chaos and shadow. Wind tugged at Starkad’s clothes, his boots, his ... soul. Pulled them closer and closer, with each passing moment.

“What ...?”

“Perhaps then,” Odin said, “to defy the thrones of Fate you might dive into the abyss of the Roil.”

“What abyss? What the fuck is the Roil? Release me!”

Odin stood and strode to the edge of the maelstrom, though its winds ruffled his clothing not at all. “It is the darkness beyond the dark, waiting to devour body, mind, and soul. It waits, hungry. Eternal. Would you yet strive with those who have looked into the churning deep beyond?”

“You’re not real! This is not real!”

All the figures had stood now. Their eyes gleamed in the darkness, luminous green, angry. Judging. Odin shook his head, his face still concealed. "Reality is more tenuous than you might imagine. And whilst I fight to preserve our fragile world, you deny me ... But I am not given to wanton cruelty ... and might, beseeched by a father, be convinced to bestow upon the son a gift." Odin pressed his hand down into the maelstrom, and the shadows rent apart. They turned to dust and drifted up into the sky, vanishing into the blackness above.

"F-father? You mean Tyr?"

"You are forever denied the apple you so desired ... and yet, I cannot ignore the pleas he makes. Let you live, keep your youth, and grace this dying world as we do."

After several breaths to steady himself, Starkad rose. He'd be damned before he met Odin or anyone else lying on his arse on the ground. Even if this was a dream. "You will grant me an apple?"

"'Tis too late for that. But I can yet offer you three lifetimes of Man. I can call upon the darkness and grant to you years beyond the reckoning of Men. And too, you shall find great wealth, carry mighty weapons, and be ever victorious in battle. And you will ... be my sword in the world of Men."

Starkad had thought his prize lost forever. But if he could not have an apple ... to have all Odin had promised ... Was it possible? Long life and wealth and glory? "What must I do?"

One of the men threw back his hood to reveal Tyr's face. "Honour." The man's eye sockets were empty pools of blackness.

Another stood, this time revealing Starkad's mother's face, her eyes too missing. "Sacrifice."

A final figure strode toward him. This one dropped his cowl to reveal Vikar's face. "Blood. Of the one who cost you everything."



“YOU MUST COMPLETE THE SACRIFICE,” Starkad said as he and Vikar stood, watching the dawn. “But let it be a mere gesture to placate the gods we defied.”

Vikar turned away from the sun to look at Starkad. “How so?”

“A simple noose of calf intestines tied to a twig. Let the völva perform the ritual, you pretend to die ... and then we might all sail from here.”

His half-brother clapped him on the arm. “I hope you are right, though I find myself doubting we can so easily appease Odin.”

Nevertheless, Vikar rowed them ashore. Starkad, two thegns, and the völva, all dour. Aboard their sea-steed, the men watched the king going to his mock death. Even knowing it not real, they feared. They feared the wrath of Odin for the deceit, perhaps, or feared more to lose the beloved ruler who had led them to victory after victory.

Ashore, Starkad was the first out of the boat. “I must find a calf or goat or something else. We need the intestines for the ... sacrifice.”

Vikar nodded. “Do not take long, brother.”

Starkad flinched at the word. Brother? Half-brother, and though he’d loved Vikar dearly, surely his brother knew what had to happen. Urd had been declared ... Odin must be appeased. Vikar had said so, had accepted his role in it. He’d been planning to go willingly ere Starkad had talked him down yesterday.

And now ... That dream ran through Starkad’s mind, over and over. Ceaseless and undeniable.

The rope was waiting where the dreams had said it would be. When Starkad hefted it up, it became slick and slippery—a calf’s intestine. As Odin had promised.

Vikar knew. He must know. He had accepted this. One way or another, Odin would have his due ... and this way, Starkad might claim all he’d forsaken to join Vikar these past years. He might ... be damned.

He blew out a long breath. This had to happen. It had to.

Odin was offering him something close to immortality. Offering the next best thing to the prize Starkad had been denied because of Vikar. Been denied, so Starkad's little brother could become a king.

As Starkad returned to camp, he found Vikar standing atop a rotting stump. A tiny branch overhung this, flimsy and leafless in the winter. Starkad flung the intestines at the feet of a thegn, who then tied it over the branch. With a glance at Starkad—and he nodded, damn him!—Vikar tied a noose and set it round his neck.

“Vikar ...” Starkad started to say.

His brother stepped off the stump. And it crumbled to dust beneath him. The flimsy branch thickened, twisting and growing, shooting out like a spear. And the calf's guts became a rope. The noose jerked tight around Vikar's throat. His eyes latched onto Starkad's. Had he known? Had he *known* and gone anyway?

The men stood in shock as their glorious leader died. As their dreams of a united Nidavellir died with him.

Then came the shouts of kinslayer. Of betrayal. Of murder. The blood sacrifice Odin had demanded. Vikar's thegns drew their blades, cursing Starkad. And as Starkad killed the two thegns, he knew—Odin had called for their deaths as well. For the Ás king, as ever, remained steeped in blood, death shrouding him like his voluminous cloak. Starkad had become Odin's blade, claiming victims. Run from Urd, and still it loomed before you, waiting.

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THE VÖLSUNGS

15 Age of the Æsir

Each night, the varulf bitch returned and claimed one of Sigmund's brothers. She would tear them apart where they sat, chained to the log, devouring them before Sigmund's eyes. Saving him for last, he supposed. As the eldest—or the one who had challenged her—she wanted to prolong his suffering. Until, at last, Sigmund was alone. Left to spend the day talking to the maimed skulls of his five brothers. Father was dead. His brothers were dead. And—much though it pained him—if Wolfsblood had gone to the trouble of such a betrayal, had hired mercenaries the likes of Eightarms, then surely he also intended to wipe out the rest of the Völsung line in Xanten.

Whilst Sigmund remained bound in this forest, no doubt Wolfsblood or his warriors had already sailed on Hunaland, intent on murdering Mother and the rest of the young ones. And Sigmund was powerless to save any of them. Perhaps he deserved to find himself standing before the Gates of Hel and prey to her hounds.

Round and round, his mind sought Gramr, but she was gone. And without her, he could do naught save wait for night. Maybe, eyes stinging with the salt of his tears, he almost welcomed it.



TWILIGHT HAD SETTLED when the snap of a twig drew Sigmund's eyes back to the woods. The varulf had never come until well into the night ere now. It was not a varulf who emerged, however, but a man, dressed in simple thrall rags and bearing a heavy satchel. What fresh torment was this? Sigmund was weary of the drawn-out struggle. Let them kill him and be done with it all. "Wolfsblood sent you?"

The man drew nigh and knelt beside him. "No. Your sister did."

Sigmund sat up straighter. "If you are the king's man, why do you serve my sister?"

The man looked away for the barest instant, but Sigmund caught it. "She has paid me."

His meaning slithered serpent-like over Sigmund, and he sneered, shamed his twin should find herself forced to barter with such coin. "Have you a name, bastard slave?"

"You can call me Thrithi. And you may account yourself lucky the Mist has not yet claimed your mind or soul."

Had that happened, Sigmund might have named it mercy, despite the dread the Mist's incessant hunger conjured in his gut. Instead, phantasmal images of his fallen kin haunted him, the reality of their loss threatening to take shape any moment. All his denials, precious and sanity-preserving, had begun to slip through his fingers like sand. "Apparently that is not my urd."

The thrall opened the sack and then uncorked a jar of honey. "Mayhap gratitude would avail you more than spite."

"For a last meal?"

“Queen Sieglinde instructed I was to smear this all over your face.”

So the wolf would lick him ere she bit him? Why? What plan had Sieglinde hatched? None with any obvious advantage, but then, Sigmund had naught left to lose. He glowered at the thrall. “Release me from these chains, cur.”

“Even had I a key, no lock binds you.”

Sigmund sighed. And how could he expect a thrall to pull free the spike hammered into the log? “So do as your mistress bids and leave me, then. I would not spend my final hours in the company of such as you.”

The thrall stuck his fingers in the honey, then slapped Sigmund’s cheek. Hard. “If you have not known lust, you are not yet a man.” Whilst Sigmund sought a worthy response, the thrall slopped more of the honey on Sigmund’s face and neck. Speaking would have disrupted the process, so Sigmund contented himself to glare. When the wolf slew him, perhaps his anguished soul would linger as a shade. If so, he would haunt Wolfsblood and his thrall both. With the last of the honey lathered over Sigmund, the thrall rose and left. Sigmund shut his eyes and nurtured his hatred. Naught else remained to him.



MIDNIGHT CLOSED IN ON HIM. Sigmund sat very still, awaiting his final moment. By now, he might be the last of the Völsungs. But when the wolf came for him, he would not go down without a struggle. The valkyrjar would see his courage and know that, alone and unarmed, bound and chained, a Völsung had faced down a varulf.

Then she arrived, entering the clearing in utter silence, pacing around him, without lifting her gaze from Sigmund’s face. He glared at her, unwilling to speak. The honey had become a sticky, cloying mess on his face, but she must have caught the scent of it, for she began to plod toward

him. When she drew very close, she sniffed, twice. Then she licked his cheek. Her rough tongue lashed against his temple and his neck. Perhaps the animal side dominated the human one, and she never bothered to wonder at the honey. Either way, Sigmund had to fight to keep still as that tongue scoured the stuff from him.

The bitch licked across Sigmund's lips, and he lunged forward, biting that canine tongue with his own teeth. Her blood scorched his throat, and she shrieked, but he did not release the tongue. The wolf thrashed, kicking her feet against him and the trunk. Her nails tore great gouges in his thighs, but at least his hauberk protected his chest.

Sigmund caught her jaws in each hand and yanked them apart, still pulling with his teeth. And then her tongue ripped from her throat. Gargling on blood, the wolf toppled over, a pathetic crawling thing. Sigmund spat out the tongue. The varulf collapsed, choking to death on her blood. For a few moments she thrashed and then fell still. Fur began to retreat back into her body, revealing an aging woman. How many winters had the varulf woman seen? A great many, no mistake.

Sigmund spat again, trying to clear her filthy blood from his palate. He coughed. Wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Starving, he might almost consider eating her. But in human form ... Bah. To taste the flesh of Man violated the oldest of laws. Though it meant he would still die here, at least he might count his brothers partially avenged. Perhaps the valkyrjar would yet ...

The log! A crack had split along it where the wolf had pulled, trying to free herself from him. A varulf had greater strength than any man, even Sigmund. And she had weakened the trunk where the stake was driven in. Sigmund twisted around to brace his feet against the wood, then grasped his chain with both hands once again. His palms were slick with blood and gore. Every speck of his clothing was worse, so there was no cleaning them.

He heaved on the chain. It creaked, wood splintering and cracking but holding.

Panting, Sigmund released the chain and mopped his brow. Siggeir Wolfsblood had murdered his entire family. Sigmund might blame Starkad Eightarms for the death of Father, but, in truth, the mercenary would have just as easily fought for them had they hired him. No, the fault lay in the man who had betrayed his wife's family and spent three moons hiring such an unbeatable army. He might have beggared his own kingdom to do it ... but since he would have claimed the Völsung hoard as his own, he could now replenish his wealth. Small wonder at the generous gifts he had made to Father. Sigmund could not stay here and allow those wrongs to go unavenged. Father. Carr. Vern. All of them had died. But Sigmund lived. And by Odin, he would have his revenge, no matter how many years it took to claim it.

Again he grabbed the chain. His muscles twitched with the strain of it as he pulled. And then the stake popped free, sending him tumbling backward. Grunting, Sigmund rose and stumbled away from the clearing. With his feet hobbled together, he could not move fast. And he needed to be far away from here ere Wolfsblood came to look into the final urd of the brothers.



SIGMUND SLAMMED the rock down on his manacles once more. A shard of metal chipped off them, but still they held. Damn! He tossed the useless rock aside and lay back in the cave. Odin alone knew how he would manage. He could not hunt—though he had at least found some roots to take the edge off his hunger—nor accomplish much else so hobbled. Certainly he could not fight Wolfsblood and his army even if the man were not a varulf as Sigmund now suspected. Who was the bitch he had killed? A relative of the king? His mother, perhaps—she certainly seemed old

enough. Or maybe Wolfsblood simply had an arrangement with the varulfur dwelling in these woods. Had Sigmund and his brothers thus been an offering? None of his questions mattered, though, not whilst he remained weak and bound.

Soft footfalls scraped on the forest floor, drawing his eye. Sigmund crept to the edge of the cave and there found Sieglinde turning about, burdened by a heavy pack. “Sister?”

She spun, then spotted the low entrance to his cave, nestled between rocks. “Sigmund! By Odin, I knew it had to be you!” She knelt and he helped her slide into the cave.

“How did you find me?”

“I heard the clanking and followed the sound.”

Sigmund glanced down at his manacles and shrugged. “With proper tools I could remove the spoke binding them, but I have only rocks.”

“Oh. Damn, I didn’t think of ... Sorry.” She upended her satchel, dropping torches, flint, steel, knives, and—gods!—food. Salted boar meat, which Sigmund snatched and tore into with relish. “Odin’s beard, brother. Take it slow, lest you retch it all back out.” Ravenous, he didn’t bother to respond. The meat was dry and tough, which stopped him from eating as quickly as he wished. Probably a boon, really. “There’s mead, too.”

The thought of aught made from honey churned his stomach, but he was so thirsty after all ... His sister handed him a skin of the stuff, and he sipped it, trying not to think of the gods-damned wolf. Finally, he wiped his mouth, panting. “You have certainly saved my life.”

Sieglinde sat frowning, hand over her belly. Where Wolfsblood had planted his brood in her. Mist take him and all his kin. “It is difficult for me to leave the fort for long,” his sister said after a moment. “But when next I come, I will bring tools and more food.”

“Wolfsblood ...?”

“I ... I could not stop him from going to Hunaland. He knows Mother will come after him when she learns what he has done.”

Indeed, and Sigmund had heard rumours of Mother’s seidr. He prayed it would be enough to forewarn her of danger now, for he could do naught to aid her from across the sea. “I’m going to kill him. However long it takes, I will find a way.”

Sieglinde hesitated, then brushed a hand over his cheek. “I pray to Frigg and Odin both that you shall do so. But, brother, promise me you shan’t strike in haste. You will have but one chance to avenge our family. We can ill afford to squander it.” That he knew well enough. He would wait and regain his strength. Perhaps even allow a few more winters to pass. With each, he grew larger and stronger. And soon, he would have the power needful to strike down the king of Skane. “I must go,” Sieglinde said.

“Wait—what of Gramr?”

“Wolfsblood has set it as his trophy now, hanging above his throne. I cannot claim it without my duplicity being discovered. We might lose our best chance.”

Sigmund ground his teeth. That bastard had done all this over the runeblade, hadn’t he? Gramr had brought this hardship upon the Völsungs, aye, but she would bring worse yet upon Wolfsblood and his brood. Sigmund would see to that. “Go then. And bring me another weapon when you return.”

In the meantime, he could use the knives to fashion a bow. A start. His would be a long war. And if Siggeir Wolfsblood thought all the Völsungs dead, it would be a war the king would never see coming.



EACH MOON, Sigmund had to venture farther from his cave to hunt, fearing to bring down too much game in one place. This afternoon, he stalked a

deer that, if he caught her, might feed him for a great many days. These hunts had made him a fine archer, though still only a decent tracker. Perhaps he had not prayed to the proper god or goddess. In any event, he crept along the forest floor until he reached the lake where the deer had stooped to drink. Sigmund nocked an arrow. Sieglinde had brought him a few fine ones, but this one was crude and tipped with stone. Seemed best to save his good arrows for killing men when the time came. Shoot a deer and fail to bring it down, it ran away. Shoot a man and fail to fell him, and he might shoot back. Either way, you couldn't always reclaim an arrow. They broke, got lost.

He paused. A woman emerging from the lake scared off the deer. It bolted away, darting between trees too quickly to let him draw a bead. Besides, the woman was the more interesting view as she drew on her dress. Her skin was very fair, her hair flaxen and shimmering. And Sigmund had been alone a great many moons.

He slung his bow over his shoulder and approached slowly so as not to startle her. The woman spun at his approach, opened her mouth, then shut it again. "I mean you no harm."

She worked her mouth a moment. "I'm glad to hear that."

"It will grow dark soon, and you are far from shelter."

She swallowed and licked her lips. "Can you not offer me shelter for the night?"

Oh, the thought of it sped his pulse and made his palms clammy. "We'll need to make haste then. We don't wish to be caught out alone in the Mist, least of all at night." The woman paused to pull on boots, then fell in beside him. "You have not asked my name," he said after a moment.

"Oh, I ..."

"But I'd love to know yours, my lady."

"Uh ... Gudrún."

“Well, Guðrún, I am Sigmund, but I would ask you to share my name with no one, for I value my privacy.”

A moment, she held silent. “No one shall know of this.”

They walked a long way to his cave. He climbed down into it, then helped her descend. The woman seemed not the least afraid of it, which was odd, but then so too was it odd for a woman to wander the woods alone. She had courage, for certain, but somehow he doubted he needed to fear her betrayal after he had offered her hospitality. He rekindled the small fire he kept by the entrance, then beckoned her to sit beside it.

“I’m sorry I have no table here.” He offered her the roots and berries he’d gathered, and the last of the squirrel he had brought down the day prior. “But what I have is yours.” The woman but nibbled at the food, glancing often at him as if nervous. And he knew why. “It is true what you think,” he said. “I would like us to share one bed. But I would not force such a thing on you. Such is not my nature.”

She swallowed and blinked, as if having a hard time even finding words. Hel, he was a fool. He’d meant to assuage her nervousness, not enhance it. Finally she licked her lips once again and nodded. “I will share your bed, Sigmund ...”

He froze, not certain he had heard that correctly. Had she said—

Guðrún let her dress fall from her shoulders, exposing perfect breasts. Then she crawled over to the blankets Sieglinda had brought for him.

And so he joined her.



SHE DID NOT LEAVE the next morn, nor the next. For three nights she remained by his side, and each night they made love. It was almost enough to make him forget his vow against Wolfsblood. Almost, though in the night, he saw visions of a wolf devouring his brothers. He saw life leave his

father's eyes. And he saw a cruel king laughing at his misfortune and fucking his sister. He slept in fits until finally settling into a deep, dreamless slumber.

And when he awakened on the third day, Gudrún had gone.

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DAYS GONE: ODIN

799 Age of Man

Sitting, waiting in Unterhagen—Odin knew he tortured himself even coming here—he could not look away. Could not stop staring at the ruined, snow-drenched village. Could not still the voice somewhere in his mind that expected his father to step around a mound of snow, walk over, and embrace him. Ask why he was fretting.

Father did not come. Not in the flesh, at any rate. Perhaps his ghost watched Odin now, waiting, as Odin did, his back to the fire Loki had built. The lamentations of so many murdered ghosts filled the air here. Not always something he could hear, but he could feel it. Like the hunger of a man who hadn't eaten in days.

The foreigner spoke little, seemed to understand Odin's desire for solitude. If that was what he truly wished. Like the dead, he dwelt in isolated misery, unable to find solace in others. Because, like the dead, no living man could understand his anguish. Or so he was apt to think in bouts of melancholy that served no one.

"Do your parents live?" Odin asked, without looking back at the man.

The foreigner did not immediately answer, but Odin could hear him poking at the fire. "All my family, all I have loved, are gone now, lost in the march of years."

"I seem to have opened an old wound." Odin watched the snowdrifts. He had been wrong. Loki clearly knew suffering aplenty.

No one came. Father would never again walk by his side. Odin kept telling himself that, but his mind refused to accept it. Such a great man could not be snuffed out in an instant like a flame doused. It should have been ... different.

"Some wounds never quite heal," Loki said. "They scab over, perhaps, and we become so accustomed to the pain we may forget it's there. The reminder of it does not cause the pain, just forces us to acknowledge it once more."

Odin grunted, then did turn back to face him. Loki was staring into the fire like a man looking into the eyes of his mistress. "You understand pain."

"Those who do not have not lived overlong in this world."

"And do you find your answer in the flames?"

Loki shrugged. "Fire is life."

Odin grunted. So he knew. "Yet I find myself weary of life, drawn ever to think on the fallen."

Loki shook his head. "There is darkness pervading the Realm of the living, I grant, but do not mistake the Realms beyond as cleaner or clearer, Odin, for they are Realms of lies. Like memories twisted in the back of your mind, the dead *lie*."

Avenge me ... Odin looked sharply in the direction whence he could have sworn the voice came, saw naught. Was that a lie? Were the voices he heard but conjured phantasms of a grieving mind? There, in the distance, he saw pale, blue flames, walking in procession. Those were torches, Otherworldly torches, carried by ... by ... nifalfar? The alfar of the Mist, come to claim souls of the dead, to drag them down to the Gates of Hel?

The spirits marched around the periphery of the valley, and Odin gawped, uncertain if he beheld truth or a figment.

He looked back to Loki, who followed his gaze but gave no indication he saw aught amiss. No, 'twas not for a man to see such things. Once more, Odin looked to the procession, thought that out in the Mist, perhaps, he saw figures following the nifalfar, bound for their journey. He blinked, and there were only trees and snow and swirling brume.

“Once,” Loki said, “I had a child, a necromancer who could hear the voices of the dead, sometimes even look upon them.”

“What?” Odin whirled back on him. “I ... know naught of what you speak.” To see beyond the World of Men was ergi, all agreed. To accuse another of such a thing was cause for holmgang, oft to the death. “Have a care with your words.” Had Odin not so needed this man, he might have struck him for the implication. Though, replaying his words, Loki had not actually accused Odin of aught.

“’Twas a weighty burden upon her soul, one that led her to a dark urd. There are things out there, Odin, lurking alongside our Realm. Some are sensitive to such things, their minds keener than those of their fellows. In Kvenland, Lappmarken, other lands, such people are named shamans.”

Shamans ... ergi, if male, and the conversation had goosepimples rising along Odin’s flesh. Aye, he disliked this talk. “Is that whence you hail?” Odin asked. “Kvenland?” Such a land was fabled in skalds’ tales, a place of seidr somewhere beyond Svjarland. No Ás had ever ventured so far afield.

“I have walked there,” Loki admitted, “though I name no place home, if such you mean.” He pointed off in the distance. “Your brothers approach.”

Blessedly, for their presence must needs bury this conversation and allow Odin to pretend it had never transpired. Necromancer ... Shaman ... No, such words were not for him.



IN THE MORN, they had set out south, toward the Sudurberks. Vé, the youngest of the three brothers, constantly yammered on with Loki. The foreigner did not *quite* engage Vé in his contests of poetry, though certainly he spoke with the authority of a skald, if not the grandeur. Not exactly.

“All who travel far are said to see much,” Vé said. “Surely, then, a wanderer such as yourself might enthrall us with tales of Miklagard or even Serkland. Speak, then, of wonders that we might know the glories of your wanderings.”

Vili grumbled under his breath, as he oft did when their youngest brother got into his moods. Vili was the largest of the three brothers, swathed in a reeking bearskin cloak, with the bear’s upper skull forming a hood. “Man claims to have seen Miklagard, and you believe him? Fools, both of you.”

Loki glanced at Odin, the hint of a wry smile on his face. “If I had seen Miklagard or Serkland or Nidavellir or even beyond, would it bear relevance to the task at hand? Or do you seek to distract yourself from the fears that prey upon you, from the threat you march toward?”

“You calling me a craven?” Vili demanded.

“I don’t believe I did.”

Vili grumbled again and moved close to Loki, probably trying to intimidate him with his size. As a berserk, Vili was always torn in two—part of him human, part of him driven by a savage animal spirit. As a young man, Father had seen something in him, some feral aspect. For that, he’d sent Vili to train with the Björn clan, along the southern Járnvidr, where berserkir could learn to become one with their fylgja and take bear form. Berserkir and varulfur were, according to Father, a legacy of the Döglinar. Odin scarce recalled what Vili had been like ere his return, but after that, he was strong, brash, and quick to deep anger. ’Twas, so far as Odin could tell, much akin to how he himself felt when grasping Gungnir. The spear filled him with extra Megin—life energy—but with wrath, too.

If the berserk's attempt to frighten him bothered Loki, he gave no indication.

"What my brother wants to know," Vé said, "is how you can know so much about the jötunnar? About this one in particular, one of whom we have heard no songs nor stories."

"Oh?" Loki asked. He walked across the snow with ease, not even relying on snowshoes. "Have you not heard the tales of Aurgelmir, the lord of the ancient jötunnar, in the days when their ilk emerged from Mist? It seems a significant lapse in the education of any skald."

Vili spat. "The fuck is Aurgelmir?"

Vé chuckled. "Father of the frost jötunnar, leastwise according to some tales. Maybe a progenitor of their whole line. So you're saying this Ymir is Aurgelmir?" Vé scrambled a little closer to Odin, who rolled his eyes.

"Bah!" Their berserk brother spat again. "The foreigner thinks you credulous, little brother. Look at you, quivering at the thought of such a thing. You truly believe the father of all jötunnar exists, lives still, and came out to smash a small village on the edge of Aujum? Next you'll tell me you believe that trollshit about men and women coming from different trees."

Vé chuckled. "My brother, a poet you are not. You doubt every tale right up until you find yourself enmeshed in it, then scream and chop and hew until the story submits to your liking."

The berserk spat again, grumbling under his breath as they walked. His mumbles persisted until nigh unto sunset, whilst Vé continued to pry against Loki's wits. Odin found himself only half listening. His youngest brother had a clever tongue, but he seemed to have finally found a man he could not outsmart. Odin cared very little for these duels of wits, even before. Ere such things became utter pettiness in the face of all-consuming loss and the need to avenge that loss upon the whole World. *Father*—a gaping void in a broken soul.

As evening drew nigh, Loki directed them toward a ruined tower in the foothills beneath the Sudurberks. Though built from stone two feet thick, a breach twice the size of a man tore through the wall, allowing a thick drift of snow to pile up inside. The tower's peak had fallen, its rubble no doubt buried in the snows that blanketed the hill.

"Men must take what shelter they can," Vé said, "but vaettir are drawn to such places. Njörd knows what kind of fell being might dwell within, and we brought no hounds to sniff them out." Aye, and the day prior, Odin had seen—had *maybe* seen—a procession of alfar come to claim dead souls. The others would not have seen them, he thought, would have blundered into the midst of that throng and not known to touch iron to ward themselves.

A thought that had Odin thumbing the iron buckle on his sword's baldric.

Torch out ahead of him, Loki kept pushing on toward the tower. "A long time ago, ere Njörd was king of the Vanir, they built towers like these to watch the mountains."

Vé snorted. "Naught happened *ere* Njörd was king. Any skald could tell you that. Your facade of wisdom falters, foreigner."

Odin glanced from Loki to his brother, then pushed toward the breach in the tower wall. Whom to believe? Certainly völvur seemed to agree with Vé, that one ought to avoid ruins when possible. Remnants of the Old Kingdoms dotted all of the North Realms, places once glorious, built to ward against the Mist or each other. Now, though, trolls, draugar, and other vaettir lurked in such places, hiding from sunlight, venturing forth at night. So völvur said. But then again, when facing a winter storm, sometimes a man had to take whatever shelter he could.

"So you think the Vanir built this tower?" Odin asked.

Loki brought his torch close to the outer wall, then began to chip at ice crusted upon the stone. A large chunk of it fell free, and Loki brushed aside

what remained with his forearm. The walls bore some kind of runes, but such symbols meant naught to Odin, nor to any man. Only völvur learnt such arts. And how had Loki known to find one there?

“Ere the rise of the Old Kingdoms, the Vanir waged unending wars against the jötunnar of Brimir. Many of their foes dwelt in these mountains, so the Vanir built towers to watch for them, guard against them. Sometimes they succeeded, and sometimes the walls could not withstand the violence the jötunnar heralded.” Loki swept his torch around to indicate the breach in the wall. “The storm will worsen and we ought to save our strength for the journey through the mountains.”

Odin grunted, then climbed over the snow to reach the inside of the tower. A spiralling stair led to the upper regions, but he already knew those had collapsed. Still, the ceiling here remained intact, and a wide fire pit lay in the tower’s centre. He nodded. Loki was right. This place was the best respite they were like to find ere nightfall.

“Vili,” Odin said. “Go find what wood you can. We need to get a blaze going ere the sun sets.” Sparse trees—evergreens, mostly—covered these foothills, though none survived higher up in the mountains. This might prove their last chance to make fresh torches or rest safe by a fire. “Vé, sweep the tower and make sure we truly are alone.” Besides vaettir, one always had to worry about cave hyenas, bears, and other predators. They all liked such places, and it would not do for Odin’s fears of the Otherworld to let him forget Midgard had perils aplenty.

Loki drifted around the edge of this central room, inspecting the shelves that lined the walls. Some of those shelves held what must be parchment. Men in the South Realms used such things. Bits of it crumbled as Loki touched it, and Odin scoffed. That was why völvur carved their runes into stone and wood. Lasted longer.

The foreigner paid no attention, lifting a piece the size of his hand up close toward his face. Wait ... could he *read* the markings upon it? Such

was ergi, as well. Odin folded his arms. Indeed, if Loki spoke the truth and the Vanir had built this place, how did the foreigner know that? How could he guess what had happened ere the days of the Old Kingdoms? The wisest of skalds Odin had ever known had a few tales, stories of the Vanir from the old times, but Loki spoke with more authority than that. Was his guide a skald? And one who could read?

Odin's brothers had mistrusted Loki the moment they met him, as had Tyr. But Tyr was filled with suspicion and doubt, Vili never liked anyone, and Vé probably saw Loki as a threat to his own status as a skald. Still. The foreigner knew—or claimed to know—more than any man ought. Such a man might well bring disaster among them by fumbling into eldritch lore not meant for Man. Such was the man with whom Odin had entrusted his chance at vengeance.



THE MOUNTAIN HAD NO NAME. Not among any of the Ás clans, not that Odin knew. The völur said that to name a thing was to evoke it, and none would dare evoke the soul of such a behemoth. Least of all as they tried to scale it. The slope they climbed disappeared into the night sky, the peak still a mile or more above them. None of his clan had attempted aught like this. Such wild places housed vaettir, trolls, and Njörd knew what else. Ahead, his brothers trudged upward, their steps not nearly as certain as those of their guide. Snow crunched under their feet, snow that reached gods-alone-knew how deep. On these mountains, maybe it had never melted.

“Just how big is this jötunn?” Vili asked. Vili was the only one smiling during this whole endeavour. Men said berserkir knew no fear. Perhaps he simply had the brains of a bear as well as the courage of one.

Loki paused, crouched atop a boulder like a bobcat ready to pounce. The pelts he wore only enhanced the image. He turned to look at Odin's

brother. “Six times the size of a Man. This one is, at least. As they grow older and feast upon the flesh of Man, they can grow larger. And Ymir is ancient, favoured by Hel in the days when the Mist came.”

An ancient jötunn and they were hunting it. This would be a long night.

Vili grunted, then looked pointedly at Vé. “Which man? Some men are *larger* than others. Vé’s barely the size of a shieldmaiden.”

In truth, Vé stood some perhaps five and a half feet tall, and his thick muscles, braided beard, and battle scars would hardly let anyone mistake him for tiny. As usual, Vé simply glowered at Vili. The burgeoning skald would have his revenge over campfires, Odin had no doubt. He could manage barbs far subtler, and more vicious, than any of Vili’s clumsy blows.

“That’s enough,” Odin said at last, pushing past the rest of the group. This jötunn would be nigh. And soon it would know the bite of his spear. He ran his fingers over Gungnir’s runes. Power seeped into him whenever he held the weapon. The power to rule his clan. The power to destroy his enemies. “We’re here to avenge Father, not bicker like lovesick maids. Shut your mouths or go home.”

“Not large enough,” Loki whispered as Vili passed him.

Odin smirked. None of the others could see his face anyway. With the damnable snow flurries, they probably couldn’t have seen it even had he been facing them. It was as if Hel herself had bestirred the winds of Niflheim to thwart his quest. And in those winds, he heard fell voices.

Avenge me ... his father’s voice pleaded. Aye, Odin was coming.

His torch sputtered in his hand. The firelight would give away their position ere they were halfway up the damned mountain. Four little specks, advancing closer on Ymir, announcing their intent. “We have to douse the flames.”

Everyone paused, turned to him. “Brother, are you already Mist-mad?” Vé asked. “Skalds and völur alike agree, fire banishes darkness, Mist, and

cold. 'Tis the first and last gift of Man, one to never be squandered.”

“If Ymir sees us coming, we lose our one advantage.” Odin scowled, staring up at the peak, barely visible through the snow. The storm was growing worse. “I shall not allow Father to go unavenged over some völva’s tale of the Mist. A man doesn’t go mad in one night.”

Loki drew close to him now, shaking his head. “Your brother speaks truth. Fire is life, and it was given to Mankind at great cost to the giver. ’Tis our only ally out here, besides which, as a frost jötunn, Ymir abhors the flames. If you cast it aside, you lose a shield and sword both.”

“I will not be denied!” Odin snapped. “Not over some petty fear of the wild. What happens if our prey sees us coming a mile away? The jötunn can hurl boulders down upon us or skulk away should it have no mood to fight.”

Loki sighed. “Or worse. These snows may well respond to his beckoning. Some jötunnar can reach into the Otherworld for the power to change the Mortal Realm. No easy choices lie in front of you, nor are any like to lie in your future, Odin.”

Odin waved the foreigner’s nonsense away. “Douse the godsdamned flames.” He drove his torch into the snow, then grasped Gungnir with both hands. Odin’s spear, handed down through countless generations, bore an engraved dragon coiling around the shaft. But it was the rose-gold blade, an undulating point like a flame, that truly made the weapon a thing of the gods. Etched on one side of the blade, another faint dragon swivelled, not worn away despite the immeasurable age of the spear. His father claimed the blade had been forged with a dragon’s soul, in the time before time. Now it would be forged anew, drunk on the blood of the frost jötunn Ymir.

Odin kissed its blade. “Gods above and below, grant us victory.” Four Men against a jötunn. And ere this night was done, it would know fear. He pressed on, pushing out ahead of his brothers. One by one, torches hissed out in the snow behind him.



THE SNOW POUNDED them with the ferocity of a blizzard. Perhaps Loki spoke truth, and Ymir had some fell seidr with which to turn the mountain against them. Or perhaps it was a mere winter storm. Either way, Odin couldn't see far. Arm shielding his face, he grunted, driving against the blinding snows. The slope had turned steep, and even using Gungnir as a walking stick, his progress had slowed nigh to a crawl. He glanced back. Vili growled, pushing on, but Vé was actually having to use his hands to pull himself forward. And where had Loki gotten off to? In the darkness, the damned foreigner had disappeared. Slipped away like a craven? Well, such no longer mattered, for the foreigner had brought the brothers far enough.

Odin pushed on, but not five steps farther, his foot slipped on the ice-slickened rocks. The ground gave way, snow skidding down past him. He twisted whilst trying to shout a warning to his brothers. The movement cost him what remained of his balance, and he plummeted down the slope. Rime-covered rocks tore through his fur trousers, ripping gashes in his shins. The ice scored a long gouge into his thigh, searing him like a burn. His pack tore free and plummeted back down the slope. His fingers grasped the edge of a rock, but they were too numb. His grip faltered. In an instant, Loki leapt onto the rock and snatched Odin's arm.

The foreign guide yanked Odin back onto the platform, then slapped him on the shoulder. "Not an auspicious way to begin the hunt."

Odin glanced back at his younger brothers. The snow he'd disturbed could well have started an avalanche, but they'd come off easy, buried only up to their calves. He'd hear worse of it over the fire, no doubt. As soon as Loki released Odin, Odin slipped down onto his arse. Hot blood streamed over his trousers and stained the ice platform. He prodded at the wound on his leg. "Hel."

The wind howled, like something calling out from Niflheim. Odin crawled to the edge, peered out over that precipice. Through the darkness and blinding snow, he couldn't see aught below. Hel would have had him if not for Loki. As it was, the dark goddess had his pack. His extra torches, his food. Vertigo seized him, and he backed away, suddenly overcome by the magnitude of what lay ahead of them. Odin coughed, choked. They stood moments away from a clash fit for one of Vé's tales. He had no time to let dread or the pain of his wounds weigh him down.

Vé scrambled down toward the platform where Odin had fallen, snow skidding beneath his feet. "Are you injured, brother?"

"No. I covered my trousers in red war paint."

The skald knelt to examine Odin's wound, shaking his head. "You cannot go on."

"Like Hel," Odin said, then spat into the night. "Father's murderer is out there, and every heartbeat he lives is an insult."

Vé shrugged. "Better to live with an insult than die of hubris."

Odin shoved him away. "Father named you a man nigh ten winters back, and still you think like a boy." He forced himself up, unsteady as he felt.

A hand on his shoulder pushed him back down. Loki. "Whether you intend to go forward or back, I must bind the wound. You cannot walk like this. You'd bleed out over the mountain."

"Man really is a fucking völva," Vili grumbled.

Loki set to tying Odin's leg with bandages and foul-smelling herbs from his pack. He paid Vili no mind, which only further enraged the berserk.

"Not got a damned thing to say for yourself? You admit to ergi? Maybe you'd rather have a boy than a girl?"

"Just shut up, Vili," Vé snapped. "We don't have a völva here. If Loki can save Odin's leg, let the man try."

"Not a fucking man at all. Probably got a trench instead of a cock."

“I must stitch this,” Loki said, ignoring the berserk. Odin gritted his teeth and nodded. The foreigner knew what he was about, treating Odin’s wound quickly, with as few stitches as possible. Would have been better if he’d had some mead. Better still had it not happened.

“It strikes me our guide must have seen a great many battles,” Vé said.

Loki paused for the barest instant. “More than you can imagine.” He bit off the stitch, then wrapt another bandage around Odin’s leg.

“This stranger has brought this upon us,” Vili grumbled. “The storm, the foul urd, all of it. He acts like a woman, speaks like a völva, and invites the wrath of vaettir. Doesn’t know his fucking place.”

Loki met Odin’s gaze and offered no answer to Vili, which only further set the berserk to grumbling. When Loki had finished, Odin stood, wobbling for a moment. Gungnir gave him strength. Its Megin filled him, dulled the pain. With it, he could best any foe.

“We must turn back,” Vé said. “The storm worsens, half our food is gone, and that injury will slow you.”

Odin sneered. “Then flee, craven. *My* father was murdered by that fucking jötunn.” He thumped a finger on Vé’s chest. “He came down off the mountain and killed him and everyone else in Unterhagen.” He thumped Vé again. “I will not allow Father’s ghost to writhe in torment one more night. I will not!” He shoved the boy for emphasis. “If you will not fight, I shall do it alone. But there is no turning back. Not for me.”

Vili cuffed Vé on the back of the head and started to climb again. Odin followed after him. No turning back. Never.



EVERY STEP SENT a lance of pain through his wounded shins and his thigh. Pain was good. Pain meant he yet had life. It meant he hadn’t gone numb from the cold. It meant there was still time. He could not feel his face. Even

his thick fur cloak provided scant protection against the scathing chill of this storm. Ice stung his eyes.

The path had levelled some. He dug Gungnir's butt into the ground, heaving himself forward. Just keep going. Father was counting on him. *Father*. Was he watching? Though he strained to hear it, the voice did not come from the darkness.

The ground rumbled beneath Odin, nigh costing him his balance. One hand on the spear and the other on an ice-coated boulder, he steadied himself. The mountain trembled again, as though it wasn't finished with its little earthquake. It went still. Then it trembled again. A dusting of snow skittered off a rock precipice above, almost blending with the flurries. Stillness. Another quake. The four men exchanged glances. Loki pointed to a pass just beyond the next rise. Ymir was here. Finally. Valkyrjar could very well have their souls ere sunrise. If so, Odin sure as Hel was not going to be the only one dying on this mountain.

Father, watch me now.

He scrambled toward the precipice wall. Vili and Vé didn't need to be told what Odin planned. They made for the pass, Vili casting aside his furs even as he ran. More snow fell from the overhang, the barrage of hoar now constant, making Odin's climb nigh blind. Gripping Gungnir, he felt for handholds with his free hand. Aught that could support his weight. He had to get to higher ground. He would look this jötunn in the eye ere he cut it down to size.

And his brothers—Odin spared them a glance. Vili's back arched. He had cast aside all garb save his bearskin cloak, dropped to all fours, roaring in pain and perhaps joy at the change. His muscles rippled beneath his skin, shifting, tearing at stomach-rending angles. Tufts of brown fur sprouted from him as he released the bear spirit inside him. Had the giant ever seen a berserk? If not, he was in for a nasty surprise.

A peak of the mountain *moved*, just beyond the edge of the pass. Not a peak ... a horn, at least five feet long. A horn of granite. Odin's handholds vibrated as Ymir rose above the pass. The jötunn turned, as if slowly taking in Odin's brothers. Clinging frost fled its mouth, like the Mist of Niflheim that engulfed the world. Its skin was tinted the icy blue of a man in the throes of deathchill.

Vili, a full bear now, roared and charged the monster. Vé hung back, but only for a moment, ere raising his battle-axe and rushing after his brother. And Loki ... nowhere to be found. Fair enough—their guide had agreed to help them find the one responsible for Father's death. It fell to the brothers to avenge Borr.

Odin yanked himself onto the plateau, then scrubbed frost from his eyes. He'd have sworn the jötunn sneered. It hefted something—a boulder. Or a hammer with a head the size of a boulder. Vili charged right in.

“Hel's frozen tits,” Odin mumbled.

Ymir twisted, surprisingly fast for a being of its size. An underhand swing of its hammer slammed into Vili with a sickening crack. The bear flew through the air at least twenty feet before smashing into the mountain slope. The jötunn's laughter echoed off the mountain peaks, reverberating across what seemed the whole of Midgard.

Vé screamed, hewing his battle-axe into the jötunn's leg. From Ymir's reaction, or lack thereof, Odin suspected his brother wasn't even cutting through the iron shin guards.

Hel-cursed jötunn was going to splatter his brothers without breaking a sweat. Odin backed to the edge of the plateau. Even with a running start, he'd never make that jump. The jötunn was simply too far. And a few more heartbeats, and Vé wouldn't be around to distract it. Odin reversed his grip on Gungnir. A good throw. A throw the skalds would tell stories about.

The jötunn swooped down and snatched Vé in one hand. Odin's little brother froze, caught in a fist bigger than he was. His face turned red. The

jötunn was squeezing the life out of him. Crushing his bones to pulp.

Now or never. Odin took off running. His feet skidded on the ice. The pain in his legs threatened to tear them out from under him. Didn't matter. Just momentum. He flung Gungnir with all his might. The spear soared faster than it should have, faster and farther than any throw a man could make. The missile shrieked through the air, and Ymir turned at the sound. Too late. Gungnir shot right through the jötunn's eye.

The behemoth bellowed, releasing Vé, who plummeted to the icy slope below. Vili might survive such a fall, but Vé was only mortal, like Odin himself. His little brother. A pit opened in Odin's stomach, and time slowed as Vé fell. As Odin watched, powerless.

From the shadows beneath the plateau, Loki jumped forward and caught Vé in his arms, rolling as he hit the ground. Odin's breath caught. He'd thought their guide had fled.

Ymir stumbled, pitching forward, headfirst toward the plateau. Odin had sworn an oath in Father's name. All three brothers had. Time to make good. Odin drew a deep breath. Set his jaw. And he ran.

He leapt from the plateau onto the jötunn's shoulder, then caught the haft of his spear. His own weight yanked it from the bastard's eye. Ymir howled, clutching its face, then fell to its knees. The movement shook Odin free, and his boots slipped on the jötunn's blood-slickened armour. He fell fifteen feet and landed in a snow drift. White filled his vision as his weight flung him deep into the drift.

Could have been worse, he supposed. Could have been rocks down there.

Odin kicked the snow, doing little but burying himself further. It'd take him forever to dig his way out of this. Ymir screamed again, this time the wail of a tortured beast needing to be put out of its misery. Odin clawed his way upward, snow giving way grudgingly, if at all. He was missing the damned battle. Some jarl he was.

Then a hand appeared before his face. He accepted the proffered grip, and Loki pulled him out of the drift. Vé had hamstrung Ymir and was now hacking at the jötunn's elbow. Loki pointed at Gungnir, which was sticking from the snow several feet away. Blood and gore streaked, a crimson stain spreading across the once pure snow.

Aye, time to finish this.

Odin's legs nearly gave out beneath him as he trod toward his ancestral weapon. He yanked the spear free, cracking blood that had already frozen to the ice. Ymir turned its one remaining eye toward Odin as he stalked over, pace steady, if slow for his wounds. In that eye, Odin could see the beast knew the truth. And it was scared.

As it should be.

"Father!" Odin bellowed, his voice echoing off the mountain. He thrust the spear through Ymir's forehead.

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STARKAD

16 Age of the Æsir

Deep into the mountains Starkad had fled. The men of Agder hunted him for his crime, for his betrayal. And betrayal it was, try as he might to cast blame upon Odin. He might claim Vikar had been ready to sacrifice himself. But Starkad had let his brother have hope—because Odin had bade him to do so. Maybe the Ás king had wanted to see if Starkad would do it. Oh, and he had. He had slain his brother in the name of Odin’s dark promise of darker sorcery. In the name of power and wealth and glory ... and all the petty things his wretched heart desired.

And in the night, the dreams had come.

Again and again, they came. Twisting in subtle variations upon the same, unending torment he had earned for himself.



MEN PURSUED him through the streets of some foreign city, all domed towers and strange arches and lattice-like stonework. Everyone in the town wore

the same clothes—black robes, running with blood, dripping. And dozens of them dogged Starkad's every step. Relentless.

As he had been.

He ducked into an alley, but this merely opened out into the marketplace once again. And they came on, offering the barest glimpse of their faces as they drew nigh. Vikar. They were all Vikar.

Always.

Starkad shoved his way through the crowd of black-robed Vikars. Each turned to him, let his wrathful gaze descend upon Starkad. Eyes dead and yet not empty, filled with loathing. Betrayal. His heart tried to climb out of his chest and into his throat. It suffocated him.

A hand fell on his shoulder from behind. Gasping for breath, Starkad spun on his pursuers. He swung a fist that seemed to move as if through water, lethargic and limp. Pointless.

Blood raced in his ears. Pounded against his temples. Dribbled from his mouth. The blood of his treacherous heart. His vision turned red. Hands closed around his throat and squeezed ... forcing his wretched heart back down into its rotten cage within his chest.

And all sight fled. For a moment. The rocking of a ship jolted him awake.

And still, blood had crusted around his mouth. He tried to speak, but his voice fled, his throat parched, scratchy. A fit of coughing seized him.

Until hands again heaved him upward. Vikar stood there, his dead eyes staring into Starkad's own. He said naught and no words would come from Starkad's mouth. Over and over, he tried. Desperate to voice some apology, as if words could appease a heart rent in twain.

"As if aught might make up for your crimes," Vikar said. But Starkad hadn't meant it ... he hadn't meant for this to ... How had he come upon this ship? "For years you lingered here ... be it three or three hundred ...

caught between life and death ... reaping the bitter rewards of your betrayal."

Starkad opened his mouth to protest. Blood dribbled out. Its coppery taste bubbled over his tongue. Choked him. His heart was again rising up into his gorge. Even it reviled him for his crimes, wanted to escape his wretched presence.

"Perhaps then, live the lives of three men ... and find victory. But not peace. Never peace ... never hope, never to sire children. Oh, deplorable brother. All your days will be drenched in blood and bereft of joy. Save that which flourishes only to be stolen away. You, who defy the bounds of nature ... and all filial bonds."

He didn't mean it. He didn't mean it!

Starkad reached for Vikar's face, but his hands too were soaked in blood. His brother's blood. That blood began to dribble over Vikar's chin as well, bubbling and dark. As his eyes gleamed with red light that seemed to emerge from the Gates of Hel.

Please. He just wanted to apologise. He hadn't meant it ... he ... he had wanted it ...

Vikar spit in his face. Black phlegm and blood that stung Starkad's eyes, burning them like acid. Backward, over the gunwale, Starkad toppled and fell and fell, plummeting through darkness.

A heavy impact threw up dust all around him, choking him, clogging his nostrils. Seeping into his skin. With trembling, bloody hands, Starkad tried to clear his vision. He lay ... in a barrow ... as the old men once built. The dead were piled high around him, the corpses of the betrayed and the betrayers alike. All rotting in never-ending anguish and grief and blood.

A single flickering torch scone lit the room, its flame weak, hardly enough to banish the thick shadows engulfing the place. And those shadows spoke.

"Long life."

“Victory in battle.”

“Wealth.”

The shadows danced about him, cackling and hissing and writhing in perverse pleasure at his horror. Starkad’s chest seized. Pain tore through him. A heart attack. He deserved no less.

He tore at his shirt, and it turned to dust, as did his trousers. All his clothes, his possessions, blew away on a wind that stank of rot and decay and old, old death. And still the shadows danced, the torchlight growing ever dimmer.

Tendrils of darkness crept toward him. Screaming, Starkad swung his bloody fists at them, but his hands struck naught. The pain in his chest grew crushing. Drove him to his knees. Ribbons of shadow slithered ever closer.

They crawled up his skin like vipers, edging ever closer to his face. Cold, dead. The shadows penetrated the holes in his ears, filling his head with pressure. He squirmed and tossed about, to no avail. The vile tendrils wormed their way into his nostrils. Up his arse. Into his eyes.

His whole body spasmed in helpless agony as darkness saturated his twisted heart. Or maybe ... the darkness had always been there. Waiting to come out.

At that thought, the shadows were gone. Starkad collapsed onto his hands, panting, able to breathe for the first time in centuries. For he must ...

“Embrace the darkness you have welcomed inside.” The voice came from the shadows. Out of them strode Vikar, still clad in black robes. “You beckoned the dark into your heart, traded the light for years more of your life. Now, but one thing remains to you.”

Again, Starkad’s heart tried to climb up into his throat as he opened his mouth.

Vikar snatched Starkad by the hair, hefted him off the ground. His other hand darted around Starkad’s heart, becoming viscous as the shadow

tendrils had been. Horrible pressure. It felt like it would rip Starkad apart from the inside.

A crushing grip settled around his heart. Vikar jerked his hand out; in his palm rested Starkad's beating, blackened heart. "You have but ... to reap your rewards." And he outstretched his hand toward Starkad. The heart sat there, oozing blood and pumping. Beckoning.

Unable to control his hands, Starkad reached for it. Took it. Warm. Pulsating. Strong and sinewy and wet. He lifted it to his mouth.

"Do it," Vikar said. Because Starkad had embraced this path. Because he had betrayed his own brother for power.

And Starkad bit down. His fang-like teeth tore through the thick muscle of his heart. Bitter copper filled his mouth. Rivers of blood ran down his throat.

And Vikar watched, eyes gleaming with crimson light.

Until Starkad ate every last bite.

And the torch finally flickered out, leaving him in darkness.



AGAIN AND AGAIN, the dreams came. Reminding him of the price he had paid for his prolonged life. Had Odin known when he offered such a bargain? He wanted to blame the Ás king. But lying alone, fearing to sleep, Starkad knew he had no one to blame save himself.

Alone, Starkad wandered the mountains of Nidavellir, heading ever north. Into the snow-choked wilds, across trackless glaciers, around barren peaks where game grew scarce. For betraying his lord, for slaying his own brother, men would hunt him, wherever word spread of his crime. And Starkad was left with but one choice—keep fleeing ... and keep killing.

If he walked long enough, perhaps he might encounter the dvergar who ruled these lands. But thus far, Starkad had seen little sign of Mankind and

no sign of dvergar. He'd heard the entrances to their dark halls oft lay atop mountain peaks, forcing mortals to make treacherous climbs to offer tribute. An affectation or a deliberate cruelty, perhaps. In either case, he seemed safe so long as he kept to the valleys.

In search of prey, he passed into another such vale, seeded with evergreens and drenched in snows almost as heavy as the mountains flanking it. Spoor indicated a cave bear might have dwelt somewhere nearby, though he'd yet to find the beast, fresh snows forever obscuring its tracks. Here though, a thin plume of smoke rose about the Mist. Starkad's supplies had dwindled to almost naught. He could hunt for food and clothing, but oil and rags for torches were another matters ...

Fire, most oft, meant Mankind, and he had not seen another person in days. So he followed the smoke to a small cabin by a frozen stream. For a time, he knelt behind a tree, watching. Just as he was about to approach, the door opened, and a woman emerged from the cabin. She was lithe, tiny even, with golden hair that seemed to reflect the afternoon sunlight.

Maybe he just hadn't seen a woman in overlong.

She trod to the frozen river and knelt upon the ice, then began hacking away with an axe. Fishing? Well, mayhap she'd let him help with that. Starkad made his way down toward her, taking care to move slowly and make just a bit of noise so as not to seem intent on sneaking up on her.

The woman spun, revealing startlingly blue eyes that—for a bare instant—seemed lit with sunlight as well. She leapt up, axe held out before her, and watched him approach.

"I mean no harm," he said, raising his empty hands in warding. "I am alone and hungry. I would very much like to share your fire."

The woman held the axe like a tool rather than a weapon. No shieldmaiden, here, but neither did she seem overly frightened of him. Wary, perhaps. Finally, she nodded. "I'm Ogn."

"Starkad Eight ... Just Starkad."

She nodded, then glanced back at the river. “I was going to catch some fish for tonight.” Her voice was light, almost musical, and instantly disarming.

He took that as an invitation to approach and drew up to the water’s edge. “I can help with that.”

“Be about it, then, Starkad.”



THEY TOOK the night meal of boiled fish, and Starkad thought it the best he’d eaten in moons or more. Long did they speak, conversation a balm to his soul after so long alone. She spoke but a little of herself, saying she lived out here alone to avoid being taken by dvergar as a thrall. Starkad could see why she’d fear it ... Dvergar took women, especially those of such ethereal beauty. No one ever saw such thralls again. Some even claimed the dvergar ate them once they were finished using them for their perverse ends. Other tales told they planted their seed in women’s bellies not so unlike trolls, and perhaps, like trolls, the birthing killed the hapless victims.

If Ogn knew aught of that, she did not say so. Indeed, somehow, she convinced Starkad to speak of his past, which had never been his wont ere now. But as the hour passed midnight, he told her how he’d come to Agder. And how Vikar had died. And he told her of the shadows haunting his dreams. Maybe, he wanted anyone to whom he might confess his crimes. Maybe, he thought saying it aloud would somehow lessen the burden on his wretched heart.

And maybe it did.

Ogn had neither mead nor ale, but she offered him a skin of water, and he took it. “I don’t know what your dreams mean, Starkad. Not for certain

... but I have heard tales. Perhaps this Odin drew power from Svartalfheim.”

The very name sent shivers upon Starkad and made his hair stand on end. “Svartalfheim ...”

“The shadows you described might have been mere fancy of your own fevered mind ...”

“Or perhaps svartalfar?” Starkad had heard but few tales of the dark alfar, none of them pleasant.

Ogn sipped her water, then murmured something under her breath. “We should sleep.”

“I have no wish to sleep.” Ever again.

“But you must. I will kindle the fire high as I can ... and will be here, close at hand. Should you cry out, I will wake you.”

Except, in his nightmares, he could neither speak nor scream. Still, what choice did he have? Sleep would come for him, sooner or later. It always did, a relentless predator awaiting its chance to strike.



A DAY BECAME many days with Ogn, and then a fortnight. Until, as such things tended toward, Starkad dared to dream of making her his wife. But she, who hid from dvergar for fear of slavery and lived with next to naught ... what had he to offer her? So he had set out to raiding, earning nigh to as much wealth as he had once enjoyed at Vikar’s side. For a mercenary, infamy proved almost as valuable as fame, and many a ruthless jarl sought Starkad’s services.

And after long moons, he returned. No plume of smoke rose from her cabin, and the snow lay so heavy upon the roof the timbers sagged. Starkad crept closer. The door was open ...

“Ogn?” He turned about. Had the dvergar come for her after all? Had Starkad left her alone only to fall to the slavery she so feared? “Ogn!”

Inside the cabin, everything seemed in its place. No sign of struggle. No fight ... Her axe still lay on a shelf by the door. Had they caught her by surprise?

“Damn it,” he mumbled. “Damn it. Ogn.” If those dvergar had taken her ... He’d burn down the halls of Nidavellir if needs be. He would get her back, Hel take the cost.

And he had learnt the woodsman’s arts with Hermod himself, son of the great Agilaz. Trying to stay calm—one needed focus to track—he returned outside and glanced at the sky.

A few scant hours of daylight ere the sun set. Nights were longer this far north, especially in winter. Time ran short for him.

He skirted about the edge of the cabin, watchful for any sign. There: a pair of tracks. One light, slender—Ogn. The other deep, large, a man who must be over seven feet tall. Surely no dverg, then. So what in the Gates of Hel ... ? A troll? But would not a troll have carried her off over its shoulder and smashed everything in the cabin whilst about it?

So a giant of a man had convinced her to come along, forced her, no doubt. Perhaps, knowing she could not win, she had not fought. Perhaps she dared to dream Starkad might return for her and keep his promise, wed her, and give her a better life.

Well, he would. Trotting as fast as he could whilst following the trail, he raced from the valley. He was coming for his woman. Ogn was the light he sought, the hope of his redemption. He needed her.

And he would not abandon her when she needed him.



THE TRAIL LED UP to a mountain peak. Starkad pushed as hard as he could, but still, the sun dipped below the horizon and a bitter wind whipped the snows and Mist about his face. There was no tracking aught in such conditions, for the ghost lights dancing across the sky offered too little illumination for that.

Reluctantly, he pulled up short and hunted for an overhang or rock pile from which to take shelter. He found naught and wandering in the dark was like to get him killed. One misplaced foot and he'd plummet off the side of the mountain and straight into some gorge.

Left with no other choice, he wrapt cloak and blanket both about his shoulders and settled down into the snows. He'd never get a fire going, so he'd have to rely on torches to keep the Mist—and the worst of the cold—at bay.

It would be a long night.



A DARK BLADE, long, with strange runes engraved along its length. Something dire seeped of it, the sense of a fell light just behind his seeing; perhaps it was only fancy.

Firelight glinted along its length, the smoky red glow of a forge, one deep in the bowels of the Earth. Clangour of hammer upon anvil, echoing, ever echoing. And dark, bent forms, upholding more runeblades, inspecting them, biding him look upon their savage glory.

“Ragnarök impends ...” Gruff voices, echoing between hammer strikes.



THE FIRST RAYS of dawn broke through the Mist, searing Starkad awake. The dreams had been worse this night, though he'd once thought them

better when Ogn was nigh. Perhaps he had lost her trail. Perhaps his mind punished him for losing her. He saw Vikar, aye, and slaughter, the haunting, accusing gazes of so many he'd slain. Those he well understood. But the figures in his last dream, were they dvergar? Starkad had never looked upon their ilk, never wanted to.

Muscles aching, he rose. His back cracked, his neck creaked. A thick layer of rime had crusted over his blankets and broke away as he stood. Starkad sucked down a bitter, painful breath of the frigid air. The torch must have burnt out as he slept. Lucky Mist-madness or deathchill hadn't taken him. He groaned, dug out another torch, and fumbled to light it with frozen fingers. The flint tumbled out of his numb grasp.

"Damn it." He snatched up the thing and struck the steel a few more times ere managing a spark to light the torch. The oil-soaked rag flared to life a moment later. Starkad sniffed and rubbed his face. His cheeks burnt with the cold, even beneath his beard. Caught out overnight on a slope of Nidavellir, most Men would have died. Well, Starkad was not most Men. And he was going to get his woman back.

The wind and snows had half-buried the tracks, forcing him to move slowly, deliberately. He couldn't lose the tracks ... nor could he afford to lose the daylight. Another night like the last did not much appeal, assuming he managed to live through it again at all.

A long time he wandered the mountain, twice having to double back to find the tracks. Around the edge of the next slope, a frozen waterfall plummeted into a gorge, glittering through the Mist, crystalline in the dying sunlight. Beyond it, barely visible beneath the layers of snow and the thick covering of brume, rose a rugged fortress. A dverg outpost?

Torch in hand, Starkad made his way past the cataract and down to the fortress. It was blocky, as he imagined dverg design must be, but large, and rimmed by a parapet that had begun to crumble. Ice crusted over the better part of it, running down the parapet and beyond, halfway to where the

snowdrift buried the foundations. The whole thing had been carved from blocks larger on a side than Starkad was tall.

Well, damn. This place seemed like something drawn from Niflheim, not a dverg ruin at all. To the side, only half visible, it seemed a portcullis sealed the main entrance. As he drew nigh, the gate creaked, drawn up into the recesses of the fortress.

Well, then. Starkad planted the torch in the snow and drew both swords. A man trod around the corner ... only it was not a Man. It stood over seven feet tall. Rugged muscles. And too much scraggly hair. Was that ... a jötunn?

Starkad balked, struggling not to back away. Tyr claimed to have fought one of these legendary creatures, but still, Starkad had doubted him. They were supposed to be banished beyond the Midgard Wall, into Jötunheim. And here, now, one strode toward him.

“What seek you here, little Man?” The jötunn spoke in accented Northern, its voice like rocks grating on one another.

“Where is Ogn?”

The jötunn glanced back at the fortress. And there she was, standing upon the parapets, watching. This *thing*’s prisoner ...

Well, Hel could have the creature, then. “Jötunn. I challenge you to a holmgang for the woman.”

“Starkad!” Ogn shouted from above. “Do not do this! Hergrimr will kill you!” Oh, but it was already done. Starkad was not leaving without her.

The jötunn slowly shook his head. “Man ... you are a fool.”

“And you are a craven!” Starkad spat back.

That drew a snarl. “I accept your petty challenge. And we shall duel at the falls below, come dusk.”

Starkad nodded. Let it be done.



HERGRIMR HAD ALLOWED Starkad to place torches around their battleground and that light now reflected off the frozen falls as Starkad danced around his foe. The jötunn carried a sword as long as Starkad was tall, with a blade wider than his thigh. A single swipe of that would have sheared through mail and flesh and bone. Would have chopped Starkad right in half. Would have cut down a godsdamned tree.

So Starkad leapt out of reach once again. He dodged. Feinted. Rolled under Hergrimr's mighty swings. And the jötunn swung and swung, chest heaving with the effort of it. Despite the speed with which he could swing that monstrous sword, Hergrimr's recoveries were slow. Getting slower. Another strike slammed down into the snow.

Starkad dodged to the side, darted in, whipped his own blade around. It tore a shallow gash along Hergrimr's shin and sent the jötunn stumbling forward, his blood turning snow ruby. Starkad pressed his edge and slashed along the jötunn's face, drawing a long, wicked gash there.

As Hergrimr roared, Starkad rolled off to the side, diving out of the way of another mighty cleave of that sword. Again, the jötunn charged in. Now blind with rage, with frustration. Clearly not used to facing a foe that could so evade his every move. The fastest man was the only one who mattered. Not even jötunn strength made up for it.

Starkad twisted away from another blow. Hergrimr overextended, and Starkad countered, Vikar's sword biting into the jötunn's elbow. That mighty sword tumbled down into the snow. The jötunn stared dumbly at his blood, now gushing from his wounds. Let him gape. It gave Starkad the chance to close inside the monster's reach. He whipped one blade around, opening Hergrimr's throat and rammed the other through the jötunn's gut.

The monster fell back, then pitched over, clutching its one good hand to its neck. Blood oozed out between those fingers. And the jötunn slumped down into the snow.

Panting, Starkad let his swords drop and bent over, hands on his knees. The cold stung his lungs. A single blow from that thing would have ended him, and all Odin's dark ritual would have amounted to naught.

Snow crunched nearby, scarce audible over his own gasping breath. He looked up to see Ogn, ashen faced, shaking her head. "What have you done?"

"I ... saved you." He panted. He needed water. He needed to sit. "Now we can be wed."

"I was not yours to save ..." She knelt by the fallen jötunn and stroked his face with one hand.

What the fuck? "Ogn?"

"Damn you, Starkad Eightarms. Damn you forever ..." Now he truly saw her. Thick with child. So thick she must have conceived not long after he'd left ... if not ere.

"W-what? I just fought for you ..."

Ogn rose, her fingers clasped around the hilt of Vikar's sword. "I didn't ask to be saved! You ... bastard ... you ..." She shook her head. "'Twas your brother's sword, aye? The one you betrayed? Slaughtered? Everywhere you go, you bring death ..." Starkad straightened, hands up in warding. She stood between him and the other sword. No. No, he needed no blade, for she would never harm him. "He was a good man ..." Tears had welled in her eyes. "We were, our child was ..."

"H-he abducted you!"

She frowned. "It ... might have started thus ... but you. You did not bother to ask ... you just came and brought death. As you always do. You bought your life with darkness. So may darkness take you, Starkad." She panted, as if barely able to hold back the weeping.

"I ... I love you, Ogn. Please, let us talk about this." He took a halting step toward her.

She hefted the sword, clearly not accustomed to it, but armed, nonetheless. “May darkness hold you, always. I damn you to it ... to never find peace. To always wander, never satisfied, never able to hold the wealth you claim.”

“Ogn! Do not speak such things.” Starkad edged toward her. He just had to wrest the sword away, then they could talk. She was disturbed, but surely they could work this out.

“May all your days be drenched in blood and bereft of joy,” she cursed, and he flinched at her use of Vikar’s words from his nightmare. “Death shall follow in your wake all your life, Starkad, and your crimes will overshadow even your fame.” Every word fell upon him like a blow. They swelled around his heart and crushed it, surely as the pressure he felt in his nightmares. They brought him to his knees.

And he crawled, begging for forgiveness. But as in the dreams, no words came. Ogn backed away. And she turned Vikar’s sword backward, toward her own breast. Starkad opened his mouth, tried to shout her name. The words choked him, refused to escape his throat. With a last, hateful glare at him, Ogn flung herself down. Her weight, light though it was, proved more than enough. The sword punched through her gut and out her back.

At last, the scream broke from Starkad’s throat. It echoed off the mountains. It sent snows tumbling down from the peak. Anguish, despair, and insurmountable guilt mingled in his cry.

No one answered.



VIKAR HAD BEEN RIGHT, of course. As had Ogn. All hope had left Starkad.

Moons he wandered, crossing the land on foot, caring naught which way he went, or even if he travelled in circles. He passed out of Nidavellir

and into Sviarland. Sometimes, he passed through a village, a town. Sometimes they let him claim supplies without argument. Sometimes they resisted; such ended poorly for them. He fought, and he murdered, taking what he needed to survive.

Ogn had been his redemption. But she had fallen for her captor during Starkad's long absence and ... was this all born of the curse Odin's blessing had brought with it? The dark urd Vikar had promised? As Ogn had said, he felt compelled to keep walking. He could not long abide any place nor find peace among any of the villages or kingdoms he passed through. Her words haunted his every step.

As did death.

His dreams too, she invaded, on the rare occasion when Vikar did not torment him. Then it became Ogn's turn. And her suicide played out over and over, in innumerable variations. All coming to the same end: that precious light flickering out of her beautiful blue eyes.

The two people he'd thought he loved best in the World, both dead because of him.

Sometimes, he mulled over the idea of taking his own life. He might cast himself from a cliff into the sea. Or cut out his own gut with Vikar's sword—that would be justice. And yet, if he did so ... if he ended his suffering after betraying his own brother to ensure his long life ... would that not be further perfidy? If he had any honour left, it compelled him now to live. To continue the blighted existence he had wrought for himself and live out the curses his loved ones had placed upon his soul. That was his punishment; he would not shirk it.

So he walked until he wore holes in the soles of his boots. Then he stole more boots and kept walking. In long stretches alone, he was left with no companion save his own beleaguered mind. And left to wonder ... Ogn had known much of the workings of the Otherworld. Had told him the alfar had clans among them, each clan changed in nature by their place in the

Otherworld. She had spoken of her fears that svartalfar, the alfar of the shadows, had touched Starkad. Could that be ... Was it possible she knew it because ljósalfar had touched her as well?

Skalds called ljósalfar—the alfar of the sun—radiant and glorious, as had Ogn been. Maybe that hint of the Otherworldly was the source of her ethereal beauty and of the power behind her curse. Or maybe his mind tricked him, struggling to make sense of the ravages left of his life.

After long wandering, he came to Uppsalir. The kingdom lay centred on the Fyrisvellir by the River Fyris above the marsh. It was one of numerous petty kingdoms throughout Svjarland, but a strong one, ruled by what had once been the strongest of dynasties. The Ynglings claimed descent from the Vanr, Freyr, who wielded the flaming runeblade Laevateinn in countless battles against the jötunnar and other forces of chaos. Not that Starkad had ever seen Freyr, nor was he like to now. No, Odin and his fellow Æsir had cast down the Vanir and banished them beyond the edges of Midgard. What that meant, Starkad could not say, nor did he truly care. Such things had naught to do with him anymore.

The kings of Uppsalir, brothers, Yngvi and Alf, welcomed him into their hall. Word of his crimes had spread, aye, but word of his glorious battles as well. Yngvi had beckoned Starkad to sit on his right hand, offering him mead and hearty stew and song.

The shieldmaidens and the thrall women, they looked at him, wanton and willing. Starkad dove deep into the drinking horn. He had erred with Ogn. Thought with his heart and his cock and placed all his hopes in her. But she had betrayed him as surely as he had Vikar. Women were fickle, not to be trusted. And Starkad had no need of them. Just the mead. Drunk enough, and he'd not dream. Surely even he deserved that slight respite, on occasion.

A man settled across the table from him, then offered him a fresh horn. This man, his long, sandy brown hair tied at his neck, had a slightly fell

edge about him. A power, an urd Starkad could not understand but could feel.

Starkad snatched the horn from him. "Who are you?"

"I'm Wudga Volundson. And I've heard many tales of your fame, Eightarms."

Volundson? As in ... the dark smith? Starkad snorted. Why not? Darkness seeped into every corner of Midgard. "What do you want?"

Wudga shrugged. "A good tale to pass the winter evenings? Perhaps friendship, even."

That drew a chuckle. "Can't say that has ended well for my friends thus far."

Again, that relaxed shrug. "Perhaps this time will be different."

King Yngvi banged a hand on the table, drawing every eye. "I have an inclination to raid into Kvenland soon. And tales of your many victories for Agder have become nigh to legend, Eightarms. Would you consent to become a captain among our party?"

Starkad slurped his mead and exchanged another glance with this Wudga. So this is what his life was to be now. Odin had promised him great wealth. And Ogn had promised it would never be enough. All those raids on behalf of Vikar, and what did it now earn him? Naught at all. But then, the only question on his lips ... "How much is my share?"

For Ogn was right. Starkad could not hold back, could not stop from venturing forth to claim treasures he *knew* he would not be able to keep. Such was his urd.

After all, he could not stay here long. He could not stay *anywhere* long.

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DAYS GONE: ODIN

799 Age of Man

*A*rm raised against the blinding snow, Odin pushed forward. Ice crystals stung his forehead, ears, and any other exposed flesh they could find. The storm had not abated with Ymir's death. In truth, the blizzard had worsened, as if rejecting the frost jötunn's demise—or feasting upon his soul and growing fat on it. Odin couldn't see a damned thing. He wasn't even sure they still headed in the right direction.

“We need shelter!” Vili shouted.

“Loki!” Odin shouted. “Where is that damned tower?”

For a moment, there was no answer, then the foreigner emerged from the snow ahead, crystal-blue eyes like burning lights amid the blizzard. “We descended a different slope. 'Tis too far to double back now.”

Odin grimaced. Every attempt at lighting the torches had proved futile. There had to be something. His leg had gone numb. Perhaps only Gungnir's power kept him upright. “Find us shelter, any shelter!”

Loki glanced off to the north, silent a moment, then shook his head. “There is naught to be found.” Was that hesitation in his voice?

“What is it?”

Loki straightened his shoulders, then stood with his hands behind his back, as if resigned. “We are not so far from Hacibey, a castle from the Old Kingdoms. We could reach it soon ... But naught mortal dwells there now.”

Vaettir? “What is it? Trolls? Draugar?”

“I cannot say for certain, now. Long ago, it belonged to a kingdom called the Odlingar.”

How could Loki know such a thing? Truth was, it didn’t matter. In this snowstorm, they’d all be dead in an hour. “Just take us there.”

Loki studied each of the small party ere turning back to Odin. Then he spun on his heel and changed course. Odin’s brothers both looked to him a moment, then chased after Loki. Odin dug Gungnir’s butt into the ground and pulled himself forward, one painful step after another.

Ymir was dead. Father was avenged. He had done it. He had brought Father peace.



WHEN THEIR GOAL at last came into view, Odin’s face had gone numb and his arms stiff. Through the curtain of snow, he could just make out the structure atop a hill. It was a castle, and more complete than any he’d ever seen. Arches supported the wings, which spread out over the valley, off the hilltop. A giant spire connected by a skybridge might have granted a view for miles over the Mist, if not for the damned blinding snow. Finely carved frescoes spoke of another age. And ice crystals covered every speck of the place.

“Hel’s frozen tits,” he mumbled. This had not been what he’d expected. These Odlingar built places fit for gods. And if they were gone, surely somewhat else must now lurk here. But here they were, and it was their only choice.

Loki glanced at him and must have read the decision on his face, for the foreigner took off toward the castle. The grade up the hill was steep, and every step over the ice threatened to steal Odin's balance. Behind, his brothers followed. Odin spared a glance at Vé, who trudged on with a vacant stare, half frozen, with Vili's occasional shove keeping him going. Odin pressed forward. Farther up, steps had been carved into the hill, those also crusted in ice and slippery. Odin used the butt of Gungnir as a walking stick, following close behind Loki. His leg didn't hurt so much—now it almost wouldn't respond.

"Have you been here ere now?" The storm seemed to swallow his words.

Still, Loki answered. "No." He pointed at the main gateway—massive double doors over an arch.

Odin trudged up to it, grateful for even the hint of shelter the shadow of the wall provided. He rapped on the door with his spear, but no answer came. All right then. Odin pushed his shoulder against the door, but ice held it fast. Taking Gungnir in both hands, he thrust it forward. It splintered the ice, sending a spiderweb of cracks across it, and kept going, punching through the door underneath. Odin tried to yank the spear free but it had lodged into the door. Instead, he worked it 'round and 'round, cracking more ice. At last he beckoned for Vili to join him. As one, they slammed into the doors. The ice shattered, and the doors flew inward, Gungnir clattering to the floor beneath.

"Everyone inside," he called and reclaimed his spear. Thick shadows swelled over a gargantuan interior caked with ice. With the doors open, snow quickly began to pile up in the entryway. They needed a fire—fast.

Ice crusted over every window, tinting what little light reached inside blue-white. Tapestries hung from the wall, even these caked with hoar. An upper balcony ringed the hall, and several archways led onward. Gods knew how long it would take to explore such a place. Whilst the others pushed the

doors half closed to guard against the storm, Odin yanked tapestries down and shook the ice free of them. He could not shake the sense of being watched, try though he might to ignore it. Moments later, Loki joined him, and he was glad of the foreigner's help. He did not dare ask if Loki could feel what he felt here, did not want to know the answer.

When the fabric was dry enough, they kindled a fire. Odin crouched nearby, warming his hands. The fire should keep the cold and the gods-damned Mist away, as well as any alfar or other vaettir lurking here, invisible. His leg had started to throb, so Odin slapped his fist against it. Had to keep the blood flowing.

"Let me see," Loki said. The foreigner pulled away the bandages while Vili set about tending the fire and heating what little meat they had. A slab of frozen mammoth, and with Odin's supplies gone, they'd have to share.

"This fire won't last long. Not with just a tapestry to burn. Vé, get some more." His brother stared at him blankly. "Now!" Odin snapped.

The young man jerked, then rose and drifted off toward the wall.

"Fortune favours you," Loki said. "Another hour in the cold and you might have lost the leg. But you'll recover, given rest and warmth."

Odin grunted. "Vili, help Vé."

"I'm fucking starving."

"So am I, but it can wait. I don't want the boy wandering this place alone. Could still be draugar or aught else here."

Grumbling, the berserk lurched to his feet and went after Vé. Loki retightened the bandage on Odin's leg, forcing Odin to stifle a grunt of pain.

"Thank you. Brother."

Loki snorted. "Brother?" he asked when Odin turned back to him.

Odin leant back on his elbows, grateful for the respite. "Without doubt. You saved my life and that of my little brother. You alone helped me uphold my vow. You may not have been born of the same woman as I ..." But what did that even matter? No one controlled what family they were born to, but

there was no reason you couldn't choose others. Rolling to his side, Odin pulled a knife from his belt. Loki stared at it without any hint of alarm. Pity—Odin had expected to at least startle the foreigner. Instead, Loki raised his eyes from the knife to Odin's face. Steady one, this. Fearless? Or just not easily worried? No, he had stood with them against a jötunn. That kind of courage exceeded that of even most berserkir.

Odin drew the knife along his palm, opening a shallow cut. "We shall be brothers in blood, my friend, until the end of our days." He held up his dripping palm for Loki to see, then passed the knife.

The other man took it without hesitation, though he did watch Odin's eyes a moment ere opening his palm. "Some things cannot be undone." He set the knife by the fire, then offered his hand.

Odin clasped it, mingling their blood. "Nor should they." A sudden warmth passed through him, and then dizziness. Hunger and fatigue, no doubt. His eyes swam. "We will be united, always. I will never accept any ale unless it be brought for you as well. I will take no glory without you at my side, brother."

Loki's hand tightened around Odin's. The man was stronger than he looked. Though svelte, his grip was like iron. "You invoke old magic without understanding it, brother. But I will stay by your side, long as I am able." In truth, Loki was the strangest man Odin had ever known. He knew far more than a man ought, but that had proved a boon time and again on this trek. Without him, Father would still dwell in agony, unrevenged. Odin had not heard that voice since Ymir fell. Surely he must be free now. Free and gone ... No longer watching Odin. That thought hit him like a blow to the chest, one that stole his breath. Would he never hear his voice again? What had, ere now, felt a torment now seemed to have been a blessing, a chance to hear Borr speak even a few words more.

Odin shook himself and broke the grip. He looked at the foreigner. Loki claimed to have come from distant shores, but Odin knew little of lands

beyond Aujum. Some said the gods lived in the west, beyond the farthest sea, on islands that knew neither time nor winter: Vanaheim. Had Idunn truly come from such a place? It seemed too wild to be truth. Odin's people—all Ás clans, really—had lived along the Black Sea—east of here—ere Vingethor led them on the Great March, when the Huns marched. Nine clans, all wandering Aujum, some fishing the Gandvík Sea, some raiding into Hunaland or Bjarmaland.

He leant back on his elbows. “You keep many secrets, brother. Will you not speak of your homeland?”

Loki watched him with those intense eyes. “A man is entitled to secrets and privacy both.”

“Just fucking move!” Vili bellowed from across the hall.

Odin and Loki both looked to him as he shoved Vé out of the way and yanked down a tapestry on his own. Vé stood there, staring at the berserk as if uncertain what to do. He had dropped his torch, which now lay sputtering on the icy stone. Loki rose, grabbed another torch, and strode over there, forcing Odin to hobble his way over to where his brothers worked. As Loki approached, Vé backed away and sat against the wall. Loki knelt in front of him, staring into his eyes. And Vé's eyes—those looked a touch too wild and confused for Odin's liking.

“What is this?” Odin demanded.

“Fucking uselessness,” Vili said. Odin's huge brother hefted the tapestry by himself—berserk strength plain—and hauled it off, back toward the fire.

Loki didn't turn from Vé's face. “What was your mother's name?”

Vé's eyes seemed to gleam in the firelight, though he cringed from it as though it pained him. He shook his head, eyes growing even wider. Odin knelt beside his little brother. What in the Gates of Hel? Their mother had died birthing Vé, and though the boy had never known her, certainly he knew the name Bestla. Father's beloved wife, oft mourned. So now what ... No. This wasn't possible. Völvur said the Mist could steal memories, but

völvur said so many things. Odin hadn't thought ... He'd taken Vé, taken both his brothers up the mountain to fight Ymir, unwilling to allow them torches for fear of jeopardising his vengeance. Every step had drawn the Mist deeper inside his own brother ... No. It could not be. Not in one night.

"Vé?" Odin's voice cracked, still sounding raspy. "Brother?"

At last a look of recognition flashed over Vé's face and he nodded to Odin. Recognition and dread. Gods above, his brother knew what was happening to him. And he was terrified. Odin reached a trembling hand to pat his brother on the shoulder. "Don't worry, Vé. You'll be fine. You just need a good night's sleep. Some food in your belly." Odin hauled Vé to his feet and guided him back to the fire where Vili had left the mammoth flesh roasting.

Gods, what a fool he'd been. To find vengeance for Father, he'd brought his brothers up a forbidden mountain, then denied them the life-preserving flames that might have warded off the Mist. Vé sat much farther from the fire than he ought to.

"Eat," Odin said. Vé moved no closer. Odin groaned and snatched the meat off the spit Vili had fashioned. When he brought it to Vé, his brother tore into it with a ravenousness that would have done Vili proud. He'd be fine. He watched Vé a moment. Just fine.

Odin turned, then tugged Loki aside, out of earshot of his brothers. Would Vili turn on his brother? Maybe not, but the rest of the clan would. At night, sometimes Men told stories about those whose minds were taken by the Mist. Some said those who went Mist-mad eventually became hateful ghosts, wandering the World and filled with unfathomable loathing of all that lived. Odin had seen it four times—men cast out from the clan because of the madness, because the clan feared a warrior's soul lost to Niflheim. One had come back. Not as a Man. As a draug—a revenant risen from the dead and bent on vengeance against those who had cast him out. The creature refused to die, tearing Men to pieces even as they hacked away

at it. In the end, Father had pinned the creature to the ground with Gungnir and Tyr had lopped off its head. Their völvu had built a pyre to send the creature to Hel, and they had fled that camp, declaring it cursed.

“Tell no one of this,” Odin whispered to Loki. A resigned sadness washed over the foreigner’s face ere he nodded. Maybe a völvu would have known what to do to save Vé. Heidr—their clan völvu, maybe she could help. Or ... The foreigner knew things, talked like a völvu himself. “Can aught be done for him?” Odin asked.

“We should rest.”

Odin clenched his fists and leant in close to Loki’s ear. “I will not let my brother fall.”

Loki sighed. “Odin, some things are not easily undone.”

“No!” Fuck that all the way to Hel’s gates and back.

He had to save his brother.



ARMS LADEN with yet another tapestry, Vili stomped back over to the fire. “Should get us through the night. Best we leave this cursed place at dawn.” He slumped down by the others, glared at them—probably vexed they ate before him—and snatched up the remaining hunk of mammoth flesh.

Odin looked to Loki, then to the entrance. “We can leave when the storm clears. Be that dawn or otherwise.”

Vili growled, juice dribbling down his chin and beading in his thick beard. “If the jötunn’s death brought this on, the farther we get from here, the better.”

Odin could not argue with that. Nor would he take Vé into the cold without flame, much as his younger brother now seemed to recoil from the very thing that ought to have protected him. The storm howling outside trapped them in this place, this ruin of the Old Kingdoms. Trapped, sitting

and watching Vé stare into the darkness of the hall, never looking into the fire.

Would Father blame Odin for this? In his desperation to avenge him, Odin had let another son of Borr fall to harm. Groaning, he lurched to his feet, drawing strength from Gungnir. He had done it. He'd avenged Father. So why did he still want to rage at the sky and burn down the World? Should it not have brought *his* soul peace as well as Father's?

Vili glanced at him, spat. "There are rune markings on some of the walls. Fell place, this. I wouldn't wander."

Odin glared at the berserk a moment before shambling off toward the back of the hall. Oh, but he wanted to wander. He wanted to be anywhere but sitting there, watching his brother lose himself. Like a Hel-cursed fool, he'd allowed himself to believe Mist-madness could not touch him. Not him, not his family. It was a distant threat, one that burdened other people. Not *his* problem. Loki fell in by his side, saying naught. Perceptive enough to know naught could be said. His new brother already knew how Odin had failed his other brothers.

Murmurs in the shadows, laments of the dead, of men perhaps trapped here for centuries, since the fall of this place. Odin tried not to listen now; if he could not hear his father's voice, he sought to hear no voices. *Necromancer*, Loki had named him, or nigh to it. *Shaman*.

A curving staircase led to an upper balcony, but Odin passed beneath it, to where a series of oak doors lined the walls. Loki drifted along behind him. The foreigner brushed away a layer of hoar to reveal some strange markings engraved into the walls. How on Hel's frozen arse had frost covered the *interior* walls? Something fell and unnatural was at work. Loki claimed not to have visited here ere now, but still he knew much of this place.

The runes Loki examined meant naught to Odin. Such were the workings of dverggar of old, warding the ancient places against the Mist, or

so völvur claimed. They also carved the symbols on runestones, marking safer routes from the more perilous ones. And Gungnir also bore runes, perhaps carved by the Vanir. Otherworldly lore, not meant for men.

Necromancer, shaman ...

“Who did you say built this place?” Odin asked.

“The Odlingar. One of the Old Kingdoms, all of which collapsed some eight centuries back.”

“How does a people capable of building this”—Odin waved his arm to encompass the majesty of the castle—“fall?”

“The same as all once great kingdoms—torn apart by strife from within and torn down by foes from without. A neighbouring kingdom took advantage of turmoil within the Odling houses and betrayed them.”

Odin grunted. “How does a man know what happened eight hundred years ago?”

Loki chuckled. “I’m a student of history.” He tried one of the doors, but it didn’t budge. The foreigner moved on to another door, tried the handle, and then shouldered it open. Ice cracked off it. The room beyond was cast in darkness and reeked of must and ancient death.

“So no one has come here in all those years?”

“They may have entered. I’m not certain whether anyone managed to leave.”

What in Hel’s frozen arsehole did that mean? “What is it you fear lives here?”

Loki knelt by a mound of ice. Under a thin layer of hoar, a pair of corpses lay in each other’s arms. A mother and child, perhaps, wrapt in a dying embrace, frozen to death in this room. The foreigner frowned, shaking his head. “I doubt aught *lives* here.” He stood. “A Niflung sorceress came here, in those final days ere the fall ... Word spread to the other kingdoms of the horrors she wrought upon Hacibey.”

A wind howled through the castle, raising the hair on the back of Odin's neck. It had come from upstairs, but no window looked apt to let wind *inside*. A wise man would flee the castle now. Save for the killing blizzard raging outside. He looked to Loki, but the foreigner only returned his stare, letting Odin decide. Cower in the hall and hope whatever lurked in those hidden recesses left them to their fire. Or face it. Odin wearied of the fear that threatened to rise in his breast; Father had not raised a craven.

Besides, Vé stared into the dark like a man drunk and dazed. Because of Odin. Because his big brother had let him face danger he ought not have. Odin pushed out the door and strode toward the stairs. A moan echoed through distant halls.

Vili had risen, taken up his axe—had he heard it?—but Odin motioned him to stay. Odin slowed as he climbed those stairs. Each step shot tendrils of pain through his leg that reached almost to his spine. Gungnir's butt clanged on the floor, the sound echoing in the empty hall. At the top, a freezing wind rushed over him, howling like a wolf. A fell whisper emerged from one of the archways beyond.

Leave ...

Odin spun. Naught there. Loki had followed, now turning about.

"You heard that?" Odin asked. Loki nodded. Not in Odin's mind then. Forward. The archway opened onto a hallway, long, probably to the great tower. Large windows lined the hall, letting in a crisscross of light through cracked ice. This must be the skybridge he saw outside.

Odin levelled Gungnir, shared a glance with Loki, and proceeded down the hall. Whatever lived here, vaettr or not, his brothers needed this place, and it was his job to get them what they needed. He'd protect Vé by any means needful.

Leave! The voice seemed to emerge from all around them, a whisper laced with icy fury.

“Who are you?” Odin called, continuing down the hall. “What do you want?” No answer came. “A wraith,” Odin whispered after the silence dragged on, praying he was wrong. Some claimed wraiths were the most dangerous of all the vaettir. They were shades of the dead bent on the destruction of life, stripped of all that once made them Men. There was no fighting a wraith, not really. With neither body to slay nor blood to spill, such a ghost could not be killed. If they were lucky, maybe it would fear Gungnir. If not, they might as well take their chances with the snowstorm.

A look at Loki told Odin the man would continue on. Odin nodded at his new brother, who drew something from beneath his furs. A crude iron dagger. Loki said naught in answer to Odin’s raised eyebrow. At the end of the hall an archway led onto a landing of the great tower. Stairs ringed the outside, rising up to the other levels.

Odin blew out a hard breath and clenched his grip around Gungnir. This was the way. The only way. His heart pounded so hard he could scarce hear aught else. Just keep going forward.

He’d stepped one foot on the stairs when another chill passed over him. He spun around to see a woman standing in the archway they’d just passed through. She looked naught like any wraith he’d imagined, though the ends of the black cloak she wore faded into wisps of oblivion. Her aspect seemed solid, and, though pained, not vile. She had green eyes and long flaxen hair that blew about, though no wind reached in here. By her side stood a white wolf: a ghost hound.

“You see her?” Odin whispered to Loki, who answered with a single nod. Odin watched the ghost a moment, wondering if, had he brought Vili, his brother might have seen this as well. Or was it only them, Loki and him, blessed with this Sight? “Be gone, vaettr!” Odin shouted.

“You dare ... command me leave *my* home ... mortal?”

Loki raised his torch out in front of him and the dagger to his side but made no move to advance on this spirit.

“Your home?” Odin asked. “Then who are you, lady?”

“I am ... I was ... the queen here, long ago.”

“Herja,” Loki whispered.

“My lady, please. We need shelter from the cold.”

The ghost’s form flickered, then vanished. Her voice whispered in Odin’s ear, *There is none.*

He and Loki spun about so fast they nearly tripped over themselves, stumbling backward. The ghost stood behind them, her wolf with teeth bared, stalking closer. She flickered again, appearing beside Loki, her hand on his head. His torch and dagger both slipped from his grip, and he fell to his knees. In an instant his skin turned blue as deathchill. Odin swung Gungnir at her, and she vanished again. He spun as she appeared some distance behind him. The wolf stalked around, circling behind. He couldn’t keep them both in view.

Loki groaned, crawling away with the torch in hand.

“Please!” Odin said. “We beg your hospitality.”

The ghost’s body shimmered, as if fading out of this Realm, ere popping back up even closer. “The last time I sheltered travellers they paid me well for it, wrought slaughter among my people, left me this cursed existence. ’Tis not an error I am apt to repeat. Least of all to those who come saturated in the Mist.”

What? What did she ... Vé? “My brother? You know what’s happening to him?”

The ghost flickered in and out of existence. “What always happens to mortal Men who breathe too deeply the Mist of Niflheim, most of all those of Elder blood. Chaos wakens.”

The wolf snarled and lunged. Odin rolled to the side, whipping Gungnir forward. The ghost wolf snapped its jaws around the shaft and pinned Odin to the ground. The thing had weight like a real animal, though its breath was

cold rather than hot, a hair from Odin's face. He pushed against the animal, straining, unable to dislodge it.

"Please! We are not your enemies!"

She drifted to his side and pressed her hand to his cheek. Even as she did, the wolf released Gungnir. Odin's own grip on the spear went limp, and it clattered to the floor. As it fell, a sudden weariness and chill set in on him. Sleep. He needed to sleep. "Please what, mortal?" she whispered.

"S-save my brother from the Mist."

Loki lurched forward, waving the torch. The ghost and wolf recoiled long before he touched either, the wolf snarling. He bent to retrieve the dagger.

"Why?" The ghost drew the word out so long it seemed to writhe in his ears.

"I'd grant any request if it might save my brother."

"Odin—" Loki began.

Odin silenced him with a glare. "I will avenge whatever wrong was done to you, spirit. Only, save Vé from this dark urd."

The ghost flickered again, appearing just before Odin's face. She drew a finger along the line of his jaw. Her touch was like the Mist—icy and maddening, hungry to consume body and mind and soul. "On your oath ..."

"I ... I swear it."

"Swear on your blood to return that which was stolen, the Singasteinn." She touched a hand to her breast, then shook her head. "Return my amulet to me ere the solstice."

"I swear! Where do I find this amulet?"

She drew back and warmth slowly returned to his limbs, though cold still gripped his heart. "Taken ... taken by the Niflungar."

Not an Ás clan. But whoever they were, he'd find them if it meant sparing his own people. The solstice, during the sixth moon, was less than three moons from now. Still it ought to prove ample time to track down

whatever people these were. He crawled over to his spear. “I swear, by my own blood.” He drew his hand along the blade of Gungnir, opening his palm. “I swear to return this Singasteinn to you in three moons. And you must save Vé.”

The ghost drifted closer still, close enough to place an icy kiss on his lips. A chill settled deep within him, clenching his heart. He hadn’t realised he’d shut his eyes, but when he opened them, the woman and wolf were gone.

Fail to bring it within three moons, and your oath is broken. All you build will turn to ash, your children shall die, and your dreams shall burn.

Odin shook his head from the voice echoing within it. One look at Loki showed the man had heard naught.

Three moons.

Three moons to save Vé. To undo his mistake. Even when he returned to the fire, Odin couldn’t get that icy chill out of his heart.

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THE VÖLSUNGS

25 Age of the Æsir

*W*olfblood's last man blundered through the woods, banged his shoulder against a tree, and spun around, his axe tumbling from his grasp as he did so. Sigmund advanced on him in a steady gait. The man glanced over his shoulder, clearly debating trying to hide in the woods.

"Naught that way but swamp," Sigmund said. He nodded toward the fallen weapon. "Pick it up. Face me with whatever honour remains to you."

The man's gaze darted to the weapon, but he didn't move. Craven bastard. "You, you're the wraith of the bog ..."

Sigmund sneered at the craven. By now, most Men knew to avoid the wood and the swamps that fed into it, but some wretched fools occasionally thought to try their luck. Most never made it out, though not all fell to Sigmund. This man's companions had, four of them, chancing the woods. "I am flesh. Pick. It. Up." The warrior—barely worthy of the name—finally stooped and snatched the axe. The moment he stood, Sigmund was on him, feinting left with his sword. The man tried to use the axe to deflect, but Sigmund reversed his feint, hewing low across the warrior's belly. Steaming

guts spilled out across the forest floor. The man dropped his axe, this time slumping to fumble with his own entrails, as if pushing them back inside might spare him his *urd*. Some said Men dying thus might give them visions of *nifalfar* come to drag them down to *Niflheim*. Certainly not of *valkyrjar*, not for a craven like this.

Sigmund cleaned his blade—claimed as spoils from a similar kill last winter—and left the man to die and, perhaps, to become an actual ghost of these woods.



ONE BY ONE, Sigmund was going to hunt down every last man loyal to Siggeir Wolfsblood. None could stand before him in a fair fight, not him, blessed and chosen by Odin himself. Sigmund stalked them through the woods, aye, but he *did* give all a fair fight when he could, any who would face him in single combat. If they attacked in a swarm like a pack of wolves, well then, he gutted them like animals.

Ten winters of this, ten since Father's death and the shifting of Sigmund's world. Gone were pretty things and joys beyond the sating of hunger, of bloodlust. Of vengeance, creeping closer, day by day.

He meandered back through the woods, an eye out for game though his last kill had not yet run out. One day soon he might need to take his personal war against the king beyond the bounds of this wood. But Sigmund, mighty as he was, remained but one man and could not well storm Wolfsblood's keep single-handedly. That being the case ...

Tracks in the mud led into the cave where he sheltered. Human tracks, albeit small ones, like those of a woman or child. Had Sieglinde returned? Sigmund dropped to a crouch, making not the slightest sound as he drew his blade nor as he crept into the cave. The fire had dwindled to embers, barely

enough to keep the Mist from saturating his home. Beside it sat a boy, maybe ten winters, a crop of sandy hair atop his head.

Relaxing and lowering his weapon, Sigmund advanced. The boy spun at the sound of his footfalls so close and jumped up, his eyes darting about the cave like a cornered beast. “Who are you?” Sigmund demanded.

“I ... uh ... I’m Kettil. Your sister’s son.”

Sigmund sheathed his sword, then folded his arms across his chest. “And what are you doing here?”

“Mother says you are to train me that we may avenge Grandfather and my uncles.”

Not so long ago, Sigmund had lamented to his twin that he could not overthrow Wolfsblood by himself, nor could he trust any man in the king’s Realm. This, however, was not scarce what he’d had in mind in bemoaning his lack of allies. A child and the spawn of the very man Sigmund aimed to murder, no less, even if the boy was also Sieglinde’s son. Still, ten winters he had waited for his vengeance. If needs be, he might wait ten more. Not even the snows of the direst winter could quench the flames of vengeance.

“So be it,” Sigmund said at last. “Come, then, and show me what you can do.”



SIGMUND LED KETTIL through the woods to the marsh, casting back an occasional glance. But with him guiding the way, he could not garner the true extent of the boy’s woodcraft. Finally he paused, folded his arms, and nodded at the boy. “Now you lead. Take us east to the edge of the swamp but not into the regions where footing becomes unstable. Take care to make no noise as you move, for we do not want to alert aught to our presence here.”

The bog wraith legend might have cropped up because of Sigmund, but true vaettir and trolls did lurk in the darker places of Midgard. Though they wakened mostly at night, a bumbling fool could well bestir some of them even in daylight. Kettil glanced around with obvious doubt for a while, ere setting off to the south. Sigmund groaned. By the time he'd been ten winters, he could have found east even in the forest. "Boy. *That* way."

"Ugh." Kettil trotted in the direction Sigmund had pointed, leaving easily followed boot prints in the mud and seeming to step on every loose twig and rotting root in the land. So Sieglinde had not taught her son the least bit of woodcraft. Sigmund scowled as he trailed after the boy, much more careful of his own steps. Still, such things could yet be learnt. Kettil needed time to grow ere he could serve Sigmund's purpose, and in that time, he'd train the boy in stealth. He just prayed Kettil had more experience at arms. Surely the son of a king ought to have received tutelage with the bow, spear, and sword? In Sigmund's youth, his father had taught him much, along with masters hired from across Hunaland.

Sigmund allowed Kettil to draw further ahead. Would he notice the edge of the swamp when he reached it? Or would he plunge in with both feet? Standing waist-deep in freezing water might well serve as a lesson the boy would not soon forget about watching where he walked.

Ahead, Kettil shrieked like an old woman. Damn it. Sigmund rushed forward, jerking his plundered blade from over his shoulder as he did so. Kettil stood frozen at the edge of the swamp, eyes locked on an adder a few feet away from his face. Sigmund glowered, careful to make no sudden moves as he drew nigh. Not until the last moment ... His blade caught the serpent solidly, half cleaving through it, half carrying it away with sheer momentum. He flung the dying beast into the murk, then turned to stare down at the trembling boy.

"T-that was venomous!"

Sigmund did not bother answering. Instead, he stalked away from the swamp and back in the direction of his cave. A moment later, the sound of shuffling feet followed behind him.



SIGMUND SAID no word the entire time they walked back to the cave, ignoring the boy's attempts to engage in conversation. Twilight had settled like a shroud ere they reached his home, and Sigmund paused only to gather extra wood to stoke the fire. A man needed fire most in the night, when the Mist thickened and all manner of beast and vaettr came looking for prey. Inside, whilst he tended the flame, Kettil settled down against the wall. "Do we have aught to eat? It must surely be time for the night meal."

Sigmund tried not to sneer. "Indeed we do. All through the forest there is food. Go out and catch some." At that the boy glanced at the entrance. Beyond, a wolf howled, followed by another. Kettil must have decided Sigmund did not mean it—though Sigmund was not certain on that himself—because he simply curled up on the floor. Shaking his head, Sigmund grabbed what remained of his kill, a different serpent in fact, and tossed it at Kettil, drawing another shriek from him. Now Sigmund rolled his eyes. "Eat it. Or starve. As it pleases you."

Sigmund rolled over by the fire, trying not to think of the useless boy Sieglinde had saddled him with.



IN THE MORN, Sigmund left to gather roots and, whilst he was out, heard footfalls in the forest. Mostlike not Kettil—he'd left the boy snoring away not an hour prior, besides which, that boy couldn't track his way across an empty room. Hand on sword hilt, Sigmund crept toward the intruder. This

time, it was Sieglinde. Cloaked and concealed, but he'd recognise the silhouette and walk of his twin anywhere. He stepped out to meet her, and she threw back her hood.

"Brother. Forgive me for not lingering yesterday, but I could ill afford to await your return. Wolfsblood would soon have noted my absence."

Sigmund shrugged, then drew her into an embrace. When she pulled away, he looked her in the eye. "I met your son."

"And?"

"He is of no use to our cause. Woodcraft, swordplay, tactics—these things I can teach, if I must. But he has no warrior's soul, and his heart beats with the craven blood of his father."

"Useless ... ?" Sieglinde frowned. Then she waved it away. "Then rid yourself of the burden."

Now Sigmund backed away. "He is your blood."

"Planted in my belly without my desire. I will not weep to see Wolfsblood deprived of his heir."

Sometimes it seemed the only one more dedicated to their revenge than himself was his sister. "As you will. Go back to the fort. You need not see this."

Sieglinde hesitated. "I will send you my next eldest soon ... I think ... you will find his nature more akin to your own." Sigmund nodded, then turned from her.



KETTIL HANDLED THE SWORD—ANOTHER plundered from Wolfsblood's men—like he knew how to hold it, at least. It was a good sign. Sigmund had taken the boy back out to the edge of the swamp, to the site of his shame, uncertain even in his own mind why he had bothered to come so far. Now they both stood, sword in hand, facing one another.

“Today we train with blades?” Kettil asked. “I prefer the spear.”

Sigmund frowned. “Had you told me that back at the cave, I would have given you one.”

The boy waved it away. “Tomorrow.”

Sigmund shook his head. “No. You see, boy, the gods respect honesty, so I will be honest with you. I am going to kill you. I will give you a chance to defend yourself. You will fail and die, but you might at least die with honour and perhaps avoid being dragged down to the Gates of Hel. Have courage and face me.”

“W-what! Why are you turning on me, Uncle?”

Sigmund shook his head and advanced. He did not owe the son of Wolfsblood any explanation.



AFTER CUTTING off the boy’s head to ensure no draug would rise, Sigmund left the corpse in the muck, an offering to whatever dark gods of the bog might choose to aid him. Unfortunately for the child, Sigmund doubted Kettil saw any valkyrjar this day. If aught at all came for the boy, it would be the servants of Hel. As they must soon come for all the brood of Siggeir Wolfsblood.



DAWN HAD NOT YET BROKEN and yet soft footsteps sounded outside the cave. Sigmund stirred, hand drifting to the sword by his bedding. Trolls did not move with such grace, and besides which, sunrise had to be nigh. Most such creatures would be moving for holes in the ground already. So a Man. But in the predawn dark? When Mist could choke, could reduce visibility to an armspan?

Careful to make no sound, Sigmund rose. Barefoot, clad only in breeches, he advanced on the cave entrance. A man had to climb up and over rocks to escape this cave, but it did offer excellent concealment from Wolfsblood's hunters. Actually, had they known who he truly was, they might not have given over their search for the wraith of the bog. Sigmund heaved himself up, out of the cave, only to find himself face to face with another sandy-haired boy. This one bore a torch in one hand and an axe in the other, his wild eyes darting about the wood for any sign of danger. The confidence of his stance, the way he held that axe, told Sigmund a great deal about his nature. He might have had a winter or so less than the last, but he knew how to kill.

"You came alone?" he asked instead, though the answer seemed obvious. Sieglinde would not and could not have snuck from the fort at night.

The boy shrugged. "She told me where to find you. I just followed the landmarks."

"What's your name, boy?"

"Fitela."

"Fitela, I am Sigmund, your uncle."

The boy frowned, then nodded. "All right, Uncle Sigmund. Have you a plan of attack?" A plan of attack? He could not stop himself from chuckling at that, drawing an even deeper frown from Fitela. "I had dared to hope you would," the boy said. "If my father could be slain with ease, I'd have done so already."

Sigmund folded his arms across his chest. Boy certainly held a high opinion of himself. The question was, did he deserve that self-confidence? And the only way to be certain of that was to test it. Sigmund cocked his head to the cave. "There's fire down there. I want you to go out and catch some game, cook it, and prepare the day meal for us."

"Where are you going?"

“First, to dress. Then I’m going out for an hour or two. Be ready when I return.”



FROM BEHIND A TREE, Sigmund watched the cave entrance. The viper writhed in the sack he held, hissing and furious at being so snared. But if it had worked well enough to test one brother, it could test the next. For a time he observed until the sounds of scraping came from within. The boy must be skinning a kill. No better time would present itself, and, thus, Sigmund crept forward to the cave’s edge. Over the lip, he upended the sack, pitching the viper down over the rocks. The hissing thing slithered off into the darkness below. Sigmund settled back to wait.

No shout came from within. Sigmund folded his arms. It ought to have unfolded by now. If the boy had found the snake, he’d have either run screaming or tried to kill it. If not, he should have cried out when it bit him. Either way ... something should have passed.

The smell of roasting meat drifted up out of the cave, sending his mouth watering. Boy could cook, too. That boded well in itself. Finally, careful of where he trod lest the serpent yet lived, Sigmund slid down over the rocks himself. Slowly, he edged toward the back of the cave. The boy looked up from a spit over the fire and turned, revealing the animals roasting there. A snow rabbit and ... a snake. He’d caught, skinned, and roasted the fucking snake.

“Uncle, do not seem so surprised. I only tracked the rabbit. The snake was just luck I happened upon.” Did Fitela mock him? His eyes were hard to read. What child was so practiced in deception he could conceal the depths of his meaning from a grown man? Had the boy *known* Sigmund had set that serpent, that he was testing him?

Either way, he had done exactly as Sigmund had ordered. He didn't lack for skill or courage, and they would need both for their mission. Rather than interrogate the boy, Sigmund settled down in front of him and accepted the meat when Fitela offered it. When he was finished, he licked his fingers, savouring the hot juice. "I have to ask, boy. What has your mother told Wolfsblood about the disappearance of first one son and then the next?"

"She told him he died of a snake bite while hunting." The boy *did* know what had happened to his brother. Interesting. "She burnt the corpse of some other peasant boy and called it Kettil. I don't know what she plans to say of me, but I trust it will be convincing." Sigmund grunted. He'd had no idea Sieglinde had grown so accustomed to deception, though he supposed her position necessitated such. Were she to admit her feelings about her husband, he'd have no doubt slain her on the spot. "So," Fitela said. "About the plan. I have been thinking about our first step."

"*Our* first step?"

"Are we not to work together to bring down my father? Mother led me to believe I could count on your assistance."

Him count on Sigmund's assistance? Had the boy eaten some bad mushrooms? Biting back his initial response, Sigmund folded his arms. "How old are you, boy?"

"Almost ten winters."

"Then, in *almost* a winter you will be two winters shy of manhood. So the first step—grow you a fucking beard."

Fitela spat juice into the fire and glowered. "To what end? In my youth, the king's men will underestimate me. We need but get by a few of them, sneak into his chamber while he sleeps, and slit his throat."

Small wonder a boy raised in Wolfsblood's court would have no more honour than his father. "I will not kill a man in his sleep, much less Wolfsblood. When he dies, he will know a son of Völsung yet lives and brought about his fall. I aim to bring down his entire house, all his line

wiped from Midgard by my blade, even as he has sought to do to the Völsungs. To that end, we wait. We train. And you grow up strong enough to face a man in a fair fight.”

Fitela glowered at him, shaking his head. “Whilst you dawdle over your precious honour, Grandfather and your brothers lie unavenged, their shades writhing in torment. But Mother has commanded I heed your orders, so we wait. At least let us use the intervening years wisely and perhaps find ways to turn Wolfsblood’s allies from his side.”

Sigmund sighed and unfolded his arms. Maybe the boy was right. Maybe he had dwelt in this cave long enough. The forest was large, and many outlying towns lay just beyond it. So then, together they would begin to right the wrong Siggeir Wolfsblood had done to the Völsung line.

Together, Sigmund and Fitela would find justice.

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DAYS GONE: SIGYN

799 Age of Man

*T*he depths of Halfhaugr, of the fortress itself, delved deep into the ground, dug—legend claimed—by dvergar. According to skalds, the twisted vaettir once held many lands beyond Nidavellir but had long since withdrawn from the affairs of Men, though stories also claimed they had crafted seidr-wrought blades for the princes of the Old Kingdoms, in vain suit for peace. In tales, dvergar had built this place and marked it with ancient runes now known to only the völvur. Some, not even they understood. Sigyn didn't doubt the dvergar existed as such; she doubted whether they were vaettir, spirits from the Otherworld, or simply an old people now nigh unto extinct and long departed from these lands.

Frigg worked in one of those deep rooms, denying access to any of her father's men but welcoming Sigyn. As if Sigyn would ever feel welcome anywhere in Halfhaugr. Her half-sister ground up some rancid paste on a table while a cauldron bubbled with fulvous smoke Sigyn avoided drawing too close to.

“Is that going to save him?” They both knew the signs in their father, of the Mist-thickness saturating his lungs, and he was not like to live out the winter.

Frigg sighed. “If such the Norns wove his urd ...”

“What do the runes say?” The ancient markings decorated this room, as they did the outer fortress, but here, the dvergar had grouped their writings close together, recording a tale now forgotten by Man. Perhaps that had led Frigg to choose this place to work her witchcraft. It ought to break Sigyn’s heart, watching her own father die. But a heart can only be broken so many times ere a woman stops noticing an extra crack or two. Sigyn ran her fingers along the runes, tracing the patterns. “What does this one mean?”

“You know I can’t tell you that. It is forbidden.” Desperation and frustration mingled in her voice.

“I might be able to help.”

“You are not a völvá.” They’d had this conversation oft enough, of course. Sigyn would keep asking until Frigg’s desperation outweighed any concern for pointless secrecy. The völvur jealously guarded all their learning, runes included. Since she had first come to the fortress two winters ago, Sigyn had resolved to unravel the threads, solve this puzzle. And at the moment, she’d do aught to keep her mind off of Hermod, off the danger he faced. As if any puzzle, no matter how elaborate, could make her forget.

The door swung open, slammed against the wall, and made Frigg jump, spilling the paste all over the table. They both turned to see Fulla standing there, flushed and panting, eyes gleaming.

“You don’t know what news I’ve got, I dare say you don’t, now do you?” The flame-haired servant bore a grin wide enough her face ought to have split in half like that.

Sigyn tapped a finger against her lip, but Frigg answered ere she could say aught. “What’s happened?”

“Jarl Odin Borrson came back, he did. Not afore killing a jötunn, deader than dead down in the Sudurberks. Whole town is abustle over it. The scouts, they wanted him to stay and feast, but did he now? No! That man just went tromping right on back to Wodan lands like he had an awful rush on him, not hearing of aught else.”

“Deader than dead?” Sigyn asked. “Are you certain? Maybe the jötunn was just plain dead.”

“Well, I didn’t see the body myself, but I can say I’m nigh positive, still.”

Sigyn rolled her eyes. A jötunn. Really. “The bluster of men often knows few bounds and he’s not the first to claim to have slain some mystical monster. But a jötunn, here? If they exist at all, they dwell beyond the Midgard Wall.” By next winter, someone would have claimed to have seen a troll, a dragon even.

Sighing, Frigg swept the paste back into the mortar bowl. “So, he did not stop in the town at all?” His absence would make all Frigg’s schemes more difficult. Hard to sway a man who was not here. In fact, had he come here half as flush with his victory as Fulla seemed to be, Frigg might have drawn him to her bed. “I suppose we’ll have to go there, then.”

“That would little behove you,” Sigyn said. “Go chasing after him, and you show your impuissance in a time when the appearance of strength could mean everything.” Like herself, following after Hermod. Wanting to ride Snow Rabbit back there and rescue him from his urd, though he sought no rescue from her or anyone else. “He wishes to celebrate with his kin. Let him. When the revels fade, he will remember who helped him, or if he does not, then he wouldn’t have proved a stalwart ally in any event.”

“You don’t know what I saw in his future.”

Nor was she certain she should care. “Because you chose to keep it to yourself. Share if you wish.”

“Oh now!” Fulla said. “That sounds a wonderful idea, it does, my lady! Why, you just tell us all about your visions, and we’ll help you understand them.”

Sigyn snorted. “Aye, we’ll help you understand.”

Frigg looked from her maid to Sigyn and back ere her shoulders slumped, ever so slightly. “No, no. I must speak with Father. Odin’s fame will begin to spread now, embers sparking a wildfire.”

So she believed his boast? Sigyn shook her head and Frigg strode from the room, Fulla chasing after her as always. Killed a jötunn. She found that about as believable as men who claimed to have fucked valkyrjar. Sigyn folded her hands behind her back and stared at the runes carved into the walls. Frigg, all the völvur, they thought to keep the secrets of old times among themselves, and thus they refused to teach any others to read the runes. Never even imagining a clever enough woman might begin to uncover their meanings on her own.

But symbols repeated in more than one place formed a pattern, and patterns were just puzzles with a few missing pieces. Find enough pieces, and a woman could guess the shape, one answer leading unto the next until, with enough time, the picture of the whole clarified. The irony, of course, in Frigg’s refusal to teach her the runes, lay in Sigyn now being unable to elucidate to Frigg the ones the völvur did not seem to understand. Her half-sister had chosen this room to work in, knowing it important, and yet probably not even supposing why. In the chambers beneath Halfhaugr, the dverg builders had recorded a history stretching back to ancient times. More surprising still, they seemed to predict or even prophesy events not yet unfolded. Something about the doom of gods, assuming she had correctly interpreted the other runes. A tale of destruction and of the someone or something that brought it about—a Destroyer the dvergjar feared. They wrote as if the gods were real, as if Vanaheim were a real place. If so, what could threaten Vanaheim?

Frigg's table stood against the wall, obscuring some of those final runes. Her sister rarely left her alone down here, and Sigyn could not exactly go creeping around the fortress on her own. She glanced over her shoulder, then crept over to the doorway. No one out in the hall. She shut the door, then dragged that table away from the wall to give her an unobscured view of the runes. Ages of dust caked the lower wall. She knelt and brushed it away with her hand. Cracks had broken along the ancient stone. But these runes, here, they appeared at the beginning of the story as well. She traced them with her fingers. Eaters? Devourers? Beings of chaos, driven to engulf the World in that same anarchy. At the start of the tale, the Vanir had struggled against these beings who would feast on Men. And here, at the end, the dvergar wrote of the return of devourers.

Her heart began to race.

Sigyn rose, glancing from the upper runes to the lower ones. The Vanir had fought terrible battles against these devourers. Jötunnar? She tapped a finger against her lip. The Vanr defeat of the devourers marked the dawn of the World of Men. But naught lasted forever. So if these devourers were jötunnar, and if Odin *had* faced one ... then according to the dverg runes, they stood upon the cusp of the end times.

A chill wracked her, and she blew out a long breath. What was she doing, getting caught up in this religious nonsense? She laughed at herself. She had more important things to worry about than the words of some fallen civilisation.

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INTERLUDE: THE KVENs

779 Age of Man
(Twenty Years Before the Rise of Odin)

*O*f the many works Volund had wrought in his life, the house at Wolf Lake always filled him with the most pride. He had not forged it in shadow nor worked into it any ancient dverg craft—save for a few runes of warding carved between the boards. No, nine winters back, he and his half-brothers had cut fresh timber and built the house on the lake shore as refuge from a broken world. And every time he returned home after a long hunt such as this, that first sight of the roof’s peak filled him with more satisfaction, more contentment, than any other place he had known.

“Volund has that look again,” Slagfid said, or panted, rather. Volund’s eldest brother had a reindeer slung over his shoulders, and even with his impressive build they had to take turns carrying this catch. The beast was damned heavy.

Agilaz nodded sternly. He did most everything sternly, but Volund didn’t hold it against him. ’Twas Agilaz’s steady aim that brought down

their prey, as usual, and Agilaz's steady heart had saved Volund time and again through his life. "I'm also eager to see my wife."

Slagfid chuckled. "See her? Or enter her?"

Agilaz scowled and Volund tried not to smile at their other brother's incessant ribbing of Agilaz, who, Volund had to admit, made a tempting target, ever stern as he was. Volund waved his torch around, dispelling the Mist. The torch's flame would protect them in daylight, but it would be best they sat round a real fire ere the soon approaching dusk hit.

"Oh, come now," Slagfid said. "Don't tell me you aren't keen to pry apart those magnificent thighs of hers, brother. I know I am."

Their middle brother spun and shoved him, sending both man and deer collapsing into a heap in the snow. The bulky animal pinned Slagfid, but the man chortled. "I meant *my* wife, brother. Not yours."

Volund snorted as he helped Slagfid up. Somehow, he suspected Slagfid had said *exactly* what he meant, just to get under Agilaz's skin. They each treasured their wives, without any doubt, Volund most of all, he thought. 'Twas for Altvir's sake Volund struggled so hard against the shadows that sought ever to claim him, or perhaps her strength having seeped into his heart. She bade him look to the light, seek it, even in darkest times, and Volund heeded her every word.

Agilaz paused, staring at their house in the valley. Volund followed his gaze. The wall's gate was closed, but from up here he could see the house's door stood wide open. An odd sight: even if the women had gone down to the lake to bathe—and they did so no matter how cold the weather grew—they ought not to have left the door ajar. That might risk allowing the fire pit to go out, something no one in the North Realms would dare chance. Volund shared a glance with Agilaz. As one, they took off running, snow crunching under their heels, paying no mind to Slagfid's shouts from behind. Wolf Lake earned its name for the dire wolves that prowled the woods throughout this valley. Such animals should not prove a threat to

their wives—valkyrjar all, and master warriors. Should not, and yet, on occasion, a varulf or two had taken to running with the packs. Wolf Lake lay betwixt the kingdoms of Skane and Ostergotland, and the former was famed for the varulfur hunting its wilds. Mostly, the brothers chased them off. Once, though, a stubborn werewolf had forced them to hunt him down, with aid from the valkyrjar.

Not bothering with the gate, Volund vaulted over the wall and dashed into the house. An instant later, Agilaz shoved him aside. The place showed no sign of disturbance. The bed alcoves were neat, still lined with furs. The pots hung from the walls. The fire still crackled in the pit at the house's heart. But there was no sign of ... Agilaz pushed forward and knelt by the fire pit, hand shaking as he reached for something.

Ere Volund could see what it was, Slagfid plowed his way inside. "What in Hel's icy trench has gotten into you two?"

"Olrun ..." Agilaz said.

And as Volund turned his back, he saw Agilaz held his wife's ring between two fingers. Its rosy, golden hue glittered in the firelight. They *always* wore those rings, even when bathing. Altvir had told him once, when they were first wed, that the ring was a symbol of her oath—her vow to some Otherworldly being beyond life and death, an entity she spoke of in whispers, if at all. And Volund had told her that same ring would now serve as their oath in marriage.

Two more rings glittered around the fire pit. Volund fell to his knees. His hand shook as he reached for the one Altvir had worn, his fingers hesitating a hairsbreadth away. This simple object whispered to him, like the hiss of a serpent as shadows began to gather at the edges of the house. Just the sun setting. But as the darkness lengthened, it danced, it hungered, wakening after so long a slumber. 'Twas starting again. Volund choked on the thought. *Look to the light*, Altvir had bade him. But she was his light, his reason for waging the ceaseless battle against the dark currents of his

own heart. Was this Urd, him losing her, being cast once more into shadow? Or, in his swelling dread, was his mind playing tricks on him?

Volund snatched the ring. It had grown warm by the fire, so warm he could almost imagine it still graced Altvir's slim finger. That warmth banished the shadows, sent them seeping back into the corners of the house like the Mist fleeing a torch. The ring pulsed, a beating heart. Her heart, calling to him.

His brothers were there, but he had lost track of them. All he heard, all he saw, was that pulsing ring resting in his palm and it demanded his utter devotion. As she had. Uncertain why he did so, he slipped it onto his little finger and clenched his fist. A welcome calm settled over him, and only then did he realise his chest had been trembling. He clenched his fist, pressing it over his heart. That pulsing was still throbbing through him, blurring his vision, lulling his mind. Beating.

Summoning.

Volund fell to his side, overcome by something that was not sight. Not exactly. And yet his heart and soul saw. A battleground, men dying in wars. They fought one another. They *always* did, despite the Mist of Niflheim choking the mortal world, despite the Otherworldly dangers that lurked in that Mist. Still, the dying kingdoms fought for the scraps of a dying land. 'Twas half the reason the brothers had settled here, beyond the bounds of civilisation, separated from the world of Men, seeking respite from the battle. Oh, but their wives had gone back to it, the ring told him as much. Almost, if he listened hard enough, he could hear the screams of the dying over that ever-present heartbeat. Men were always dying, and as a valkyrja, Altvir had once delivered their souls unto the Realms beyond Midgard. No matter how oft he asked of the Otherworld, she would not speak of it, save to imply even she, valkyrja though she was, looked past the Veil with dread. There was darkness out there, akin to the grasping shadows that sought to claim him, aye, but sometimes, within her, he swore he saw a pale

luminance, a faint corona. A promise that, if there was darkness, so too was there light.

The night breeze battered his face. *She was flying*, he knew it. *Had taken the form of a swan and flown away. Left him.* Why? Why, after nine winters, would she abandon her home? Why would she do this?

No, no, no ... he would not give in to this, would not become something other than himself, than the man he had made himself to be worthy of her.

“Papa?” A small voice, distant.

Volund shook himself, trying to regain his vision. It came back slowly, the house seeming to warp and spin even as he shook. She was gone. She was gone! Those shadows were laughing at him, mocking. Growing bold and creeping out of their hiding holes, sliding ever closer, and yet also on the periphery, never there if he looked directly. They were coming for him.

A child was crying. Groaning, Volund crawled to the threshold. Outside the house, Agilaz cradled his son in his arms. Hermod had five winters now. Had the boy been outside? In the *night*? Freyr’s flaming sword. He must have wandered out, seeking his mother.

Slagfid lay on the floor, clutching his wife’s ring as Volund had done. As Agilaz had probably just recovered from.

A terrible heat built in Volund’s chest. With that heat came the rage. He wanted to punish someone for this. This was *someone’s* fault. It had to be. Slagfid? Maybe his wife, Svanhit, had tired of Slagfid’s not-so-subtle hints they ought to trade wives. Was that it? Had she convinced her sister valkyrjar to flee because of him? Damn him. Damn the lustful, arrogant fool. Volund seized his half-brother and heaved him to his feet. Slagfid shook himself, glazed eyes starting to clear. Volund punched him in the face, sending Slagfid pitching backward, almost falling into the fire pit.

“You did this, didn’t you?” Volund roared. He could push him into the flames, immolate the one who had ruined their lives. Hissing shadows bade

him hurl the bastard to his doom, offer him to the night in obeisance to its living darkness.

An instant later Agilaz wrapt him in a bear hug, pinning his arms to his side. Volund strained, slowly breaking his older brother's grip. Agilaz might have been strong, but Volund had spent years slaving at a dverg forge. His muscles had become like the rocks whence the dvergar had crawled. "Volund!" Agilaz shouted.

Slagfid regained his feet, inspecting his bloody lip with a hand. He spat. "Aye, little brother. After nine winters I decided to drive away my wife. And yours too, for good measure. All whilst hunting reindeer at your side. By the way, while you slept, I fucked the goddess Freyja. And slew a dragon. At the same time. Gods you should have seen it, what a tale."

"Shut up!" Volund broke Agilaz's grip but did not go after Slagfid again, despite the roiling hunger in his gut to hit him, to punish him for his words and arrogance and for *this*—this nightmare.

"They've gone," Agilaz said.

Volund spun on him, shoved him. *Feed them all to the night ...* A feeling, almost words, whispered to him. "Any other wisdom you want to share?"

Agilaz glowered. "They have gone to fulfil oaths made long ago to some ancient power. Perhaps a fresh war draws them, perhaps they can no longer deny the pull of their vows."

"And what?" Volund folded his arms. "That's it? You'll leave your son without a mother?"

Leave themselves without their wives. Without Altvir. She was the sun shining in the sky, banishing the shadows. He ran his thumb over the ring, drawing small comfort from its grooves, its intricate etching. The whispers abated; the swelling darkness receded, if only just.

"No." Agilaz shook his head and held up his hand, displaying the ring. He too wore it on his little finger. "I'm going to find her. With this. I can

feel Orlun. Well do I know she still loves me. Mayhap she could not break her oath to whatever god or goddess she serves. But she left this for me, and I have to believe it a sign she yet holds her oath to me. That she wants me to follow, to find her. So find her I shall.”

“How will you know where to look?” Slagfid asked.

Agilaz shut his eyes and clenched his fist around the ring. “I can feel her. To the southeast.”

“Southeast? On Ostergotland’s coast?”

“Farther, I think,” their middle brother said, his eyes closed.

Slagfid groaned. “What then, across the Gandvík and into Aujum? Those are the lands of Ás tribes.”

Agilaz nodded. “Then little surprise there is war.”

Volund shut his eyes and concentrated on Altvir. She was there, somewhere close. North? Did he need to travel north? Everything was a confusing rush of sensations. Like a dream, nonsensical if viewed apart from its own reality. But in that dream ... in the dream, she seemed to have gone north.

He opened his mouth to say so, but Slagfid spoke first. “I must go south, then. Southwest, I think.”

“Sjaelland?” Agilaz frowned. For once, his stern look was justified. There were powers on the Gandvík islands even dvergar were not keen to challenge. Powers of ancient times, best left sleeping, best left forgotten. Some said, there, the Old Kingdoms had not entirely died.

“They have flown in three different directions,” Volund said, both terrified of being separated from his brothers—left alone in the dark—and eager to be quit of them before he hurt one again. He needed Altvir’s strength, could not face this without her words of support. Gods, he was weak.

Slagfid shrugged. “Perhaps war spreads throughout all the North Realms. What say you then? We must go our separate ways and meet back

here once we have reclaimed our wives. Either way, let us agree to meet here again, in one year.”

Volund shuddered. The valley had been a refuge. In nine winters he had scarce left, and never without Altvir at his side. But without her, even this refuge would become hollow, empty, save for the ever-lengthening shadows grasping at his mind. The ring pulsed. A heartbeat, calling to his own. He might remain here, wait, and pray to all the gods she returned to him. But perhaps Agilaz was right. Perhaps the valkyrjar wanted their husbands to come after them. And if such was the price to reclaim his wife, he would do so. He would trek across Midgard and even beyond if needs be.

But on his soul, he was going to find Altvir. That was *his* oath.



BEYOND THE VALLEY lay the petty kingdoms of Svjarland, each ruled by an equally petty king. The brothers rarely had contact with any of them, save for trading with the nearest border town, usually done by Slagfid. Once, at Altvir’s behest, Volund had trekked to the town, for she had wished to see the place and meet the locals. Volund had feared to walk amongst Men and be tempted toward darkness. Feared it, aye, but found it had proved no great burden to go and trade venison for ale and wheat and radishes, to sit around a hearth fire and swap stories with locals. Later, he wondered if Altvir had cared to see the place at all or, rather, had meant only to show Volund he need not give in to dark impulses.

Well, Volund had passed through that same town a day back and traded some furs for supplies, extra torches, especially. One could not walk the wilds without torches. The dvergar who trained him had spoken of days ere the Mist had seeped into Midgard—when the world was covered in endless sea—had confirmed the legends among Men that the Mist had come from the icy world of Hel, Niflheim. ’Twas poison to mortals, not only to the

body but to the soul, to the mind. Those who breathed deep went Mist-mad, lost themselves, and if they came back at all, they came back wrong. Once, Volund's father, Wade, had cut the head off a man so afflicted. Volund had been a boy, but he remembered those empty eyes, like the man was looking at something no one else could see.

Even the dvergar of Nidavellir avoided venturing out of their subterranean domain when possible. Now Volund wandered through the Mist. Forests covered much of Svjarland, so he would not lack for wood. If he wandered too far, though, he might run low on oil.

The ring kept drawing him northward. Into the heart of those damn kingdoms. Not places he had any desire to see. Nine winters had passed since he escaped Nidavellir, but the dvergar had long memories and held the deepest of grudges. They would hunt him for the rest of his days, maybe beyond. Some said the dvergar could conjure the dead and force them into servitude. An apt punishment for his crimes against them, perhaps. Volund shook his head. The more time he spent in civilisation, the more chance for word to reach Nidavellir. A great mountain range separated Svjarland from Nidavellir, but mountains were no barrier to the dvergar. The Earth spirits were born of rock and stone, and though Otherworldly, they dwelt beneath those mountains. Sooner or later, they would hear of him, and they would come for him. Such was the way of the World.

Yet, if he did not follow Altvir, he was already lost. His life would mean less than naught. Just shadows, growing deeper with each passing day, whispering their hateful imprecations. So northward he pushed, but not on the sledge trails. In winter, dogsleds and sledges wore common paths one could follow between kingdoms. Common, if not safe. Volund had less fear of the Mist and the wilds than he did of wagging tongues, so he kept to the depths of the woods. He had no sled, but soon snowfall would necessitate skis or snowshoes. Those first snows always came this moon. He did not have much time.

Agilaz was the best woodsman and tracker among them, and Volund could not match his brother's skill. Still, he had the ring to keep his course true. When he slept, it sang to him in a whisper. He could not make out the words, but the voice he knew. 'Twas hers, calling him, calming him. Saving him from himself.

The brisk wind tugged at his cloak, threatening to tear it loose from its clasp. At least the valkyrjar had not left in the heart of winter. True, it was easier to cross frozen lakes than go around them. But in winter, that chill could kill a man whilst he slept. And worse, thanks to the Mist, those who died alone without a pyre might again rise.

Ahead, in a clearing, lay a stone hall. Volund hesitated. Shelter was good, especially with the gloaming approaching. But the obvious disrepair meant naught human laired in this place. Some such ruins were empty, safe from Mankind. Many, though, housed vaettir, beings of spirit keen to prey on Men foolish enough to draw nigh. Even those without vaettir could still harbour trolls and the like. Still, a hall would have a fire pit and a fire pit meant safety, a chance to sleep without fear of the Mist. Volund knelt, watching the hall. No one emerged from it. No smoke from the chimney. That alone confirmed that no people lived here. At least, not any longer.

In the distance, a wolf howled. Volund hoped he'd ventured far enough from the hunts of the varulfur not to chance an encounter with one; he did not think he could overcome such a foe without Altvir at his side. Regardless, night was fast approaching. He either had to claim this place or find somewhere and build a fire. As the sun set, the Mist would thicken. And with it, vaettir would grow bolder. Darkness unleashed draugar, trolls, and ... worse. Vaettir even dvergar feared.

This place offered an unknown risk, but also his best chance.

He approached the hall in a crouch, staying low, hand on the sword hanging over his shoulder. He had crafted it himself, in the great forges of Nidavellir. Pattern-woven dverg steel—adamant, they called it—stronger

than blades carried by Men. Strong enough to cut down a varulf if need be, little though he relished such a battle. And yet, naught stirred as he approached. The wall around the compound was eight feet tall, much too tall for him to see over once he had drawn up against it. Runes marked it, but the work was sloppy. The dvergar had not built this place, though they might have taught the Men who did. Remnants of one of the Old Kingdoms, perhaps. Volund jumped up and grasped the top of the wall. His fingers slipped immediately. A thick layer of ice coated it. It would make going in that way impossible.

That left only the front approach. The builders knew what they were about, at least. He edged along the wall, cringing at each crunch of pine needles. The gate had long since rotted away. Slipping his sword free, he peered around the wall's edge. The stone hall lay beyond, its entrance off-centre so one could not charge straight from the gate to the door. From here he could see that the door, too, had fallen away. Volund slipped around the wall's edge and crept up to the entrance. Still naught to see. Already, dusk bruised the sky, and the Mist thickened. He had no choice now, 'twas too late to search for other shelter.

More runes marked the hall proper, though they had faded. Perhaps they still offered some protection, barring the house against vaettir. Hard to say for certain. Had he more time, he might strengthen those runes, but not now, not tonight. Torch in one hand, sword in the other, he stepped inside. The shadows retreated at the light as though they resented it, and, almost, he swore they hissed at him. The main hall was open, not unlike a modern longhouse. On the far side, a wall separated the main hall from back rooms, so the keeper had once had enough wealth to want to hide it. If luck held, maybe Volund would find a treasure hoard. More importantly though, in the centre was a stone fire pit. Volund drew closer. No kindling, of course. The last of the Old Kingdoms had fallen some eight hundred years back. If this was such a ruin, of course naught would remain.

A long, low growl from behind set the hair on the back of his neck on end. He turned slowly to see a mound of fur lurching from the shadows on the far side of the hall. It lumbered forward, its gait uneven, its form massive, five, maybe six feet tall at the shoulder. A cave bear. A fucking cave bear had chosen this place to hibernate, and he'd awakened it. Thing had to weigh half a ton. And it was coming closer, moving faster with each step.

Volund backed away slowly, torch held out before him. If the bear feared it, it might well count for more than his sword. He ought to have trusted his first instinct and passed this place. The bear snarled again. Heart pounding, Volund's vision narrowed. Those shadows grew thicker, enclosing the bear until he could see naught else. Aye ... if he slew the bear, he'd have meat. A lot of meat. It had chosen its home poorly.

"Well, then," he said, "come on."

The bear growled once more, then barrelled forward. Fast. Volund thrust the torch at it and dove to the side in the same motion, even as it swiped with its claws. Those dagger-like weapons scraped stone, shrieking. The torch caught the bear's foreleg, and it roared in pain.

Volund came up from his roll and thrust the torch again, barely warding off the enraged animal. It did not like fire, but that wasn't going to keep it at bay for long. It reared up on its hind legs. Volund flung himself to the ground, rolling away as fast as he could. In an instant the bear had closed the distance and swiped again. This time, he flung the torch in its face. The cave bear howled, pawing at its singed maw. Instead of retreating, Volund leapt forward and swung his sword with both hands. The adamant sliced through muscle and bone, severing the bear's foreleg at the joint. Off balance, it pitched forward.

This time, he leapt backward, immediately running for the far side of the room. A wound like that, and the bear would bleed to death. Eventually. The cave bear bellowed, half running, half falling forward at a more uneven

gait, seized by a paroxysm of rage that would mute its pain. The beast was going to rip him to shreds ere it died. Volund dashed into one of those back rooms and froze for a moment at what he saw. A forge—an ancient forge, long cold. 'Twas naught compared to the smithies in Nidavellir where he had trained, and yet ... it called to him.

He shook himself and backed away from the door. The bear slammed into the doorway and began to wedge itself through. Had it not bulked up for the winter, it would have fit through all the quicker. But that would buy him only a moment. The forge had a back door. He could retreat that way. He could.

Instead, the bear's rage seemed to seep into him, it licked at his mind and soul, drew him forward. With a cry, he rushed forward and hacked straight down with his blade. It cleft through the bear's skull and muzzle and stuck, held fast by the bone. The bear dropped to the floor, yanking the sword from Volund's grasp.

His muscles trembled. It was dead. And still, he saw naught but that bear, surrounded in darkness. Calling him. With a foot planted on its shoulder, he yanked his sword free of the skull. Ere he knew what he was doing, he hacked into the bear again. And again. He chopped the skull into bloody bits, screaming with wordless rage.

Finally, he fell to his knees in exhaustion. Cold sweat had soaked through his tunic and breeches. It stung his eyes. He mopped his face with his palm, and his hand came away smeared in blood and brains. His chest was tight, heaving. The bear now blocked the doorway to the main hall ... where his torch was.

The Mist had not crept in through the back door, but he wasn't about to take chances. He dug another torch from his travel bag and set about trying to light it. With his trembling, bloody hands, it took a good many tries ere it caught. When it did, he rose and drifted about the forge.

'Twas yet in good condition, though he had naught to burn here, either. All the tools, though, they remained. In fact, these looked to have been forged from dverg steel as well. Maybe that was why they had remained rust-free after so many years. Nidavellir had traded with the Old Kingdoms. *Trade* was how the dvergar put it. In reality, they graced humanity with pittances, in exchange for slaves and sacrifices. Much as they did now, save the powerful Old Kingdoms might have received slightly better terms than the dying petty kingdoms now scattered across the North Realms.

A few more generations, perhaps, and if Mankind had not yet wiped itself out, the dvergar were like to enslave what remained. The Age of Man was ending fast. All the more reason for Volund and his brothers to remove themselves from these lands. He needed to find Altvir with all possible haste.

And yet ... this place ...

Volund ran his fingers over the masterful tools. With these, he could make almost aught. Things for trade, for information. The only reason he had to stay at this forge. Spread the wealth around, and someone must have seen Altvir.

The thought of her sparked fresh visions, and he slumped down to rest. Volund tossed the torch into the forge's fire pit and shut his eyes. He could almost see her. Feel her soft hands massaging his temples and banishing the need for fear or anger. Suppressing the rage and replacing it with light.

He needed her light.



IN HIS DREAMS, a world of shadows danced and played, its laughter a muted cacophony of madness. It called to him, whispering of pleasures found in the places where no light had ever reached, taunting him of the weakness inherent in the world he clung to.

So, Volund did not sleep oft. He sat through the ever-lengthening nights with his back to the fire, staring off into the woods. The wolves were out there, howling, stalking. Their anger saturated the air. No, they did not like that Men had dared settle in their valley, had begun cutting timber to build their house. The foundations of it were set already, the fire pit dug and set ablaze. That kept the beasts at bay. That and, perhaps, that Agilaz had put an arrow through the eye of one who had drawn too close.

Volund's brother slept on a wolf pelt now. Soundly, as did Slagfid. Volund had told them he would watch through the night. If sleep was to be denied him, why should he not at least allow his brothers respite? And what did they dream of? Girls, perhaps.

It had been too long now since Volund had touched a woman. The dvergar had given him the habit of spending himself before sleep. His dreams, when he found them, they showed him flickers of flesh in the darkness. Daring him, demanding he hunt down some farm girl and ravish her. Even now, awake, it was like having a serpent constricting his gut. Squeezing him, pushing him toward his insatiable need. He did not want to be this thing, this abomination the dvergar had made of him! He did not want to be them.

He gagged on his thoughts, stumbled away from the fire. A glance in that direction nigh blinded him. So bright. Volund scrambled away from the flames, stumbled his way to the lake, and fell to his knees there. Beneath the surface, flesh writhed in a mass of tits and arses and trenches begging to be ploughed. "No," he sobbed. "Stop it. Get out of my head."

He plunged his face into the water. Its icy chill beat the salacious thoughts away. There was peace down in the murk. If he but held his head under a few moments longer, all suffering would abate. Just hold it there and let oblivion take him, sweep him down into the frozen underworld of Hel, where twisted souls such as his own must surely belong.

His lungs burnt. His arms twitched.

Of its own volition, his head jerked upward into the air, and he sucked down great lungfuls of it in painful gasps. Unable to catch his breath, he pitched over backward and lay in the wet mud. The Mist was thick over the lake, and here he was, breathing it deeply. Welcoming Mist-madness.

The Men of Kvenland claimed that Mist would steal souls and memories. According to the dvergjar, the latter was true. Memories faded, replaced with a corrupted poison of Niflheim. What would such poison do to a Man, were he to accept it willingly? Should one welcome the fading of memories, would it then become a painless transition into whatever haunted state the Mist would leave in place of a Man? No. That seemed unlikely. There was no end to pain in this World. That lesson the dvergjar had taught him with clarity, their cruelty merely a reflection of their own unending agony.

Such was the way of the World.

And they had put it in him. That cruelty, that wicked perception that had no place beneath the sunlight. As, indeed, the light still felt too hot upon his skin, on rare morns when the Mist was too thin. He, like some accursed vaettr, now felt shelter in that poisoned Mist. Hel damn Dvalin and all his people and Volund's father for sending him to the dvergjar. They had done something to him. Gods above, had he but left when his first year was ended, he might have escaped this.

What if they had ... had put one of their own—

The lake exploded upward like a geyser.

Volund jerked to a sitting position as the waters showered him. It was like a jötunn had tossed a rock into the lake, but no such monster ought to be here, on the wrong side of the Midgard Wall. He reached for his sword. Damn—still resting by the fire.

Something splashed in the water.

"Who's there?" he shouted.

A cry of pain, a woman's voice. Volund stared dumbly at the water. Some nixie trick perhaps, a ploy to lure him into the lake where she could drown him. If so, then he welcomed such a reprieve. Volund waded into the waters, waist deep. Freezing, so cold he already could not feel his legs as he stumbled around. But he could see. Despite the Mist blocking all starlight, he saw the woman, splashing around, trying to pull herself to the surface. Volund grabbed her, throwing her arm around his shoulders. She struggled—stronger than a woman ought to be. Volund pulled her ashore and dropped her in the mud.

Her sodden blonde hair spread wildly. Her gown was torn, soaked in blood. Volund knelt beside her and pulled it away, revealing the glint of golden armour beneath it. Blood caked that too, seeping from a gap between plates over her ribs. The workmanship was Otherworldly: even a glance revealed that much. Not dverg made, though, and he knew little of the crafts of other vaettir. The ljósalfar favoured golden armour, he supposed. Could she be an alf? She was glorious indeed.

The armour was held on by latches, which he began to pop one by one. She groaned, swatting at him. Despite her eyes being closed, she was still strong. Inhumanly so. Had she been more than half conscious, he probably couldn't have managed this. With a third clasp open, he pulled the plate away, exposing her ribs. A severe wound had pierced her side. Not an arrow—it was too big. Someone had thrust a spear through her. The question was how? A man might have slipped a knife between those plates, but not a spear.

“Be still,” he said, when her struggles continued. “I needs must tend this wound if you are to survive it.”

Her resistance abated, if not ceased, and Volund pushed up her linen shirt to examine her ribs. Doing so exposed one of her breasts, and the shadows around him began to moan, driven into corybantic frenzies of lust. His dream visions of flesh blended with the waking world, became a

phantasmagoric panoply. Prurient need washed over him in waves. Shadows bade him tear her shift away, bury himself in her, gain reprieve from the dark they had planted in him.

No! Gods, preserve him, he would not be this thing they had sought to make him! Hel take his accursed soul for the foul urges the dvergar had instilled in him, but Volund would not give in to this! He dug his nails into his palm and beat his other hand against his brow, relishing pain as distraction. He would not force himself upon a woman. Well did he recall the shame, the abomination of such a thing. They used it as much to break him as for any desire to sate themselves, he suspected. They sought to remake him—temper him—into their own image. Volund would not become a dverg! Even had they planted a nascent soul inside his body, even if that accounted for the burgeoning darkness that crept upon him, he would resist to his final moments. And should ever his will falter, he needs must make an end of himself.

Aye, Volund was not vaettr, but a Man! To humanity he would cling, unto his last breath.

He looked back at the flaxen-haired woman, bleeding out in the mud. After lifting the woman in his arms, he carried her back to the house's foundations. "Brothers!"



THERE HAD BEEN JOY, in days gone, and Volund found himself ever drawn into wells of perilous memory. As if, were he to reach a bit deeper, he might re-enter better times. But then, were he to dwell overlong in such ephemeral moments, no future would lie ahead. He needs must find her. Besides, not all moments of the past were so pleasant.

Altvir's ring was a masterwork, a piece of beauty not quite like any of the jewels made in Nidavellir. Depending on how you looked at it, it might

have been a dragon or a swan. And it had been wrought from orichalcum, the most precious of all metals. Rosy-gold orichalcum was found rarely in Midgard, and the dvergar treasured it above all other ores, above all treasures even. For it was stronger even than adamant and, more importantly, apt to soak up Megin. Or souls, really, as such items were forged from the souls of unfortunate victims, hammered into metal, the object thus rendered potent. The greatest crafts of history, including the famed runeblades of old, were made from souls bound to orichalcum. Dvalin and his kin had crafted the nine runeblades long ago for the Old Kingdoms, weapons without equal. Any weapon of ancient Art must be forged from orichalcum, but little of the ore remained.

The valkyrjar had rings of orichalcum, symbols that bound them in service to some eldritch power. And bound them to their husbands. If Volund could but understand the power of the rings, he might use it to immediately find Altvir, maybe even to summon her back to him. Or even—he scarce dared dream it—break the bond that tied her to that master of whom she feared to speak. Perhaps the rings held a piece of the valkyrja’s soul, but he could not be certain. Thus, to understand it, he had forged seven duplicates at the forge in the ruined stone hall. Not of orichalcum, of course. The forge was stocked with iron and silver and even gold, but only those metals. With a fine chisel, he carved away, working every pattern in perfect replica.

It had not mattered. He could make seven or seven hundred. The mysteries of the valkyrja’s ring were not unravelling.

Still, he worked, the seventh ring almost finished. A little tap here. A shaving there. All to give perfection form; if he was to craft something, he would craft it without flaw. A master smith created naught less than a masterpiece. The dvergar had instilled that in him, had said their kin had learnt their art based on the teachings of the Smith Lord in distant Eras of the world.

Volund feared they had instilled other things in him, too. His time in Nidavellir was when the darkness in his heart had first awakened, deep inside him. When the shadows had begun to move, to whisper to him as though they knew him well. They lied, claiming he belonged to them and need only welcome them. Perhaps—had he not met Altvir—he might have eventually heeded their call.

Volund blew metal shavings off the latest of his rings. 'Twas flawless, of course. Gold and silver entwined, married in elegance and beauty. It might bind a man and wife, but it had no secret power. He might have tried to infuse it with dverg Art and bind a soul, but somehow he didn't think Altvir's ring came from them. No, the style of her ring was different, if somehow still familiar.

The duplicates would serve, however. In his days hunting, he had found a town not far, a trade centre. People passed through oft enough, and they would direct him. One of these rings should buy him a lead on Altvir's location. It must.



SHE SHOULD HAVE DIED. A mortal woman would have perished from any such injury. Instead, the woman—or ljósalf, if so she was—clung to life. Her colour returned not long after Agilaz had bound her wounds. She stirred in restless fits, though, turning, twisting, and crying out as though engaged in a pitched battle. Perhaps she was, albeit a battle not to be won with spear or sword.

Agilaz and Slagfid sat aside, arguing over the woman and who she might be. They wondered if she was Sviar, Gaut, or Lapp, or some wanderer. The latter seemed mostlike, though Volund said naught. The thought of explaining to his brothers he suspected this was no mortal at all

tasted foul on his tongue. What strange twisting of Urd had caused this woman to plummet into their sheltered valley?

Not certain why, he leant forward and held the woman's hand. 'Twas hot, clammy, perhaps even feverish. She should have died, but she hadn't. She shouldn't have been here at all. But she was. And whilst he clasped her hand, whilst he watched her struggling face, no longer did he feel compelled to give in to violence or darkness. All he could think was how to save her. As if Freyja or some other Vanr had heard his prayers and offered him a purpose to his twisted existence—to aid one in need. Whatever had befallen this woman, she was helpless now, would have died had not Volund been there.

It meant that whatever the dvergar had done to him, he had a choice. He could bring weal, could aid one so stricken.

A cold metal band touched his fingers. She wore a ring. He pulled her hand closer to examine it. The most intricate of designs decorated it. Swan feathers, perhaps, etched into orichalcum.

Not sure why he did it, Volund pressed the ring to his lips and kissed her knuckles. "I shall not let you perish, now, strange creature."



THE FORGE'S fire held blessed warmth. Volund slumped with his back against it, letting the heat seep into his chilled flesh. He always slept in here these days. He'd cut the bear's hide and made a fine bed from it. Besides, the forge comforted him. The smell of thick smoke lingered long after he'd last worked iron, and the tools themselves seemed wont to sing him to sleep.

Sleep came easy. Easy, but rarely restful. In his dreams, he saw the deep places of Nidavellir, dancing in his memories like the play of shadows cast from torchlight in halls beneath the mountains. A domain of rock and iron

and gemstones, glimpsed ever in half-light. The dvergar themselves could see as well in shadows as any cat, and after two years in such a habitat, even Volund had become accustomed to it. So much so that, back then, the sun used to sting his eyes on the rare occasions he saw it.

That expanse called him back, welcomed him into the darkness and whispered to him secrets no mortal could know. Secrets of the Otherworld beyond Midgard whence came the vaettir. That world knew more, knew deeper truths. The dvergar were like that too, alien to this world, privy to lore that might make a völva piss herself in horror. They had bored up through the ground and, having no form in this world, taken mortal hosts, twisted their shapes to their liking, into gnarled, swarthy old men and women. Their spines would bend and twist and shrink until a dverg stood no taller than a man's shoulder.

And ere even the Old Kingdoms, they had begun to build, to craft, and to dominate the deep places. They took thralls as workers, messengers, and sometimes, as hosts for more dverg souls. Volund supposed he was lucky that had not been his urd.



WITH DAWN, his brothers resumed cutting timber. Volund stopped every so oft to check on the woman, who remained by the fire, soaking in its warmth. Her sleep had turned fitful, and for a moment, Volund rested beside her, tending the hearth pit, whilst his brothers worked to build a wall around their home.

The air had grown chill. Snow would soon fall and they needed to have the walls built, or dire wolves would feast on their corpses. His brothers deferred to his orders, trusting he knew best how to construct a hall. He did, of course. He had learnt architecture from the finest architects on Midgard, after all. He could not quite decide whether he hated the dvergar. They had

tortured him, perhaps even implanted something in his soul, something slowly taking him over. And yet, they had taught him secrets and wisdom no Man had ever known.

Once, Dvalin had spoken of Midgard as it was in another Era of the World. An Era ere the coming of the Mist, when Mankind ruled the land and they, too, had known and built wonders. Perhaps the dverg spoke of such times as one more torment, meant to shame him with the knowledge of all his people had lost. Somehow, though, it made Volund dare to dream he might help Mankind return to those days.

As soon as the house was done, he'd start on the wall. They'd want a strong one to keep the wolves at bay, should the fire prove insufficient.

The woman groaned, turned over on one side, creaked open a bleary eye and watched him, wary, as an injured warrior might be.

"You are safe here," he said.

"Bold claim ... when you know not ... what peril may pursue me."

There was truth in that, he supposed, and he did not know how she had suffered such injuries through that golden armour. "Nevertheless, I shall protect you."

She looked at him, doubtful. "Why?"

Because I must be better than what they sought to make of me, he thought, but shook his head. He had questions aplenty for this woman, but most would bide with her in such a state. "What do I call you?"

"Altvir." A pause. "You?"

"Volund." He extended a hand toward her wound. "It heals well, you shall live, I think." Was she an alf of one clan or another? Not a fjallalf, for a dverg soul would have twisted her. Still, a mortal ought to have died.

"Wounds heal, aye, but drowning would not have. I owe you my life."

'Twas a pleasant sound, that, and he thought he'd done well. Darkness need not be his lot. "Rest now. I must tend to construction ere winter settles in truth."



THE TOWN LAY on an icy crag above the fjord, making it unapproachable on two sides. A thick wall encircled the rest of it, no doubt intended to protect from the other kingdoms as much as from trolls and dangers of the wild. It was damned large, too. Several dozen houses gathered together in mutual defence, all probably beholden to some king or other. In the far distance, a castle rose up out of the mountainside. No one built like that anymore. More remnants of the Old Kingdoms, mostlike, but it lay too far off to judge for certain.

The gate guards had welcomed him at the mention of trade, and now he climbed the rocky path toward the town centre. There would be a market up there. Atop the path, a wooden bridge spanned a small waterfall pitching down into the fjord. Clumsy work that would not last a decade—yet one more example of Man’s vain attempt to assert the slightest dominance over nature. The bridge creaked under his boots as he strolled toward the market. Volund shook his head. He could have built a better bridge in his sleep. Did the artisan take no pride in his craft? None at all?

In the square, he paused before a cobbler’s shop. His boots were worn almost through, and that was one thing Volund could not so easily make. After inspecting the lot of them—all serviceable, in a handful of different sizes—he broke off a piece of his arm ring. A tiny shard of silver, but more than enough for a good pair of boots. The cobbler grunted at him and tossed him a pair.

Volund frowned. How could the man know which size he needed? He slouched down on a rock and yanked his old boots off. His toes had turned sickly yellow, and he had to massage warmth back into them ere he tried on the new boots. They sat snugly, as close a fit as he’d ever had. Cobbler knew his trade after all. And everyone needed shoes. Especially men going

off to the spear-din, marching long distances. “Who rules here?” Volund asked.

“King Nidud, ‘course.” The man arched his neck toward the castle in the distance, then spat for emphasis.

Volund refrained from comment. Dvergar were known to do the same. Most Men were, in fact, vulgar. And to a prince of Kvenland, it seemed, quite vulgar. “Not a just king, then?” The man spat again, the only answer forthcoming. So not just—but then, who was? Power settled upon the corrupt, the one drawn to the other in an endless cycle. Such was the way of the World. And if this Nidud was not generous with his people, perhaps he was at least ambitious. “Men come through here. Do they speak of wars?”

The cobbler grunted, then looked to the sword hanging over Volund’s shoulder. “You a mercenary?”

Volund might have told him he was searching for a valkyrja. The man might have laughed, might have said it best to die in battle. Either way, it did not seem apt to get him anywhere. Instead, he drew one of the silver rings from his pouch. “I am a smith. Where there is war, one finds profit.” The cobbler would understand profit.

The man’s eyes flashed at the ring, perhaps enough wealth to change his life—at the least, it would ensure he lived well through the next winter. For Volund, such treasures meant naught without Altvir. They were pittances compared to the jewel of his wife. The thought of it left his stomach roiling and shadows playing upon his periphery. Without warning, an urge built in his gut, the need to seize the cobbler and beat the answers from him. Volund bit his tongue, trying to still the sick feeling. The man had done naught to warrant such violence. *Look to the light*, Altvir’s voice chided him.

“King raised a levy last moon, took a great number of men, he did. Some say they raided east, but talk is more that they went to challenge one of them barbarian tribes ‘cross the waters. Hel, mayhap he thought to plunder their fleas.”

“The Æsir of Aujum?” The cobbler spat in apparent agreement. He would spit less if Volund smashed his jaw. Drool through broken teeth, perhaps. Volund forced his hands to his side. “Which tribe?”

“Eh, I know foreign tribes ‘bout as well as I know Freyja’s tits, man.” A shattered nose would improve his face. “And the goddess hasn’t deigned to prance hither, unclad or otherwise, if you follow.”

Volund shook his head slowly and dropped the ring in the snow. Let this facile, vulgar man dig it out.

He turned away. ’Twas a start, in any event. If a Gautish king raided or warred with an Ás tribe, surely glorious battles would ensue. Battles and honourable deaths. Those deaths would draw valkyrjar, maybe many of them. And if Nidud had spread his schemes over several locations, it might explain why the three valkyrjar had flown in different directions. But what did this Gautish king hope to gain by provoking the Æsir? To the Svjarlanders—Gautar and Sviars, both, maybe even the Lapps—the Æsir were naught but barbarians, feared for their mystique, their savagery, and the berserkir and varulfur oft found within the tribes.

If the king could claim their land, he might grow rich, but more likely, he would find himself raided by one tribe after another. The Ás tribes shared no love between them, but Volund doubted they wanted their land taken by foreigners. Of course, those barbarians themselves had swept in and stolen that same land some few generations back. They claimed Aujum as their own, enslaving most of the natives—those who were not killed or driven out as refugees.

The truth was, it didn’t much matter to Volund if the Gautar and the Æsir all killed one another. In fact, it might make it easier to find Altvir.

Volund made his way back toward the bridge. He would return to the ruin. If he hurried, he could make it ere dark. Then at sunrise he could head south, find passage across the Gandvík Sea, try to find the battlefields. He ought not to travel at night, he knew, and yet somehow, he was no longer

certain why it should frighten him ... With a torch, a man could move at night. But all wisdom urged one not to, said the vaettir were most active then.

No, he would go at first light.



DAYLIGHT WANED, and still they were about setting that wall. Nights grew longer this time of year, and they needs must make use of every hour. Volund's brothers had hewed lumber aplenty, and Slagfid was sawing spokes for a palisade fence whilst Agilaz and Volund planted them. Of a sudden, Agilaz dropped the post he carried and turned to the south. A pair of women stood there, golden armour glittering in the dying sunlight. More impressive still, they each bore great wings spread out behind them. Both women were blonde like the one within, somewhat similar of feature. One had brown wings, the other silver.

Slagfid, too, had come to stare open-mouthed at them. At the valkyrjar. The dvergjar had not spoken of such things, and Volund had thought them mere legends. Choosers of the slain who came to take the greatest warriors to some blessed afterlife. They claimed the souls of great warriors ... Like the woman he had saved.

Volund tossed his tools aside and drew his sword from over his shoulder, advancing on the valkyrja pair. "If you've come for her soul, you shall pay dearly for it."

The silver-winged valkyrja scowled and drew a sword, whilst the other laughed. The laughing one strode forward. Her hand rested on a sword at her hip, but she did not draw it. "You are a bold one, to think to defend anyone from us."

"Damn it, little brother," Slagfid mumbled. "What are you getting us into this time?"

Agilaz edged his way toward the house. His bow was there, but he'd never make it. Volund tried to wave him to stillness, lest the valkyrjar attack.

"Do not come between us and Altvir," the other valkyrja said. She advanced a few steps, spear ready. They knew her name. They had come for her.

'Twas madness to stand before valkyrjar. Had they come to claim this Altvir's soul, it surely meant she was already dying, despite his best efforts. Moreover, fighting valkyrjar was apt to get his brothers killed. Still, Volund could not sheath his sword, could not allow harm to befall her charge. "You shall not lay a hand upon her whilst there is life left in her body."

The silver-winged valkyrja leapt into the air. Her wings flung her upward with such force the wind of it swept Volund from his feet. He crashed to the ground, the impact stinging. Somehow, he managed to hold onto his sword. The valkyrja landed astride him and hefted him upward by his tunic with one hand. The other hand held her sword a hairsbreadth from his eye. Her eyes were pale blue, but they blazed with Otherworldly fire, demanding he not look away. Holding him bound to her power.

And then it hit him. This valkyrja was stronger than any woman, blessed with supernatural grace and power. "Altvir is one of you ..."

"Indeed. I am." The voice came from behind them, still weak, though stronger than it had been that morn. "Release him, Olrún. He's only tried to help me."

The silver-winged one—Olrun—dropped him, and he landed on his feet. "They do not hold you against your will?"

Altvir looked down at her bandaged side, then pointedly at Volund. "This one fished me from the lake, when I would have drowned after the wound that nifalf dealt me."

Olrun scowled, but the other valkyrja walked forward with a half-smile. As she did so, the wings receded into her back, vanishing. Olrún planted

her sword in the ground and folded her arms but made no move to retract those beautiful silver wings of hers.

Agilaz had continued to move toward the house and now snatched up a torch from the fire pit, holding it before himself in warding. Volund chuckled. Fire held at bay many sorts of vaettir, but it was not like to hold much fear for these valkyrjar. He did not know their true nature, but they clearly did not fear to walk in daylight. Which meant if they were vaettir at all, they did not hail from Niflheim or Svartalfheim.

All three valkyrjar looked at him, then glanced at Volund. Altvir walked forward slowly, the effort an obvious pain. Volund closed the distance between them in a few strides.

The brown-winged valkyrja had begun to walk toward the lake. Volund glanced at her, then focused on Altvir. “What is it, my lady?”

Altvir placed a hand on his shoulder, seeming to support herself that way. In fact, she seemed ready to pitch forward at any moment. “A man who aids a valkyrja is entitled any wish in her power to grant.”

“Ask her for a night,” Slagfid said.

Volund struggled to keep his face emotionless. The very thought had crossed his mind, though perhaps not for the reason Slagfid thought. Men told stories about the valkyrjar. They lusted after them even as they feared them, and ’twas said if one could win such an embrace and please a valkyrja, one would inherit glory and Otherworldly insight. And he wanted her so badly it hurt. Not just in his cock and aching balls, but in his gut. In the hollow of his chest. ’Twas more than all that, though. Altvir’s green eyes were somehow luminous, like the sun. But unlike the sun, he could look into them and feel no pain, no burn. Feel no desire to return to the shadows.

“Marry me.” The words escaped him almost unbidden.

Her mouth opened, eyes wide. She might well strike him down for such temerity. If that was her wish, he found the thought acceptable. Just to touch the light, if only for a moment. “You cannot be serious, mortal,”

Altvir said, her voice trembling. "I have an oath to keep; I am a chooser of the slain."

"Make a new oath. An oath to me. And I will be only yours. Is that not in your power to grant?"

"A new oath ..." Altvir glanced at Olrún, then the other valkyrja. Was that ... relief upon her face?

"Altvir ..." Olrún's voice had a hint of warning, and yet, almost an edge of longing. Part of her approved, wanted it for her sister. Volund knew she did. Could he, in marrying her, free her from whatever else bound her? His proposal had come without conscious thought, without consideration, but as he thought on it Volund knew he would have chosen no differently given time. He would willingly bind himself to this strange creature, would dedicate his life to her good.

"You hesitate," Volund said. In the end, the bold might find early graves. But they alone took all the glory and all that was worth having in life, while those who cowered in fear languished in envy. Such was the way of the World. *"I will change my wish. Three valkyrjar. Three brothers. You each marry one of us."*

Olrun's wings stirred the air. *"I ought to eviscerate you for such arrogance."*

"Be that as it may, I did save Altvir. And that is my wish. I leave it to you whether to grant it."

"I do not speak for my sisters," Altvir said. She looked at Olrún, then at the other, who now returned from the lake bearing a sword. Altvir's? It must have fallen when she did. *"Their choice is their own, and they are not bound by custom to honour your wishes. I, for one, though ... I will stay with you. As much as I am able and think it a blessing."*

Volund flung his arms around her and kissed her, then. Altvir returned his embrace, stiffly at first, then without reservation. Unbidden, a tear crept from the corner of his eye.



FITS HELD VOLUND, tried to throttle him with memories. Part of him longed to go back there, back to Nidavellir. Why should he wish such a thing? His apprenticeship had cost him all he had. But, too, it had made him all he was, a craftsman without peer among Mankind. Even, sometimes, he thought the dvergar had begun to envy his talent. Maybe that was the origin of his true woes.

Cold iron clanked around his wrist, and he jerked awake. A half dozen men were in his forge. He lunged for the nearest, the one who had manacled his wrist as he slept. He caught the man's throat and squeezed. That pathetic, squirming life seeped out, eyes bulging, tongue lolling. Blows rained on the side of Volund's head, and he fell.

He tried to rise, but manacles bound his feet too. Someone kicked him in the face.



VOLUND WEPT as he spent himself in her. He had felt many women climax beneath him. This was different. A wave of sunlight crashed into him and scoured him from the inside out, suffusing his soul and silencing the wicked shadows that thought to command him. Peace and warmth surrounded him as much as her arms and legs did. Whatever the dvergar had tried to plant in him, Altvir killed it, burnt it away in her light.

Her eyes looked so deeply into his he could see the glory of all the World. Of his salvation.

To his surprise, the other two had agreed to marry his brothers. Perhaps they did so to remain with Altvir, or perhaps they too longed for a simple life, removed from the death they must witness without end. Or mayhap he would never understand their reasons.

Olrund, who spoke little, chose Agilaz, and Volund thought them of a kind and well suited. They seemed keen to walk the woods alone together, hunting, snaring. 'Twas hard to imagine there being much conversation, but then, perhaps they spoke without words.

And Slagfid had seemed more than happy with the last valkyrja—Svanhit. Volund's eldest brother was probably happy to bed any valkyrja, and twice thrilled to spend his life with one who seemed to appreciate his sense of humour. And Svanhit's laughter did often grace the night.

His brothers had slept with their new wives as soon as they were wed, he had no doubt. Altvir—despite his desires—Volund had insisted recover more fully ere they lay together. Tonight she had come to him and told him it was time. Three days since they'd wed, and they had finally consummated it.

He lay stroking her hair for a time.

And when he slept, he dreamt of sunlight dancing over green fields and lush forests where shadows fled his presence. He knew, then, he had at last escaped the darkness the dverggar had sought to forge into his soul.



HOT WATER SPRAYED HIS FACE. Volund coughed, rolled over. Gods, that smell. The man he'd choked stood, pissing on him, laughing, along with his men. Volund surged upward, but two of the other men grabbed his arms. "Thought that might wake you," the first man said as he fastened his trousers.

Volund spat in his direction. Sometimes vulgarity was called for, even from a prince. Such was the way of the World.

"You assaulted a thegn of the king. I could have your head for that."

Volund sneered. "My king is back in Kvenland."

The men chuckled. “Now your king is Nidud, smith. And your king wishes to meet you.”

“Believe me, he does not. Release me now, else you shall rue this day for the rest of your miserable life.”

The thegn backhanded him. The blow left Volund dazed, only half-aware as the men dragged him from the forge. As his vision cleared, he spied the man at the front, wearing *Volund’s* sword. The temerity of it set his blood roiling afresh, had strange shadows playing at his periphery. He might charge forward, maybe even break the grip of these two if he caught them unaware. Perhaps he might strangle the thegn with his fetters. But he could not overpower five other men, especially not unarmed and chained.

So he walked. The dvergar had taught him naught if not patience. One struck only when the iron was hot enough. With the right timing, the right temperature, even the strongest of metals could be beaten into submission. Men were not nigh so strong.



IN TRUTH, he ought not to have shown the cobbler such wealth, Volund mused as they walked. Or perhaps he simply should not have insulted the man by dropping the ring. Or he ought to have just killed him. A dead man tells his king very little.

Volund’s ring seemed cold now, the heartbeat had grown faint. They were taking him the wrong way. They marched him around the same town and up the long, broken path toward the fortress. The closer they drew, the more certain he became. This Nidud did not occupy any fortress of the Old Kingdoms, but a place built by the dvergar themselves, in the days before they were driven from these lands. A great platform extended out of a sheer cliff face, a vista from which the king must be able to see out over the Mist, so high even birds seemed to fly only beneath that peak. The mighty arch

that delved into the mountain must lead to deep tunnels, mines, and all the workings of olden days.

The Old Kingdoms had, on very rare occasions, taken such places from the dvergar. Some of those kingdoms had patrons among the Vanir. Perhaps one of them had helped capture this place. And yet, such a fortress was nigh unassailable. The only approach from outside was a narrow, winding path along the mountain's edge. No more than one man at a time could pass that way. From the battlements, a single archer with half Agilaz's skill could hold back an army.

Mostlike, this place had fallen to the Niflungar. Their sorcery—powers drawn and learnt from the cursed goddess, Hel—that alone might have given them ingress to the fortress. But like all the Old Kingdoms, the Niflungar had collapsed into a shadow of their former glory, and they, too, had abandoned many of their outposts, left them for petty kings like Nidud to hold and think himself great, think himself worthy of a legacy beyond his ken.

Volund found himself shaking his head as the king's men forced him up that path. "Men know the dvergar are famed for their metalcraft and stonework. But did you know they work with almost aught you can imagine?"

The lead thegn glanced back at him. "Shut your fucking mouth, smith."

"I've seen them make daggers of human bone you would swear is walrus ivory."

"Shut your mouth, lest we cast you from this mountain."

"You shan't. You did not bring me all this way to kill me. You brought me here to meet your king. Mostlike, he wants me to craft something for him, some great work. And perhaps I shall. I just want you to know, I shall carve it from your bones. And your king will thank me for it, for it shall be the finest work he has ever seen."

The thegn spat at him. Volund smiled.



THE GREAT HALL rose at least fifty feet high, ending in a vaulted ceiling lost in dancing shadows. Did the others see that umbral play? Did the ever-encroaching darkness move before their eyes as it did before his? Volund suspected not. If they had seen what he saw, they would flee hence, screaming for völvur to ward them against the night. No, these Men knew not of the tenebrous expanse encroaching into a domain they thought their own.

At the back of this hall sat a king and queen. The man was ancient, his long hair gone grey, his beard threadbare. He must have reached twice the age a man ought. What more could this king want from his life? He was rotting and withering away and would have best met his end on a battlefield. Or perhaps that was his intent. Perhaps that was why he started this war, to meet a final, glorious end.

His queen was younger, though by no means young. Perhaps forty winters, and certainly nigh unto the end of her life, as well. Streaks of grey ran through her flaxen hair, and she watched Volund's approach with wary eyes. Oh aye—she knew they had brought something dangerous into their midst. In their arrogance, they chained a cave bear and thought to make of it a tamed beast. But sooner or later, beasts always escaped their chains. Woe be upon those who dared try to master them.

“Well, Thakkrad,” Nidud said, malice dripping from his words, “I see you return with your prize.” The thegn shoved Volund forward hard enough he fell to his knees a few feet from the king's throne. More like than not, Volund could leap up, strangle the king and the queen both. Of course, then Thakkrad really would throw him off the mountain. Instead, Volund raised his eyes to meet first the king's gaze, then the queen's. Nidud licked his lips, whilst his queen averted her eyes.

“What is it you wish of me, King?” Volund asked.

Nidud rose slowly, a pop echoing from his spine, followed by a groan. The dverg architecture was designed with such perfect acoustics the sound carried throughout the entire great hall. Why did the men follow such an elderly lord? Had he earned such loyalty in his younger days? More likely he'd bought it with treasures stolen from this ancient place. "The townsfolk speak of a smith with talent worthy of song. Some say you seek employment in my wars." Nidud spread his hands. "And you have found it."

"You want me to forge a weapon for you?"

"A weapon? I want you to forge an armoury. You will outfit every thegn under my command with such arms and such protection none can stand against them. Do this, and you shall have your weight in gold."

Volund rose slowly enough that Thakkrad made no move to stop him. His weight in gold? His father had once paid that price, though Volund was a man now, with thick muscles and much greater weight. "I have no time for such lengthy endeavours, King. Nor do I find your men's hospitality sufficient to warrant any such arrangement."

Nidud groaned, stretching his back ere answering. "You mistake me, smith. You shall do this work."

"Or what? You'll kill me?" Volund smirked. "Then you will have naught to show for it." He jerked his head back toward Thakkrad. "Give me this one's head and I'll make a sword for you the likes of which you have never seen."

The king arched an eyebrow and glanced at Thakkrad. Volund kept his eyes forward, watching the queen, but the sound of the thegn squirming almost made him smile. "Thakkrad," the king said, after the moment had stretched, "our guest needs encouragement. Hang him from the platform."

The thegn chuckled, and this time, Volund couldn't help but look at him. The man winked, then seized Volund by the shoulder. Ere Volund was taken

anywhere, the queen rose and whispered something in the king's ear. Nidud's eyes went to Volund's hand, and he grunted.

"Hold his hand," Nidud commanded, and Thakkrad grabbed Volund's wrist. Volund slammed his elbow into the man's face. Cartilage shattered under the blow and the thegn fell, blood gushing between his fingers.

Several more men rushed forward and drove Volund back to his knees. The king shook his head and rolled his eyes at the thegn. "I'm half tempted to let the smith have your head after that foolery. Get his hand."

Blood streaming down his face, Thakkrad did as the king commanded and grabbed Volund's wrist with both of his own. Volund strained but could not pry his arm free from the man's grasp. Slowly, the thegn pulled it forward.

"What in the fathomless dark of Svartalfheim do you think—"

Nidud grabbed his hand and yanked Altvir's ring from his little finger.

"No!" Not that. "Do not touch it!"

"My wife seems to think the princess will find this a prize." The king held the orichalcum band up before his eyes, examining it. "Such exquisite work. Yes, let Bodvild have this." He returned to his throne and handed the ring to the queen. Then he waved a hand. "Get on with it. The platform."

"No!" How dare he? Altvir's ring was for him alone, his gift, his blessing. His solace in the darkness. Without it, he could never find her. Never even find himself.

They dragged him away from the throne, even as he raged, pulled against their grasp. He could not lose that ring. It would never be allowed to grace the hand of another. Never. "I will bring ruination upon your line! Return it to me or the skalds will tell of your vile urd for a thousand years! You shall reap horrors for this, King!"

Six men hefted him into the air and carried him from the great hall, out onto the platform. The men flung him onto the freezing ground, the impact sending jolts of pain through his limbs. Thakkrad attached another chain to

the manacles on his feet, this one running from a great iron ring embedded in the stone.

Two other men grabbed his arms and dragged him toward the edge.

“Return my ring!”

“Go fuck a troll. Assuming your cock doesn’t freeze off.” Thakkrad shoved him.

For a heartbeat, he fell through the air, icy wind stripping his scream. Then the chain jerked him to a sudden stop, a feeling like his legs had been ripped out from their sockets. He’d fallen only a dozen feet but now hung in open air, swinging back and forth beneath the platform. Hanging upside down here, he had an excellent view of the masterful buttresses supporting the platform. His cloak fell away, denying him even the slightest ward against the screeching wind. Snowflakes landed on his face and stung his eyes.

Above, the men’s laughter rang out. Volund howled in pain and rage.

Then, he shut his eyes.

He had survived two years of servitude to the dvergar. Oh, he had known suffering. They had forged him from it like tempered steel. And if they had not broken him, neither would some worthless king.

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PART III

*An ash I know, | Yggdrasil its name,
With water white | is the great tree wet;
Thence come the dews | that fall in the dales,
Green by Urd's well | does it ever grow.*

*Thence come the maidens | mighty in wisdom,
Three from the dwelling | down 'neath the tree;
Urd is one named, | Verdandi the next,—
On the wood they scored,— | and Skuld the third.
Laws they made there, and life allotted
To the sons of Men, and set their fates.
— Völuspá*

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DAYS GONE: ODIN

799 Age of Man

*T*he clan's elkhounds heralded their return long ere Odin and his brothers laid eyes upon the Wodan town. By the time Odin reached the sentries, dozens of clansmen and women bearing torches had rushed out to greet him. He was their jarl now, and they needed to see him as glorious. Especially if it meant no one looked too closely at Vé. "The sons of Borr have returned," he bellowed, spreading his arms as if to take in the entire clan. "And they are *victorious!*"

His voice echoed through Eskgard, and with it rose a cheer from all around. Most nights he might have urged control lest the vaettir in the woods be drawn to the town. But they needed a celebration. Vé needed one most. Maybe enough mead and a night with a woman, and he'd be spouting poetic insults at Vili afresh.

"The jötunn Ymir is dead!" Odin shouted and hefted Gungnir. "I drove this through his eye and split his skull. And I ask you—who is your jarl?"

"Odin!" the crowd cheered. Shieldmaidens pressed forward, some winking salaciously at Odin, others eyeing his brothers. A pair of

particularly voluptuous sisters each took one of Vili's arms around their shoulders and guided him away.

Odin raised his arms, waving down the commotion. Then he slammed Gungnir into the ground, letting it stand as a reminder to all of what they had accomplished. "Then I ask you," he said, when his people at last grew silent, "where. Is. The *mead*?"

Another whoop filled the night, his people caught up in his own joy. On this night, let trolls and draugar and any other vaettir hear. Let them come and see the Ás clan that had slain a jötunn. Let them know that on this night, Men ruled. On this night, at least, Mankind would not fear the darkness beyond the flame, would not fear the cold or the Mist. Especially not the Hel-cursed Mist.

And, if Odin had heard more dead voices on his way here, if he had seen, in shadows, hints of ethereal forms drifting in the Mist, he would not dwell on such. Would never speak of it.

In moments, a stein of mead graced every hand, including Odin's, as a blonde girl slipped him a mug. The smith's daughter, he thought, and by the sinewy tendons on her arm, primed to follow in her father's trade. If the look in her eye was any indication, she was a girl more than happy to serve her jarl.

Someone struck up a song, and soon the whole of Eskgard was caught in its fever, chanting along to ancient words calling back to ancestors long passed. They called their ghosts down from Valhöll, that their fathers and their fathers' fathers might look with pride on the clan this night. And did Father see him? Did he hold himself avenged, or did he blame Odin for Vé's condition? Odin would not let Vé fall, not under any circumstance. Father's voice, alone, Odin would have welcomed from the dark.

He'd only taken two steps when Heidr, the völva of the Wodan clan, pressed a hand to his chest. "You grow too bold." And here, the woman most apt to recognise the change in Vé maybe noticed the growing sense of

the Otherworld in Odin. It made her a threat, but he forced himself to smile. He grabbed her around the waist and planted a kiss on her lips. Heidr probably had fifteen more winters than Odin's own twenty-four, but she was comely. Not that he'd ever bed a völvá. Heidr shoved Odin away. "You forget yourself, jarl!"

"Not yet, witch," Odin said, then took another swig of mead. "But a couple more of these and just maybe. You might try it. If not with me, then for the gods' sakes, with *someone*." He knew better, of course. A man would need more than a few drinks to risk falling under a witch's spell.

"You still behave like the child you always were," Heidr said and took another step away from him. Odin swore her glare ought to be enough to melt snow. "Your father was a man who understood that actions have consequences. You have a responsibility to your people now. Your gallivanting is apt to bring the wrath of the vaettir down on us, and though you *think* yourself prepared for the harsh realities of life, you are *not*, my jarl. Not even close."

Odin waved her away. He had no time for lectures. Besides, no doubt a lass or three would be eager to join him in his bed. Maybe he could still find the smith's daughter. He waded through the celebration, slapping his kin on the shoulders as he passed. All raised mugs to him. Good folk. Folk who knew life was short. Moments were all you had. Hel-cursed völvá probably had her arse squeezed so tight she couldn't pop a fart to save her life. The World was what it was: cold and bloody. A good death was the best one could hope for—that and lots of fighting and fucking ere one got there. Odin planned to make a fair account for himself before valkyrjar came for his soul and he couldn't do that running scared of what might lurk in the night. Times like this, in the heart of winter, nights were long. Cold.

Feral grunts sounded from Vili's tent, followed by the sound of one woman's giggles and another's cries of pleasure. Odin shook his head. His brother didn't waste time. Vili had two bastard children already, which

seemed to suit him nicely. The man often paraded through town with a toddler on each shoulder, boasting of his conquests on the battlefield and in his tent. Knowing Vili, he probably hoped some of the bastards would grow up to train as berserkir like himself. Not that Odin would mind—the more berserkir a clan had, the more influence they could win. Berserkir and varulfur were savage, but savagery had its uses. Berserkir trained with the Björn clan, varulfur with the Godwulf clan; only the völvur really seemed to understand what fylgja a man had, which clan to send a potential therianthrope to.

A bonfire blazed in the heart of the town. Nights like this, Father had sat in front of the fire, telling tales of the Njarar War, of the dark smith Volund, of his own travels among the other clans, legends of Vingethor and the Great March, or myths of the lost runeblades of ancient times. Father had been nigh a skald himself, and Vé took after him that way. Odin shook himself, trying to force the image from his mind.

Someone offered Odin a slab of elk flesh, which he took with thanks. The rest of the animal roasted over the fire. Grease dripped from it, sending sizzles of smoke into the sky and an aroma fit for gods wafting around. Odin bit off a hefty piece, savouring the steaming juices as they dribbled down his chin. Unlike his brothers, he didn't wear much of a beard, and for just this reason. He'd never liked feeling it sticky with grease and fat. Of course, Vili kept one for *just* that reason—he said, if he got hungry in the middle of the night, he need only lick his whiskers.

In the shadows, just beyond the firelight, sat Loki. The same lass—the smith's daughter—seemed to be trying her wiles on Loki now. Poor girl wasn't having much luck, from the look of it. Loki acknowledged every word she said without ever meeting her gaze. He just kept staring into the fire as if it held more of interest than a woman's hips. Damned strange man, that foreigner. Probably ergi, as Vili had accused. Loki was Odin's brother, now, too, though. Besides, Odin seemed to have more in common with Loki

than he did with Vili or Vé. Loki had seen the ghost, heard the words, or at least some of them.

Mug in one hand, hunk of elk in another, Odin marched over to them. “What’s your name, lass?”

“Jorunn, lord.”

“Well, Jorunn, I need a few moments to speak with my brother here.” He clapped her on the shoulder. “I’m sure you understand.” The last thing he wanted was to make her feel rejected twice in one night. Nobody deserved that. The girl blew out a breath but nodded. From the smell, she’d had more mead than Odin had. Good for her. Course, he’d have to fix that. No girl of seventeen winters was out-drinking him. She strolled back toward the fire with admirable poise, only a slight sway in her steps. Or she could have been swinging her arse that way to get his attention. Which it had. He’d not mind a closer look, in fact.

“So,” Odin said, then cleared his throat. “You don’t fancy girls? That lass seemed fair eager to share her warmth with you tonight.”

Loki chuckled. “A drunk child is eager to share her warmth with any who would have her, just so she wouldn’t have to feel alone in this world.”

“That’s what everyone wants, right?”

“After a fashion,” Loki said. “But I doubt you came to ask me about my sexual appetites.”

Odin snorted. “No.” If Loki did prefer to bed men, Odin thought it better not to know, and thus not to need to name the man ergi. He could not abide the thought of others driving Loki from their clan, not now. Besides, Odin had left Vé wandering the town as a man in a daze. Eating, at least, but still it soured Odin’s mood. Let the people have their feast. They did not know, could not know, the fresh grief Odin had brought among them. In avenging his father, he had placed his own brother in jeopardy, no doubt further agitating Father’s shade. “I have to find that damned amulet. Do you know of it?”

Loki poked the fire with a stick and stared at it a while ere answering. “The wise man might have asked such a question ere agreeing to the quest.”

Odin groaned. “I already have a fucking völvá to lecture me. Wisdom is for elders and witches. Men have to act. Wait too long and opportunity burns away.” He took another swig from the mead and wagged his fingers over the fire. “Burns away like smoke. And you didn’t answer the question.”

“And here you claim not to value wisdom.”

“Bah. Speak plainly, brother. You know these things, things about the Old Kingdoms, call yourself a student of history.” *You know of Otherworldly things, too.* “Know you of the Singasteinn, or don’t you?”

Loki sighed. “There is a tale spoken of by but a few völvur, that ere the Mist, the seas had swallowed our world. Men had little, but one made a deal with a mermaid—a saealf, as your people name them. She drew up the most perfect pearl from the depths of the ocean and ensorcelled it, forged an amulet from it, one designed to grant the wearer power in a world so inundated. And when the seas receded, still the amulet remained. Lost to the clans that once held it, found by others, and lost yet again, down through the ages. But those who touch the Art are drawn to artefacts created with it, and such things rarely remain lost forever.”

“Uh huh.” Odin licked the last juices from the elk meat off his fingers. “That helps me about as much as a cock made of straw. What I want to know is what I’m supposed to do about the godsdamned thing. You’re the one with all the answers, so tell me what to do.”

“No man has all the answers, Odin. Some just have better questions.”

Odin lurched to his feet, scowling at the foreigner. He leant close. “I’ve not the time for games or riddles. You know what I’m dealing with, and if you can’t or won’t help me save my brother, I’ll find someone who will.” At that, he spun and left Loki to stare into the damned flame.

The feast had served well enough to keep the others distracted, drunk and thinking little of Vé. But that might not last forever; if the people learnt of Vé's condition, they would banish him into the Mist. Odin could not allow that to happen. If he could find these Niflungar, that ghost would solve his problems. "I swear, Father," he mumbled under his breath. "I swear I'll save him."

He had not gone far when Tyr cut him off. Father's champion. And indeed, Tyr had helped train Odin with weapons, helped him grow into the warrior he was. Tyr's fame had spread throughout Aujum. Could he help Vé? Certainly his loyalty to Father had seemed absolute. And to Borr's sons? Odin clapped Tyr on the shoulder, drawing him to walk beside him. "We did it."

"Indeed. Skalds shall sing of your feat until the end of time."

Well. Odin liked the sound of that. "Aye, but now I face another challenge."

Tyr nodded. "Glad to hear you say it. Consider Idunn's challenge to you. Your fame will spread. Strengthen your claim to becoming king. Still, you'll need supporters. I spoke with your cousin Annar. The Athra find themselves in difficult times. If you were to—"

"What in the Gates of Hel, Tyr? I already told Idunn I have neither time nor desire to claim a throne." Was that what Tyr had been doing with his time? Odin scowled and shook his head. Being jarl was burden enough.

"You *must* talk to the Vanr, Odin. You cannot ignore the words of the gods. Such is madness."

Idunn. Could she truly be a goddess? In the chaos of the hunt and of Vé's condition, Odin had given her little thought. But she had offered—had claimed to have an apple of Yggdrasil, one that could grant eternal life. Eternal life ... "Where is she?"

Tyr nodded, obviously pleased, then pointed to one of the outlying fires. "Speak to her. Then we must talk of the Athra."

Odin shook his head and stormed to the fire where the supposed Vanr sat, laughing with a pair of shieldmaidens, passing around the drinking horn. Idunn looked up at his approach and crooked a mischievous half smile. "Walk with me," he said. "Please."

She whispered something to the nearest shieldmaiden, which set the woman chuckling and winking at Odin. Idunn rose then. Odin snatched a burning branch from the fire as a makeshift torch and wandered toward the edge of the town, Idunn drifting by his side. "Are you a temptress?"

Idunn laughed. "For certain. Are *you* tempted?"

For certain. "In so many ways."

She laughed again, shaking her head. "If you are who you claim to be, I need a sign," Odin said.

"Oh? Huh. Why?"

What in the Gates of Hel was wrong with her? "Because you walk into my life, ask me to do great deeds, offer me great boons, and claim to be a goddess. Would you believe such a person?"

"Ahh." She smiled again, grabbing his hand and drawing him through the main gate, outside the town. "So you think I'm not really the same Idunn who gave your ancestors the spear. I understand. Why would you believe such a tale, after all? So instead, you turn to a stranger who takes you up a fell mountain, hunting a jötunn. And did that work out the way you wanted, did it sate the emptiness in your heart or balm your deepest anxieties?"

Odin frowned. Could she somehow already know about Vé? About what killing Ymir had cost him? He shook his head. "I want to trust you."

"Wonderful!" she exclaimed. "I want that too." Odin worked his jaw. How did a man deal with such a woman? Idunn swirled around, finally pointing to the south, toward the Sudurberks. "So you climbed the peak with your foreign guide. What did you think of the mountain? Was it beautiful? Mysterious, unknowable?"

“I suppose so,” he said, following as she led him toward the forest. “I didn’t think of it that way. I was there for a reason.” There, amid Mist, drifting between trees, he saw again shadowed figures on the fringes of mortal civilisation. They must think themselves unseen, he decided. Even Idunn did not seem to notice them. Were they alfar? Ghosts?

“Ah, that’s the thing, my lord,” she said. “You take it for granted because, for you, it’s always been this way, hasn’t it? Like this tree,” she said, putting her hand on one. “Is this a normal tree?”

Odin shrugged. So far as he knew it was. Some of the trees might have their own spirits within. In summer, the sparse greenery of the forest would thicken, hiding increased game and sometimes even fruits. The weaker plants never survived the hoar, but some did. Some always did. Life adapted. Of course, long ere summer, he’d have to honour his oath to the Odling ghost. Not quite three moons, and here, away from the terror the ghost invoked, that suddenly seemed a very scant amount of time.

Idunn pressed a finger to her lips, kissed it, then pressed it against the tree. As Odin watched, an evanescent hand seemed to stretch from Idunn’s own, like a corona around her flesh, mirroring her gesture. He blinked, and it was gone, but he could have sworn something lurked inside her. A ripple passed under the bark, and ice fell away, shaking free from the branches as if the branches made for a morning stretch. Leaves sprouted—moons ere they should have. And then, unbelievably, flowers began to burst from the branches. An explosion of white and pink and red petals erupted across the tree.

Odin had seen flowers on occasion, but this ... He shuddered, mouth agape. A rainbow of colours. Warmth radiated from the trunk, from the flowers, from the roots.

A long, cool breath escaped Idunn, and she steadied herself against the trunk.

“Wh-what *is* this sorcery?” Odin managed.

Idunn caught her breath a moment ere answering. “What this world once looked like, ere the Fimbulvetr. What it’s meant to look like.” Fimbulvetr. He’d heard that term—what skalds called the time after the coming of the Mist. This age. Then it was all true? Midgard had once been free of the Mist? It had known warmth, and the nightmares visited upon Mankind—the trolls and draugar and aught else born in the cold—were not meant to be.

“There was a time ere all this?” He waved his hand at the Mist gathering just beyond the flames of his makeshift torch.

Idunn stared at something beyond his vision. When she spoke, her words came out slowly, albeit still with her unusual accent. “My grandfather died battling Hel, trying to keep her from spreading this Mist across this world. He gave his life to stop the invasion of Niflheim, but much of the essence of that world had already seeped into ours. For nigh five thousand years, Mankind has been left out in the cold. Most of our Realm looks like that”—she pointed first to the Mist, then to the tree she’d set into bloom—“when it should look like *this*.”

Thoughts ran through Odin’s mind too fast for him to call them to order. Five thousand winters ... Did that mean Idunn herself was so old? She looked to be no more than twenty-five. And they were true, the stories that said the Mist came from Niflheim itself? Men always said that, but Men were quick to claim Hel visited all the wrongs of the World on them. And völur were so caught up in their own mystery he’d never given too much credence to their claims. Which made him twice the fool. All his life he’d spurned the lessons and warnings Heidr tried to impart, certain *she* was the one who did not live in the real world.

Odin swallowed, trying to get a handle on the situation. “Then why not use your power to fix all the trees?”

Idunn laughed, the sound high and echoing, clean as a brook in summer. By now, others had gathered to stare at the tree, just out of earshot. Afraid,

no doubt. As was he, truth be told. Such seidr was beyond his ken. There was ... something Otherworldly beneath her flesh, something only he or those like him could see. Idunn had not lied when she claimed to be of the Vanir. “It takes too much out of me, sweet Odin. I gave part of my own life to do this. Even in a thousand lifetimes, I could never restore every tree in this world. They would die faster than I could finish my work. But there is a place where spring—true spring—reigns eternal.” She waited for his questioning look ere continuing. “Vanaheim.”

“The islands of the Vanir ... they’re real?”

Idunn leant close, so close he could feel her breath. “Real enough. Like me. Do I seem like a dream to you?”

Odin swallowed and fell back a step. “A dream might be easier to believe.” He shook his head. “What do you want of me? Why me?”

“Excellent questions,” she said, holding up a finger. “As to the second, you’re cunning, ruthless, and courageous. You’ve the potential to be a great king. Yeah, you could go far, if you stop staring at my breasts.”

Odin flushed. Right. Look at her eyes. Best not even consider other parts of her anatomy that had been on his mind. Odin rubbed his temples. “Can you, uh, give me a moment, please?”

“Of course. Sometimes we all need to think things through. Take as much time as you need. I’m immortal, so it doesn’t bother me, you know? For certain, though, it’s nice to have someone to talk to. By the Tree, wandering Midgard, you spend so much time alone, or hiding from different kinds of vaettir, trolls, and Men of ill intent.” Odin stopped listening to her babble. She had spoken the truth. She truly was a goddess. No völva could have wrought the miracle with that tree. And if that much was true, then, too, must her tale about the apples be. Apples of immortality. “... because down in the far south, some places are still warm—not warm like Vanaheim, but warmer than here. And besides, my ancestors came from islands in—”

Odin cleared his throat. “Idunn.”

She quirked a half smile. “Sorry. Was I rambling? I get lonely.”

“My brother, Vé,” Odin said. “He ...”

Idunn’s face fell. “I spoke with him. The Mists are deep inside him now.”

“And can the apple stop him from going Mist-mad?”

Idunn pursed her lips. “An apple would certainly slow the process.”

“Then give him the apple, please, I beg you.”

Idunn glanced at the gathering crowd, then once again took Odin’s hand and led him deeper into the forest. They wandered in silence a time, Idunn’s steps slow, a little unsteady. She did seem weakened, drained. No wonder she he had hesitated to provide any demonstration of her power.

She leant against a tree and blew out a breath. “I have an apple for you, and enough for those closest to you. I already gave you my terms. You must make an oath to become king and to fulfil my other wish once you have done so.”

Odin clenched his fists at his side. For a brief instant he imagined himself strangling the woman. Goddess. No, even if he could have killed her—and with her power, who knew—he was not that kind of man. He had to be worthy of his father. With a growl, he unclenched his fists and stepped close to her. “So be it. I swear it.”

“Swear an oath you cannot break.”

Odin leant a hand against the tree, placing his face a breath away from hers. “I swear on my father’s spear, Gungnir, and upon my father’s name, Borr. I will make myself king, and I will grant you any favour within my power. Now, give me the fucking apples!”

She ran a finger over his cheek and he trembled. Then she pushed him gently backward. She turned and knelt, then dug away at snow piled in front of the tree’s roots until she revealed a hollow inside. From this, she drew forth a basket filled with apples that shimmered like gold. Even from the

basket, their sweet scent wafted toward him, making his mouth water. Idunn ran her fingertips over the apples ere selecting one and offering it to him. “You will eat first; then I will take one to Vé.” His hand closed around the apple. Warmth filled his palm. “Come,” Idunn said. “Eat just one. Taste apotheosis.”

Odin’s breath had grown ragged. His heart pounded as he raised the apple to his lips. There would be no turning back. He didn’t know what *apotheosis* meant, but if this worked, he would have to become a king. He would become more than a king. He would become a god. A thousand generations would praise his name. And by Hel, he’d be there to witness those thousand generations. Immortal as Idunn.

To be king of all the Æsir ... What glory. What honour to his father. What pride. Heidr had so often tried to warn him of the cost of his pride, and he had never listened. But he had sworn an oath. He had to save Vé.

Slowly, he bit down. Juice flowed over his tongue. Sweeter than any fruit he’d ever tasted. Sweet and bitter and spicy all at once. He swallowed, almost able to feel the bits flooding through his nerves. Explosions of sensation cascaded along his body, and he became only dimly aware he continued to eat. It was like eating the essence of life. Better than mead or sex or aught he’d ever known.

Stars swarmed in his eyes and he fell back, watching as the Mist cleared and revealed the glorious sun beyond. Midgard itself pulsed with life, as did every being on it. And he could feel them all. He shuddered in ecstasy until he had to close his eyes against the flood of sensations.

The myriad voices murmuring forever on his periphery sharpened. Though yet wispy, they became clear as conversations perceived across the room. He heard them, the dead, clamouring over all they had lost.

Years gone ...

See that, the apple ...

Flows with Megin ...

To live again ...

They come, they come ...

Ever hungry ...

No one heeds us ...

No succour for those who are dead ...

When he opened his eyes, he was looking up at Idunn, lying with his head in her lap. He turned, saw the tree line, saw the incipient shapes once hidden from sight now made plain. Man-like they were, aye, but not Men, these beings beside his world. Odin had the distinct sense the alfar stalked the ghosts, lay in wait, ready to spring upon them as wolves upon prey. A flickering world, just beyond, its denizens unseen, unheard by most. Not by him.

“What has happened?” he mumbled, forcing his gaze back to Idunn.

She stroked his hair. “You are changed now.”

His pulse was pounding, his loins throbbing. Everything seemed apt to burst around him. Fire coursed through his veins as he rolled over, forced himself to stand. “Vé?”

Idunn stood as well. “I will take him an apple.”

“Vili too.” Odin groaned. The World was spinning. The alfar were singing, their song haunting, ethereal, and so alluring. Shades drifted away from Odin, toward the wood where those predators lurked. Of their own accord, Odin’s limbs sought to move him there, as well, now he could hear the threnody.

“That will leave you few apples,” Idunn said. “Choose with care your remaining companions, Odin.”

He waved the comment away, panting, stumbling back toward the town. Gods! What was happening to him? Never had his intuitions of the world beyond shone with such clarity. Ethereal colours flittered at the edge of his vision. His gut had become a roil, twisting, writhing. His stones had become pulsing flames, so hot they seemed apt to burn through his trousers.

In the town, a riot of sensation coursed over him, the smells, the laughter, the taste in the air of smoke and food and sex. There were other ghosts here, faces haggard, drifting from shadow to shadow as though lost. Some faces he knew, distended and ruined though they were. The ghost of a man drifted about behind his wife, wailed as she took a new lover to replace him. A child, dead of the Mist-thickness, stumbled, coughing and wheezing after parents that did not see or hear him. Odin pressed his palms against his eyes. He did not want to see this, did not want to hear the lamentations of the damned.

Jorunn was at the drinking horn again. Odin staggered toward her, shoved the horn away, and kissed her. Her tongue was in his mouth, exploring, driving his senses to explode. Unable to stand it a moment longer, he grabbed the girl, threw her over his shoulder, and carried her off to his hall. She giggled as he shouldered his way toward his bed. Wide-eyed thralls gawked a moment. It didn't matter. Odin yanked the girl's dress away, fumbled with his own trousers so clumsily he tore the laces. Not sure whether he wanted to moan, laugh, or cry, he entered her. Part of him knew he used her more roughly than was his wont, but she only clutched him tighter. Gods, he couldn't get enough. He would never have enough.

The dead were in the hall, watching, envious of the life he and Jorunn poured into one another. So hungry for pleasures of flesh denied them. Odin squeezed his eyes shut, could not close his ears to the dozen discordant voices begging for a taste of life. Jorunn squealed, laughed; ghosts moaned, their distress saturating the air like a miasma.

Three times Odin took her until she protested she could handle no more. Then he beckoned one of the thrall girls over to join them.



ODIN SHOT awake at the sound of the howl. It echoed through the town like a cry from Hel, setting all the hairs on his neck on end.

The girl on his chest clutched her arms around his waist. “My lord?”

Odin pushed her aside and snatched his trousers and a fur cloak. The screams began ere he’d even finished fastening it with his brooch. Odin stumbled from the hall in time to see a massive black wolf leap onto a shieldmaiden and tear her apart. Its jaws ripped through her throat and shredded her flesh.

His spear. He needed his spear. He scrambled past the feeding wolf, struggling to reach Gungnir, unable to look away from the gruesome sight. Her death was his fault. He’d left his spear standing in the snow, a symbol of his pride. A symbol of his vanity. A wolf circled in front of him, cutting him off. It turned its head toward Odin’s spear, then back at him. And it pulled its lips back in a snarl. Hel. It *knew*. These weren’t just wolves. Their eyes had the intelligence of Men ... of varulfur. The völvá had been right: this celebration had caught their attention.

Someone shrieked in agony behind Odin. He kept his eyes locked on the wolf man. It advanced on him with slow deliberateness, a fell gleam in its eyes. Odin could tell it knew he was unarmed, was toying with him.

A man charged from the far side of the nearest tent, bellowing a war cry, sword high over his head. Tyr hadn’t had time for armour or even clothes. The wound-sweat drenched him from the neck down—no little of it his own, judging from the bite on his arm. The varulf spun, leaping aside as Tyr swept his sword downward. “My lord! Go!”

Odin nodded at his champion. Tyr could take care of himself. There was no finer raven-feeder among the Æsir and the distraction gave Odin just enough time to reach Gungnir. He ran for it, skidding to a stop, his hand wrapt around the shaft. Power filled him, his strength and fury amplified. The rage of the dragon coursed through his veins. These wolves had picked the wrong town. Spear raised, Odin roared a challenge to any varulf foolish

enough to accept. Moments later, a pair of them bounded toward him. No single challenge. So be it. He whipped the spear around, turning about and using its length to keep both wolves at bay. One snapped at him. A twist of his wrist slashed Gungnir's blade across the beast's snout. The werewolf yelped in pain and fell to the snow, pawing at its half-severed nose. The other varulf jumped for him. Odin snapped the butt of his spear into its throat. The wolf fell, gagging.

"I am Odin Borrson, jarl of the Wodanar! And I send you to Hel, shapeshifter!" He thrust his spear straight down. It pierced right through the wolf and into the ground. The creature gurgled, then began a slow shift back into human form.

A woman screamed as Odin yanked Gungnir free. That had come from the guest house he'd given Idunn. It had to be fifty feet away. Odin took off at a sprint, but it would be too late ere he got there. He was human, and he'd never cover that distance before the varulf devoured her. His breath came in shallow gasps, the cold stinging his lungs. He had to try. He was running fast, faster than ever he had moved ere now, his muscles exploding with power.

He barged into the house in time to see a wolf jump at Idunn. "No!" Odin hefted Gungnir for a throw.

The wolf passed through Idunn's form, which shuddered then vanished. Odin's jaw fell open, the spear forgotten in his hand. Sorcery?

The wolf shook its head, sniffed the room, then turned toward the bed. Odin followed its gaze to a slight shimmer in the air, a trembling among the covers. The wolf leapt at that shimmer. Odin flung Gungnir. It flew fast as ever, impacting the wolf midair. The varulf crumpled and fell, a splatter of blood coating the ethereal sheen ere vanishing. Odin strode over to the wolf, now whimpering on the ground, planted his foot on its head, and yanked his spear free. The beast stilled and transformed back into a man. "Idunn?"

“Hmm,” she answered, coming from the direction of the bed. A heartbeat later, her gossamer illusion fell away like a discarded shawl, revealing the woman beneath. Blood coated her face and dress, but it looked to be all from the varulf.

“Are you harmed, my lady?”

“No. I ... I’m fine. Thank you. By the Tree, I should have known it could smell me, what with that wolf spirit inside it. A foolish mistake that could well have cost me my life.” Dare he leave Idunn alone? Odin backed toward the house’s threshold but hesitated there. “Go,” she said, clearly reading his unease. “I’ve crossed from one side of Midgard to the other, foolish errors notwithstanding. I can take care of myself.”

Odin nodded and darted into the snow. The town had become a slaughter, dozens of warriors and shieldmaidens wounded or dying. Some of these he saw rising from their own corpses until he had to concentrate to tell the living from the dead, all of whom raced about the chaos of this ruined town. What a fool he’d been to disobey Heidr. She’d always urged caution, insisted the Æsir remain quiet and avoid drawing the ire of vaettir. And he’d ignored her wisdom and thought *her* the fool for wasting her life in fear. She would know what to do now.

He started for her but caught Vé watching the varulfur with a blank expression. Gods, not now. They could not afford this tonight. Odin slapped him on the shoulder. “Little brother!” Vé turned toward him, eyes a bit too wide. For a brief instant they glimmered red. It was just a reflection of the fire. Had to be. “Arm yourself, Vé!” Odin shouted, then took off running again.

He had to find Heidr, ensure her safety. Maybe her seidr could drive away these wolves. He bypassed several fights against the varulfur. Mankind might be disadvantaged against their superior strength and speed, but he had to—

A bear roared, a swipe of his claws taking off the muzzle of one wolf as another leapt onto his back. The Wodanar had their own therianthrope, and Vili would help even the odds. Odin jumped into the air and flung Gungnir, impaling the wolf on his brother's back. The creature fell in a heap. Odin rushed over, yanked the spear free, and kept going.

Ahead, the völvá's front door had fallen in. Godsdamned wolves! Odin scrambled over the snow, then slid to a stop when he spotted Heidr lying on the ground just outside the house. Her body lay still. A varulf had torn her throat out. This was not supposed to happen. Odin dropped to his knees beside her body. Her eyes were wide, staring at the night sky, at the Mist above and the perilous moon. The völvá had served his father. In Odin's earliest memories, she'd just been an apprentice, but since he was a child, she'd become a font of strength for the clan. The source of their wisdom. The völvá told them when to move camp, where to hunt. And she'd been lost because of his pride. He'd brought the varulfur down on them. Heidr had tried to tell him ...

Actions have consequences. Such simple wisdom, and he'd refused to hear it.

His hand trembled as he shut her eyes. "In the name of my father Borr, I promise you vengeance, völvá."

"Vengeance?" she said, now standing beside her corpse, her throat missing. "Upon your own hubris, Borrson?" Her words were wheezes, agonised rasps, as if she were damned to forever bear the pain of her fatal wounds. Odin winced. Her eyes widened as she realised he saw her, heard her. "If you would avenge me, strike not against wolves, but against the pride that drew them."

"I swear ..." He rose—unable to bear her gaze—eyes sweeping the town for any further varulfur. There, on the edge of town, he saw one, struggling with a shieldmaiden. Odin ran toward the pair, hefting his spear as he did. "Fly true," he said, then threw.

The spear soared through the night, cutting away Mist as it did so, impaling the wolf. Odin continued his trot to retrieve the spear, battle-fatigue beginning to take hold of his chest. The moment he grasped the weapon, his strength and rage returned. How dare these wolves attack his people and kill his völvá! Odin would see them rent and driven to the gates of Niflheim! He'd serve them in pieces to the minions of Hel!

"My lord," the shieldmaiden said. He nodded at her, then turned to take in the town. Whimpers and screams of pain continued to fill the night, but there were no further signs of battle. Had they slain the last of these creatures? There would be more. He would hunt down the savages.

"Find my brothers," he told the shieldmaiden. "Send them to me."

"Yes, my lord."

He'd hardly felt the cold during the struggle, but as his battle frenzy wore off, an icy chill ate his muscles. From the darkness, dawn would come within the hour. Best get more fires burning to keep the Mist from Eskgard. Was the Mist what turned the varulfur into cannibals? He worked his way back toward Idunn's house. The Vanr seemed to know something of these varulfur.

Loki intercepted him, bloody sword in hand. The foreigner breathed heavily but showed no sign of injury. After a glance around, Loki tossed the sword aside. "Are you harmed?"

Odin shook his head. He was not harmed—he would do the harming. He would rend these monstrous wolves in half and leave their corpses for ravens. "Can you track them?" These creatures would pay for the lives they had stolen. Heidr would have vengeance ... against Odin's pride, aye, but against the wolves, as well. Whatever her shade claimed, the living owed the dead no less.

Loki nodded. "I can."

Idunn slipped out of the house, eyes locked on Odin. "You don't want to do that."

Odin spun on her. “Hel-cursed varulfur slew my völva, Idunn! I have enough to tend to without such raids, and no time for such fuckery. I will erase these beasts from the face of Midgard! I will cut out their hearts and send them screaming down to Hel!” They would see what happened to those who attacked the Wodanar. He needed make a point and make it fast. His oath to the ghost had settled around him like a noose, drawing ever tighter. He grabbed Loki. “Find out where they came from. Now.” His blood brother nodded, cast a quick glance at Idunn, then took off into the Mist. “Gather the warriors!” Odin bellowed.

Wolves would bleed for this.



“THERE, IN THE RUINS,” Loki said, pointing toward the hilltop. The foreigner crouched on a rock, out of sight of the creatures. Vili had tried to convinced Odin to attack beneath the moon, when he could shapeshift, and disliked it when Odin had refused, claiming one berserk did not outweigh a small army of varulfur.

Now, Tyr at his side, Odin knelt behind Loki, waiting, watching. The crumbling wall might once have housed a stone fortress. Maybe it had once been intended as a bulwark against vaettir, or vaettr-touched Men like varulfur. Now, as so oft seemed the case, beasts laired in ruins, and Mankind dwindled. Among the Ás clans, varulfur came from the Godwulfs. Some left civilisation and became beasts, changed by the animal within them, or perhaps by the Mist they breathed. Or maybe, though no one liked to dwell on it, maybe savagery was inherent to Man, and he needed but an excuse to cast aside the veneer of society. Maybe nature was chaos, and to nature, a part of Men forever longed to return.

Of course, it was always possible this was *not* a pack gone feral, that these wolves yet served the Godwulfs. That was what Tyr thought, and he’d

dealt with them of late. Had fought against them when they threatened Odin's cousin Annar Ótmarson.

"Daylight wanes," Loki said. "If you want to do this, now is the hour."

"We should put out the fires," Tyr said.

"No!" snapped Odin. "Torches up." He looked to Tyr. "Take a small party around the back. Catch them off guard. But do not douse the torches, not on any account."

The thegn disliked it but made no argument, grunting in assent. The man motioned the two shieldmaidens and a pair of other warriors to follow him. They wound their way around back.

Odin waited for Tyr to draw their attention. The waiting wore at his nerves, but it was a strong tactic, and needful, for Men could not match the strength or speed of varulfur.

Still, vengeance demanded blood, and Gungnir would provide; it always provided. These wolves would know the price of threatening the Wodanar. Odin waited a few moments more, giving Tyr time to get into position, then pulled his flaxen hair back into a ponytail, keeping it from his eyes. Other warriors flexed their muscles, or twitched weapons.

"They'll mark our scents," Loki whispered. "But with luck, they sleep and may not notice until we've descended upon them."

With a start, Odin realised Loki carried no weapon. "Where's your sword?"

"That one wasn't mine."

All right ... "And now?"

"The varulfur will have weapons. If needs be, I shall borrow one."

Odin snorted. His new brother was as mentally deprived as his others. Loki would fit right in. "'Tis time."

As one, his warriors rose and charged up the hill, not letting out their typical war cries until they'd passed through a breach in the wall. Then shouts rang through the chambers, scattering an unkindness of ravens that

had perched atop the ruins. A pile of sleeping men and women leapt to their feet. They'd all been naked, sleeping on and under furs, one atop another, akin to real wolves. Odin slashed open one varulf's throat, then impaled another. A lop of Vili's axe beheaded a woman who went for a sword. Odin's raven-feeders fell upon the unarmed wolf pack with ferocity, with well-earned vengeance for last night's raid.

More shouts and war cries sounded from across the ruins. Tyr's forces must have found another congregation of the pack. Odin stalked through the snow-blanketed halls, cutting down stragglers. A large man—well over six feet tall—charged at him, snarling like a beast. Odin set Gungnir for the charge and thrust it up at the last moment. The spear shot through the varulf's chest. The varulf looked down at the shaft as if stunned. Odin kicked him and withdrew the spear, then continued on. A tunnel had been carved into the hillside, creating a cellar. After pausing to light a torch, he continued.

A body slammed into him from the side. Gungnir skittered away as Odin fell. The impact knocked all wind from his lungs and his vision blurred for one instant, then a man sat straddling him, hand on his throat. He grasped at the man's arm, but the werewolf's strength was Otherworldly. Odin couldn't breathe, lungs burning. He flailed weakly, trying to dislodge his assailant. The beast snarled, saliva dripping onto Odin's face, the foul spittle stinging his eyes.

Someone slammed into Odin's foe, knocking him aside. Tyr tackled the wolf, and the pair tumbled several times. Odin gasped, trying to get air through his bruised throat. When at last he rolled onto his side, he saw Tyr now atop the werewolf, raining blows on the man with a dagger. As Odin rose, the werewolf gripped Tyr's wrists and flung him aside. The varulf turned over, growled, and leapt for Tyr. Odin stumbled toward Gungnir. The instant his fingers closed around the shaft, strength returned to his limbs. The dragon's Megin filled him, and his breath came easier. A simple slash

of the blade opened the varulf's back. The creature wailed, and Tyr kicked it off him. The warrior rose, then stomped his foot on the werewolf's skull.

"How fare you?" Odin's voice sounded raspy in his own ears. It would probably take days for the damage to his throat to heal. Maybe Heidr could have given him a draught to help—if his pride hadn't killed her.

"Damned sight better than you," Tyr said.

Odin grunted. A child's wail caught his ear from the next room. Odin exchanged glances with Tyr, then they made for the back room of the underground chamber. The place stank of uncooked meat and spoilt milk. Animal skins were spread over the floor like rugs. In the shadows of the room, a naked woman twisted, blocking his view of something. She snarled at him but made no move to charge. She was one of them, one of the animals that had slaughtered his people, killed Heidr. A bitch for the slaughter. Was it the dragon's rage or his own? It did not matter. Blood for blood, and he'd made an oath.

He stalked closer, ready for her to move. She growled at him. Then he charged forward and thrust Gungnir through her chest. "Your menfolk await you in the Realm of Hel."

As she fell, he spied a straw-filled cart beyond. Inside lay two babes, probably twins, one male, one female. Odin hesitated. *Varulf* children. His oath ... Odin never broke an oath. He raised Gungnir.

Tyr's hand on his shoulder yanked him away. "My lord!"

Odin jerked. He damned himself for letting Tyr creep up on him. "They are monsters!" Odin shouted. But the dead woman was on hands and knees, weeping, pleading for the lives of her brood. She was there, not a pace from Tyr's leg, and the thegn had no idea.

Odin looked to the babes, forced his gaze away from the ghost. These were varulfur—or they would have become such, for therianthropic gifts oft passed to children, awakening after training or trauma. These babes were of the same clan he'd sworn vengeance against for Heidr. If he failed to

uphold his vow to its fullest, her spirit might well crawl out of Niflheim to haunt him for it. And yet, these children had done naught. They would have, of course; they would have grown up to be savage animals who raided the Ás clans. Even then, that was not so different from what the Æsir did to each other, or to any foreign peoples they came across. The gods respected only strength. And some varulfur did serve in clans, as berserkir did.

“They are infants,” Tyr said.

Aye. The adults in the clan had raided his village or condoned the raid, but the babes were innocent. Yet to spare them was to break his vow to Heidr, to the others. Odin’s mind swirled at the sight of the two werewolves. His throat had grown so dry. He had no desire to murder these babes. And it would be murder, no mistake. He could not condemn them for what they *would* have done, had they grown up savage. “I would not expect ... sympathy from you.” He looked back to thegn, tried not to meet the ghost woman’s eyes. He did not want her to know he could see her, could hear her.

Tyr folded his arms. “Because *I* was raised savage? I’ve more sympathy. Men can change. Your father gave me that chance.”

Indeed. Father had always tried to see the best in people. He had believed Mankind was slowly dying, that chaos was engulfing Midgard, and only if humanity banded together could they forestall the end. “Father trusted you.” Odin let Gungnir fall from his grasp. The moment it left his hand, weariness wrapt its claws around his chest. His muscles ached from the battle, a fatigue he’d not even been aware of finally taking hold, even as the anger clutching his heart began to abate. *The spear is the strength of the clan*, his father had once said. *But it is anger—a power to be unleashed or held in check, as the need arises.*

Tyr nodded, face solemn, slight hint of approval in his eyes. The thegn had gone on about the Athra and the Godwulfs just last night. The Godwulfs—a clan ruled by varulfur. Did that prompt Tyr’s request to spare these

babes? Either way, the thegn had the right of it. Father would want him to check his anger.

Odin reached into the cart. “Forgive me.” Heidr forgive him. He would not become a murderer of children. She had said to overcome his own pride; was it pride now, sparing these children in the name of his honour? Or would the völva approve? Odin wondered if her shade yet lingered in Eskgard, to ask her. He handed one babe to Tyr and cradled the other in his arms. “We’ll take them with us.” The Wodanar had a few berserkir, but no varulfur. Maybe these twins would change that in future generations, assuming someone could guide their training.

Right now, he needs must find a way to save his brother. But still, he had sworn an oath to Idunn—an oath spoken on Gungnir and Father’s name alike, thus unbreakable—to become king of the Æsir. “Tyr ... You served as champion to my father.” Odin pulled off his arm ring—coiling dragons wrought in a twisting of silver and iron—and stared at it a moment ere offering it to Tyr. “Serve as my champion now.” The thegn shifted the babe in his arm before taking the arm ring with reverence. He placed it on his wrist where Father’s ring had once sat and nodded solemnly. Odin clapped him on the shoulder. “Good. I ask you not to judge me harshly. I do what I can to be worthy of Father’s legacy, but I am bound by more than one oath now, torn in many directions. I have sworn to Idunn to become king, but first I needs must tend to another oath.”

“What could be more important than the urd of all the Ás clans?”

The urd of his family, of course. “Work with Idunn and do as you think best to draw the other clans to our side. With word or blade, prepare the way and hold together what Father tried to build.”

With a sigh, Tyr nodded. “If we are to return to the town ere nightfall, we must leave now.”

Indeed. Odin had someone he needed to see.

THE DÖGLINAR

25 Age of the Æsir

*B*ow in hand, Hervor crept through the woods. Summer had broken, and that meant trade, with merchants traveling between towns in Ostergotland. Merchants tended to be overburdened with goods, silver, and food. All things her little band could use. Beside her, Red-Eye moved with the grace of a boar. The so-called King of Deeppine lacked subtlety, lacked finesse, and wasn't half so stealthy as a bandit leader ought to be. On the other hand, he was good with a bow, great with an axe, and roughly the size of a snow bear. It did tend to intimidate men.

Not Hervor. She was pretty certain she could beat him if she had to. Size counted. Speed counted more. And she was fast with a sword. Her grandfather's thegn had trained her as a shieldmaiden, she had insisted. Not for her, the loom, the lonely bowers, no. When Urd strove to weave that which could not be borne, 'twas better to burn those threads, to reject the life laid out completely, than plod meekly along Fate's ordained path.

She motioned for Red-Eye to hold in place. The bandit king scowled at her and looked ready to spit. She turned away and slunk forward, toward

the path. Deeppine covered so much of Ostergotland you couldn't really cross the land without passing through it. And that meant taking one of two paths. Those heading to Jarl Bjalmar's lands took this one.

Men's voices rang out from down the path. Coming this way, not quiet about it. These folk either hadn't heard of Red-Eye's Boys, or they were fools. Red-Eye knew what he was about. He was the one who had insisted Hervor disguise herself as a man. She could fight as well as any man—better than most—he'd granted that. But merchants tended to be more afraid of young men than they were of young women. So he'd told her to wear a helm, bind her breasts tight under her hauberk, and keep up the illusion. And he'd been right. More merchants surrendered without a struggle when facing an armed man than an armed woman. Men were, after all, fools.

“Learn the womanly arts, Hervor,” Grandfather had bade, time and again.

Well, fuck that with a pine tree. Hervor signalled back to the chief. He, in turn, let fly an arrow into the depths of the woods. A signal. Ahead, the Boys would be converging, blocking the trail. One of the merchants had started singing. She and Red-Eye exchanged open-mouthed stares. “Fucking imbeciles,” he mouthed.

She nodded. The long trail was lonely, boring. Still, even if you didn't believe in trolls or vaettir, attracting undue attention like that invited trouble. Mostlike, these were foreigners, maybe from Skane. Anyone native to Ostergotland would know better. They'd have to know better. A pair of well-laden carts drawn by mules appeared around the bend, each protected by a pair of guards walking beside it. The singer was the driver of the first cart, who kept casting glances at the bundle-wrapt woman sitting in the back. Trying to impress his wife. How adorable.

The singing stopped when one of the guards fell, Red-Eye's arrow in his neck. Hervor loosed as well, her shot catching the opposite guard in the

chest. Their prey was shouting, the remaining guards drawing weapons. The Boys let out a whoop and rushed forward. Six of them, and she and Red-Eye made eight. Eight on two guards, plus the cart drivers and merchants. Good odds. And good fun. She slung the bow and drew her sword, making her way forward.

One of the guards had already fallen, but the other was holding his own against three of the Boys. Trained, experienced, maybe even a former raider or soldier. No wasted movement. An efficiency that made a man seem faster, able to face more than one foe at a time. He should have surrendered, though. One of the merchants already had. Red-Eye had taught her something else, too. If a man fights, you kill him. If not, you let him go. It encourages others not to fight. Then again, she liked the fighting, the thrill, the pounding of her pulse. No weaving at any loom had one feeling so alive as the threat of death, a hairsbreadth away.

As she closed in, the blanket covering the back wagon fell away. Two more men jumped out, these clad in hauberks. One rushed against the remaining Boys. The other glanced around a mere moment ere settling on her. His eyes locked on hers and she faltered, gawping. Gunther Uffeson. Her former trainer moved in with deliberate confidence, sword and shield in hand. And she had left her shield behind a tree. She dared not take her eyes off him to check. Instead, she fell back a few steps at a time, keeping her sword in front. “What in Hel’s frigid arse crack is this, Gunther?” Bravado was the only ward she had left to her, now.

“You never did learn to guard your tongue, girl.” Aye, because men could be warriors, could speak as they wished, but it ill became a woman, or so *men* said.

She spat at his feet. He grimaced but did not slow. She could make a break for it. Maybe lose him in the woods. Or at least make it to her shield. Bellowing, Red-Eye charged forward at Gunther. The aging karl pivoted, shield catching the King of Deeppine’s descending axe even as his sword

swung low. It slashed into Red-Eye's unarmoured knees, and the bandit king toppled over.

Hervor used the chance to rush Gunther. He twisted around but couldn't get his shield back into position. Her sword scraped off his hauberk, tearing a gash in his side. With a groan, he fell back. She pushed her advantage, slashing again. This time he caught the blow on the edge of his shield. Splinters of it flew loose. The impact jarred her for an instant.

Enough time for Gunther to fall back into a proper stance. "You can still surrender now. Come with me, and answer for what you've done."

"You're outnumbered."

Gunther shook his head but did not bother to look at the rest of the Boys. "Not for long."

She did look. Those guards were Gunther's men, and they'd already downed four of the Boys. Not counting Red-Eye, who was stumbling, trying to rise. He'd probably never walk right again. Red-Eye was an evil bastard, but he'd been good to her and had given her a place among the Boys. Damn Gunther. With a grimace, she twirled her sword. "Why can't you leave me be?"

Rather than frightened, he seemed sad, shaking his head. "Hervor ..."

"It's Hervard!" She rushed forward and swung, a feint to get him to move the damn shield. He did, but not to block. He thrust the shield forward, impacting her sword and driving her off balance. He leapt forward into her and slammed the shield forward again. It hit her square in the chest and sent her sprawling. Her back connected with a root. A flash of red pain blinded her.

She blinked it away. Her legs wouldn't respond, arm was twitching. Odin's balls, that hurt.

Groaning, she rolled over, tried to stand. Gunther had stepped away. He kicked Red-Eye in the face. The bandit king fell over backward and hit his

head, then lay still. “No!” Hervor’s voice sounded more like a croak. “Don’t kill him ...”

Gunther glanced in her direction, then moved in to help his remaining soldiers. They cut through the Boys in a few moments. Hervor’s arms gave out beneath her twice ere she managed to rise to her knees. By then, it was over. Gunther had returned and bent to snatch her sword ere she could even reach for it. She spat at him again, almost ready to scream with frustration. She was not going back! She refused to be what they would make of her. She could just throw herself at him, try to bear him down and claw his eyes out. All that would earn her would probably be a blow to the head and maybe tied hands. Still damn tempting though.

Red-Eye was alive, and guards were already binding his hands. “Release him,” she demanded.

“The jarl’s orders override yours, girl,” Gunther said. “He’ll decide the *king’s* urd.” Some of the others snickered at the title. “Here’s a new lesson for you. Ere you throw your lot in with a king, make sure he has more than a dozen subjects. Otherwise he’s not a king, just a self-important arse. One who only managed to draw the jarl’s attention when word reached him of your activities.”

“I have naught to say to him.” If he sought to marry her off to some fat jarl, she’d rather they just hang her with her fellows and have done.

Gunther shrugged. “Aye, well, your grandfather has more than a few things to say to you.” He motioned to two of his men. “Double bind her. She’s a slippery one.”

They dragged her hands behind her back and tied them. Red-Eye was staring at her the whole time. “Jarl Bjalmar is your *grandfather*?” he demanded once the soldiers had begun to march them down the trail.

Hervor tried not to look at him. The jarl would surely hang the man for his crimes. And if Gunther spoke true, her grandfather had only even known about the Boys because of her.

Because of her, they would all die.

No. She could not look at Red-Eye, could not face him.



GUNTHER and his men marched Red-Eye, Hervor, and the last of the surviving Boys—Big Spear Harold they called him, a name she was told had little to do with his fighting weapon, though she'd not learnt the truth for herself—into town just ere nightfall. Her grandfather stood, watching, as did her mother, although the latter stared at her feet rather than meet Hervor's gaze. No one spoke. Not even her grandfather. The jarl pointed to the gnarled oak on the west side of town. Gunther grabbed her shoulder and dragged her along while his men marched Red-Eye and Big Spear Harold to the tree. They threw thick ropes around the branches, and men began to tie nooses. Those nooses were placed around the Boys' necks. Gunther's hand on her shoulder tightened, warning her against trying aught.

"Stories claim Odin hanged himself for wisdom," her grandfather said. "Sacrificed himself, to himself. These criminals I sacrifice to Odin in the hopes we may all learn wisdom." Bastard meant her, wanted her to learn from her mistakes. The jarl waved and men yanked on the ropes, yanking the Boys off their feet. Hervor forced herself not to look away. She owed the Boys that much respect. One did not reach Valhöll with deaths like these, but still. Even if they were bound for the Gates of Hel, she owed them. More than she could repay. She had brought them this death, wanted to apologise, dare not do so. Not for fear of Grandfather, but for fear an apology would only insult Red-Eye.

The two men struggled, kicking, a long time choking to death. Finally, her grandfather's men dropped their bodies to the ground.

"Burn them," the jarl said. "We need no draugar haunting these woods." He turned, ostensibly addressing the gathered crowd. But he was talking to

her. “King Gylfi had it from Odin that the corpses of oath breakers and the worst criminals are food to the vilest of serpents in Niflheim. Let these disgraceful savages thus feed the dragon Nídhögg and his spawn. Speak of them no more.”

Hervor clenched her jaw. The sun had set, but numerous torch poles and bonfires lit the town. Rather than build a proper pyre, men hurled the bodies of her friends on those bonfires. As that awful stench reached her, Gunther ushered her away, back into the jarl’s longhouse. Hervor made only token resistance. It was pointless now, really, though she wanted to linger. Her grandfather received her alone. No sign of her mother. Gunther unbound her hands and let her stand free in the middle of the hall, fidgeting beside the fire pit, wondering what urd lay before her.

Her grandfather drummed his fingers on an armrest. “I indulged you too much, Hervor. You refused to learn womanly arts, sought always to fight, to hunt, to ride. And I let you!” He rose from his throne, slapping the armrests with both hands. “I had Gunther teach you to use shield, sword, and bow. Let you go on raids. Aught you wished, you had, and never did I force you to learn weaving or to manage the household. Despite your mother’s wishes. And now this. *This* is how you repay me? By taking up arms against my own people. By throwing in with criminals and thieves, and for what!” He spread his hands as if expecting an answer. “Surely you did not want for coin, for jewellery? What was my hall so lacking, girl? Speak!”

Hervor scoffed. “You indulged me, Grandfather? Did you? Did you let me go on the raids last summer when the men went out on the Morimarusa? Or did you insist I stay here and meet suitors from your allies and enemies? I seem to recall one pompous arse after another offering you silver for my trench. How much would you have sold that for, by the way, had I lingered here? I will not be sold like some thrall at the block!”

Gunther’s sudden intake of breath was her only answer.

Jarl Bjalmar trembled as he lowered himself back onto his throne. He shut his eyes a moment more ere answering. “And did you let those ... *dogs* touch you?”

Now she smiled, couldn’t quite stop from laughing. “You mean did old Red-Eye plough my trench?” She pressed her palms to her eyes, still grinning. Odin’s balls, was that what he cared most about? That his precious commodity might be sullied? It wasn’t as if a man wouldn’t trade for her if she wasn’t a virgin. She raised her hands in mock timidity. “Oh, Grandfather, it was *awful*. Those big strong men held me down. I tried to stop them, but they did things to me. Dirty things.” She pretended to shiver, then grinned. “And I *liked* it!”

“You are a disgrace, Hervor.”

“Then you ought not have forced me to return, Grandfather.”

The jarl looked to Gunther. “Get her out of my sight. She is forbidden from leaving this hall without guard.”

The thegn grabbed her arm and pulled her into the side rooms. Her mother stood in one, face ashen. Damn. Hervor had not expected her to hear her outburst. Hervor opened her mouth, but no explanation or apology seemed sufficient. “They didn’t really touch—” she started to say.

Her mother turned away and stormed out. Hervor looked to Gunther, who shook his head. He didn’t want to hear aught she had to say either. The karl left her there in the antechamber before her old room. The door just stood there, inviting her, mocking her. Just like the thralls, sitting on the outskirts, staring at her, judging her. *Thralls*, watching her, condemning her, as if they knew aught of her life. As if they could understand what it felt like to see their friends hanged, burnt, and they be castigated for having cared for such people. “What?” she demanded.

Two of the men looked away, but the other met her gaze. Now *he* was judging her? A thrall thinking himself fit to decide what she ought to have done. Hervor ran her tongue over her teeth. No. Not this motherless thrall.

Not today. She strode toward the thrall, who finally looked away. *Too late, little man.* Hervor grabbed him by the tunic and shoved him against the wall. The other two thralls rose from the bench but were smart enough not to interfere.

“What is it? You have something you want to say?” She edged in closer, giving the man nowhere to move, though he glanced to one side and the other. “Come on!” She shoved him again, and he collided with the wall. “Come on, thrall.”

“Naught, my lady.”

She stepped back. “Good. Then next time shut your mouth and your fucking eyes.” She punched him in the right eye to emphasise her point. Her knuckles stung from it, but his head collided with the wall. After a heartbeat, he slid down it, groaning. Hervor wrung her aching hand. A thrall who didn’t know his place had no business judging her for stepping out of hers.

“We should have expected no better from you,” one of the others mumbled.

Hervor spun on that man. “What did you just say?” Now the man stood, defiant, glaring at her. Red-Eye had told her once the best way to get cooperation was to let someone know how far you’d go right from the start. He almost always killed someone ere making his first threat. Choice brutality, he said, saved lives in the long run. Hervor wasn’t going to kill anyone ... not quite. She grabbed the speaker by the scruff of his neck and pulled his face close. “Got a death wish, thrall?”

The man refused to look away. “The jarl forbids us to speak of it. It shames him for you to know. You disdain us thralls when your own mother lay with the basest of our kind.”

Hervor faltered a moment, uncertain she had even heard that aright. “How dare you?” She could barely form the words.

“Oh, Lady Svafa had the ache real bad between those thighs of hers.” The other thrall gasped, mumbling for the speaker to quiet. Hervor squeezed the man’s neck, drew him in until she could smell his foetid breath on her face. “You liked it in the woods with bandits, did you? No surprise. Mama couldn’t get a jarl’s son to take her, so she ordered her thralls to it, I hear. One by one, until she was good and finished. Odin alone knows whose git you are, girl.”

Hervor trembled, the red haze that filled her vision blocking all other sight beside the man before her. He lied, besmirched her mother. Shrieking, she slammed her forehead into the thrall’s nose. Cartilage cracked and blood splattered his face. He screamed for an instant ere she head-butted him again. She rained blows upon his ribs and gut until she was gasping for breath. Then and only then did she let the thrall drop. He fell in a bloody pulp. His fellows, even the one she’d banged up ere, rushed over to help him.

Her hands were trembling. Knuckles split open, blood dripping between the fingers. Shaking like a child. She stumbled as she tried to walk away. She hadn’t meant to take it so far ... Hadn’t meant to ... Odin’s balls! Why would a thrall tell such a lie? No. No, her father had been a visiting noble who had died raiding. Her mother never talked of him, but she’d said she could not speak of her sorrows. That was all.

The thrall lied. He’d lied. She cast a glance back at the ruined heap of the man, felt an emptiness open in her gut.



JARL BJALMAR HAD no völvu of his own, and so a simple healer, a woman from the town, treated the thrall Hervor had beaten. For three days, the man had lain abed, and the healer could not say whether he would live or die.

Hervor had peeked in on him twice, each time greeted by the disdainful stares of the healer and the other thralls who had come to visit their friend.

Three moons she had spent among Red-Eye's Boys, and with them she had killed many men. Not like this, though. Not someone she had seen every day, even if she did not know his name. She had not intended to cripple him, much less murder him. She didn't know what she'd intended. His words had enraged her beyond all withstanding. And she was within her rights to kill a thrall for speaking to her thus—for any reason at all, she supposed, though it would mean she'd owe her grandfather the man's worth in silver. Either way, it had not been her intent. What she'd intended mattered little, in the end. Not after the man died from the injuries she inflicted. She wanted to say it had been an accident, but whom to speak such to, and what good would her words do anyone now?

She'd paced the jarl's hall since then, never able to settle her mind nor her gut. To think her mother would lie with such men left her nauseated. She needed a sword in her hand and a foe to slay. Someone to punish. For the lie. It had to be a lie. But then, she had not been able to confront her mother about it, and the thrall would never talk of it—or aught else—again. And so Hervor found herself waiting outside her mother's door once again, unable to knock, unable to ask a question she so dreaded the answer to. Men did that kind of thing—fucked thralls to sate their lust. But women, especially noblewomen, were meant to have self-control. Did this matter?

She'd lied to her mother, too, when she'd tried to claim Red-Eye hadn't fucked her. Of course he had, though he certainly had not shared her with the Boys as she'd said to her grandfather. The old man was just too tempting to humble, to shame. Like how she now felt ashamed to know of her true parentage. A child born to a thrall belonged to the mother's owner. So what if the mother was a noble?

Well then, at least her mother would have no more right to judge *Hervor's* excesses. She was about to knock when the door opened. Her

mother jerked back to see her standing there, then stared at her a long time.
“What do you wish now?”

“To speak with you.”

“I’ll hear no more lies.”

Hervor folded her arms over her chest. “This night, I’ve come for truth.”

At that her mother pursed her lips, then sighed, and motioned for Hervor to come in. She had rarely visited her mother’s room. It was well decorated with tapestries, some of which she had probably woven herself on the loom in the corner. A small brazier kept the room warm and well lit, if redolent with smoke, hazy.

Her mother sat in a chair beside that brazier and beckoned Hervor join her in the other chair. “I had given up inviting you here.”

Hervor tried not to sneer. Her mother meant to say she had given up on Hervor completely. “Who is my father?”

With a sigh, her mother shook her head. “I thought we were past this. I do not wish to speak of—”

“I’m sure you don’t. The thralls told me, though.”

“They *what*?” Very real concern marked her face.

“So it’s true. You forbade them speak of it. You lay with so many men you don’t even know who my father is.”

“W-what?” Her mother stood so swiftly her chair toppled over. “Who speaks such lies? *Who*!”

“A dead man, as of this afternoon.” Her mother groaned, then began to pace the room. “So now I know.” And neither Mother nor Grandfather had any right to complain about *any* of her actions.

“You know naught, spiteful child!” Her mother snapped. Hervor froze, looked to where her mother stood by a shuttered window. “Your father was a jarl’s son, Hervor. And we were properly wed, though aye, he died ere you were born. Angantyr, son of Jarl Arngrim, who gave him a perilous sword

to wield in a duel. You are no thrall's child but rather the last of the royal Döglinar."

Now it was Hervor's turn to stammer, unable to wrap her mind around what she was hearing. "Royal?"

Her mother wrung her hands, then looked back to the window again. "Aye, and he sought to restore the glory of the fallen Old Kingdom. Him, his twelve brothers, all berserker. 'Twas said they took no one else into the spear-din with them, so mighty were they. Angantyr was the eldest, the most famed and most powerful. He had eyes like furnaces and arms thick as a bear's. And he ...

"There's another kingdom here in Svjarland, to the north. Back then, King Yngvi had a daughter famed for her beauty. And Angantyr's brother, the next after him—Hjorvard—he swore to marry her. But he was challenged for her hand by a housekarl, if you can believe that. A mere servant to the king thought to marry the beautiful princess."

That took some temerity. Hervor drifted to her mother's side and put a hand on her shoulder. "And what befell them?"

"They arranged a duel, on the island of Samsey, in the Morimarusa. And ere they went to the duel, the brothers wanted to seek their father's blessing. They passed through here and Father gave them shelter, feasted them for a few nights and they ... Angantyr and I met. Angantyr told me he thought me fairer even than Princess Ingibjorg, and he asked my father for my hand. Father agreed and we were wed, feasted. It lasted only one night since they were in a hurry to reach Samsey."

"I was conceived the night of the wedding feast?" Hervor could barely hear her own voice over the crackle of the fire. "And the duel?"

"I was not there."

"But you know what happened. Tell me." Part of her did not want to know. There was only one possibility after all. Clearly, her father had not returned.

“The housekarl took with him a crew and a champion, the Arrow’s Point, skalds call him. No one knows exactly what happened on Samsey. But the Arrow’s Point was the only one to leave that island.”

Hervor’s hand on her mother’s shoulder tightened. “My uncles?”

“He slew them all. Your father, his eleven brothers. All lay, unblessed by any prayers, mostlike never burnt on the pyre. All I can say is Samsey is called a haunted place and no one will go there.”

No. This Arrow’s Point had destroyed not only her father but all his kin. Her kin. “I will go.”

“Do not be a fool.”

“A fool! Did Arrow’s Point come here and pay us weregild for our losses? Did he pay Jarl Arngrim for the death of his sons?”

“One does not pay weregild for an agreed-upon duel, Hervor.”

“A duel ends with a man dead. When it ends with *twelve* men dead, I call that something fouler! They were murdered, probably set upon unawares and killed. And you tell me he may have left them to rot?”

Her mother shook her by the shoulders then. “Listen to me, child—”

Hervor batted her mother’s arms off. “No! No, I will have vengeance for my father. This I swear. I will avenge him and my uncles both, and I will do it with Father’s own sword.” She stormed off toward the door.

“You are but a girl!”

Hervor froze. “I am my father’s only heir. You say I am among the last of the Döglinar? I will not break this oath. No matter how long it takes, I will avenge him.”

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DAYS GONE: TYR

799 Age of Man

The sun had nearly set when they returned to the town, the babe cradled in Tyr's arms. She'd wailed all day with a hunger he had no way to sate. Here, at least, he could find a wet nurse to care for the children.

Though it was early for the night meal, Odin ordered the tables set in his feast hall. Much like his father, he kept his intentions guarded closely—too closely for Tyr's liking. Odin had asked for his trust, aye. And Tyr *wanted* to give it to him. He so wanted Odin to be worthy of it. But the man had refused to explain himself or what he intended, whilst asking Tyr to make him a king. Worse still, Odin didn't seem to want the fucking throne. He wanted something from Idunn; Tyr couldn't say what. That sat ill.

Tyr headed for the feast as soon as he found someone to take in the varulf twins. Odin arrived after him, though, up to something once again.

"Tyr," Idunn called from behind him. In her arms she carried one of the varulf twins. Took her away from the midwife already?

"Lady Idunn, welcome. Do you realise the child is a werewolf?"

“Well, not as yet, though of course she might become one, Tyr. Isn’t that amazing?” She pinched the varulf’s cheek. “It was so magnanimous of you to spare these two. It makes me proud to be your friend. And we will be friends, I promise.”

She spoke rapidly, left Tyr untangling her words, and he hadn’t even started on the mead. “I welcome your friendship, my lady. And I hope showing the wolves mercy proves a wise decision.”

“Mercy is always wise,” she said, continuing forward until she stood at his side. “And what are we going to call these hungry little puppies?”

Puppies? “Odin said he’d call them Geri and Freki. He plans to raise them as his own.”

Idunn clicked her tongue and rubbed Geri’s chin. “Little Geri werewolf! I bet you’ll have the most beautiful fur when you learn to shapeshift!”

“No doubt,” Tyr said dryly.

“And now, darling Vili,” she said and kissed the top of the berserk’s head, “would you mind looking after poor Geri a while? I need to steal your friend away for a private conversation.” Several of the men and no few of the shieldmaidens whooped and beat on the table. Idunn smiled. “They approve.”

Whilst Tyr wouldn’t mind some alone time in his house with the beautiful goddess, he wondered if she knew what those warriors thought. Was she truly oblivious, or just coy? Either way, ripping off her silky red dress was all he could think of. After bloodletting, sex was all *most* men thought of. Shieldmaidens, too. Killing made you remember living.

He offered her his arm, and she took it, walking out with him. Outside, the afternoon was setting. The Mist had begun to thicken. Numerous fires around the town kept it away, as they kept away the worst of the cold. Kept it at bay for now. But all fires dwindled in time. Hymir was fond of saying so, and the jötunn did not lie. Not about that. Idunn led him around the town a bit, chattering about the goings-on whilst he’d been away. How a

shieldmaiden was now with child. How a hunter had found a bride in town. About the dwindling food stores and how lean the winter would grow.

Tyr grunted at each story, never certain what to say. At least not until she led him into her house and beckoned him sit before the fire pit. A pot hung over it, boiling some odd-smelling brew. “What is that?”

“Hmm? Tea. Would you like some?” She scooped out a mugful.

He took a large swig of it. Scorched his mouth, tongue, throat. Left him gasping. “Bitter as a troll’s arse! Some völvu medicine? I am not ill, Goddess.”

She giggled, then gingerly sipped from a mug herself. “To your continued good health, then. So tell me, champion of the Wodanar, how did you fare in the Athra lands?”

“Uh. Godwulfs press out all their borders. Athra are falling one by one.” He recounted his tale whilst she listened, only occasionally asking questions.

“So,” she said when he had finished. “This Hallr Stonecrusher would be the new jarl. And would he fare better than Alci?”

“Alci’s ambitious, but Stonecrusher is a fucking traitor. Less honour than a troll.”

“Hmm. Interesting thing about honour, viewed from the long perspective. It can be everything, and it can be naught. The Vanir made many choices for the sake of expediency. Wrong choices perhaps, but only history can judge, if then. Men look at the World from but a single vantage.”

Tyr cracked his neck. “I know naught about such things. I know Borr taught me honour is the one thing no one can take from you.”

She raised a finger, sipped her tea, then nodded. “Perhaps. But then, if you hold to it so stubbornly that your world freezes around you, and your people falter and die, that honour will not warm you in the lingering cold.

Then, perhaps, your persistence in taking the high road becomes a matter more of pride, and from there but a short stop to reach hubris.”

“Huh. So ... Placing my honour above the needs of the people is ... arrogant?”

She shrugged. “Mayhap, Tyr. Should you refuse to stop Alci on grounds of your honour, you must live with the ghosts of his victims. Offer them what explanation you will; tell them how they had to die so that you might remain clean.”

Tyr scratched his head. Something about all that sounded off, but then, Idunn was a goddess. She ought to know best. He had to put his trust in *someone*, after all. “So you would have me send Hallr back to his people to kill Alci?”

“For now, I think, you may be better using him as a spy. Learn what you can until the time is right.”

He groaned. Intrigue. Lies. Treachery. “Tastes foul.”

Idunn nodded. “Then I have something sweeter to offer. Odin asked you to be his champion and thus asked me to give you this.” From her dress, she drew forth a golden apple.

From the World Tree. Immortality. His breath had quickened. He didn’t remember reaching for it, but he held it now. Warm in his palm. Pulsing like his heart. “If I ...”

“You can live forever,” she said. “Or at least slow your aging to a crawl.”

What a thought. He bit down. Tastes exploded in his mouth. His throat. His eyes swam. Whole fucking house spun. More. More! Juice dribbled over his face. He was lying on his back. How had he gotten here? Another bite. Another. Fire and ice and life surging through his veins. His heart ready to burst. Every muscle tingling.

Alive. So alive. The core fell from his half-numb fingers. He rolled to his knees. Room whirling. Round and round, up and down, like a ball.

Idunn sitting there, half a smile on her face, watching. Her pulse beating fast, in time with his. Showing through her skin. Through that thin dress.

He crawled to her.

“Are you well, Tyr? It can be ... overwhelming.”

Freyr’s flaming sword! Whole body was going to fly apart. So alive. And he needed more and more life.

He launched himself at her and tore at her dress, hiking it up over her hips. She laughed. Made no attempt to stop him.

Stroked his cheek as he fumbled with his trousers. “I know. It happens to everyone. But if you choose me, you’ll face consequences. Maybe see things you didn’t—ugh.”

She grunted as he pushed inside her. He pounded again and again, choking in fervour. Not able to find release. Freyr! He just needed to let go. To be with someone again after so long. To hold her. “Zisa,” he mumbled.

“No.” Idunn shoved him backward, then straddled him. “I am not her.”

She grunted, panted. And then screamed, laughed. Waves of it hit him. Made him spasm. Time stopped.

Idunn sat in the shadow of a tree that touched the heavens. Sat with an old woman, tan skin, short, dark hair. Talking, arguing. And somehow, setting the course of the future. The old woman died. Idunn carried her ashes across the World, beyond the Midgard Wall—where it should have been, would be—and vanished into the snowstorms. The chaos lands, Utgard.

“I’ve eaten some foul mushrooms ...”

Idunn leant her glowing face close to his. He lay on his back. “I warned you.”

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THE VÖLSUNGS

25 Age of the Æsir

No matter what Sieglinde had told Fitela, how could the boy be so eager to kill his own father? Kinslaying was foul before the eyes of gods and Men, and though necessity forced Sigmund to accept aid, he could little fathom his nephew. Always, the boy trained. He completed every task Sigmund set before him and spent the hours betwixt concocting and discarding plan after merciless plan. Sieglinde had raised him with such a singular purpose he seemed incapable of even discussing aught else. At present, Fitela ambled through the forest, not nigh to as silent as Sigmund might have hoped for, especially given their errand.

“Have a care in your steps,” Sigmund chided. “Every time we go without a torch we risk Mist-madness. Fail to move with grace, that risk little avails us.”

Fitela grunted, slowing. “You don’t imagine we can sneak up on these varulfur in any event?”

Sigmund frowned, not denying the boy’s point. He had always avoided this stretch of the wood for fear of the creatures, but Fitela had confirmed

Sigmund's suspicions of a pact between Wolfsblood and the varulfur. Any ally of the Gautish king had to die. "I am most concerned with ensuring they cannot sneak up on *us*, but aye, boy. I hope to catch them sleeping ere moonrise and thus force them to fight without being able to ..." The hair on the back of his neck had started to tingle and with it came a nagging sensation in his gut.

Someone watched them. He had not heard aught, but ... Even the birds had fallen silent. Sigmund grabbed Fitela's wrist tight. The underbrush rustled some distance to his right. His hand drifted to his sword hilt over his shoulder. The faintest creak of leaves sounded behind him; the varulfur had started to flank them. In one motion, Sigmund shoved Fitela forward and pulled his sword. "Move, boy!" Sigmund relished a fair fight. Taking on multiple varulfur at once did not sound to him the least bit fair.

Fitela sprinted through the woods, darting between trees with natural agility. Sigmund came slower, casting his gaze behind them. The wolves pursued, he had no doubt, though he had seen no sign of them. They were even more adapted to this forest than he, and being inhuman, they mostlike had naught to fear from the Mist. They would move through the brume as if a part of it, spectres in the dark.

Sigmund dashed around a tree, leapt over a root, and spun around, sword out before him. Still couldn't see aught. Through the Mist, he heard them though—light footfalls, bushes pushed aside, the occasional pant.

"Face me like Men!" he bellowed. None answered him. They awaited the moonrise, when they would gain every advantage over mere Men. Mist take the accursed beasts. Lacking a better plan, he raced off after Fitela, who had already disappeared into the Mist himself. Following tracks whilst running was never easy, but it looked like the boy had held a true course.

It felt like a quarter hour—maybe less—and he almost ran into Fitela, where the boy had knelt in a clearing, staring at a log house. A hunter's cabin, perhaps. Fitela glanced at Sigmund, then scrambled forward in a

crouch ere Sigmund could say aught about this plan. The boy stole up to the window, then rose to peer inside. Sigmund crept forward after him. Then a twig snapped behind him. Hel! He rose, sword in hand, breath coming heavy after his run. The damn varulfur had become all but invisible in the Mist. Where were the bastards? Hiding like cravens?

He glanced over his shoulder. Fitela had disappeared. A moment later, the boy flung open the cabin door and beckoned toward Sigmund. Chest heaving, Sigmund ran for him. The moment he crossed the threshold, Fitela slammed the door and then dropped a board in place to bar it. "I think we have stumbled upon their very lair," he said, as he raced to the window. No full-grown man could have fit through it, but Fitela flitted about, seeking after a way to bar that as well. "Don't bother, boy. We must face them sooner or later." The varulfur had left a low fire, embers really, burning in the fire pit. Sigmund stoked this, feeding it until it rekindled. The cabin's owners had only a few torches lying about. Hel, they were lucky these savages kept flame at all, if they did not fear Mist.

"Nowhere to run!" someone shouted from outside.

Sigmund snatched a torch and stuck it in the fire. "So face us like Men! Save what honour remains in your accursed bones."

A face covered in a matted beard appeared at the window. Wild, savage. Sigmund spun and lunged at him, thrusting the torch at the man's face. The varulf bellowed and fell back, even as something else struck the door. The board trembled with the impact. It wouldn't hold long.

Fitela cast about the cabin, tossing aside aught he found, in his search for Odin-alone knew what.

Sigmund raced over to the door, heaving the torch back in the fire pit. Another impact cracked the board barring the door. With one hand, Sigmund yanked the pieces free, then backed away from the door. An instant later a different varulf barrelled through the unbarred door, clearly expecting more resistance. He stumbled on his footing. An upward swipe of

Sigmund's sword cleft the varulf through the jaw, splitting his face in half in a shower of bone and blood. Such a wound ought to have slain anyone, but the man pitched onto the floor, clutching his face and wailing in agony. Ere Sigmund could do aught else, Fitela launched himself atop the body and slit the varulf's throat with a dagger.

Sigmund stepped around the boy and the corpse to the outside. "Fight me like a Man!" A silhouette stalking around in the Mist, a dark form. If the wolf dragged this out much longer, twilight would settle upon them. Then the *true* varulfur could join the battle. Damn, but Sigmund missed the comforting weight of Gramr's bone hilt, even after so many years. Sigmund strode forward, bloody sword pointed in the last direction he'd seen the beast. "Craven!"

A heavy pant beside him sent him spinning, but not fast enough. The varulf caught him with a shoulder slam that lifted Sigmund off his feet and flung him several feet away ere he crashed down. The impact knocked the sword from his grasp. Gasping for breath, Sigmund struggled to rise. An instant later, the varulf leapt atop him, superhuman strength driving Sigmund back down. The man grabbed Sigmund's tunic and slammed him hard against the ground. Everything went red as his head cracked against the dirt.

Scarce aware of it, Sigmund raised arms to block blows that he knew would come. And they did, slamming against the arms he held over his face with such force as felt apt to break bones. Sigmund rolled to one side, struggling to win free. Something hit him in the ribs and sent him doubling over into a ball, unable to block out all the pain of it.

Giving over any attempt at defence, he jerked his fist up into the varulf's stones. The man yelped, stunned for long enough for Sigmund to scramble away, hand over foot, and snatch his blade. Eyes bleary and feet unstable, he rose. Every breath sent waves of agony rioting through his chest. Broken or bruised ribs, for certain. That he could use his arms at all

meant no fractures there, but every move ached like Hel herself had wreaked her torment upon him.

The varulf rose, snarling, and unslung an axe from his belt. So the games were done.

That suited Sigmund well enough. He spat, spewing out blood and phlegm. "So there were only two of you after all."

Savagery had seized the varulf, as though he barely still understood human speech. He sprang forward with such speed and ferocity, Sigmund had to fall back, any hope of a counter given over. It took all he had to back away fast enough, ducking and dodging the varulf's never-ending barrage of swipes. A torch sailed end-over-end through the air and caught the varulf in the chest, igniting his tattered garments. The man shrieked, patting out the flames.

Scowling, Sigmund lunged forward, swinging with all he had left. The varulf veered backward, but the blade still clipped his abdomen, releasing a spray of blood. With one hand, the varulf grasped his guts. And with the other, he attacked with the damn axe, stilling swinging. Sigmund toppled over backward before the unexpected assault, unable to form an effective riposte in time. The varulf overreached and Sigmund kicked him in the knee, sending him stumbling to the ground, one hand still holding in his entrails. Maybe he'd even live through that wound.

Fitela appeared out of nowhere, landing on the varulf's back. Ere either the varulf or Sigmund could react, the boy planted a dagger in the man's throat. A geyser of hot blood sprayed Sigmund in the face, blinding him. He shoved, sending his attacker tumbling over, then managed to crawl away, wiping his eyes.

As Sigmund's vision cleared, he saw the boy plunge the blade into his foe, time and again, until the creature at last collapsed in the now blood-drenched dirt. Sigmund rose, gasping. "I was engaged with him. You had no right to interfere, torch, dagger, or otherwise."

“I just saved your life.”

“I might have taken him! Here I stood, calling them out for refusing to face us one on one, and you made me guilty of the same charge. We have naught but our honour, boy!”

Fitela wiped the gore from his face, then spat out a trickle of blood. “Your honour will not keep you warm when you pass the Gates of Hel ... Uncle. Nor is it like to see your father and brothers avenged on Wolfsblood.”

Sigmund opened his mouth to object, but his legs gave out, and he fell to his knees. With the battle fervour broken, he had no strength left. Night would draw nigh, and the varulfur’s cabin offered the only shelter they might find in time. Fitela must have realised the same for he sauntered over to the first man he’d killed and began to drag the body from the doorway. It was well since Sigmund could barely drag *himself* inside.



SIGMUND LAY on his back beside the fire pit, trying not to dwell on the myriad ways his body ached, nor to give thought to whether or not the boy had the right of things. Honour was all they had. But ... more like than not, that varulf would have slain him. And if Wolfsblood himself was such a monster? How then could Sigmund avenge Father in any fair fight, much less considering the king had a great army? And how many more varulfur served Wolfsblood? They needed to hunt each down one by one, but they’d been lucky only the two varulfur lived together this time.

Unless there were more of them now stalking the woods. Sitting sent fresh pains washing over him and stole his breath.

“Uncle,” Fitela said when he realised Sigmund had woken from his stupor. Beside the boy, Sigmund saw, rested two wolf skins, still marred with the blood of the varulfur who had worn them. With an idle hand, Fitela

stroked the fur, almost lovingly, a gesture that had Sigmund shuddering. “These men, these wolfskins, they may have bequeathed unto us a mighty gift. Do you know the tale, Uncle, the stories of the brood of Fenrir?”

“Little,” he admitted. “Varulfur are scarce found amid the Hunalanders.” Legend claimed that, in times long faded, Sigmund’s ancestors had dwelt along the Rijn, ere war with another of the Old Kingdoms had driven them far to the east. It was a return to the fabled homeland, more than a century ago, that had prompted the great conquests. “Some claim their ilk remnants of the Döglinar, one of the Old Kingdoms destroyed in the wars.”

“Aye,” Fitela agreed. “After a fashion, for it is said refugees of that broken kingdom out of Nidavellir came among others and spread their secret lore. Those who with minds and spirit strong, with fylgja of wolf or bear, could take the skin of beasts and thus became as such. Don the raiment of the wild and step beyond the World of Men into something deeper, older.”

The boy’s meaning settled upon him, at once sickening and heartening, for the chance it represented, horrid though it tasted in his mouth. “You would have us make monsters of ourselves.” Fitela had the right of it before, Sigmund could ill afford to offer varulfur honourable combat when his foes had such an edge. And yet ... To join them in rejection of humanity ... “Whatever comes of the Otherworld, it is a plague upon this one.”

“Peace, Uncle. Odin is served by a pair of varulfur, his loyal wolves. How can I speak of something foul if the gods themselves practice it?” Odin, according to some stories, also practiced seidr, making him ergi by most accounts. Sigmund imagined his face said it plain, for Fitela grunted. “Whatever your misgivings, we cannot discount any advantage in our pursuit of vengeance. For all you know, Odin himself sent this chance to us that we might gain the power needed to redress the wrongs done to the

Völsungs. If we are to be monsters, it is our betrayer who forced such roles upon us.”

Sigmund hesitated. “Surely there is more to it than draping bloody skins upon our shoulders.”

“Aye,” Fitela agreed. “But I saw things, creeping ghost-like through Wolfsblood’s hall. I know the way of it.”

A chill wracked Sigmund. Was this, indeed, the path the Norns had woven for his vengeance? “So be it.”



THE BOY HAD CUT the hearts from the dead varulfur and kept these aside whilst he stewed strange herbs in a brew of their blood. With fingers too steady for Sigmund’s liking, he traced bloody lines across the both of their brows.

“Taste the flesh that pulses with their power,” Fitela commanded. “Then drink this draught.”

Sigmund wanted to demur, but the hour was long past for fretting over such things. So he bit into the gamey muscle, trying not to gag as he worried a piece off with his teeth. The iron taste of it choked him. The wolfskin about his shoulders reeked; he was sweating beneath it, though they sat in the snow, beneath the moon, daring the Mist to come for them.

Never eat the flesh of Man. Such was an unbreakable law of Midgard. Jötunnar, fabled monsters Sigmund doubted existed, were said to indulge in such obscenity. Men held themselves above beasts by denying such a thing.

He gnawed until, at last, he could swallow the gory chunk.

Already, Fitela had hefted the bowl of blood and took a long swig from it, spilling its filth down his chin, allowing it to seep into his furs. Gasping, he passed it to Sigmund, who took it, glad his hands held firm.

Father ... Let this be the step that leads your shade to rest ...

Metallic taste filled his mouth and Sigmund tried not to dwell on what other flavours polluted this foul draught. He chugged as much as he could manage, then coughed, letting the bowl tumble down beside him, imbruing the snow crimson.

Pain clenched in his gut. Sigmund tried to breathe through it. The sky came alight as if with ghost fire. The shadows deepened, the sounds and sights and smells of the wood redoubling, becoming a cacophony assaulting his senses. He pitched over onto his side, fingers scoring gullies through the snow.

His body felt aflame. A perilous knowledge settled on him—he had wakened something.

A howl ruptured the night, rent the forest, sent the trees shuddering. Sougning branches, groaning roots. An intimation of hunger, wildness, untrammelled by the fetters of civilisation. Shadows became slaving maws bristling with fangs. Eyes peering, liquid gold, watching, watching, staring deep inside the soul, awaiting the beckoning.

And beckon, he did—a howl of his own, hands scraping snow and dirt, scrambling on all fours. Need, furious in intensity, it welled in his breast, threatening to burst forth unless it should be sated. The need to run, to hunt, to kill.

Overhead, the moon loomed, a bulging jewel embedded in the firmament. Gargantuan, until it filled all the night sky, until it blotted out stars and became the sum of the cosmos. A face within, shadowed, hollow. Not empty, no, for within its hidden depths glistened a pool of voices, of all those gone before. Wild live, wild die.

Padding footfalls, light on snow, as the wolf paced closer, bridging the gap betwixt man and forest. A crossing, an offer. Aye, he crawled for the creature, his eyes locked upon the golden gaze of the wolf. Until he knelt a hairsbreadth away, felt the beast's hot, foetid breath bestirring his hair. Saw, in its eyes, his own face reflected.

Pieces of shattered consciousness longed to meld. The animal stared, rapt, a question in its eyes.

The answer ... he knew it. He craved it. He lunged forward, seized the beast's mighty skull between his fingers, drew its brow against his own.

His hands were empty. They were on the snow again, fingers splayed, arching. Changing. Claw-like nails rupturing skin. Joints popped; bones shifted. Ravages of delicious agony broke and remade flesh. The hair along his arms and legs coarsened, fur bursting from him. He howled, praised the moon, the wood in his corybantic delirium.

Then he was running, racing through the moon-dark wood, seeing everything, smelling everything, faster, faster than ever he had moved. Fast as a moonbeam, flowing over water, a liquid shadow he became.

It was in him, had always walked alongside him, this fylgja, this guardian. It was him, now.



FOR TWO MOONS Sigmund and Fitela had stalked wood and marsh, hunting down any who dared intrude upon their domain. As a varulf, Sigmund no longer feared the Mist, and indeed, it concealed him from his prey, though he sometimes got the impression it recoiled from his presence. The wolf vaettr inside him stirred most after moonrise, demanding he run, stalk, and kill. Sigmund obliged it.

He and Fitela sat on the forest floor, perhaps a quarter mile from the wood's edge, waiting. They had stirred up enough trouble for the outlying villages now that the local jarl had sent men to hunt them. Perhaps the locals even blamed Wolfsblood, the man who was supposed to have driven out the varulfur from his land. As it stood, Sigmund had now slain another four of those as well. He could not quite conceal the smile at the thought of Siggeir Wolfsblood bearing the blame for crimes Sigmund committed. They

had done well, aye, but Fitela still needed to learn to track and fight on his own.

“They look for us,” the boy said.

“Indeed. But they fear to wander into the forest. We can play on that, but first, we must draw them in. We will split up, each harrying the hunters from different sides. When you have a few alone, take them, and leave no survivors.” Sigmund hesitated. Despite the wolf spirit giving him the strength of a grown man, Fitela remained yet a boy. “Much as you are young and daring, do not risk engaging more than seven men at a time. If facing such odds, retreat and howl for my help.”

Fitela sneered. “And will you bide to the same?” Damn, but the boy had grit. Sigmund snorted, but he nodded his head, then stalked off on his own.

As the moon rose, the wolf spirit stirred, restless beneath his flesh. Sigmund fell to his knees, shedding his clothes—save the wolfskin—and groaning in pain as muscles shifted and joints popped. It always hurt. Fur sprouted from his back, his shoulders, then everywhere else. His face stretched and twisted, elongating into a snout, the process of which felt much like having his bones smashed to pulp with a rock. Finally able to breathe, he howled—or the wolf inside did. In such a state, he could scarce tell the difference.

And Sigmund ran, dashing around trees with speed and grace no human—nor even a mortal wolf—could hope to match. The sheer freedom of it, of the wind racing over his eyes and snout, it overwhelmed all other sensation and set him into a euphoria much akin to battle frenzy. And he ran and ran.



THEY HUNTED HIM, of course, maybe thinking him prey. Or maybe they were not such fools but had given in to their desperation and thus pursued him through the woods. In truth, it little mattered. These men paid tribute to

Wolfsblood for their safety; through their slaughter, the king was shown as weak and would thus lose his supporters.

Besides which, the wolf demanded it. It needed the hunt. It needed the *kill*.

Through the Mist, Sigmund stalked behind the back of the hunters' group. They stuck close together, all torches and spears and one with a bow. Seven men. He no doubt could have slain them all but had struck a bargain with the boy. And thus followed them, letting loose a long howl that sent the hunters into a frenzy. They swung their torches about to banish Mist and formed up close together. Sigmund would have laughed had he the throat for it. Instead, he loped around to the side. Waiting. Fitela's answering howl rang out through the night, some distance away. How was it he could now recognise a specific howl?

Sigmund's tongue craved the iron taste of blood and the soft pliancy of flesh. Sometimes, he could no longer say where the wolf ended and he began. He continued to circle. At last, the hunters gave over their watch and began to spread out, seeking their prey. Falling dead still, Sigmund tarried. It was a pain, almost, trying to control the wolf, to stop it from surging forward. Every instinct demanded he act immediately. But wait ... he had to wait.

One of the men screamed off to the right, drawing the eyes of all others. At that, Sigmund lunged. Snarling, he leapt through the air and bore down the bowman. They collided, and Sigmund's jaws clenched around the man's throat. A single savage twist ripped it out, the intoxicating taste of a fresh kill settling over his palate. He could not let the wolf savour it. Rather, Sigmund moved to the next man. His victim brought up a spear, trying to fend him off, but moved as if mired in snow, his every motion clear long ere it connected. Sigmund dodged around the weapon and bit the man's knee, crunching bone and cartilage. The victim fell and the wolf took over. It

snapped jaws over the man's face. Bit and tore, rending, chomping. Destroying.

Predator. Prey. Meat.

Sigmund felt it as another man tried to advance on him. The flying form of Fitela bore that man down. Sigmund leapt at another. One by one, they tore the villagers to pieces. Then they parted again, for there were yet more hunters to fell this night.



SIGMUND's last victim led him on a chase back toward the village, intent on escaping. He caught the man in a field just beyond the wood. His weight drove his prey onto the ground. Jaws snapped closed. One more dead. One more man the king had failed.

After lapping up the blood, Sigmund rose and shook himself. Where was the damn boy? He had not heard from him in hours now. An ill feeling seized his gut, and Sigmund trotted off, back into the woods, until he finally picked up Fitela's scent. This, he followed a long way. He tracked the boy past several kills, over a creek, and beyond, into a grove where lay the bodies of eleven men, all torn to shreds. What in Hel's frozen underworld was Fitela thinking? He had taken on so many and never called for help.

The other wolf's scent mingled with a trail of blood, one Sigmund followed to a great oak. There the boy lay, in human form, bleeding from numerous wounds. Sigmund knelt and examined the worst one, what looked like a spear thrust to the hip. Fitela groaned, eyes popping open as Sigmund touched the wound.

"What madness took you, boy? Why did you not call for my help?"

Fitela pushed himself up, back against the tree, grinning. "Oh?" He chuckled. "You do not test your limits. You accepted my help to kill seven

men, whilst I, a child, killed eleven by myself. Perhaps I am the greater of us.”

Ere he realised what he was doing, Sigmund had hefted Fitela to his feet and slammed him against the tree trunk. The wolf took over. *Fury. Dominance.* It used his jaws to bite the boy’s neck. Hot, acrid blood ran down Sigmund’s throat. Burning rage pumped through him, demanding he force the boy into submission. Demanding it. None might challenge his authority. Not in this pack!

Not ... Sigmund dropped the boy, gagging. For a moment he stared at his hands, soaked in the blood of his own nephew. Fitela gurgled, spitting up yet more blood, clutching both hands to his throat.

No. No. No!

What had he done? He hadn’t even thought, hadn’t had the chance to form any ... “Fitela?” Sigmund grabbed him and lifted him in his arms. “Fitela, boy!” His nephew tried to say something but just choked. *Oh, Odin. Please, do not let this boy die. Please, Odin. Please.*

The wolf had taken over. Its rage blinded him to aught else, its fury at being challenged. Damn the wolf.

Naked save for the skin, cradling his nephew in his arms, Sigmund raced through the forest. The cabin those other varulfur had claimed lay nearby. There Fitela could rest. He’d be all right. He had to! Sigmund’s heart clenched, and he felt apt to retch up all the blood and flesh he’d taken down this night. Fitela’s blood.

A varulf could heal from wounds mortal to a human. He could heal. He had to heal.

Sigmund found himself screaming, roaring into the night. He would do aught it took to gain control of the beast now sharing his body. But first, he had to tend to Fitela. His nephew could not die; Sigmund would not allow it. Together, they were going to save the Völsung dynasty. Together they had planned everything.

DAYS GONE: ODIN

799 Age of Man

*I*dunn emerged from Tyr's house, flushed, her dress torn. Odin watched her, arms folded over his chest. She jumped when she saw him, then flashed her wicked half smile.

"When I asked you to give him an apple, I did not expect you to give him so much more."

She shrugged. "We all have needs. The apples are so imbued with the Pneuma, the energy of life, they tend to bring those needs to the forefront."

Odin quirked a smile. "You weren't concerned about my needs when I ate my apple."

Idunn grinned. "You didn't ask." She winked and returned to the dance.

Son of a bitch. Did she mean she would have ...? Now there was a missed opportunity he'd regret for eternity. He shook his head. "Walk with me, Idunn."

She smoothed her dress and fell in beside him, trying to ignore the rip running up the red silk. Odin stifled a chuckle. In his fervent lust, Tyr had

ruined fabric no doubt worth more gold than the thegn had ever laid eyes on.

When they were away from the other houses, Odin turned on her. “I have agreed to your terms, Vanr. I must soon choose the rest of my companions. Give me the last three apples.”

Idunn quirked a smile. “Have someone in mind, do you?” She drew the apples from her dress, and he dropped them in his satchel.

“I might. But ere I can become king, I have something more I need.”

Idunn sighed. “By the Tree, Odin, I beseech you for the good of all, let this thing go.”

He scowled. She knew what he’d ask. Vé was blood, and for him, Odin would never let go. “Where do I find these Niflungar?”

“Such ancient peoples are best left forgotten. They serve as a distraction from your true goal.”

He clenched his fist at his side. His goal was saving his brother, and if the ghost could do that, he’d take any action on her account. “I have an oath to uphold, one made ere my oath to you. Help me fulfil that oath, then I shall tend to yours.”

“These people worship *Hel*, Odin. They draw strength from Niflheim, and it changes them, turns them into something you cannot imagine. They were driven from these lands long ago, and even if I knew where they now hide, I would not tell you. Do not disturb their rest. Better for you, for us all, if they are left to slumber. I have seen the ruin they left in their wake, I saw the icy tomb that became of Valdia.”

Odin slapped his fist against a tree trunk. “Enough! If you won’t help me, I will find someone who will.”

“Odin!” she shouted after him. He did not stop, did not turn back to face her. The goddess was quick to offer assistance—when it suited her—and withhold it when it did not. That refusal reeked of betrayal. That, or his own

delusion in allowing himself to believe she cared aught for the anguish suffered by Odin or his kin.

Leaving her behind, he trod to where his new blood brother took shelter. The man sat awake, staring into the flames of his fire pit almost as though he expected company. “Do you know where the Niflungar lurk?”

Loki motioned for Odin to sit across the flame. “Welcome, brother. Still you seek this amulet, and it so vexes you, but at last you begin to realise the questions you ought to have asked ere embarking on this undertaking.”

Odin groaned but did take the seat. “Damn it, Loki. Can I not have a straight answer?”

“Would you know one if you stumbled upon it?”

“What in the towering Gates of Hel does that mean?”

Loki dug a finger into the ash around the fire pit, drawing a line. “The simplest way to reach from one place to another is a straight line.” He dropped a stone in the middle of that line. “Unless of course a mountain blocks your path. Then you must assess whether to go around, under, or over—all to reach a destination you cannot actually see.”

“I do not seek a metaphor.”

“Perhaps that’s the problem. You assume that, despite the mountain in your path, the simplest road must still be a straight one.”

Odin snatched the rock and flung it out into the snow. “Who are the Niflungar? Where do they dwell?”

Loki sighed. “What do you know of the Old Kingdoms?”

Odin groaned. *More* lessons. “They dominated the North Realms for centuries. You said they all fell apart some eight hundred years ago, left a bunch of ruins. Oh, the Odlingar were one of them, as were the Döglinar whence come the therianthropic arts.”

“One of nine kingdoms, aye. Also among them, the most feared, most treacherous, were the Niflungar. They tried to conquer the North Realms, and though they were defeated—by your ancestors among the Lofdar—it

was not ere breaking many of the Old Kingdoms, and not without great cost to those who remained. The Niflungar fled from these lands and retreated into myth, into restless sleep, awaiting the day they might return.”

Gods, what had he agreed to? How was he to find these people at all in three moons, let alone retrieve the ghost’s stolen amulet? In a moment of desperation, he’d made any bargain he could to save his brother. Once again, he’d been a fool to give no thought to the cost. But he no longer had a choice. He had to save Vé.

“Brother ...” Odin blew out a breath. “In the time I have known you, I have come to rely a great deal on you.”

“You honour me with your trust.”

“Then tell me how to find the Niflungar. I understand what you say. Even Idunn tells me to turn away, that these people draw strength from the Otherworld. But I cannot turn back, surely you understand that. I will not abandon my brother to Mist-madness. The ghost is the only salvation to which I might yet turn.”

“Salvation is not the province of ghosts,” Loki said. “You are quick to cast aside warnings when truths do not suit you.” The man sighed. “The Niflungar’s power comes from Niflheim, the domain of Mist and of ... Hel herself.” Loki seemed to choke on that. Frightened? Him? “They are sorcerers, Odin, masters of the Art who would leave your völvur trembling in pools of their own urine and begging to wake from nightmares without end. And you are yet resolved to seek them out?”

“I’ve no choice!” Odin leant forward. “Do you not understand family, man?”

“Aye, brother, I understand family.” He looked to the fire pit and shook his head. Odin recalled the man had once *had* a child, and the implication he no longer did. “There are those who can answer any question, should they be so inclined. They can speak of all who walk on Midgard and even those who dwell beyond, for they watch from outside the bounds of time as

we see it. You call them Norns. And they will have your answers, if you can ask the right questions.”

Norns. Weavers of Urd, Mistresses of Fate. Every step he took carried him deeper into Mist-madness, into Realms beyond those of Men, beyond where any sane or living soul ought to tread. Even so, there remained no way back. Only forward. “So be it. Take me to them.”

“I will arrange it.” Loki rose.

“Wait, brother. I ... I owe you more and more with every passing day. Idunn has asked me to become king of the Æsir. I would have you by my side in this.”

Loki folded his arms over his chest and cocked his head. “I already swore a blood oath to you.”

Odin fished through his satchel and pulled out an apple. “You know what this is? Eat it when you find yourself free to take a woman.” Or three.

Odin’s foreign brother stared at it—an indecipherable light glinting in his crystal-blue eyes—ere taking it and slipping it into a sack at his side. “Even if you find the Niflungar, even if you steal the Singasteinn from them, still you have made other oaths that bind you.”

“That’s why I need you to help me become king. I gave apples to my brothers, too, and to Tyr.”

“A few immortal warriors will not put a crown on your head.”

Odin grunted. “No. But with them and Gungnir, it’s a damned good start. I’ll bend the people to my will, if I must, and offer them a better future.”

“Offer them? Or thrust it upon them for their own good? Thus speaks many a tyrant.”

Odin’s fist clenched at his side. Who in Hel’s name did Loki think he was? Odin had just given him fucking immortality, and his brother compared him to a tyrant? “Is that how you see me?”

“No, but others will. If you choose to follow Idunn, then consider carefully *how* you do so.”

Odin worked his jaw. In truth, Loki was probably right. As usual. But Loki also understood the twisted urd cast upon Vé. “I had to make this bargain.” With a sigh Odin rose and left to walk the grounds. In the day, the Mist wasn’t as bad, and one need not fear the vaettir—at least not as much. According to Idunn, he should now be immune to the effects of the Mist. He was one of a lucky few, whilst the rest of the Æsir suffered under a plague stretching back five thousand years. But still, he’d be careful to heed Heidr’s words on caution. It was a mistake he would never repeat.



IN THE WOODS just beyond the tents, a horse neighed. Odin jerked at the sound. Horses were rare and valuable beasts, and the Wodanar had few enough that no one would let one roam free. He crept forward to the edge of a copse. Despite Odin’s attempt at stealth, Loki beckoned to him. Odin rose to join him, then balked. The horse Loki led had eight legs, a pair jutting from each shoulder and hip joint.

“What in Hel’s frozen underworld is that?”

“This,” Loki said, guiding the horse toward Odin, “is Sleipnir. Finest steed in the lands, and one who can guide you anywhere in Midgard and beyond.”

“It’s a godsdamned monster.”

The horse snorted at him, eyes flaring red.

Loki folded his arms across his chest. “Legend says ere the World was formed, there slept primeval abominations. Their offspring became dragons and monsters. Ere the Mist, many had been driven into hiding or hunted to extinction. Long ago, great winged horses were common, and such a beast

could have taken you anywhere. Now few, if any, remain. But Sleipnir is ancient and wise. Earn his trust and he will earn yours.”

Earn the damned horse’s trust? Like a troll’s rocky arse. “And the horse will take me to the Norns?”

“They are keepers of the past, present, and future. Sleipnir has seen the secret places they dwell and can carry you there. But I urge you to use caution among them.”

Loki was a bit too full of his own mystery. “You speak like a völva, man. Can you not just guide me yourself?”

“Trust me, brother. And trust Sleipnir.”

Odin sighed and shook his head. Truth was, he could afford to waste no time. Three moons sounded long enough to find a clan or kingdom nigh to Aujum. But a foreign people, driven into hiding? And sorcerers. Warriors Odin could best, monsters he could slay. But seidr was a thing not meant for men ... *Necromancer, shaman* ...

Nor could he leave Vé for long. By Freyr’s flaming sword, he would *not* lose his little brother. Odin’s mother was gone, and now his father. No more. There was no time. “Tell the others where I have gone.”

The horse had no saddle, so he slung himself over bareback and tucked Gungnir in front of him. A hand on the horse’s mane to steady himself, he turned to Loki. “Tell them I will return soon.” Odin hesitated. “Brother. I need you to guard the last two apples well. Save them until I decide who to trust.”

“I shall do so.”

Odin tossed him the satchel. This was madness, more like than not. But Odin needed answers. He could not save Vé without knowledge. He kicked his heels into the horse and it bucked. Odin slipped from the sudden motion and spilled over the horse’s neck. The deep snow cushioned his fall, leaving him dazed only a moment. “Godsdamned beast!” he spat.

Loki shook his head and stood with hands behind his back, saying naught but raising a brow when Odin looked to him. *Earn the horse's trust.* Stupid animal.

After brushing himself off, Odin moved to Sleipnir's head and placed a hand along it. "Please." The horse neighed. Hopefully a good sign. Odin grabbed his spear then leapt back on the horse again and pressed his knees together. "Take me to the Norns, Sleipnir. *Please.*"

The horse took off at a trot, forcing Odin to lean low and clutch his mane. Sleipnir darted around trees and obstacles with no guidance from Odin. It was fast—much faster than a horse had any right to be. On and on it charged. Trees swept past in a blur. His mount moved at unearthly speed. Apt, as his quest was like to take him beyond the bounds of Midgard.



AN HOUR'S TRAVEL, and Odin recognised an old ruin as they passed it. Impossible—that place was eighteen miles from Eskgard. It should have taken nigh unto a day to reach it. Sleipnir charged onward, never slowing. The horse ran up the steep incline of a hill and leapt right off it, clearing the distance to an icy precipice ahead.

"Whoa! What in Njörd's name are you doing?" Odin yanked the horse's mane to slow him. "I want to get there in one piece. If that means we arrive a bit slower—"

A low growl rumbled through the hills, cutting him off. Odin turned to the side in time to see a snow bear rise up on its hind legs. He fell backward, trying to clear the bear's claws, but they swept across his shoulder. The claws ripped through his furs, hauberk, and skin like a blade through stewed meat. Sudden pain blurred his vision, and the force of the blow hurled him aside.

Sleipnir snorted, raising hooves to kick the snow bear. It backed away under the assault, then roared. Odin crawled forward, pulling himself toward Gungnir where it had fallen, twenty feet away. He was never going to make it. The bear roared again, moving in on him. Odin pulled himself to his feet, fighting the pain in his shoulder. He would die standing, a man of the Æsir. The animal reared up on its hind legs, bringing both paws down on Odin. Odin screamed back at it in defiance. Its forelegs fell on him like boulders.

And he caught them.

His feet dug into the snow as the impact drove him backward, but he held up the bear's legs. His arms ached with the struggle of keeping the beast away. It snapped its jaws at him, snarling. Gods ... He was holding up a bear. He was holding up a fucking *bear*!

Odin roared back at the animal. "I am Odin! God among Men!" For an instant, the beast recoiled, as if shocked a man was matching its strength. In response, rage and power boiled inside Odin.

Sleipnir reared, kicking the bear in the back of the head. Dazed, it shook its maw. Odin dropped the bear's legs, and it slumped down. Damned animal could have killed him. Odin punched it right in the nose. Bones crunched under the blow, and the bear whimpered. Odin roared at it again and landed a wild haymaker atop its skull. The impact stung his fist and cracked open the bear's skull. It collapsed into the snow, blood oozing from its mouth.

Hel's frozen tits. He'd just punched a bear to death.

His legs gave out from under him as his newfound strength seeped away and he fell to the snow. Sudden pain in his shoulder raged. His hands had gone numb. He'd probably cracked his own bones with that absurd stunt. He was losing blood from the gouges in his shoulder. Thanks to Sleipnir's speed, he was far from Eskgard.

He had to get up. The horse nuzzled him, eliciting another grunt of pain. “Aye, thank you.” Sleipnir was offering his head, wasn’t he? Odin grabbed on, and Sleipnir rose, pulling Odin to his feet. Then the horse knelt in the snow, allowing Odin to mount more easily. First, he paused to retrieve Gungnir, then mounted.

He’d underestimated his new friend. “Thank you,” he said again.

And would the apple stop him from bleeding to death? He supposed he would soon find out.



SLEIPNIR CARRIED Odin far and fast in the morn, and the next day beyond that, and again. The days blurred as much as the miles, and they passed far beyond aught he had ever known. The eight-legged horse carried him to the east, beyond all Æsir lands and back through Bjarmaland where the clans had lived ere the Great March of Vingethor. And beyond, in mountains that stretched into the sky and covered the land as far as he could see. On one of those peaks he’d paused, looking out at the world above the Mist, a world stretching so much farther than he’d ever imagined. And over that Mist, running through the heart of the mountains, rose a wall of impossible height and thickness.

The sight left him trembling, shivering atop the monstrous steed. Skalds and völvur spoke of the fortification with the reverence of the works of gods one never expected to lay eyes upon. But the stories were true. Out of these mountains, the Vanir had raised the Midgard Wall to enclose the middle world, shut it out from Utgard, the outer world. Beyond that wall lay the Realms of utter chaos, the wilds of Jötunheim and Njörd alone might know what else. And to serve its purpose, the wall must run for thousands of miles, around the Hyrcanian Sea and beyond.

Far-wandering travellers told stories of Serkland, a Realm of savage foreigners across a southern sea and thus outside the sphere of Midgard. If those Serklanders were Men, did they worship other gods? Were there other gods besides the Vanir?

At last, they climbed a mountain peak he would have called impassable on his own. But the horse's every step fell surefooted. Icy winds bit at Odin. They had passed through the chill of the Mist and above it, and now he clung to Sleipnir as much for warmth as to keep his seat.

The horse snorted at a series of rocky protrusions along the mountainside, causing Odin to afford them a second glance. Slowly, the scope of what he beheld took shape before him, seeming almost blasphemous. For those protrusions were giant bones, encrusted with ice, melded into the mountainside through the inescapable force of time. Ice-laden ribs jutted up like arcing lances, whilst a monstrous skull formed a hollow mound. This thing, it would have matched Ymir for size, maybe even stood above the behemoth that had slain Odin's father.

No longer could any doubt remain that Odin had crossed the threshold beyond Midgard, beyond the World of Men, and passed into spaces unknown and forbidden. Völvur would have called him Mist-mad for daring such a place. But what else was there for it? To turn back, to abandon Vé to his cruel urd? No, Odin was not one to meekly accept an unpalatable destiny.

He rode on, trying not to think on how the skeleton's owner would have looked if alive, or on what manner of creature might have *slain* such a monster. His stomach growled. The apple sustained him, though his supplies dwindled, and he found himself eating but a few mouthfuls at a time. Even once he found these Norns, still he would have to return to the known lands.

"I hope Loki knows what he's doing." The horse snorted. "Aye, I trust you." Absurd, one-sided conversation. Yet, he was glad for it. Without

someone to talk to, even a horse, madness might indeed have set in. His breath frosted the air, and his cheeks had gone numb. This place would be the death of him, apple or not, unless he found warmth quickly. The horse followed a winding route up the mountain that had begun to look suspiciously like a path. At last a hall came into view—a hold carved right into the mountain. An ice-crusted overhang kept the snow from gathering too heavily on iron double doors taller than he was. Runes like those he'd seen in the Odling castle covered them.

Odin raised his fist to knock, but the doors creaked open on their own. Given the choice, he'd have stayed well clear of aught reeking of sorcery, but then, he needed these sisters. Loki claimed they were keepers of past and future. Perhaps that meant they could guide him toward his destiny; mostlike, though, they would try to steer it. Either way, if they could tell him of the Niflungar, he had no choice but to descend into the foreboding passage.

Inside, a row of braziers lined each side of the hall, which descended farther into the mountain than he could see. The dancing flames set shadows leaping around the ceiling, flowing like a churning river. The passage looked sepulchral, yet Odin saw no sign of ghosts, as if not even the dead could linger here. Despite himself, despite his resolve, he hesitated.

Gungnir in hand, Odin glanced back at Sleipnir, who neighed. "Best have done, then?" He clenched his fist and strode through the threshold. He'd gone no more than a dozen steps ere the doors swung closed behind him. Starting, Odin levelled Gungnir. "Show yourselves, völvur!" His voice echoed down the hold, making him cringe. No answer returned to him. Even with the doors shut, he could see, thanks to the braziers, though he didn't relish wandering through the dark hall. The flickering flames cast pitiful light that gave way to deep stretches of shadows, all dancing to an unheard song.

Were these Norns human *völvur*, or were they *vaettir*? The latter, he began to suspect as he pressed on down the sloping path. Perhaps *fjallalfar*—*dvergar*—for such beings dwelt beneath mountains, or so *skalds* held. He walked longer than he could track the time. Hours, perhaps. Still the path went on and on; still the braziers continued. He should have been well under the mountain by now. The apple had given him stamina beyond mortal limits, he knew, for despite the hunger and the distance, he still had energy to carry on. “Go up the mountain, go down the mountain,” he mumbled. And he’d have to repeat the whole process to get out, wouldn’t he? Had Loki known about this when making his fool metaphor with the rock? Mostlike he did. Odin’s blood-brother always knew a hair too much.

Odin could boast of his journey here, but the clan would think it just that: a boast. A hall carved into a mountain, and the Sisters of Fate? Indeed, why anyone would choose to live here was beyond him. What was it Loki had said? That *Sleipnir* would carry him across *Midgard* and beyond, to the lands of the Norns. Did this mean he had passed into the Otherworld, or merely *Utgard*? He had reached perilously close to the *Midgard Wall*, so he might well have crossed some other boundary between worlds. Though the hall was shut against the mountain wind, a sudden chill passed through him and he pulled his cloak tighter. More than once Odin caught himself looking back over his shoulder. Maybe he erred, seeking out these Sisters of Fate. Maybe he should return to *Sleipnir*. But if he did so, if he abandoned this path, he had no way to find the *Niflungar*, least of all in the time the ghost had given him. Already the days had begun to slip away from him. This remained his best chance. Fast as his new steed could run, still it had taken nigh unto half a moon to reach this mountain.

He had to save *Vé*. He had to. So he trudged onward, keenly aware of the echoes of his boots upon the stone floor. Every sound he made here seemed magnified, for it competed only with the crackle of flames. And was it his imagination, or did those braziers grower dimmer as he

descended, dwindling down to embers, as if even they feared to pass into such foreign worlds? Odin's palms had grown clammy; a chill sweat beaded upon his neck and left his habergeon sticky, despite the cold air.

Odin half expected to see dvergar peering at him through shadows, crouching in the dark recesses between braziers. Vé, he spun tales of the dvergar, the mountain alfar, for they were said to have wrought fabled runeblades, the finest arms in all Midgard. Odin had wondered how such swords would stand against Gungnir. Either way, he saw no sign of any beings here, mortal or vaettr. Rather, it felt he trod into a space where breath itself, visible as it misted the air, became an intruder. A space beyond time, beyond places.

Finally, the path levelled out, opening into a wide, circular chamber, adumbrated by a single, sputtering brazier whose flame seemed primed to wink out any moment. As he trudged inward, the space seemed to groan like the floorboards of some ancient house, though he felt it rather than heard it. At the heart of the room stood a massive well, and around it, three hooded women. As if possessed of a single mind, each slowly craned her head toward him. Their cowls concealed their faces, and he could make out almost naught of their features.

"You are the Norns?" Odin asked, his heart hammering, his voice nigh breaking with the strain of this place. It was an intrusion, and affront, to speak here, he felt. For him, a Man, to violate the silence was akin to venturing upon the thinning ice of a frozen river well into summer, daring it to give way and pitch him into dark depths.

"We were," said the nearest, her voice the rasp of a hoary ancient who had seen too many winters.

"We are," said the next. From her came the sounds of a woman in the fullness of her life, heady even.

"We will be," the final answered, youthful.

Odin tried to release the tension in his muscles. "Your location is hard to reach."

"That was the point," the elder said.

"Location is irrelevant."

"We shall be where we need to be."

He glowered at their foolery. The women were *worse* than fucking völvur. He approached the one to his left, the eldest. "Can you tell me where to find the Niflungar?"

"You know not who you are," she said. Now her voice was no longer ancient, but fresh and healthy. "Nor who you've been."

Odin swallowed, uncertain how to fathom these creatures. He was certain that, somehow, their ages had shifted, as if, without moving, they had exchanged places. Or ... bodies ... "I do not understand."

"Correct," said the one who had seemed young and now sounded older than the mountains themselves. "Son of Borr, who felled the jötunn who once ruled this Realm. Eldest of three, descendant of Wodan."

He shifted his footing. They knew him already.

"All the powers went to the thrones of Fate," the middle woman said. "There to ruminate on the thoughts of stones, and the urd of a withering tree, whilst they await the roar of Jötunheim and the writhing of nine serpents."

"Now you fancy a child of the Vanir, grandchild of the far eastern isles," the first woman said. "New moon and dark moon. Dream of one who dreams of you, never the two dreams to meet. Still you wait for the one to hold your heart."

"Find your heart you shall," the third sister said, "and lose it, too. First, the burning child ignites a pyre you cannot staunch. A price must be paid for every gain, a hefty weight for each wisdom. Sight for sight, breath for breath. The seed of the one-eyed king falls in betrayal and languishes in Hel. The beginning of the end, time of fire, time of flood. The land trembles

and weeps ere the ravages she knows are to come. Axe-time, sword-time, come the sundered shields, wind-time, wolf-time. Never shall Men each other spare. The sun turns black, and the land sinks into the sea, while a conflagration feasts upon the heavens. Only fires burn pure, only ash will remain.”

Odin grunted, more unnerved by their nonsense than he’d have liked. “Sisters, you speak in riddles that mean naught to me. I’ve an oath to keep. Can you guide me to the Niflungar?” Or had he wasted time venturing here?

“Old places the people of the Mist favour,” the first sister said. “Places touched with ancient past where waits the doom of Men. When all lands have fallen do children cross the seas and dwell in sorrow, waiting upon the dimming of the sun. Night falls, and darkness wakens.”

More riddles. People of the Mist? Did that mean the Niflungar were somehow connected to the Mist of Niflheim? Why not—they seemed to have named themselves after it. And if the Norns thought them perilous, the doom of Men, he had to expect them deranged by overlong exposure to that Mist. But the rest, what did it even mean? Odin rubbed his face. “Speak plainly. I need answers, a location!”

“Knowledge has its price,” the middle sister said.

He stiffened, for he had not brought tribute, as well he should have. “What price?”

“The knowing,” the third sister said. “’Tis not easily unknown.”

Odin opened his mouth but had no idea how to answer that. “Your riddles serve no purpose.”

“We have spoken.”

“We will speak.”

That was all? All this way and that was all these women would tell him? Odin groaned. She said they *would* speak ... speak again? He hoped he had no reason to ever seek out these Norns again. Loki had said they held the

answers, but instead they had given him more questions. Maybe his foreign brother would understand their words, but Odin surely did not. Be these sisters goddesses, vaettir, or mere deranged völvur—they were too removed from the World to reach, and far too unnerving for him to wish to hear their counsel. He wanted to bellow at them, browbeat them into revealing what they knew; he dare not indulge such thoughts even in fancy.

No, best he returned to Sleipnir and was quit of this blighted mountain. Slowly, gaze upon the sisters, he backed away. When he reached the chamber's threshold, he turned, started down the hall. After a few paces, he glanced over his shoulder. The well stood alone in the darkness. The sisters had disappeared into the unknowable places they hailed from. The last light from the dying embers winked out, and the chamber itself was gone, forcing Odin to retreat back into the brazier-lit corridor.

Though he wanted to dismiss the Norns' words, in the hours trudging back up the mountain, Odin could not escape them. They rang through his mind like a funeral dirge. They blazed his consciousness like the pyre the sisters had spoken of.

None of it made any sense. None except ... *A price must be paid for every gain.* The pit of his stomach would not let that one go. Not even when he at last crested the slope and reached the icy mountain where Sleipnir waited.

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THE DÖGLINAR

25 Age of the Æsir

The winter had frozen the lake, allowing Hervor to walk to Bolmsö—the island of her father and paternal grandfather, a place that should have rung with the noise of civilisation. Instead, the only sounds she heard were the howling wind and a raven’s caw. She wrapt her bear fur cloak tighter about her as she trod onto the island. Snow crunched under her heels, making each step laborious. She should have waited for the storm to break. She should have brought snowshoes. Then again, she always hated people telling her what she *should* do.

Actually, the lake held hundreds of islands, and she’d had to search a long time to find the right one. This *had* to be it. A thick copse of trees decorated the shoreline. Evergreens, though fresh snows had weighed down their branches. The raven she’d heard must be somewhere in those boughs, watching her, a sentinel in this otherwise forgotten place.

She pushed on. The trees cut down on the wind’s bite, at least a little. She sniffed. Her face still burnt with the cold, but she’d live. More snow crunched behind her. At once, she spun, fumbling with the cloak to free her

sword hilt. No one there. Frozen in place, she looked from tree to tree. She had heard *something*. She jerked her sword free. “Whoever you are ...”

The moment she spoke, a reindeer broke between the trees, covering great swathes of land in a heartbeat. Hervor blew out a breath. The isolation was getting to her. She hadn’t seen a person in days, not since some fisherman pointed her in this direction. Only a few of the islands even had people living on them.

She sheathed her blade and pressed on. On the far shore, a wooden hall rose from the landscape. What was left of it, anyway. A large section of the roof had caved in, exposing the east side of the hall. Snowdrifts piled into the gap, choking the hall. The doors stood ajar, so she slipped inside. Mist clogged the interior, swirling in thick eddies that danced about her, held back by her torch. The hall’s heart had been the fire pit, of course. And it had gone long cold now, naught but cinders. Ash. No one had lived here in a long time.

Hervor moved to the walls. Tapestries still hung there, one depicted great battles with a bear at the heart of them. A berserk. Her grandfather, perhaps. The Döglinar were one of the Old Kingdoms, originally. Their royal bloodline had been—almost—wiped out in the wars that brought low all those kingdoms, but some few of the Döglinar survived. They were hearty folk, famed for the number who possessed the therianthropic gift of varulfur or berserkir. Since learning royal blood ran through her veins, Hervor had oft cursed that she had not that gift. She had imagined herself becoming a bear, fierce and unconquerable, wild and free. She dreamt of it, even. Maybe, if Arrow’s Point had not murdered her father, he would have taught her the secret to such a thing.

For traveling around the countryside had eventually turned up skalds happy to weave tales of those otherwise forgotten days. Of the perilous berserk Arngrim, feared by all. So pleased was the king with his champion thegn, he granted him not only the title of jarl but use of a runeblade, an

heirloom forged by dvergar long ago. Father had sought to restore the Döglinar, but the Arrow's Point had denied her entire clan. Somehow she had allowed herself to hope her grandfather would be here, would tell those stories himself. But there was no one here. This place was dead and forgotten, much as all her kin.

There were not any treasures left for her to claim. No inheritance. No wealth to hire men to join her quest. The tapestries had value, but they were too large for her to carry back across the lake. Whatever had lain here was plundered long ago.

An intake of breath from the doorway drew her eye. As she turned, a figure burst forth, running.

"Wait!" she called. Whoever it was did not stop. Hervor dashed after the figure. The trespasser was short, slim, and very quick. He darted between the trees and leapt over a pile of rocks. Hervor's feet slid on ice, and she near slammed into the rock pile. Damn it. She scrambled over the rocks, then skidded down a slope. The boy glanced over his shoulder. Only it wasn't a boy. A girl, maybe twelve winters. "Stop!" Hervor shouted.

The girl did not stop, raced behind a tree and vanishing from view.

Hervor panted as she reached the spot. "Girl, I mean you no harm. Come out." She turned about. The girl's footprints in the snow stopped at this tree. She looked up. Crouched over a branch, the girl stared down at her. Hervor folded her arms over her chest. "Come down from there."

"Not fucking likely."

She almost wanted to smile at that. "I mean you no harm. Who are you?"

"I'm the queen of this island, so you best get away ere I call my guards."

The queen. Now Hervor couldn't quite stop the smile from reaching her lips. "Do call them, then." The girl glanced away to the north, and Hervor followed her gaze. "Is that where your parents are?"

“My father is Odin himself, so you better flee ere he arrives.”

“Why? I’d be eager to meet the King of the Gods. I’ve questions aplenty for him.” The girl stuck out her lip and looked around. Probably trying to think up another retort. Hervor could ill afford to waste the scant daylight hours with more of this game. “Come down now, Queen. Take me to your people, whoever they are. If you cooperate, I won’t harm you. But if you make me climb that damned tree and get you ...”

Indecision warred on the girl’s face ere she finally groaned. Then she leapt from the tree and landed in the snow in a crouch. As she started to rise, Hervor snatched up a handful of the girl’s cloak. No sense giving her the chance to run off again. “Come on, Queen. Lead the way.”

With a sullen glance, the girl did so, guiding her to a small house a short distance from the fallen hall. As they approached, an aging couple rose from the shore and walked to meet them. The man had an axe in his hand, albeit one better suited for chopping wood than battle.

“What do you want?” the man demanded.

“This your daughter?” He nodded. With a gentle shove, Hervor sent the girl scurrying off toward her parents. “Who are you? What are you doing on this island?”

“It’s our home.”

“This is *my* island. I claim it as the last heir of Arngrim. And I ask you again, who are you?”

The couple exchanged glances, then the man spoke, lowering the axe. “Come inside. Eventide comes, and no Man ought chance the night.”

Hervor nodded.



THE WOMAN OFFERED her water and hot fish, both of which Hervor took gratefully. Even more so, the warmth of their fire. When she had eaten, the

man spoke. “We were thralls of Jarl Arngrim, a long time ago. You’re too young to be his daughter.”

“Granddaughter. My father was Angantyr.” The former thrall nodded, obvious wariness in his eyes. Hervor licked fish juice from her fingers ere settling her gaze first on the woman, then the man. “I’ve no mind to disrupt your lives. But I will have my birthright, and I would like to know what happened here.”

The man clucked his tongue and looked to his wife ere speaking. “Scant birthright left. A long time ago—we were young then ... what, maybe twenty winters back, word came the lord and lady’s sons were killed in battle. Not just one or two, all twelve of them. Nobody believed it. They’d never lost a battle; they were invincible. Everyone said so, always sure Angantyr would succeed in taking the throne, restoring the Döglinar.”

“But they never came home,” the woman said. “Never came back. Winter passed, and in summer, Jarl Arngrim set out. We heard he cast himself into the sea, so we supposed it was all true.” She took Hervor’s cup and refilled it, then began to clear away the plates. “After that, everyone urged Lady Eyfura to go back to the lands of her father in Holmgard. She wouldn’t listen, though, just kept waiting here, like she thought the men would yet return.”

Hervor cleared her throat when the woman fell silent. “And?”

“And they didn’t, of course,” the man said. “The princess wasted away. What was left of the population fled. We ...”

“You thought you may as well claim it as your own.”

The man scowled. “I never dared claim it, my lady.”

She waved the thought away. “As long as you respect my claim, I welcome your presence here.”

“Will you rebuild the great hall, lady?” the woman asked.

Hervor shook her head. “I cannot rebuild my family’s home while they remain unavenged. The kings of Uppsalar and their champion destroyed our

entire line.” She spat in the fire. “Now I learn they are to blame for the death of my grandparents, as well. No.” She ran her tongue over her teeth. No, it was too much. A weight, a burden that only served to reinforce her oath. “Await my return and if anyone should chance upon this island, tell them the last descendant of Arngrim claims all that should be hers.”

She would need wealth to challenge the Yngling dynasty. Hervor knew one sure way to earn wealth. Red-Eye had taught her that.



A FEW MOONS of raiding and piracy had earned her a small share of booty and a loyal enough crew. Sure, she’d had to kill their former captain for the position. But few men wanted to follow a leader with no head, so she’d given them an easy choice.

They had stopped at a town on Sjaelland to resupply ere setting out for Samsey. As the largest island of the Morimarus, Sjaelland was home to numerous seaside towns, each within the domain of one jarl or another. The island was fertile and thus immensely valuable. Legend claimed the Vanr Gefjon had dug up the whole island and sown it, though the Vanir were all gone now. Still, the Skjöldungar claimed her blood ran in their veins, and this island was oft considered the heart of their domain.

The prosperous towns of Sjaelland had provided a large sum of plunder, though of course not from the domain she visited now.

“I mislike it,” Viggo said. “Men say the island is haunted and not without reason, I think.” On raids, all men were equal, or so the thought went. In practice, the crew was hers, and Viggo was the most respected. He’d earned a reputation for once cleaving a man from skull to sternum—exaggerated, perhaps, though he was a big man. They walked together through the town while the rest of the crew was out trading for ale, bread,

and the like. Or looking for thrall girls to bend over when their masters were not around.

“It will be a short stop,” Hervor promised. She shifted the sack she carried over her shoulder. Its contents had soaked through the canvas and began dripping blood on the ground. More than one townsman gave her a wary look.

“And a wasted one.”

She couldn’t refuse to tell the crew where they were meant to sail. On the other hand, Viggo’s reluctance to go to Samsey was problematic. They passed by a smithy, and the warrior paused to examine an axe most men would have needed two hands to wield. Sacrificing a shield would never be worth it, but a man Viggo’s size could do more, manage more. He had his uses.

“How does an island become haunted?” she asked.

He pricked his thumb on the tip of the axe. “Too many men die without a proper sending, no pyre. No völvá.”

“Which means?”

Viggo offered a bronze arm ring to the smith, who nodded. The warrior slung the axe over his shoulder—it was too large to sit on his hip, even had he not two other axes there already. “Means ... they come back as ghosts, draugar, whatever.”

He had his uses but was not the smartest man on her crew. It didn’t matter. She didn’t recruit for brains. “It means people lived there once. People lived there and left behind all they had when they died. Ruins means treasures, and stories of hauntings mean not many men go after that treasure. Silver, maybe even gold.”

Viggo grunted, eyes lit with the glimmer of interest. Hervor hoped to find plunder there, though most importantly, her father’s sword. Anyone who wielded a runeblade would find him or herself the subjects of a skald’s tales. Those were the ones who did great and terrible deeds, who shaped

history and found lasting fame. And with such a sword, she could begin to avenge her father. The trouble was, she didn't even know for certain where on the island to look. And if Viggo was any indication of the rest of the crew, they wouldn't want to spend long there.

Fortunately, this town was famed for its völva. Word said she heard the voices of the gods, dreamt the past and future. Such a woman held promise for Hervor's errand. The sack was not heavy, but it felt awkward, especially trying not to let it stain her clothes.

"Go back to the ship. Make sure everyone is ready to leave at dawn."

Viggo shrugged and trotted off. Hervor wandered the town, asking for directions until she found the völva's house, well beyond the town wall, nestled between the hills. Animal skulls adorned the fence around that house. A deer, a wolf. The big one must belong to a cave lion. Other skulls she couldn't even be certain about. A rabbit, maybe. She swung open the gate and approached the house. The door stood open, so she ducked inside. The place stank of burning weeds and strange herbs. The witch had no furniture, just benches built into the walls, half of which were laden with mushrooms, animal skins, or pots filled with Odin alone knew what. The fire in the pit had burnt low, casting the room in such deep shadow it took a moment to spot the old woman.

She sat on one of those benches, gnawing on a branch. Only a few teeth remained and those were oddly pointed, like a wolf's. Her eyes were glazed over, milky white. She spat a piece of bark out as Hervor approached.

"Seer," Hervor said. The woman slurped, sucking down black goop that had dribbled over her lip. Hervor knelt before the woman. "Men say you know many things."

"Men say many things. Rarely are all true."

"Can you help me?"

"No one can help one intent on destroying herself."

Hervor frowned. "I strive to restore the legacy of my bloodline."

“A legacy of blood, aye.” The witch didn’t look at her so much as at the space behind her. She giggled, then continued to gnaw on the stick.

“Tell me of Samsey,” Hervor said. The seer snorted at that, coughed, and spat. The thick phlegm landed less than a foot from where Hervor knelt. Hervor frowned, then opened the sack and drew the heart out of it. She tossed the cold, bloody thing at the völva’s feet. “I hear you collect hearts.”

“Ehh.” She sniffed, then snatched the thing up. Squeezed it. “Ehh. Not beating.”

“Of course it’s not fucking beating!”

The völva licked the heart. “Mmm. Stag, a strong one.”

“Did you expect a human heart?”

She licked her lips. “Ehh. That’s the best, of course. Deep lives, deep souls, lots of light. So much darkness.” She giggled.

Hervor leant forward barely able to stop herself from clutching the old witch by the shoulders and shaking her. “Where does my father lie?”

“In burning torment, in freezing lament. In cold ground as was the wont of fallen lands, wakeful and grim.”

Cold ground. “He was buried?”

“But not forgotten. Left behind yet lingering. Layers upon layers of warped agony.”

Buried in a grave, perhaps. But she had said something about fallen lands. Maybe she meant the Old Kingdoms. They entombed their dead in barrows. “Where on the island do I find these barrows?”

“So many questions you ask, and none of the right ones.” She giggled again. “If you ask the right questions, you won’t need the answers.”

Hervor threw up her hands. “Fine. What is the right question?”

“At last! You inquire after wisdom. Good, good.” She sniffed the heart again, ere setting it down in her lap. “Won’t save you, though. Too stubborn to listen to wisdom when freely given ... and you’d think to bargain for it?”

Hehehe. The gods are watching, little girl. They watch whilst you fumble around in the dark.”

“The gods can keep their riddles. I only ask upon which shore I should make land. I gave you the filthy heart, now tell me, witch!”

The völva shook her head, uttering a chittering sound like a rabid squirrel. Then she licked her lips. “Like a child, you stumble until the children you will anger. They too are wakeful, now. Wakeful, mindful, wrathful. Go then, shieldmaiden, make land upon the southern shores. And if you so dare, wake the dead and embrace the urd laid before you.” The south. A place to start, at last, and worth the effort of hunting down the deer. If perhaps not quite worth the irritation of dealing with this crone. “One last question I will answer. If a good one you ask.”

Hervor stood. “I have no more questions for you, witch.”

“More’s the pity. The answer might have offered you solace when the night grows long.”

Hervor sneered and turned away but looked back ere she exited. “The answer would have been one more riddle trying to warn me about something that would only make sense once it had become too late. Such solace avails no one. I will have my vengeance, and I will make my own urd.”

The völva favoured her with a wide, toothy grin, and laughed. That laughter continued to ring out of the house as Hervor fled back to the street.

It followed her all the way back to her ship.

DAYS GONE: TYR

799 Age of Man

*T*he ice spread out over the Gandvík Sea for a dozen feet or more. It created a shelf Tyr now walked on with Annar Ótmarson. His journey back to Athra-held lands had felt different. Easier. A new strength rose in him, an endurance. As if the apple had reinforced his muscles. Not only would he live forever, but he'd be more than a Man. How was he supposed to feel about that?

In the distance, a whale breached. Both men drew to a stop, watching. "Whalers are too far out," Annar said. "They'll be cursing themselves for missing that beauty. Would have fed us through the rest of winter."

Tyr grunted. Though they stared at the deep, no other sign of the whale arose. Mist covered the sea. You couldn't see far anyway. "You'll have to send him back there," Tyr said at last.

"So Odin agreed to it?"

"Ugh." Odin had barely heard two words about the Athra and the Godwulfs. *Make me king*, he'd said. Well, Tyr would do it.

"I thought you hated using the lying traitor."

“I do.” Tyr spat on the ice. “Fucker should be hanged. But we have more to lose by not acting.”

“Suppose we do. Doesn’t seem like you, though.”

And how well did this jarl think he knew Tyr? With a scowl, he turned to look back at the town. “It’s not just me. There’s a hand guiding mine and Odin’s both.”

“Oh?”

Men might deny it. Call him a liar or a madman. But some might believe. Maybe it would give them an edge. And Hel, Tyr needed to tell *someone*. “A Vanr is driving this.”

“Ah. You mean a vólva. That Heidr, aye?” Annar started back for the town, Tyr following.

“Naw, she’s dead. I mean an actual Vanr came to us, bid Odin do something.”

Annar faltered, looked back. “Trollshit. What are you playing at?”

“Not much of a tafl player.” He paused. “Idunn came to Odin.”

“The goddess?” Annar chuckled. “Next you’ll tell me my cousin had a romp with her too.”

Ah. Well, not Odin. Not so far as Tyr knew. He frowned, shook his head. “Whether you believe or not does not matter overmuch. Something does matter. World is changing, Annar. Odin’s going to change it more.”

“Meaning?”

Tyr walked in silence until they reached the fence around Annar’s hall. He leant on that fence. Went inside. Let the traitor go free and hope he spoke the truth. Bold move. And as Tyr had said, he wasn’t much for tafl.

“I’m here for Odin, helping you save your people. One day soon, Odin will come. Come and call the Althing. Not to try any great crime. He will stake his claim as king of the Æsir. You will support him.”

Annar coughed, looked around. “He is my cousin, aye—”

Tyr looked down at the log forming a horizontal beam of the fence. Anger swelled in him. Heat. Power. He slammed his fist on it. The log cracked and splintered. Whole chunk of the fence crashed down. Everyone in earshot paused, staring. Tyr had wanted Annar's attention. Hadn't really expected that dramatic an effect. "Odin is chosen by the Vanir. And if you would have us as allies, I will have your oath."

Annar swallowed, looked at the fence, at his people. Shook his head. "Gods. So be it. I give my word. Stop the Godwulfs, and Odin will have my voice at the Althing."

That put two clans in line.

Seven more would need to be won over.



ESKGARD OFFERED a welcome sight after his time away. It seemed every time Tyr came home he'd had to leave almost as soon. Back into the Mist, into the cold. Such went kingmaking.

Much had changed, if not here, then in Athra lands. Much Odin needed to hear. This time, Tyr would force him to listen. The jarl could no longer push aside his duties. Tyr headed straight for the great hall. The doors stood half open, despite the chill. Vili reclined on Odin's throne. Fumbling with an empty drinking horn. Other men and women sat at the tables, passing around horns. Talking. Bored.

"Where is Odin?" Tyr demanded.

Vili chuckled. "Ask the goddess, maybe she knows. Or his new blood *brother*." He nigh spat the last word, pointing to the corner where Loki sat, alone.

Tyr ignored the foreigner. "Odin is away?"

Vili snorted. "Long away. Whilst the rest of us pass a dull winter." He thumped a large index finger against an armrest. "Come summer, I say we

raid somewhere.”

“Borr spent his life bringing peace between the clans.”

Vili shrugged. “Father’s dead. Besides, we can raid into Hunaland, Reidgotaland, anywhere. Fuck a troll if I care.” He slapped the armrest. “We can join the Friallafs against Miklagard!” Men called the southern empire soft in one breath. Undefeatable in the next. Decadent, but vast.

Tyr slumped down on a bench before Vili. Not the most articulate of Borr’s sons. Strong, though. Brave. Maybe more honourable than Odin. Tyr sighed. “Your cousin Annar finds himself beset by the Godwulfs.”

“You want us to fight werewolves?” Vili banged his fist against his armrest again and grinned. “Now that’s more like it. I can rip a wolf clean in half. Owe them too, after that raid.”

“Huh. Maybe. But it’s not about us. It’s about a rivalry between the Hasdingi and the Godwulfs. I aim to maintain the peace your father built. Not break it.”

Vili scoffed, waving the thought away.

If Odin wasn’t here, maybe Idunn would know what to do next. Tyr rose, turned to find her. Instead he nigh crashed into Loki a half step behind him. “What do you want, foreigner?”

“You are keen to bind the clans to Odin. Some can be bound with silver, some with sword, but one bond holds stronger than either.”

Vili chuckled. “He always talks like that. Should’ve been a skald.”

“What are you on about?” Tyr asked.

“Jarl Hadding of the Hasdingi is old and dying, and with a sole heir, the woman, Frigg, who remains unmarried. Nor does Odin have a wife. You might well bind the clans together with a marriage. And with the Wodanar joined to the Hasdingi, do you think the Godwulfs might well reconsider their course of aggression? Especially facing three clans united against them.”

“A wedding!” Vili roared. “By Hel, yes. That would give us some fucking excitement. Get old Hadding busting out his finest mead.” Vili pointed at Loki. “I thought I didn’t like you. Becoming a brother to Odin and so forth. But you helped us kill Ymir, and now this. You are a good man.”

Tyr doubted that. Nevertheless, the plan did sound workable. A marriage alliance between the heads of two clans would secure another clan under Odin. And possibly an end to the Godwulf clan’s attacks at the same time.

“All right. I will visit Hadding and propose this.”

“I will accompany you,” Loki said. “I know the jarl, and they know me there.”

“Good, good,” Vili said. “Be quick about it. I want that damned feast.”

He had only just returned once again. Tyr grumbled under his breath.



IDUNN SAT on the fence outside her house. Balance should have been awkward. She was like a cat. Tyr blinked, tried to not imagine her naked again. Writhing. Her pulse joining his own. Her warmth wrapt around him like ... No! Gods. Get it out of his head. He’d had a wife. And he’d lost her. Idunn was right. She wasn’t Zisa.

She was a goddess, though. “Tyr!” Warm smile. Warm arms. So perfect, wrapt around him.

He nodded at her. “I have a plan. I’m going to Halfhaugr. I’ll arrange Odin’s marriage to Frigg, the jarl’s daughter. Should swing that clan our way. Might give the Godwulfs pause, too.”

“Oh, wonderful. That’s a lovely plan. I almost wish I could go as well, but he’ll expect me here.”

“Uh. Wasn’t my plan, really. Loki suggested it, even insisted on coming.”

“Loki?” Idunn frowned. Expression ill suited her. Aught that made the goddess frown set a vein throbbing in his head. “The foreigner.”

“Indeed. Why? You know aught of him?”

“A little, maybe. A wanderer, that one, dabbling in the affairs of others where he ought not.”

Tyr scowled. He’d known that bastard would bring ill fortune to the Wodanar. Idunn fretted over him, too. Almost enough to make Tyr crack the man’s skull and be done with it. Save for his oath to Odin. To Borr. “Is there more?” No way he could act against Odin’s blood brother. Not without serious charge.

Idunn sighed, then shook her head. “I cannot say. The marriage might still serve our ends, Tyr. Odin needs the support of the Hasdingi, and Halfhaugr is central to control of Aujum. Once, in days gone, this land was ruled from that seat.”

“Then come with me. Help me keep the foreigner in check.”

“Hmm. I wish I could. I have a ... duty here, a promise made to Odin.”

Shame that. Tyr grunted. “All right. We will speak when I return.”



THEY LEFT IN THE MORN, trusting to a dogsled to carry them far. Fewer nights spent in the wild the better. Tyr guided the sled, whilst Loki stared off into the Mist like he could see aught through it. After long hours of silence, the foreigner looked at him. Smirked. Brash trollfucker.

“What?” Tyr demanded.

“Some questions are best held close to one’s chest, true enough, but ask naught and you may learn even less. Vast ignorance is apt to disguise itself as common wisdom.”

Tyr shook his head, looked to the dogs. “What the fuck does that mean?”

Loki chuckled. “It means you wish to ask something but still your tongue. Deep down, part of you realises that uncovering the answer means exposing your worldview to scrutiny it might not endure.”

“You talk like a damned völva. You took Odin to fight this Ymir. Sons of Borr might’ve died up there. And now you’ve sent him off, Njörd knows where. Why?”

“Are you so certain Njörd knows so much?”

Tyr spat over the side of the sled. “You insult the Vanir now?”

“Has it occurred to you that you ask me questions and then complain when I have the answers?”

“What answers? You led Odin to fight Ymir. He tells it like you even aided him. But you tell no stories of your glory.”

“I’m not interested in glory.”

“And that’s the godsdamned problem. You can’t trust a man who doesn’t care for honour.”

Loki was staring off into space again. What did he see out there? A trap? Was the foreigner leading him into an ambush? “You think glory and honour are the same thing?”

“A child still on the teat knows that much, foreigner.”

“The pursuit of glory may one day cost you much.”

Tyr scoffed. “Are you a craven?”

Loki offered no answer, the bastard. Tyr’s accusation was unfounded, of course. The foreigner *had* gone up against the jötunn, even if he downplayed his role. He had gone where Tyr should have gone. But then, Loki had somehow tricked Odin into sending Tyr away. He must have.

And now, Loki had convinced him to have Odin marry Hadding’s daughter. The foreigner must have some greater scheme. But Idunn was the only one clever enough to unravel it. And she had said to arrange the wedding.

Tyr would do so, but he’d keep an eye on Loki. A careful eye.

INTERLUDE: THE KVENs

779 Age of Man
(Twenty Years Before the Rise of Odin)

*T*he Njarar king, Nidud, had his castle high up the mountain: a route that, even in summer, chilled Agilaz. Young Hermod made the climb without complaint, though his teeth chattered ere they reached the main gate. Decent folk did not live in such places. Still, Agilaz had to admit any attack against this fortress was doomed. From the platform above, he alone could probably hold off a small army. Despite the summer, ice still crusted the fortress, including the main gates. Guards with spears met him as he reached the landing, barring the way.

“I have come to see your king,” he said, certain Nidud hosted his brother Volund.

“And who are you?”

“Agilaz Farshot, thegn to your ally, Jarl Hadding Gundericson of Hasding clan in Aujum.”

The guards exchanged glances, then one of them ordered a runner sent to the king. The men guarding the platform did not invite them up, so

Agilaz wrapt an arm around his shivering son. So this was how King Nidud treated guests? It did not speak well for him, nor for Volund's likely urd here. None of the men spoke. Finally, the runner returned and whispered something in the ear of the guard who had sent him, who in turn whispered back. Agilaz frowned. What in Hel's frigid domain were these people about? The guards parted then, and the apparent leader waved him forward.

Agilaz glared at the man who had kept them waiting in the cold before accepting his invitation. They escorted him through the great doors into a long hall, their footfalls echoing behind them. Agilaz stilled the urge to glance over his shoulder as more echoes joined, those of men following, at least five of them. Hermod looked back, tried to speak, but Agilaz silenced him with a heavy grip on his shoulder. There was a time to acknowledge bad manners. All things had their proper time, and patience was oft the difference between wisdom and folly.

The Gautish king and his queen were too aged, especially the former. To hold a throne so long meant he must be either cunning, ruthless, or beloved. From what Agilaz had seen of the town, he doubted Nidud fell into the last category. The hall was high, with a vaulting ceiling supported by fluted columns of stone, their craftsmanship beyond any skill of Man. It proved a long walk to stand before the dais where sat King Nidud, and mostlike that was the point. Petitioners must come before the lord, awed and with growing apprehension with each step taken.

"Agilaz Wadeson," Nidud said. "Thegn to Jarl Hadding of the Hasdingi. Your exploits fast become legend, even here in Njarar."

Agilaz inclined his head. "King Nidud. I'm honoured you've heard of me."

"Indeed. If one believes the skalds, your archery skills would make you a match for Ullr himself."

"Never would I deign to compare myself to one of the Vanir."

Nidud chuckled. “How modest, archer. What do you wish here?” To the point then. No invitation of hospitality as custom dictated—only the barest pretence of civility to one who ought to be his ally. Did the king know who he was? He knew of Agilaz’s father, after all. It stood to reason he might understand the connection between Agilaz and Volund. It had been a mistake to reveal his parentage to the Æsir. If Nidud had heard his name, perhaps the dvergar might one day as well, and that boded yet more ill. Volund, though, he would have been wise enough not to reveal his heritage. Cunning ran through Volund’s veins thick as blood.

Agilaz frowned and gazed about the hall. A lot of men, well armed, and many wearing hauberks nigh as fine as Otwin had. “Word reaches us that you employ the finest craftsman in the World of Men. I would see this smith for myself and, with your permission, I would have him craft something for me as well.”

Nidud shifted on his throne and drummed his fingers. “With my boys away at war, this place has grown too quiet. Dull. I would have some entertainment. A demonstration of your legendary skill seems in order.”

“If it would please my king.”

“Oh, it would.” Nidud motioned, and guards encroached around Agilaz and Hermod. A pair of them grabbed his son. Agilaz reached for his knife, but a man punched him in the gut. Gasping, he fell to his knees as they dragged Hermod away. His boy was kicking, shouting for him.

“What treachery is this?” Agilaz could barely catch his breath, and still he stumbled to his feet. “Is this how Gautar treat allies?”

“Even a Kvenlander must know the custom, I’m sure. What better way to test a man’s aim than with a living target?”

The king’s men marched Hermod back toward the main entrance, in the middle of the hall. One placed an apple on the boy’s head, then backed away. Hermod stood, jaw clenched and only the slightest tremble in his legs.

Agilaz glowered. “This *game* is not played with children, but with grizzled raven-feeders.” And it was barbaric, often resulting in men being maimed, killed. Drunken fools and old men tired of life played thus, and even then, not so far a shot.

Nidud shrugged. “’Tis played between those vested in the outcome. Since there is no one else here you could be expected to care for, show us your skill. You can do it, can you not? Show me you are worthy of the workings of my smith.”

Agilaz glanced between his son and this vile king. What cruelty prompted such an act? Hadding was a fool to throw in with this man, no matter what he offered. And Volund ... he was here at this man’s mercy. But Volund was a man grown, and Hermod was Agilaz’s own son. His brother would not ask this of him under any circumstances.

“No craft is worth risking the life of my son,” he said. Damn Nidud, but Agilaz could not save his brother, not at such a cost. He’d feared to leave Hermod alone in Aujum, alone to be used or harmed by enemies Agilaz knew remained behind him. He had not considered Nidud would dream up such a mockery of hospitality. “I withdraw my request. I shall take my son and leave.”

Some of the men surrounding him grumbled in disappointment. What would Hadding do on learning of Nidud’s behaviour? Would the jarl consent to march against the Svjarland king? Even if he would, they could not seize this place. Such a war would be hopeless.

“It seems your prowess with a bow is exaggerated. How disappointing. Or perhaps you need more motivation?” The king rose and advanced, one shambling step at a time. “How about this then? Shoot the apple, or you both hang from the platform for, say, an hour? Does that entice you to a demonstration?”

Freyr’s flaming sword, the king had gone Mist-mad. Agilaz knew his mouth hung open, but he could find no words, even in his own mind. He

felt empty. Blank. That, of course, was the best way to shoot. With a long, low breath, he let his quiver slip to the floor. Then he pulled two arrows from it, one in hand, one wedged into the cracks between floor stones. He looked to Hermod.

“You can do it, Papa.” The boy was not shaking anymore. He had gone still.

All else fell away. The hall, the guards, the evil king. They vanished into his periphery as he nocked an arrow and drew it to his cheek. Even Hermod was gone. All that remained in the World was the apple and the arrow and his own slow, steady breath. There was naught else. Naught else at all.

He loosed. The arrow flew straight and split the apple down the middle. Some of the gathered men cheered, others shouted in disbelief. Dimly, he saw a few exchanging coins. They had bet on whether his son would live or not.

Nidud sank back onto his throne and clapped his hands. “Well done. Well done, indeed.” He shifted around as if having trouble finding comfort in his chair. “Tell me, if you could make such a shot, what need for the second arrow?”

“For you, should any harm have come to my son.” The words left his mouth ere he could think better of them. So much for patience. His hands shook with cold rage. Many of the warriors brandished spears at his words, and a collective gasp had silenced the hall.

Nidud, however, snorted. “Well said. I commend your honesty and your courage. You may see the smith—tell him I bid him craft whatever it is you wish, archer.”

Agilaz nodded, not trusting himself to speak.



HE DARED NOT LEAVE Hermod alone with the king and his men, so the boy had accompanied him into the darkness of the deep forge. Such a place seemed to belong to the Otherworld, a place not meant for Men to walk. Hard to fathom his brother had ever lived and worked in dark halls like this one, though long had Volund trained with the dvergar of Nidavellir. Indeed, Agilaz had never understood what kind of strange life Volund must have had there, and little did his brother speak of those days.

“Uncle Volund is here?” Hermod whispered.

Agilaz stiffened. Neither of his guards had reacted to the boy’s words, so he had to hope they had missed them. It would not do for Nidud to learn of his relation to Volund, not now.

The guards led him to a stone bridge spanning an underground lake. Hermod knelt as though intent on touching the water. Agilaz snatched him up. The guards were watching them now, with wry smiles. The lake must contain some hidden danger—he’d swear to it. At the guard house, his escort left him, pointing to the rocky island beyond the end of the bridge. Agilaz and his son walked alone to the gap at the end. It was small enough even Hermod could make the leap. What was the point in such a gap? How could a short jump keep Volund confined here?

After patting Hermod on the shoulder, Agilaz leapt over the gap, then turned to his son. “Come. I will catch you.” The boy stepped back, then ran and jumped. Agilaz swept him into his arms, then set him down on the rocks. “I want you to remain outside the forge. Do not go nigh to the lake. Stay right there.” He pointed to a rock pile nearby.

After glancing between the water and the forge, the boy scrambled onto the rocks and sat. Maybe Agilaz should have let him follow inside, but this place seemed fraught with danger, and it all left a hollow feeling in his gut. They should all of them be quit of Njarar as swiftly as they could. As soon as he found Volund, he’d need to think of a way to help his brother escape the Gautish kingdoms.

The forge itself was dimly lit, the dancing fires seeming to magnify the shadows instead of push them aside. The place stank with sweat and coal smoke and something acidic he couldn't identify.

"Volund?"

"Brother." The voice bubbled from a dark corner. It sounded like him, but off, raspier, as though Volund had taken ill. "You ought not to have come here."

"I've come to free you."

"You cannot. Not alone."

Maybe not. Maybe he could convince Hadding to return with an army. If only he could see some way to attack the fortress other than that suicidal path to the main gate. "Surely I can do something to aid your situation."

"Perhaps." Volund stumbled into the torchlight, dragging an obviously lame leg behind him. His long hair, once bound at the nape of his neck, now hung in disheveled strands. Black strands, where once they had been brown. Even more striking, his skin had turned a sickly grey.

"B-brother? What in Hel's underworld have they done to you?"

"Not *her* underworld, I think," his brother purred. "They woke something the dverggar perhaps planted in me." Agilaz's legs threatened to give out. He stumbled backward until he collided with a workbench, then leant against it to steady himself. "What ails you, brother?" Volund asked. "Do you not like the monster that stands before you? Does my visage frighten you?" His brother chuckled then, as though let in on some jest Agilaz could not begin to fathom.

"Are you ..." Agilaz swallowed. There was a vicious rumour he and Slagfid had promised never to speak of again. Knowledge was precious, but on rare occasions a Man was better off not knowing things. Or so Slagfid had thought, and he was the eldest brother. But then, perhaps stumbling in ignorance might prove worse. "Are you certain the dverggar put it in you?"

Volund shrugged, an elaborate motion that swayed not only his hair, but the very shadows around it. A trick of the firelight was all. Aught more was impossible. Was madness Agilaz would not credence.

“Father never brought your mother to court,” Agilaz said. “There were stories ... He had met some woman in the woods and lain with her. That in the middle of one night, in the dead of winter, she had come back. Left you on his doorstep. A skald once claimed a thrall had seen the woman and she seemed inhuman, like some *vaettr*. But if this slave existed, no one found her. And Father did not speak of such things.” A thoughtful look fell over Volund’s face, and then he melted back into shadows so thick Agilaz could not make out his form. This was a place of nightmares. Maybe Volund was right; maybe he should have never come here. But he had done so, and this Gautish king had *lamed* his brother. Agilaz would not abandon Volund. “Tell me how I may aid you.”

“They took my ring, brother,” Volund said. “Altvir’s ring. I would have it back.” The disembodied voice had the hairs on the back of Agilaz’s neck standing on end. Praise be to Freyr he had not brought Hermod in here. The boy would have had nightmares for a moon or more. As, Agilaz suspected, would Hermod’s father.

“Who has it?”

“The princess, Bodvild. Ask her to meet me in secret. She will have seen the jewellery I’ve crafted. Tell her I would make something for her. Tell her whatever will get her here—but I must see her, brother.”

Agilaz shuddered. “I will tell her.”

Maybe Altvir’s ring would help Volund escape this place. Agilaz hoped so. For he could not bear to tarry here a single night.



KING NIDUD of Njarar had at last deigned to feed Agilaz and Hermod. Their feast hall lay across from his throne room. A dozen braziers and a great hearth built into the wall lit the room and provided warmth. Even the distance from the main hall did not quite abolish the howl of the wind outside, however. Summer was well under way, aye, but a chill rain had risen. Agilaz would have preferred to leave and seek shelter in the town below the mountain. With the rainstorm, though, 'twas too late for that. Had Nidud not offered him hospitality, Agilaz didn't know what he'd have done for Hermod. The boy ate ravenously. Agilaz found it a bit hard to stomach food from the table of a man who had hamstrung his brother and, worse, threatened his son.

By now, mostlike, the princess had paid a visit to Volund. And if Volund had stolen back the ring, perhaps he had escaped. If so, Agilaz too needed to be quit of here, ere Nidud realised his part in the plan. Despite the risk, Agilaz needs must take Hermod and sneak out in the night. If they could make it off the mountain, he could lose the Njararans. The storm would even work in his favour, though it would prove hard on poor Hermod. The boy was strong, though—he had more than proved that.

“So tell me, archer,” Nidud said. “What did you request of my smith?”

Agilaz took a long swallow of ale. He should have prepared an answer for such a question already, but the shock of seeing Volund like that ... “Well, my king.” Agilaz took another sip. Only one answer came to mind: “An archer is naught without well-wrought arrows.”

“Oh, indeed. And is he making arrows for you now?”

Agilaz opened his mouth. The loud caw of a raven rang through the feast hall, interrupting him. The bird had perched above the hearth, though Agilaz had not noticed it fly in. The queen put a hand to her chest and shook her head, as though the shock had almost been too much for her. Several of the thegns at the table murmured, and a thrall rushed over to wave the bird away.

“I think—” Agilaz began.

The raven cawed again. As the thrall drew nigh, the raven swooped at the man. A swift peck of its beak tore out one of the slave’s eyes. The man fell screaming, clutching his face. Agilaz launched himself to his feet, fumbling to get his bow off his back. The raven spat out the eye and laughed. Not the laugh of a bird, no, but the hearty chuckle of a Man, the sound ringing darkly through the hall and sending shivers through Agilaz.

“What sorcery?” Nidud demanded.

“Do you sleep well, Lord of the Njarar?” the raven asked ... in Volund’s raspy voice. A terrible cold settled over Agilaz.

The king rose slowly, steadying himself on the table. “I do not.”

“Nor ought you, son of Man, he who thought to imprison a prince of the alfar. Do your sons fare well now? Was it wise to send them to fight your battles?”

“What are you?” Nidud demanded. This was a nightmare, and Agilaz needs must awaken. Yet he scarce knew whither to flee.

The raven cackled. “You ought to have asked that ere cutting my leg, oh mighty king.”

“Volund! How is this ...” The king held up his hands as if to ward off evil. Agilaz was half inclined to do the same. Volund had taken the ring, he must have, and somehow it had let him change his form, as their valkyrja wives did. With a hand beneath the table, Agilaz began to draw Hermod away. They needed to be free from here, and quickly. Whatever Volund intended, it did not bode well for them. Not for anyone.

“Why do you speak of my boys, Volund?” the king demanded. “What has become of my sons?”

Volund cackled again. “A great many things have become of them, King. Go to the deep forge and see for yourself. See the bellows spattered in blood where I hacked their heads from their shoulders. Dredge the lake and find their limbs. Even now, you drink from a goblet carved from one’s

skull, inlaid with silver.” Nidud paled, his eyes dropping to the ivory cup on the table. The queen looked down at a similar goblet before her and screamed. “Oh, cunning wife of Nidud,” Volund said when she quieted. “Do you not like the goblet? And yet you wear their teeth upon your breast.”

Oh, Hel. The brooch? What had Volund done?

Volund snickered again, the sound deafening in the now-silent hall. Agilaz tried to pull Hermod away, but the boy was trembling, struck by the unmatched dread of the eve. Damn Volund for letting his son see such horror. “And dear Bodvild,” Volund said, “your precious daughter. Already my seed has taken root in her womb. I think mine like to be the only child she ever bears. A boy, unless I miss my guess, a son to carry forth my name.”

The queen collapsed to the floor, babbling and pointing at the raven that now flew about the chamber.

“Live in despair, King,” Volund said. “And know that when death closes in around you, I shall wait on the other side to drag your soul to the Gates of Hel. Or somewhere *darker*.”

Nidud swallowed, turning empty eyes on Agilaz. “Shoot it. Shoot the monster!” Agilaz couldn’t move, couldn’t think, couldn’t act. This was impossible. “Kill him or your lives are forfeit, archer!”

Nidud was right. The king was a monster—but so was Volund. He had murdered two princes and raped the princess, all so he could release that monster from deep inside himself. All so he could become this accursed thing. And still, Volund was Agilaz’s brother. One did not slay kin ... Agilaz nocked an arrow. The raven swooped past him, out into the main hall.

“Papa!” Hermod shrieked. Men were advancing on him, swords and spears readied. The nearest, Nidud’s thegn Thakkrad, had snatched Hermod by the arm. Agilaz swerved and loosed his arrow. It punched through

Thakkrad's eye and sent him crashing into the table, overturning all the dishes.

"Run, boy!" Agilaz shouted. Hermod did so, dashing for the main hall. Agilaz ran several steps after him, then turned to face the charging troops. He launched an arrow into the throat of the nearest one, then raced out again in the chaos.

A guard lay on the floor, clutching his face. The raven had torn out another eye. Hermod tore out of the hall, ducking under a guard's arms and sliding outside. There was no way Agilaz had time to get any more shots off now; his foes were too close. He tossed the bow aside and pulled a knife from his belt, then slammed bodily into the guard who'd tried to grab his son. The man toppled to the ground, and Agilaz leapt over him. Shouts echoed through the hall. A spearman blocking the exit thrust at him. The man was shocked by the scene, must have been—his attack was clumsy. Agilaz stepped around it and caught the spear in one hand. He flung himself forward and buried the knife in his attacker's armpit.

As the spearman fell, Agilaz wrested the weapon from him. He spun on the others. They advanced in a rough unit now, several with shields up, not quite a shield wall. Agilaz backed outside, into the pouring rain. A glance over his shoulder, all he could spare. Hermod was backing away, toward the edge of the platform. Lightning crashed above, silhouetting the boy.

Agilaz's ring had grown warm. Yes, he would see his love very soon. If this did not qualify as a valorous death, he knew not what would. A dozen men advanced, forcing him to fall back. Others already blocked the path, denying him even the barest hope of escape. "Stay behind me!" Agilaz shouted. "And whatever happens, do not cower. Meet the end on your feet and you may see Valhöll!"

Men surged forward. Agilaz flung the knife in one's face. He saw it coming too late, didn't start to raise his shield in time. The blade hit between his eyes and one of his companions tripped over his falling body.

Agilaz ducked to the side and slammed his shoulder into the shield of another. The man lost his footing and fell backward over the platform, screaming, vanishing into the night.

A blade bit into Agilaz's ribs and something hard slammed into his face. The impact bowled him over and sent him sliding along the rain-slicked platform until his head dangled over open space.

"Papa!"

Peals of thunder rang, crashed, demanding more from him ere the end. His ring had become a molten flame on his hand. He would die on his feet, and she would come for him. If he had but one last wish, it would be to look into those pale blue eyes of hers one more time. Agilaz roared as he rolled to his feet. Unarmed, he did the only thing he could and flung his body into the nearest man.

Something sharp gouged his shoulder. It did not matter. Lightning flashed. He grabbed the man and hurled him out behind himself, into the open air. Thunder covered his screams. Men before him faltered. They knew they would buy his death dearly. Skalds would speak of this day.

Lightning nigh blinded him even as a heavy impact crashed onto the platform, flinging standing water up in a wave that washed out in all directions. Every man there froze, blinking away the afterimages of the lightning.

A silver-winged woman rose from a crouch, sword in hand. With terrifying swiftness, she surged at a pair of men. Her sword lopped off one's head whilst she caught the other by the throat. With one hand she flung him out, off the platform and into the night. Those screams rang for a long time. The woman, the valkyrja, looked to Agilaz ... with those beautiful, pale blue eyes.

Was he dead? Had that last blow felled him? He looked down, but blood still seeped from his wounds.

“Mama!” Hermod’s voice tore Agilaz from the dream and he caught his boy in his arms, shielding him with his own body.

Olrún folded her arms over her chest and swept her wings together. Their beat hurled her off the platform and created a wave of air that flung Nidud’s men backward, into the great hall. A moment later, strong arms caught Agilaz around the waist, and he and Hermod were swept up. Air scoured his face as they plummeted downward faster than a man could fall. Each beat of Olrún’s silver wings carried them farther from the castle and out into the night. Her chest heaved with the effort of carrying them. On she pushed, farther.

Agilaz called to her, but the wind swallowed his words. Until the ground began surging toward them. “Olrún!” he shouted.

Trees drew nigh. All he could do was tighten his grip on Hermod. They brushed over the treetops and out into a clearing. No, ’twas not a clearing, but a lake. He had time for no other thought before they plunged into the chilling waters.



THE SMALL FIRE might attract attention. Agilaz could see no way around that risk. Hermod was shivering and had to get dry. And Olrún would no doubt survive, but she had lost consciousness when they hit the water. Her wings had vanished then, making it much easier to pull her from the lake.

For a long time, Agilaz sat there, hand on her shoulder. His other arm was wrapt around Hermod, who had fallen asleep against him, the boy’s fingers interwoven with those of his mother. Agilaz sighed, finally able to breathe. Olrún’s hair hung in a heavy braid over her shoulder, but strands had come loose, either in their flight, or underwater. Agilaz ran a hand over her cheek as she stirred, blinking. Those beautiful eyes. “You came back for us.”

Olrun pushed herself up. "Well, I ..."

"I thought you would come for my soul."

She glanced around until she spied her sword where he had stuck it in the mud. "That was the plan. That was what I was supposed to do."

"You could not watch us die."

Olrun swallowed and looked at the sky. "They do not like us to bear children."

He could see why not. He had never known a mother to turn her back on her children. Not for any rule, not for any law. After laying Hermod on the ground, he rose to his feet, then helped her stand as well. "I will not let you go again, wife."

"I gave you all the years I could. The oath always draws me away."

He shook his head, refusing to accept such. "I will chase you down, again and again, mother of my son. Love of my life. I will track you across Midgard and ... if you so force me, and beyond. Through all the wilds of Utgard, if need be." He held up his hand, displaying her ring. "I will never give up on you."

Olrun pressed her palms to her temples. "Oh, Agilaz. What you desire is not how this works."

He pointed at Hermod. "Tell that to our son."

"He would be our *only* child."

"Why? You spoke once of wanting a daughter."

She bit her lip, then shook her head. "My mistress punished me for giving you the first child. I will never be able to bear another." She put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. "You are a prince. Go! Find some princess to love and let her give you a dozen children. Live your life."

Now he shook his head. "Not without you. You are the only princess I care for."

Her expression warred between joy and grief until, finally, she looked up at the sky once again. "Is this truly what you want?"

“You know it is; you’ve always known. No oath you ever made or could make counts for more than the one between husband and wife.”

Olrún shivered such that he could barely stop himself from throwing his arms around her. The cold was probably not the cause of her distress. “Agilaz ... you must return to me the ring.” He hesitated. That ring was all that had let him follow her. If he handed it over and she chose to flee, he could not pursue. “Trust me.”

Trust. He asked her for a lifetime, and that meant naught without trust. His chest clenched as he slipped the band from his finger, but he did so and dropped it in her palm. She looked at it, the moonlight reflected off the coppery band. Then she shut her eyes and set her jaw. When she opened them, she strode to her sword and took it up.

Was that it? Was she going? She met his gaze and set the ring upon a rock. “You will have to give me a new wedding band, one day soon.”

“What are you—”

“Stand back.” She held her sword before her face, whispering something.

A long time she stood like that, speaking some tongue he could not begin to catch, much less understand. Until the first rays of the rising sun began to reflect off her sword blade. Then she raised the blade above her head. Her silver wings shot from her back and spread into the sky. With a shriek, she thrust the sword downward. It pierced the ring and rock both, burying itself.

The ground rumbled outward from that rock. Hermod woke, but Agilaz wrapt his cloak around the boy, shielding him. Olrún’s body shook. She turned to him, light pouring from her eyes and mouth and nose. The earthquake built in intensity.

The ring melted into the stone. The sword turned to glass and shattered in her hands. And then her wings exploded. It hit him in a wave of heat and

light that flung him to the ground and sent him tumbling end over end. Dazed, he lay there a moment.

What the ... Gods! Olrun!

A macabre spray of blood and swan feathers covered the lakeside and floated upon the water. Olrun lay face down in the mud, clad in naught but her undershirt, now soaked through with crimson. The armour had vanished, trails of gold melted into the ground. No obvious wound marred her, but her back was drenched in blood.

“Olrun!”

“Mama!”

He and Hermod raced to her side, rolled her over. Her chest rose and fell lightly. She lived. Agilaz kissed her face, her forehead, her lips. Hermod wept over his mother.



“SO NOW YOU’RE mortal too, Mama?” Hermod asked.

They had agreed to return to Vestborg. After all Volund had done, there was no going back to his brother. It weighed heavy upon Agilaz, when Olrun had told him Slagfid had died, fallen in battle. Olrun knew it, for Slagfid had perished gloriously and thus been chosen by the valkyrjar. An urd Agilaz had expected for himself, and so it would have been, had a mother not so loved her child, a wife her husband.

“More so than you, mostlike,” Olrun answered. Though she spoke lightly, her words felt heavy. They had spoken of it once, when Hermod was born. That she, not quite human, might have passed on some of that nature to their child. Never had he demonstrated any such tendency, but then, he was young. No one who knew the truth of Volund’s lineage could deny what impact it had had upon him.

“But why?” Hermod asked. “I liked your wings.”

Olrun laughed, but her eyes looked sad. “So did I. But a valkyrja cannot make as fine a wife for your father as a woman can.”

“Oh.” Hermod walked in silence a while longer. They moved through the forests nigh to Halfhaugr and hoped to pass the night within the safety of its walls. A few nights, maybe, if Hadding favoured them.

Soon, the first flakes of snow would fall. Winter loomed, and Agilaz was eager to be settled for it, to find a warm hearth and claim some quiet with his family. Slagfid had said they would all meet again after one year. That year had passed, but Agilaz would not return to Wolf Lake. If he was to have a home now, it would be among the Hasdingi. Though he had come from Kvenland, had tried to make a home in Svjarland, he had become, in the end, a man of the Æsir.

First, though, they needed to see Hadding, to be certain the jarl still wished Agilaz’s service at Vestborg. He had left with Hadding’s blessing, but things could change. Especially if word had reached them of Nidud’s falling-out with Agilaz.

Word had already outpaced them on one story, though Agilaz did not know if it was truth. But skalds already sang of the cruel smith Volund, and of the fallen king Nidud. In the end, they claimed, the king had hung himself from the platform. Ordered his body not be removed until ravens had eaten the last of his flesh. It sounded more like a skald’s fanciful end to the morbid tale, but who could say? Agilaz’s beloved little brother had become a legend, not only for his skill, but for the depths of his unmatched revenge against the tyrant king. There was a horrid poetry in that, though Agilaz could only pray no one came to associate his name with Volund’s. Such ties were now a great liability to the kin he had left.

“So,” Hermod asked finally, “weren’t you a woman before, Mama?”

She chuckled. “Ask your father.”

“Papa?”

“We will discuss it when you are older.”

“Why?”

Agilaz was spared having to answer by the sound of footsteps in the forest ahead. He held up a hand, stilling his son, then crept forward while readying his bow. Hasding scouts, mostlike, but he could not be too careful. As predicted, war now raged between the Hasdingi and the Skalduns and had even begun to spread to other tribes. The chaos was like to go on several summers unless something changed, though men already spoke of Jarl Borr of the Wodanar trying to bring peace. A man valorous as Vingethor come again, some called Borr.

No scouts were here this afternoon. Instead, Jarl Hadding crouched by a small creek, setting a wrapt baby down in the woods—exposing the child. Hadding rose, shaking his head. Agilaz cleared his throat, and Hadding spun, hand on his sword hilt. The jarl groaned then. “I had begun to think you’d not return.”

“The child is deformed?”

Hadding shook his head. “No. She’s beautiful, perfect. But Liv didn’t survive the birth, and Fjörgyn won’t have the girl in our hall.”

Agilaz slung the bow over his shoulder. That explained a great deal. “Liv was not carrying Erik’s child at all. ’Twas yours.”

The jarl shrugged and spread his hands. “And if another man had so abased his wife, I might have had him hanged. But my wife has agreed to keep it quiet so long as the child is gone. What would you have me do? If I keep her, I shall never hear the end of it.” Twigs crunched behind him. Olrún and Hermod. How much had they heard? “You found your wife.”

“Aye,” Agilaz said and looked to Olrún. Her eyes darted to the baby. Finally, she nodded. Agilaz sighed. Urd was odd, twisted. Or maybe the gods had a sense of humour. “I was fond of Erik and Liv both, despite what happened.”

“So were we all.”

“My wife and I would be honoured to foster this child.”

Hadding shuddered and at once swept the babe up in his arms. He stared at her for a long time ere finally handing the babe to Olrún. Agilaz's wife took the child without comment, but her smile was warm. "She has milk?" Hadding asked.

That earned him a scowl from Olrún that might have sent other men shitting themselves. "We'll manage," Agilaz answered ere Olrún decided to unleash her anger. "The girl has more chance to survive on goat's milk than she does on water from the creek."

Hadding hung his head. "You shame me."

"No, you honour us."

"You won't earn gratitude from my wife for this, you know."

Agilaz looked at Olrún, cradling the babe, and to Hermod, now peeking at his new sister's face. "I don't care."

"Well, in either event, you have *my* gratitude. You have saved me from a dire choice. I will never forget what you've done, Agilaz Wadeson."

"Just Agilaz, now. I make my future among the Hasdingi. Myself and my family."

"Then Vestborg is yours, my friend." Hadding turned to go.

"What is her name?" Agilaz called after him.

"You saved her life," Hadding said. "Fitting you should decide."

Agilaz looked to his wife, who smiled down at the babe. "Sigyn," Olrún said. "Our little victory."

The girl stared intently at Olrún, eyes with startling intelligence. Sudden, unfathomable emotion forced Agilaz to steady himself against a tree. He had lost his brothers forever. But he had not only regained his wife, they made themselves a full family with a proper home.

As they walked, Olrún began to sing to the babe.

However twisted Urd might prove, he had much to be grateful for.

PART IV

In the gloom-laden deep forges beneath Nidavellir did the dverg princes craft nine blades of wonder, pommels graven with secret runes of power. These treasures did they offer to the princes of Men, the heirs of Halfdan the Old, who sought to claim the sum of Midgard. But not lightly did the dvergar make such bribes, nor without enmity surrender their claim on the four corners of the Earth. So did each blade, endowed with frightful might and bound souls, too bear an inescapable curse. Those who would dare to take up a runeblade would thus reap glory and tragedy, in equal measure. Woe to Men who dare strive against the will of the vaettir.

— The Saga of the Runeblades

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DAYS GONE: SIGYN

799 Age of Man

*T*he deer wouldn't venture beyond the copse of evergreens. It was rare to spot one this close to town, and Sigyn was determined not to lose it. She was no warrior, as Frigg insisted on reminding her, but she was a good shot with a bow, having learnt from her foster father, Agilaz. Her calves ached from crouching still so long, waiting for the animal to give her a clean shot. Her father had not named her a hunter, but she *could* be a hunter. Maybe that was her place—the same place Hermod had once held.

She'd left Snow Rabbit tied to a tree a quarter mile away, afraid the horse would spook the deer. Poor mare thought she'd been getting a gentle ride, 'til Sigyn had seen the tracks. She would be the song of the town if she brought the animal down. Game had grown sparse around Halfhaugr, especially in winter. Bringing home fresh meat certainly wouldn't hurt her marriage prospects, either. Her father would have her pretend to be simple, demure, and spineless. Then maybe he'd find a man for her. "No man wants a wife smarter than he is." Trollshit on that.

Through the veil of Mist, the deer lifted its head sharply. Damned beast had heard her. It was going to bolt. She could feel it. It was going to—

The deer bounded off, darting between trees. Sigyn rose and drew her bow back in a single motion. She narrowed her sight along the shaft. Steady. Steady ... She loosed. The arrow whizzed over the deer and thunked into a tree. “Son of a troll!” She blew out a long breath. She ought to have stuck to riding this day. Her dress was damp with melted snow as she trekked back to Snow Rabbit, making the journey oh so much more enjoyable. When she finally reached the mare, the animal shook nervously. Leaving her tied to a tree outside the wall might have been foolish, but no harm had come of it, nor would she expect any during daylight, though that light was fast fading, the Mist thickening.

“Come on, girl,” she said as she untied the rope. “Best head home.” Snow Rabbit started back the moment Sigyn mounted her, setting a pace just shy of a trot. Sigyn wouldn’t hold her back. The poor animal knew what lurked out in the Mist at night.

The wind blew against the back of her neck, so she pulled her hood up. For a time, she kept the pace, then set Snow Rabbit trotting. They’d both be less on edge behind the shelter of the palisade. Moments later, another rider approached from the direction of town. A man, by his bearing, and pressing hard—in the wrong direction if he wanted to reach anywhere safe by nightfall. She could get off the road to avoid the traveller, but he would have seen her already. If he meant her ill, she’d rather meet him with bow ready. Besides, a man in that much of a hurry mostlike wouldn’t stop for a lone woman. She dismounted, unslung her bow, and nocked an arrow.

It took only a few breaths for her to recognise the man—Agilaz. “Sigyn, what are you doing out so late? You should be behind the wall.”

Sigyn tucked her arrow back in her quiver. “Well, *you’re* out here.”

“I’m a trained hunter and scout. You’re a wellborn lady.”

Aye, wellborn—after a fashion. “Where are you going, then?”

“Scouts reported trouble spreading between the Athra and the Godwulfs. The jarl wants me to learn the truth of the matter.”

She climbed back on Snow Rabbit. “So I’m coming with you.” She cared little about the Athra, but any threat to the Godwulfs was a threat to Hermod.

“No.”

“But I—”

“No, Sigyn! Go home. The jarl has guests from the Wodan clan. You should be there to meet them. You can catch the night meal if you make haste.”

Guests? Had Odin returned after all? Sigyn winked at Agilaz, letting him know she knew he’d manipulated her. It was fine—she *was* curious about the jarl whom Frigg and their father so desperately wanted to win over. “Just take care, then.” With that she took off toward the town.

A guard called out at her approach, then others opened the gates for her, albeit briefly as they ushered her inside with disapproving glares. With her luck, she’d probably added a slew of rumours for the town to whisper about her. “Did you hear about Sigyn? Out riding at twilight like a crazed völvá. Tempting the vaettir, that one.” She shook her head. Truth told, the fear of possession was strong enough she shouldn’t risk further implicating herself. Suspicious fools wouldn’t need much goading to think she’d become host to something or other. A few winters back, the town had driven out a woman they claimed was alf-ridden. Poor woman had probably frozen to death in the wild.

Sigyn hurried to the stables and handed Snow Rabbit’s reins to the boy there. “The Wodan jarl, he’s here?”

“No, my lady. One of his thegns went to see the jarl, though. And the foreigner came back with him.”

“Foreigner?”

“Am I so foreign?” a voice said behind her. “I have walked these lands often enough.”

Sigyn’s shoulders hunched and she blew a quick breath to calm herself. She’d not even heard anyone approach. Slowly, she turned to face the man—an auburn-haired stranger. His eyes, blue as sapphire, widened for a heartbeat when they met hers—so briefly she might have imagined it. Except she knew well enough the effect her pretty face could have on men who didn’t know better. This man dressed simply, like a common freeman, though his elocution was too fine for that.

She lowered her eyes from his. She couldn’t seem too bold. “Does walking in a land make you a native there?”

The man nodded, then stood straighter, hands behind his back. “Given enough time, I believe most would argue it does.” He spoke with such deliberateness that Sigyn felt her cheeks flush. Gods, he was probably imagining her unclad. And did such even matter? Not really. Had she not just been looking for a husband to distract her from Hermod? With such thoughts in her head, it mattered little what went on in the heads of others.

“Are you with Jarl Odin?”

“Yes. You can call me Loki. If you wish to see Odin, though, he is not with us.”

And if the jarl of the Wodanar had not come, why had he sent his thegn here? Surely not to thank Frigg for her aid in avenging his father. Such a purpose required he make the trek himself. The thegn might have come alone bearing a demand or threat, if Odin sought pretence to make war on the Hasdingi—the last thing Frigg or any of them needed.

“You speak volumes in silence,” Loki said.

“That’s ...” Disturbingly perceptive. “... the gift of women.”

“Hardly a universal one. I’ve known many women—”

“No doubt.”

He raised an eyebrow and Sigyn flushed, praying it was merely that she'd interrupted, rather than that he'd caught her implication. With a lean body, a handsome face, and refined manners, he could well have had *many* women.

"I ... should go," she mumbled and edged around the man, careful not to brush against him.

What in Hel's frozen world had she been thinking? Letting herself get flustered by a man just because he looked her way. It wasn't like she'd never known a man's touch—she'd taken her pleasure from a few in her time. But deep down she'd always known they'd never take her for more than someone to warm a bed on a cold night. If she wanted a husband, she'd need to ... to what? To not interrupt a man when he was speaking, maybe. Freyja alone knew how to please a man. Legend said the love goddess could have any who drew breath. It shouldn't be that hard for Sigyn to claim just *one* for herself.

She pushed open the door into the longhouse, forced to put her shoulder into it because of its weight. It creaked on its hinges, revealing the warmth of the hall. Inside, a feast was laid for a night meal. Jarl Hadding had gone to great lengths to impress his guest: plums, apples, roast squirrel, and at least one whole reindeer. Not that it surprised her. Her father wanted to win Odin's support just as much as his daughter did.

All had gathered around the feast table, with Odin's thegn sitting across from her father. Sigyn's chair stood empty next to Frigg, so she settled into it, offering only a nod to those around her. The Wodan thegn took no notice of her, and most of her people pretended to take even less. Frigg, however, clasped her hand in welcome.

No sooner had Sigyn sat than Odin's thegn rose, hefting his goblet into the air. "Jarl Hadding. Your hospitality is worthy of song. We come unannounced, and you honour us with a feast to make your ancestors proud.

And I ...” The thenn looked to Frigg ere taking another sip of his goblet. “I would like to propose a more permanent alliance between our people.”

“What have you in mind?” Her father folded his arms.

“What alliance is stronger than one of marriage? My lord remains unmarried, as does your daughter.”

Silence filled the hall, ere several Hasding warriors whooped in approval. Sigyn lowered her gaze to hide her own shock. Odin *knew* Frigg was a völvá. Whilst her sister had plotted to sway or seduce Odin, he’d come to her on his own. Sigyn would have put her sister’s chances of a good marriage at even less than her own—which was to say about the same as finding a mermaid atop a mountain. By Hel, Sigyn would have made a better match for Odin, though she had never met him, and he probably knew naught of her. It wasn’t as if Hadding boasted of his bastard daughter, but she could have made a wife fit for a jarl. She sipped her mead. Not that she cared.

Her father stroked his chin, though whether in consideration or just because he wanted to cover his own surprise, Sigyn couldn’t quite say. “You honour us, Tyr. Please, convey my acceptance to your lord.”

Tyr sat, banging his hand on the table as though he’d won a great victory. Loki slipped in during the commotion and sat close to Tyr, those too-blue eyes watching Sigyn. There was a man with an agenda, a deep plan. One more puzzle.



CLAY POTS, metal phials, and bowls of Freyja alone knew what all came crashing onto the floor as Frigg swept her arm over her worktable. Sigyn’s sister wailed and leant against that table. After blowing out a slow breath, Sigyn moved to Frigg’s side and set a hand on her shoulder. Very few

people ever saw a völvá lose her composure. The respect their titles carried demanded they hold themselves above others, above petty human emotions.

Frigg turned toward her, and Sigyn embraced her older sister. “Naught I try helps him,” Frigg mumbled into her shoulder.

Sigyn held Frigg at arm’s length so she could see her face. Their father had had a long life—longer than most jarls could hope for. Now that Frigg could no longer stave off the inevitable, she seemed to take it harder than she should have. Or mayhap Sigyn would have felt the loss more poignantly had she not been pushed aside and cast out by nigh everyone she’d ever known. “Perhaps no brew *can* help him.” Sigyn squeezed her arms. “If it is his urd, he will die.”

Frigg scoffed. “I didn’t think you believed in Urd.”

Sigyn shrugged. “You do, völvá. That’s all that matters here. Not that I think that’s all that weighs upon your mind this afternoon. You’ve hardly left this room since Father agreed to have you wed. For all your plans to sway Odin, you never actually expected to get him, least of all like this. You went hunting for a bear and, on finding one, only then realised you have not armed yourself for such prey.”

“Odin isn’t prey.”

“And yet you pursued him as such. Had you slept with him, could you have swayed his mind with your seidr? Or is that all völvur bombast meant to discourage men from raping your kind?”

Frigg’s face fell, touched by a hint of fear that tugged at Sigyn’s heart. She had not expected that.

“You don’t know. You’re a virgin, aren’t you?”

Frigg turned from her then, leant back on the table, shoulders slumping.

Damn. Sigyn never had learnt to mind her tongue. “Don’t fret over it. In fact, forget such things. You spoke with this man. Tell me of him.”

“Angry ... He is so angry.” Frigg turned to look at her now. “Consumed with it, like his insides were caught aflame. A fire rises in him, one fit to

consume Midgard.”

“Is that your vision?”

Frigg sighed. “It was difficult to make sense of it. But I saw myself as his wife, side by side, ruling over a great city like the ones in tales of ancient times. And there was fresh water, greenery, plants—like summer, a summer without end. I think Odin won’t be a mere jarl—I think he will be a king. And there was war, aye, famine, flame.”

Sigyn tapped her finger against her lip. What was she to say to something like that? Frigg seemed so convinced of herself, it almost made it hard to doubt her. So *had* she seen a vision of her future with Odin? And why was Sigyn even here, forcing her to talk of it? The decision definitely had naught to do with a masochistic need to see Frigg, of all people, find a marriage while Sigyn remained alone. “The Ás clans have not had a king in over a century, but even if they raised one, what has such to do with summer?”

Frigg considered, her eyes latched onto Sigyn’s face. “What if Midgard could change? The Vanir are said to live in islands of spring—of warmth that does not wither and fade after a few moons. What if somehow our lands could share such a destiny?”

Sigyn shook her head, then rubbed the bridge of her nose. Now they had devolved into true völvur pomposity. Breathe in the smoke of a few strange plants and call the hallucinations visions. If that’s all it took, she could be a völvá herself. But these women convinced themselves what they saw was truth—albeit not always literal truth. It could be a metaphor. And since no one could really disprove a metaphor, a völvá’s visions could hardly be disputed. If that proved monstrously convenient, surely that was but coincidence ...

Sigyn sat on the cold stone floor. “This Realm has been covered by the Mist of Niflheim for as long as anyone remembers. These stories about a time ere the Mist—they’re just stories. Who wouldn’t dream of a better

World? No matter what world we live in, people will look around and imagine it could be or could *have been* better, for naught ever chafes us so raw as the present.”

If Frigg thought some rage-mad jarl could change all of Midgard, she was thinking with her heart over her brain. And Sigyn was beginning to think Frigg *did* have feelings for Odin. Perhaps those feelings had been born of Frigg’s visions—a self-fulfilling prophecy of her love for him. Though Sigyn had not met him, the man didn’t sound fit to be king of fossilised troll dung.

“What if I could be a queen?” her sister blurted. What if she could? She’d be like to spend the rest of her life watching for knives in her back. Frigg eyed her, as she sometimes did, clearly trying not to reveal what was going on in her mind. Sigyn knew well enough, though, even if Frigg would never admit it. She knew because her own thoughts had gone there—that Sigyn herself might prove a better heir to Jarl Hadding. She was younger, more beautiful, and not a völva. She’d have been a decent match for a marriage alliance—if any man would have had her.

Frigg had her first visions as a child. Visions damned a girl, forced her to look into the darkness and allow it to seep inside in the name of cultivating seidr, in service to a clan that would fear her. The clan’s old völva had taken Frigg away—and no father, not even a jarl, could deny a völva her chosen quarry. And thus began the slow poisoning, the transmogrifying a girl into a witch, who, in moments of weakness, clung to shreds of a life that might have been.

Sigyn tapped a finger against her lip. “Do you believe Odin has such ambitions?”

“Perhaps. Whether he has them or not, I believe he carries a weighty urd.” Frigg paused, then sighed. “Father is ... not long for this world. All my potions have only staved off the inevitable. I will need a strong husband if I am to hold leadership of this clan. And that is to say naught of the

numerous threats we face from without. The Skalduns, the Godwulfs, and the Vanir-damned Sviarlanders. And those are only the nearest threat. Were Father to have refused Odin, then we'd have made enemies of the Wodanar as well."

There. Frigg had accepted their father's death, at least in some part of her mind. But Odin had sent his man here unbidden, offered marriage ere Frigg or Hadding had finished sowing those seeds. And even Frigg realised that for the man's actions to line up serendipitously with her plans—and her vision—ought to raise a few doubts. More than a few.

"And you want me to find out where Odin's true intentions lie. If he plans to strive for kingship, and if his offer for your hand holds any ulterior motive."

Her sister sighed, looked back at the empty table. "You have a way of uncovering the truth of things, aye. But Sigyn"—she turned, serious as ever—"tread with care. Our whole clan hangs in the balance."

For a heartbeat, Frigg's calm trembled, her poise threatened as it so rarely was. Sigyn had seen her sister's tears when her mother died, but most oft, the woman was so afraid to show anyone her true feelings. Was that need to hide something that had been beaten into her sister? Sigyn remembered running through the town square, laughing, chasing after a smiling Frigg, but that was so many years ago, ere the visions and the training and the loss. Ere the Otherworld reached its clammy hand out and grasped a young girl by the back of her neck, laying claim to which it had no right.

"Don't worry," Sigyn whispered. "I'll figure it out."

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THE DÖGLINAR

25 Age of the Æsir

*A*n etheric light hovered over the hills, beckoning or forewarning, depending on the constitution of one's heart. Hervor's heart was cast from iron. No daughter of a great berserk feared to tread in any land, nor did ghost stories frighten her. Her own crew had refused her, refused to even set foot upon this island after sunset. They had argued against even anchoring offshore, had wanted to return to other lands ere dark. But Hervor—or Hervard as she called herself when she thought it best others mistake her for a man—had led this crew on more than one raid. They had bent to her will, even if she'd had to row ashore on her own.

She had left the rowboat behind and headed for those hills. The ever-present Mist grew thicker in these lands, thicker than Hervor could explain, unless the ghosts conjured it. It did not matter. She carried a torch to ward against the poison fumes and had several more in case of need. That ephemeral light meant her destination lay nigh. Skalds called the light barrow fire, claiming the wakeful dead might sometimes cast it above their resting places. The bravest of men would turn craven at the mere thought of

beholding a ghost or draug. In this case, she was lucky enough not to be a man. Her errand had waited long enough, her vengeance delayed for far too many years.

The damn Mist seemed almost as thick as a wall of water, and she had to keep waving the torch back and forth to drive it back. Fire was the only true defence against it, for not even Hervor wished to court Mist-madness. She'd seen it happen: a raider with her had lost his torch and come wandering into camp, hollow look in his eyes. Hervor had cut him down. You let men like that go, they'd turn on you or run off into the wilds becoming Odin alone knew what. Death was quicker, even if the Mist drew the poor bastard down to Hel.

A flame flickered atop one of the hills—a real flame, not some etheric light. Fire meant people. Since when did people live on this haunted island? Had some trollfucking looter come here thinking to steal *her* plunder? Even as her steps quickened, she jerked free the broadsword slung over her shoulder. No one would take what was hers. No one. Arrow's Point had stolen so much from her already. She raced forward, blade in hand. You couldn't see more than a few feet ahead in this cursed Mist. But one torch probably meant only one ... she nigh collided with a grazing sheep. The creature let out a mewling cry and scampered away, running off into the night.

"Who moves in this land?" someone called. The torch drifted closer, the light burning away Mist and revealing a man. His grey cloak billowed in the breeze, seeming to blend with the Mist. He had a hood up, concealing his face, only his long, grey beard dangled from beneath that cowl. He leant on a gnarled staff as though he might topple over without it. "What fool dares these shores? Do you not know where you've come to, girl?" The shepherd glanced up at the moon, barely visible through the vapours blanketing the ground.

He knew her for a woman, even with her disguise? Hervor surpassed her irritation; she could scarce find fault with a man for his keen perception. "I have never been one to flee, old man. These hills are barrows, aren't they?"

"Do not ask such things. You have come far astray from all you have known, such I warrant. This island belongs to an old people, one best not disturbed. To say naught of what lies buried in ..."

Odin's balls. This was just some frightened thrall. Hervor sheathed her sword. "I do not scare easily. Stand aside. Something of mine lies here, and I will have it this very night."

The shepherd did step aside, with a slight shake of his head. "Ill does it become one to venture willingly into the darkness. Worse still, to bemoan it all as Urd when darkness lays claim."

Hervor paused, turned to look back at him. The old man had vanished into the Mist. In fact, even the bleating of his sheep was gone, and she was left alone here. Hervor opened her mouth, clapped it shut. A shudder took her, then. What in the Gates of Hel? Where had ... She glanced back toward where she had left her rowboat. Samsey was haunted, they said. But Hervor had sworn to fear no ghosts, had sworn to reclaim the legacy of her father, the runeblade.

She forced a laugh and, torch held beside her head, pushed forward. No path led over the hills, but neither were they too steep. The barrow fires glowed but produced no heat. Indeed, as she passed among them, they seemed more like luminous Mist than aught else. Except ... she swayed a little ... it made the hair on her neck stand on end. She shivered at a sudden chill, then swept the torch around in anger.

"I know you are here, dead ones. I do not fear you." Even a brazen lie, repeated oft, can become truth.

Far away yet somehow all around her, the Mist seemed to laugh. She shook herself. Her mind playing tricks and naught more. Instead, she

wandered, embracing the chills and walking toward where they grew stronger. When a faint shock ran along her fingers, she paused. Turned. At the base of one hill lay a mound of stones. Behind one lay a crack revealing darkness. The entrance to a barrow. Hervor planted the torch in the ground, then grasped the stone with both hands and heaved.

Dust and dirt cascaded around the stone. She pulled until her muscles felt ready to burst, but it did not pop free.

“Fucking Arrow’s Point” she said, then spat. That murderer must have put this here. Or put it back. She wiped her brow, then climbed above the mound.

Back braced against the hill, she used both legs to push at the stone. Pain welled in her lower back. Her fingers dug into the dirt and scraped rock, and she grunted with the effort. All at once, rocks beneath that stone shifted. The stone slipped free, tumbling away from the mound. Hervor fell over backward. Grimacing, she sat there a moment ere gathering the strength to rise.

With the top stone removed, the barrow opening was large enough for a small man—or a well-muscled woman—to squeeze through. She reclaimed the torch, then crawled forward on her belly, holding the light out in front of her. After a few feet, she dropped down into the barrow tunnel. She was tall for a woman and had to stoop to avoid hitting her head on the roof. Years of dust caked the walls. With the torch, she batted at spiderwebs choking the passage. The webs ignited and sparked away. Skittering creatures retreated from the torchlight.

Odin’s balls.

The air had grown stale, rank, harder to breathe. She pushed her way forward a dozen feet. The path delved down deeper into the hill ere opening up into a triangular chamber just tall enough to allow her to stand properly. She cracked her neck side to side and flexed her shoulders. A stone slab lay here, with a body rotting on it. Hervor held the torch over it. “Angantyr?”

The corpse did not respond. It had a sword clutched in one hand. Hervor brushed dust off it. Pattern wrought iron but otherwise unremarkable. This wasn't the runeblade, the body not her father.

The flickering torchlight should have spread farther than it seemed to. The Mist had seeped down here, but it wasn't thick. Still, the sepulchral shadows did not retreat from the light, not as much as they ought to have. Hervor paced the room. On each wall of the triangle, an opening led to another such chamber. Those in turn opened up into more tombs. Her pulse had begun to beat in her ears, chills to wrack her. Something ill, foul permeated this forbidden place, and she understood, now, why the old man had bade her turn away.

Scowling, she turned about. One tunnel led out, and if she lost track of it, she might wind up wandering this mound for hours. Not that she was frightened. She feared naught. Naught! This, she told herself.

That stench of death had grown so thick she felt herself wading through it. Not like the smell of blood and shit and piss that saturated a battlefield, no; the smell here was old. Flesh had rotted away to leave decaying bone. A smell of eternal damnation and unending despair, like a stench escaping from the Gates of Hel.

She might well search this whole place and not find what she sought. And were she to do so, she might truly run out of torches. How much longer did this one have? An hour, at the most. Not even a brave woman should climb around barrows in darkness.

Odin's balls. Hervor had come here for a purpose, one that demanded it be fulfilled. Turning around, torch held high, she cleared her throat. "Angantyr, wake now! The daughter of Svafa calls upon you. *Your* daughter, your only child, last of the royal Döglinar. Wake, Father!" Her voice echoed through the barrow, ringing from one tomb to the next and seeming to repeat too long. Hervor swallowed. Could she have the wrong barrow? No, this had to be the one her family lay in. Her father, her uncles,

all entombed here to rot and writhe in restless sleep, denied Valhöll or even the halls of Hel, locked in unending torment within putrid husks.

“Hervard! Hjorvard, Hrani, Angantyr!” She turned about again. “Berserkir wake! Have the children of Arngrim turned to mould and dust? Will not one speak to their kin?”

Unintelligible whispers carried on the Mist, to stalk the shadows. All the hair stood on end now, and fresh chills wracked her. But no voice spoke that she could understand. There were ghosts here, but they did not deign to speak with her. She had once heard a völva say there was another world, an invisible world. This Spectral Realm was the true home of ghosts and vaettir and all beings not quite of Midgard. A barrier one could not see or touch separated the worlds, but sometimes, those on the other side could see this Mortal Realm. Could hear it. In places like this, tombs and caverns and deep regions, the barrier was thin. Or so the völva claimed.

So Hervor thought, perhaps, they could hear her. “If you will not speak to me, then may it seem as though a mound of maggots wriggle through your ribs. Let your corpses moulder and rot if you will not fetch for me the sword Dvalin made.” She turned about again. A palpable anger had begun to creep into the air, one that felt like a stone beginning to compress around her heart and lungs. She grunted. Harder to speak now. “It does not become ghosts to hoard such valuable arms. What use have the dead for sacred blades?”

The pressure lightened, and she sucked in a deep breath, forced to steady herself on the wall. Her hand came away caked in mould and unidentifiable black slime. She scrubbed it on her trousers.

“Why do you hail me, Hervor, Daughter?” The raspy, halting voice came from the opening to her right. She spun, torch forward. Naught there. “You tread swiftly toward your own doom. You walk in darkness, and in darkness shall you lose your way.” The voice was like a hollow whisper, as if spoken by the wind, from far away. She pushed forward, slipped into the

next tomb. No sign of aught. “You have gone mad, your mind shadowed, when you think to wake the dead.”

Hervor’s jaw trembled. She wanted to deny him, to defy him. She was not scared. And she had come here to avenge *him*. No words escaped her, though.

“Our father Arngrim did not lay us in these cairns,” he said, “nor did any kin of ours. Our enemy placed us here, cursed us, and took from me Tyrfinn. ’Tis lost.”

Hervor gasped, rubbed the back of her hand over her mouth. “You lie! By Odin, you lie! I have come here for my due, Father. I, your only child, demand my heirloom.” The stories agreed with what the thrall had told her—Arrow’s Point had entombed Tyrfinn with the brothers. It had to be here. And after all she had done, all she had risked, now she had found her father. And he was *lying* to her. She set down the torch, drew a dagger, and sliced open her palm. The same völva had told her a blood offering could contact that invisible world ...

Hervor pressed her bloody palm to the wall. “By the blood of the living I beseech you! Show yourself, ghost!”

A crack sounded through the barrow. The ground trembled and dust and dirt fell from the roof. The whole mound was going to cave in. Ere she could react, even try to run, etheric blue flame erupted from the next tomb and swept inward. Hervor threw herself against the wall and covered her head with her arms. She did not scream.

No heat reached her—if aught, the graven chill only deepened. She dared look, reclaiming her torch. Across the tomb drifted the image of a large warrior, writhed in blue flame, clad in a bearskin. He was translucent, his features hard to make out, save those piercing, flaming eyes. A great gap had been cleft through his skull, and yet the two pieces hovered together. “You willingly call open the Gates of Hel and crack the barrows. This

island is thick with ghosts, girl, all now blazing into grim wakefulness. Your ship shall burn around you, lest you reach it quick. If you still can, maiden!”

Hervor glanced back at the exit. No. Another lie. She swept the torch in front of her. “You cannot light any flame, ghost. Fire is the enemy of Hel and all her Misty children. I’ve no fear of you! Aye, I see you, blazing in the darkness, standing on the threshold between this world and the next. Is that your wish? To drag me down to meet Hel?”

Her father’s form flickered, appearing closer to her, though the blaze had dwindled. He appeared almost lifelike, with just the barest hint of that ethereal fire. “I am trying to spare you, Daughter. Hervor, heed my words. Tyrfing will be the ruin of all your family. Take the sword, and your children shall wield it and suffer for it. The dvergar forged the runeblades for their own ends and for the hands of the Old Kingdoms. Their time has passed, and the blades ought to lie dead, in darkness, as their wielders.”

Hervor squeezed her fist. “No! I make my own urd. And my kin lay entombed here, cursed and denied Valhöll because of the crimes of a living man. I, too, remain human. And I shall have the bane of Hjalmar ere I leave this place.”

The last flames around the ghost faded. The torchlight seemed to not set quite right upon him. He reached a hand to her cheek. It was not like being touched by a person. More like a feeling, a slight pressure without substance. At last his hand fell away, and he shook his head. “You are strong, Daughter. And foolish. Beneath my back lies Hjalmar’s bane, blazing, scorching me as was my curse.” Hervor grimaced. Arrow’s Point had spared her father no agony. ‘Twas not enough to end the Döglinar, but too, he chose to damn them. “No woman would dare take up the runeblade,” her father said.

This, again, this disdain for her because she had not been born a man? “*I will.*” She stepped around the ghost and trod into the next tomb. It must be this one. Another corpse rested upon the slab here. Its face had rotted,

but it could have been the same man who stood beside her. She looked to the ghost. A slight blaze had returned to his eyes. “I will guard it well and use it to avenge the murders and the curse, both.”

“Fool Hervor. I cannot refuse my own blood ... I warn you one more time—Tyrfing will bring ruination upon your line. It seeks blood and, once freed, that bloodlust cannot be denied.”

Hervor scowled at that and reached slowly toward the corpse. “My family lies here, dead and suffering. My father burning instead of feasting in Odin’s halls. I have no sons. You do well to yield the sword to me. It is dearer in my quest than were I to rule all Svjarland.” She pushed the corpse over. The shade flickered as she did so, vanishing for a moment.

Beneath the body lay a sword, writhed in faint, ethereal flames. Just more ethereal fire. It could not harm her. Her hand closed around the hilt. Flames surged up her arm, searing hot, scalding flesh. She collapsed to the floor screaming, clutching her hand. The sword and her torch clattered down beside her.

Hervor gasped, trying to stifle her screams. Odin’s balls!

The ghost watched her, saying naught. All the flames had gone out of him. Back into the sword. It was still there on the floor, incandescent with the heat. It seemed the curse passed between Realms and allowed it to harm the living and dead both. Finally, he shook his head. “Do not touch the edges, for the wounds they inflict fester like poison and never heal.”

She crawled over to where the runeblade lay. Pattern welded from a coppery metal, with a hilt of the brightest gold. And along the blade ran ancient dverg runes that made it a weapon unmatched in the World of Men.

“Nigh to twenty years you have lain here, burning in death,” she said. “From today, that suffering shall begin to rain on our enemies.” Hervor snatched up the hilt again. Fresh jolts of agony seared through her flesh and seemed to melt her bone. She screamed in pain but did not drop the sword.

Instead, she rose to her feet and only tightened her grip. “Tyrfing is ... mine.”

The flames cooled. The sword stilled in her hand. Its blade shone with a white light that filled the tomb, limning the walls with a pale gleam.

She turned, but her father’s ghost had vanished.

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DAYS GONE: ODIN

799 Age of Man

When Odin returned to the Wodan town, his people were waiting for him. Scouts must have reported his arrival, because Vili already had mutton roasting on the fire, though it was early for the night meal. The thick aroma proved intoxicating as heady wine, for Odin had eaten little since he'd left the Norns' mountain.

"Thank you," he whispered to Sleipnir ere dismounting and joining his brothers.

Vili ambled over the moment he spotted Odin. "Sons of Borr together again," his middle brother said.

Odin clapped him on the shoulder. "Indeed." He cocked his head at the mutton. "And well you know me." He snagged a leg of mutton and bit, shuddering with pleasure as its hot juice dribbled down his chin. He took a swig of mead, then looked around. "Where's Vé?" He had dared hope the apple would have revitalised the boy.

Vili belched out a raucous laugh. "Little brother's been ploughing the goddess's trench, putting the two of us to shame. Spends all his time in her

house.”

A pit opened in Odin’s gut that had naught to do with hunger. He handed Vili the mead skin and mutton. “I’d better check on them.”

“You think he’d let us join?”

Odin glared at Vili, who jerked back and then let out another rumbling chuckle. Having no time to spare for his boorish brother, Odin stormed off toward Idunn’s house. Vili was an oblivious fool and always would be. And if things had gone awry, maybe that was a mercy. He paused on the threshold, listening. Just in case Vili was right. Inside, a girl sang softly, though not Idunn. What in Hel’s frozen underworld was going on?

*THE FINEST ARMS, ‘gainst dead men raised,
The great ones fought, in bygone days.
Where shadows swell, and flames do fade,
And darkness swarms, on Vígrídr plain.*

ODIN STUCK his head in the tent to find Jorunn sitting in front of Idunn, singing of valorous battles amongst the Old Kingdoms, long ago. ’Twas a song he’d heard since he was a lad, handed down from times ere the Great March, though Odin knew little of its meaning. Beyond the women, Vé sat on a cot, skins wrapt around himself, rocking back and forth to the melody, eyes staring vacantly ahead. Idunn had positioned the smith’s girl such that both the small fire and Idunn herself blocked clear view of Vé. The goddess crooked a half smile at Odin’s entrance. “Did you know this girl has a lovely singing voice, Odin?”

He shook his head. He’d had no idea. “Indeed you do, girl. Why don’t you grab some mead at the feast hall? They’ve started the meal early tonight.” The moment she left, he turned to Idunn. “What’s happened?”

Idunn ground her palms into her eyes. “I should have given you the apples sooner. I’m always too late. I keep trying to be like her, and it’s never enough.”

Odin knelt beside Idunn and reached a hand to her shoulder. “Be like who?”

“My grandmother. She was a hero, Odin. You’d have liked her, I think. A warrior like you—”

“What is happening to my brother?” he demanded, having no patience left for Idunn’s prattle. “You said the apple would halt this!”

“I think ... part of him wants it.”

“What? What did you say?” She grimaced as his grip tightened on her shoulder. He knew he was hurting her, but he couldn’t make himself stop. “You were supposed to be taking care of him, Idunn! I trusted you. Half the clan thinks you’re in here fucking his brains out. And ... and you’re saying he wants to lose his mind? So what in Hel’s frozen underworld—”

Idunn’s face darkened and she shoved him so hard he tumbled over. “Do *not* use those words. My grandfather *died* to stop that frozen underworld from becoming *this* world. Yeah, and I ... I would have gladly slept with Vé had I thought it would have saved him. Do you think I wish to bear witness to this?”

Odin rose slowly, gathering himself ere stalking to his brother’s side. Vé’s eyes glimmered red, and he gnashed his teeth as though they pained him. “What is the Mist doing to him? And what do you mean he *wants* it to happen?” When Idunn didn’t answer, Odin turned back to her only to find her looking away. “Idunn?”

She shuddered, clutching her head in her hands. The goddess, looking so vulnerable. Afraid. Such a thought did not comfort him. But if she was who she was, only for having eaten an apple, just as she had given him ... “A person can fight the Mist—for a while, at least. He’s not fighting hard

enough, and they're swallowing him up inside. Leaving room for something else."

Something else? Gods, she meant a *vaettr* was possessing Vé. "Use your sorcery. Cast it out."

"I *can't*. For Vé, it's as if whatever is inside him is filling a void. Part of him wants it there."

Odin placed a hand on Vé's head. It burnt as with fever. "I just need time! Time to find the Singasteinn and earn favour from that ghost."

"Are you so certain she can halt the transformation?"

Transformation? Hel's frozen ... Odin let the thought trail off. When he stood, he almost fell over. The ground seemed to sway beneath him. Was this his fault? What would drive Vé to such loneliness that he'd rather be possessed than face it? Vé had always been ... just there. Odin watched out for him, never let him get in over his head in a fight. What more did the boy want? A woman? Had Vé needed a wife? He'd never asked Odin to arrange a marriage, but maybe Odin should have broached the topic. Vili had been content to foster bastards on every willing woman in the clan. Odin had just assumed Vé would be the same.

Or was it something else? Had Odin and Vili pushed Vé aside? No, damn it. All he had to do was honour his oath to the ghost. She would stop this. "Hel ..." he mumbled, biting off his curse on remembering Idunn's objection. Unable to look at Idunn or Vé any longer, he staggered out of the house, wandering until he at last collapsed before a fire.

Someone offered him a stein of mead, and he kicked it back, hardly tasting it.

"So, brother," Vili said, "tell us of these *völvur* you went so far to see." Odin turned to the berserk. Gods, they *had* ignored their little brother. And now ... now Odin was going to fix it. No matter what it took, he was going to save Vé. No, not just Vé. He was going to save *all* his people. "Well?" Vili asked. "These Norns?"

Odin hesitated. There were ghosts here, about the town, some he had seen prior to leaving for the Norns. One, a tanner, he had seen hale and healthy a moon back. From the way the ghost clutched his chest, Odin thought the Mist-thickness had taken him. There was no help for the dead, so far as he knew. He looked back to Vili. The Norns spoke in riddles, but what he'd understood of it left an unpleasant taste in his mouth, like a splinter in the back of his mind. Talk of fire and flood and betrayal would only distress the others, and even if it were all true, they could do naught about it. "You know völvur. Stuck on their own mysteries. Now is the time for drink."

Vili chuckled and nodded. "Skål! Meat and mead both!" Just like that. The World was so simple to Vili—action without consideration of consequences. Odin tried to share his joy, but there was no joy in him. He could feel the emptiness in his own heart, born of his failures and weaknesses. Failures he could not repeat. And it wasn't his brother's counsel he needed, was it? For a time he sat with Vili, ere slipping off to find Loki.

He had not gone far, however, when Tyr intercepted him. Part of him wanted to wave the thegn away, to push toward the only thing that mattered. Loki might know where to go to save Vé. But Odin had made Tyr his champion and his voice, and he had made an oath to Idunn as well. "What is it?"

Tyr grunted, dropping whatever greeting he'd intended. "I've done as you bade. Found a way to draw the Hasding clan to our side."

"Good. Aye." Halfhaugr was central to all the clans. If he controlled that, winning support at the Althing became much easier. "What did you offer them?"

"You are to marry the jarl's daughter."

Odin sputtered, scarce believing his ears. "Marry the ... She's a Hel-cursed völvva, you fool!"

“Everyone will fear you. Respect you.” Aye, the king with a witch bride. “Jarl Hadding is not long for Midgard.”

Odin groaned. And Frigg was his only heir. The plan had the barest hint of sense to it. Enough to keep him from smacking Tyr for his folly. “You overstep your bounds.”

“You said to make you king. Few drops of blood on the marriage bed might save you rivers of blood on the battlefield.”

Odin clenched his fists at his side. Gods, but he wanted to hate Tyr for this. “I’ve other things to tend to.” He left Tyr standing there, no longer caring what the man had to say. Only Vé mattered now. Odin’s blood brother had climbed a hill some distance outside the town and sat alone beside a small fire. The trek was short, and after so long on horseback, any chance to stretch his legs was welcome.

“Hail, brother,” Loki said when Odin reached the top. “Did you find what you were looking for?”

Odin slumped across the fire from Loki, then kicked at some of the loose kindling. The fire sputtered and seethed. Like Odin, recoiling from outside forces. Every step he took seemed to carry him further into damnation, all whilst Vé dwindled. “I’m not sure. But for certain Sleipnir was an aid. Thank you for that.”

“Then keep him. He’ll be loyal to you as long as you return it.”

“A fine gift.” Not so long ago he’d seen the horse as monstrous. Now he knew better. Sleipnir was glorious. And everywhere Odin rode, Men would look on with awe. Maybe that had been part of Loki’s plan all along. “And I want you to have something ... Another of the apples, brother. One to give to whom you choose as your companion in life.”

Loki opened his mouth, then swallowed without speaking. Odin raised his hand, forestalling the need for thanks. Loki had earned all Odin could give and more. And now Odin needed his counsel more than ever. The foreigner had a way about him, and if anyone could handle the details of his

visit with the Norns, Loki could. Odin's blood brother had become his last hope to save his true brother. He told Loki all he could recall of the Norns' prophecies and riddles. And at last he told him what Idunn had said of Vé. And when he had finished, Loki nodded. "So what do you want to do?"

Part of him wanted to simply ask Loki what to do. But if Odin was to be king of the Æsir—a role Idunn had forced upon him, true, but one he had pledged to accomplish—he needed to make such decisions himself. He drew in a deep breath and blew it out ere speaking. "Tyr would have me marry Frigg Haddingsdotter. A völva. But the Niflungar ..."

"You don't know where to find them."

"I was hoping you would tell me." The ghost's curse coiled around his heart, crushing it, threatening to steal those he cared most for. His brothers were all the family he had left. And all of this because of his damnable pride on the mountain. Had he not gone after Ymir, Vé would not have caught so much of the Mist. He'd not have needed sanctuary in the Odling castle. The varulfur would not have come to the feast. Like a wretch, he brought misery upon his clan and his own kin. Or was he but a fool for not considering the consequences? For not heeding Heidr's warnings about the cost of all actions. No way remained to him save forward.

"What of Tyr's plan?"

"Marry Frigg?" The woman was attractive, no denying that, but Odin was scarce ready to settle down with a wife. "Marriage would mean passing up on a great many willing girls. Why settle for one love when you can have many?"

Loki raised an eyebrow. "Is that love?"

Odin shrugged. "Physically speaking, anyway. Besides, the woman is a völva. How could I marry someone like that?" Legend said to sleep with a völva was to risk falling under her spell. To say naught of dealing with a wife who'd always have to act like she knew less than she really did. That

bit was apt to grow tiresome about three days into the marriage. Sooner, even.

“A völva touches the Otherworld,” Loki said, “and is touched by it in turn. The marriage might serve more than one end, should you let it.” Now Odin raised a brow. “What do you know of seidr, brother?”

Odin felt dread slithering about him, serpent-like, ready to strike. “A völva’s magic. They see things, know things, can bespell a man’s mind.” *Necromancer ... Shaman ...*

Loki nodded, then stirred the fire. “There are two kinds of energy at play within us, Odin. One kind is stronger in men, one kind stronger in women. When men and women are intimate, they can draw out a small portion of the opposing energy, balancing our own. When you bring her to fulfilment, part of the energy she gives you will be that feminine energy.”

Odin scoffed. “You’re saying I can fuck the seidr out of a witch?”

Loki frowned. “That was vulgar. If you are to be a king, you must rise above vulgarity, no matter where you came from. What passes for the jarl of a small clan will not pass for a king. And no, that wasn’t what I was saying. Naught is lost, just shared. Her vital energy passes into you as yours passes into her, and from it you may gain a hint of seidr.”

“That’s a power for women.”

Loki raised a finger to forestall the objection. “Oh, there is something of the Otherworld in you, already, though you remain loathe to accept the burden a shamanic gift represents. Still, you seek to unite the Ás clans under your banner, and yet you’ll be swayed against gaining power and insight because it’s *unmanly*? Perhaps Idunn did not choose her champion carefully enough.”

Odin’s fists clenched, but he forced himself to keep them in his lap. “How dare you? *I* will lead our people.” He would do *aught* to save Vé.

“Then lead. Take the power from her, and you may gain a glimpse of the things she sees, might quicken the nascent psychic perceptions we both

know lurk in the corners of your mind. Thus might you understand riddles that otherwise leave you out in the cold.”

Odin grunted in disgust. But Loki said the strange urd was in Odin, as well, and were it known to others of such proclivity, no Ás would follow him. Wizards and their ilk, men touching the Otherworld were oft cast out, shunned. And Loki saw it in Odin, try as Odin had to deny it in himself. Tyr had little love for Odin’s foreign brother, but they both agreed on this damned wedding. And if it could tell him where to find the Niflungar ... Gods, Loki had been right about Sleipnir. And maybe, just maybe, the things Odin had believed all his life, the truths he took as undeniable, were not so plain as he had first thought them. Was Odin tainted for having this Sight? He was no longer so certain. Such shallow conceits were the province of lesser men facing lesser urds, smaller woes. If he was to be a shaman—necromancer, wizard, whatever term—then let him be one of such power as could help him change Urd.

Marrying Hadding’s daughter would give him many things he needed. A queen, aye, and a quickening of his own seidr. Maybe even, one day, there could be something more between himself and Frigg. She was regal, intelligent. She *would* make a fine queen. And other clans couldn’t help but fear the man with the monstrous horse and the völva queen. He sighed and let his face fall into his hands.

Finally he stood. “Prepare yourself. We leave for Halfhaugr in the morn.”



THE BAYING of elkhounds greeted them as Halfhaugr drew nigh. Odin rode Sleipnir out ahead of his people. More than a third of the Wodanar had come. Warriors, berserkir, shieldmaidens, washerwomen, tradesmen. All he had invited to see his wedding. The numbers would serve as a message to

Hadding, as well—a reassurance, perhaps, of the value of their alliance, or a threat should the jarl have second thoughts. Odin had little time to worry overmuch on his oath to Idunn until he had saved Vé. But if the key to either lay between Frigg’s legs, he needed to make damned sure her father could not change his mind.

A scout approached as he drew nigh, a hound at his heels. Agilaz Farshot. He took in Odin’s entourage but made no comment. Not even a visible reaction to the eight-legged horse. A steady man, this thegn. “We did not expect so many guests. I’d ask them to wait outside the town while I inform Jarl Hadding. He can arrange for your lodging.”

Odin looked at his people. “I understand. We are eager to celebrate, of course.”

“Of course.” Not even the hint of a smile. Stern bastard.

But that name ... Agilaz. Odin had not much considered it when they first met at Father’s funeral feast, but wasn’t Agilaz some famed archer from back in the Njarar War? Vé would have known, for he thrived upon such tales.

“Jarl Odin, I welcome you inside Halfhaugr, however. Frigg Haddingsdotter awaits you in the fortress.”

So they wanted him to enter alone, separate from his warriors. A reminder of their own strength, of the strength of their walls. Hadding was a fool if he thought he could hold Halfhaugr against Odin’s men. The jarl could not have even guessed what Odin had become. Something far more than a Man; infused with the glory of Idunn’s apple, Odin could fight his way through a dozen warriors, more.

He snorted, then dismounted. “Lead the way.”



INSIDE THE FORTRESS, Frigg stood, hands behind her back. She wore the most elegant of green dresses, embroidered with golden knotwork that might have represented the boughs of Yggdrasil. Irony, that the fruit of that very tree had made Odin immortal. The woman nodded respectfully as he drew nigh. Aye, she had beauty, grace, poise. And to save his brother, all he had to do was satisfy her. In his mind, he tore the dress from her shoulders. Held her down until she shuddered beneath him, crying out in pleasure. The image seemed so real, he flushed. At least with his thick fur cloak, she probably couldn't see the swelling in his trousers.

"Welcome to Halfhaugr, my lord," she said. A blonde girl stood beside her as well as a burly man. A guard, perhaps. Agilaz had wandered off to meet Hadding. There were ghosts in the hall, too, drifting upon the fringes. Old men, old women, perhaps dead in their beds. Men held funeral pyres to send the dead to the Otherworld, but either it didn't work, or didn't always work. He wondered if the nifalgar dared enter, invisible, into this city, to claim the souls.

Trying not to stare at the dead, Odin smiled at Frigg. He'd wooed many a girl in his time, though never had he considered claiming *it will save my brother's life* as a reason to overcome a woman's resolve. "Thank you for accepting my proposal."

Frigg half bowed, then beckoned for him to follow. "My father has arranged a private room for you in the fortress. I hear you bring a great many retainers with you. We will try to arrange lodging for them in the town."

"Wonderful." Would she agree to sleep with him ere the wedding? Unlikely. Still, knowing why he had come here made it hard to think of aught else. There was anticipation and terror all mingled up in a roil inside him, fierce as a winter storm. Dread ... and relief, at the thought of embracing that forever-hidden part of himself.

Odin followed behind her, taking in the fortress. Old dverg work, and stronger than Men could hope to build. Vé would have loved to have seen the place. Odin recalled him saying, a time or thrice, that after the Great March, Vingethor had first claimed this place. But the alliance of clans had not survived Vingethor's death, and the Hasdingi had been the ones to end up holding the ancient fortress.

"Did you truly ride here on an eight-legged horse?" the flaxen-haired girl asked.

"Indeed. And I don't believe I caught your name."

Frigg looked to the other girl. "This is my half-sister, Sigyn."

Half-sister. A bastard child, perhaps? Elsewise, why had he never heard aught of another daughter of Hadding? "Well, Sigyn, the horse is called Sleipnir. And he has carried me across more leagues than I can count, into lands you cannot imagine."

"I have a great imagination."

Odin chuckled whilst Frigg raised an eyebrow at her sister. The girl bit her lip, as if suddenly realising she might have overstepped herself.

Frigg led him down a hall, past several wooden doors, ere stopping at one. "Please make yourself comfortable here. I need to check in with my father."

Sigyn hesitated as if she intended to linger, ask more about Sleipnir. Frigg grabbed her sister's wrist and pulled her along after her, followed by their guard. Odin grunted, then stopped in the room long enough to cast in his satchel. He had things to ask the jarl of the Hasdingi.



JARL HADDING SAT in his darkened hall, coughing and sputtering whilst Odin waited. The ghost of an old woman—his wife?—drifted about, glowering at him, cast haggard looks at all the living. At first, he'd taken

her for alive, but no one else saw her. When she drew too close to Odin, glaring daggers at him, he stared her down until she withdrew, trembling, head lowered. The jarl cleared his throat once more. “We’re arranging a few private houses for the nobles among you. The others will have to stay in communal lodgings.”

As long as his brothers got their own houses, Odin cared little. The others would be used to living in close quarters. Well, Idunn, of course, she would need her own space. Odin shrugged, trying to seem amicable. “Aught you can arrange will serve. Come, let us speak of the wedding date.” The much more pressing matter.

“Aye.” The man coughed, then spat out some thick vileness on the floor before his throne. “The new moon will prove auspicious. Frigg has divined this.”

“The new moon! By the Vanir, man, you’d have us holed up here halfway to the solstice.”

The jarl snorted, whether at Odin or because of the Mist-thickness, who could say? “A strain on our supplies, aye.”

“So let’s set the date sooner. Surely tomorrow or the day after would—”

“Tomorrow!” The jarl shook his head, then raised a finger. “I remember being young. That eagerness. You won’t grow old in a single moon, Jarl Odin. Tonight the mead will flow. Bring your men and enjoy it. Savour this time.”

Odin scowled. He would certainly partake of the mead. He rather doubted, however, he would enjoy the jarl so delaying his more urgent quest.

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THE DÖGLINAR

25 Age of the Æsir

*B*lood seeped between Hervor's fingers as she climbed from the barrow. The burns on her hand and forearm were all too real. The slightest touch brought fresh agony. Bits of her skin had flaked off. Once free, she tumbled down the hill and lay there, beside her second torch. Had Odin seen what she had done? Faced down ghosts and withstood the burning of her own flesh to claim her family's legacy.

Aye, she should have the eyes of the gods on her now, she thought. With a knife, she cut away a strip of her tunic. She had no völvu's salve, so she wrapt the strip around her arm and palm, teeth gritted against the pain. Wrapping it hurt too, but it was better than constantly brushing it against things.

Tyrfing's weight over her shoulder was a comfort, a reminder of what her pain had bought. The first step toward vengeance. A great many men had wronged her family, and not one silver of weregild had ever reached her. No, her father and uncles had waited too long already for vengeance.

Maybe, once Arrow's Point and his Yngling masters had fallen to her blade, maybe then her family's spirits could reach Valhöll.

For that, she had to get off this damned island.

She pushed up, took up the torch, and stumbled on through the Mist. She had raised a crew with some effort, though she could trust them. She even had led them raiding all around the Morimarus, into Reidgotaland, Svjarland, Hunaland. And still they had not wanted to come here. Samsey was haunted, they claimed. Some ancient power dwelt here, restless and best left alone. Men were given to such facile superstitions.

Her stomach growled. No matter, the crew would have something left of the night meal she could sate herself on. Blood seeped through her bandage; she forced herself to look elsewhere. Best to keep her eyes alert in any event, especially at night. *That* was more than superstition. Hervor did not much care for night, in fact. Daylight meant freedom, the ability to walk, run, raid. At night, men had to cower in front of flames, not knowing what lurked in the darkness just beyond their sight. Naught tasted fouler than the impotence of that, of admitting to such weakness.

And the Mist was always thickest at night. Legends claimed the Mist came from Niflheim, from the domain of Hel. It seemed some skald's fancy to her. Either way, Hervor would happily send a great many men to the Gates of Hel very soon.

She passed out of the hills and down toward the shore. Thank Odin. Vengeance could wait a day or so. She needed a few mugs of mead, a hearty meal, and a long sleep. She paused a moment to check her helm and her hauberk. Most of the regular crew knew her for a woman. You couldn't conceal these things forever. They addressed her as Hervard though, for the sake of her reputation. Regardless, they had taken on some fresh bodies ere coming here and she saw no reason to let her secret slip.

By the shore, her steps stalled. Where the fuck was the ship? She was certain they had anchored here, in front of the rock face. Hervor paced

around, past the rock, waving the torch to dispel the Mist. What was going on? Where would they ... was that the light of a fire? Way out, over the whale-road and fading quickly. It was. Her sea-steed sailing away, vanishing into Mist.

Hervor stood there, mouth open. Her crew. Her trollfucking crew! They had *left* her here. Odin's balls! They must have seen the earthquake and ... and panicked like some untested boys. Those craven bastards! "Get back here!" she shouted after them. No way her voice would carry.

Samsey was haunted. That's what they claimed. Just about everywhere people didn't congregate and build large fires was haunted, people would say. But the crew had feared this place enough to leave their own captain behind. She worked her jaw. Her fingers twitched, eager to draw Tyrting and spill their blood. It wanted to punish them. She knew it did.

Any sign of that flame was gone. And her own torch was dwindling. Sure, she had a few more. Maybe enough to get through the night. But she had no supplies, no food. There were woods here. She could gather tinder for a fire. That would be a start. But without a bow, she couldn't hunt. So how was she supposed to survive? Where would she get ...? The shepherd. If there was a shepherd, there would be other people. Locals, somewhere. She just needed to find them. There had to be some way off this island.



THE RUMBLES of Hervor's stomach had begun to grow louder than the waves lapping on the shore. A numb heaviness had replaced the burning in her right hand. Even flexing her fingers felt apt to tear off her skin.

Following the shore meant she'd find fishermen sooner or later. Or so she'd thought. Samsey was a damned large island, and already daylight waned. It little helped that she'd slept beneath an ash tree for Odin-knew how long, though by sunrise, she'd been ready to collapse. In daylight, the

Mist thinned and you could almost allow yourself to breathe. So she'd kindled a small fire, shut her eyes, and tried to shut out the pain in her hand.

All the walking had worn her new boots in. She'd taken them off a pirate she'd slain the past moon but only just bothered to try them on just before coming to Samsey. Luckily, they had strong soles—what with her walking the shore all fucking night and day. When she caught those craven, traitorous crewmen, she'd have each and every one of them flayed and cursed down to Niflheim. A skald once claimed that, in those dark depths, a dragon gnawed upon the helpless corpses of murderers, rapists, and oath-breakers. Her crew had already managed to fall into the first two of those categories, and now they'd earned themselves the third. The worst of all crimes, many would say. Well, the dark dragon would suck the marrow from their bones, and they would feel every instant of it. For the dead were dead already and could find no respite from their suffering.

Hervor, however, was not going to break her oath. She had sworn vengeance on the Yngling dynasty and upon its champion Arrow's Point. She would do whatever proved needful to uphold that oath, would track him to the ends of Midgard if she must, all to spit him upon her father's sword. This, she swore as a daughter of the Döglinar.

Her steps on the sand had become shuffling, graceless. A long time she walked, trying not to think too much. To just keep moving. To not consider that her throat had grown so dry it felt on fire. To not think about drinking seawater, as she had seen a desperate man do, once.

There had been a shepherd. He had gone somewhere. Obviously, she had picked the wrong direction to walk, aye, but if she turned around now, she'd lose another day, one she could ill afford to waste. There had to be someone living here, some way off this cursed island.

As twilight drew nigh, the peak of a longhouse came into view, praise Odin. Hervor increased her pace. The wind howled, as if welcoming in the fresh reinforcements of the Mist. Had she inherited her father's berserk

nature, she might have welcomed the night and rejoiced in the moonlight. As a human, the night was strange. If it did not embrace her, why should she not scorn it in return?

She almost collided with the fence surrounding the house. It only rose up to her chest. Easy enough to vault were she not bone tired. She shook her head. These people were not here for her to plunder in any event. Their presence had mostlike saved her life. She edged along the fence until she reached the gate. Out on the water lay a dock, and tied there, a small sailing boat, probably for fishing. Small but probably big enough to get to Sjaelland, and thence onward to Svjarland. She could take the boat, flee this accursed shore ...

Hervor glanced back to the house. She was starving. Smoke rose from the chimney; fire meant people, warmth, and food. Dammit. Vengeance would wait, at least for an hour. She swung open the gate and ambled toward the house. Shuffling sounded inside—they had heard her. No one opened the door. She groaned. Obviously hospitality was not the highest virtue among these people. Perhaps they thought, not without cause, anyone wandering alone during eventide was a vaettr or other force of ill.

“I am mortal.” Her voice was harsh, cracked from too long with naught to drink. She rapped on the door. “I am a traveller in need. Open up, and let me in.” Whispers she could not catch sounded on the other side, quickly stifled. Frightened fishermen too stupid to know ghosts and trolls would not ask for permission to enter. Hervor shouldered the door. It creaked on its hinges but held as though a solid mass bound it. Had they barricaded it? Hel damn the peasants anyway. She was too hungry, too thirsty, and too fucking tired for this. She drew Tyrfing. As it left its scabbard, it emanated a faint light, the illumination glinting off the thickening Mist. “Open the door! I just want food and ale!”

Holding the sword filled her with renewed strength, much as it hurt in her cracked and bleeding palm. Perhaps it was just the refreshing feel of a

blade in hand once again. Such a thing was nigh to a part of her. Her heart was pounding, throbbing, beating through her like a drum. The whole World was beating with it.

Thump thump.

“Open the fucking door lest I hack it down!”

Thump thump.

Her palm was sweating. The sun had already set. Grown chill. The Mist was creeping in, swirling about her calves, crawling up her legs like scrambling fingers. “I can pay in silver!”

Thump thump.

She just wanted food. Well, and their damned boat. They were forcing her hand, after all. She had not wanted to rob them.

THUMP THUMP THUMP.

She couldn't hear aught over that pounding, ringing in her ears. Were they mocking her inside? Did they think those ash wood planks protected them? With a war cry she could barely hear over the pounding, she chopped at the door. The blade sliced through ash planks as though they had the strength of wool. Hervor hacked again and again, grunting with effort. Great chunks of the wood flew free, hewn splinters lancing through the night.

The pounding had stopped. A woman was screaming.

Hervor fell still, mouth agape as she beheld the blood dripping off Tyrfing's blade, landing in steaming splatters amid the snows. Odin's balls! Bastard had tried bracing the door with his own body, hadn't he? She kicked what remained of the door. Boards cracked and it swung inward, partially obstructed by the eviscerated man on the floor.

A woman had thrown her arms around two small children, shielding them with her body. She was shrieking in some language Hervor couldn't make out. Perhaps Old Northern? Hervor ought to have paid more attention to her tutors. She shook her head at the mother, grimaced, tried not to retch.

The children were wailing. She had not sought this. “I just wanted a damn meal ...”

The woman kept sputtering, but Hervor caught one word she recognised, repeated on several occasions: Hel. Whether the fisherman’s wife was damning Hervor to the icy goddess or actually beseeching her for aid, Hervor could not say. Either way, Hervor sheathed Tyrfing and stormed over to where the family had a steaming halibut sitting on a piece of wood near the fire. She snatched the plate, grabbed a drinking horn filled with water—best thing under the circumstances—and stormed back to the threshold.

She paused, looked back at the family. She hadn’t intended to kill anyone. She was desperate and ... and ... She set down the fish and fumbled with a silver arm ring. What was the weregild for a fisherman anyway? Who knew? Instead of breaking off a piece of the silver, she tossed the whole arm ring at the woman. “I just wanted to live through the night ...” The law would have held it fair weregild, she thought, even counting her taking the boat. Hervor doubted the woman, the children, thought much of the law, at the moment.

She drained the drinking horn in several great gulps, then tossed it into the house. The woman was staring daggers at her.

Hervor shuddered. “Maybe I’ll meet Hel, maybe I’ll dine with Odin in Valhöll. The only difference this made is now it’ll take a bit longer first.”

The widow gave no hint of understanding. Hervor shook her head and walked away. She hadn’t wanted to kill anyone here. She hadn’t.



THE MIST HAD GROWN THICKER than it ought to, thick enough that it seemed to slow Hervor’s boat, as though the water created a little too much drag. Already the wind had died and forced her to take to oars. Now,

approaching Sjaelland with sweat streaming down her face and back, every stroke felt like pulling against snow instead of water. Hervor grunted with the effort. She'd wanted to skirt the coast until she found a town where she could buy food, maybe find some straw to sleep on. But at this point, she'd take land any way she could have it.

Hel's frozen underworld. When would dawn break? It was too long coming. Even her calloused left hand felt raw from the oars. And the right one, the burns ... best not to even consider that. Felt like she'd worn it down to the bone. In her mind, she could see that, her flesh torn away, revealing what ought to lay beneath.

Heaving, she gave over as soon as the water seemed shallow. Three dozen feet offshore, but she'd fucking swim if she had to. This boat was faulty somehow; it had to be. She dropped the oars and leapt over the side. The water was cold as Hel's crotch, and deeper than she'd thought. It rushed over her head and tugged at her hauberk. Hervor surged upward, sucked down a breath and swam under the surface until her feet scraped sand. Finally, she waded toward shore.

This night—every night since she'd gone to Samsey—had not gone to her liking. When she found her traitorous crewmen, she'd—

A sudden undercurrent swept her feet out from beneath her. She pitched forward into the water. It yanked her back, pulling her toward the depths. Her fingers pulled through sand underwater, then caught on a rock. She couldn't see a damn thing. Felt like some eel had wrapt itself around her legs and was tugging on them. With her right hand, she swatted at them. Naught there. Just water.

Already her lungs wanted to burst. What was it? *Where* was it?

She was *not* going to drown twenty feet offshore. Her grip on the rock began to slip. With her free hand, she grabbed Tyrfing's hilt. She had to twist around to free the sword. Once it leapt from its sheath etheric flames

wreathed it, illuminating the depths. Fish darted away from the sudden brightness reflecting in all directions. Naught at all had held her.

She stood, gasping, panting, scarce able to keep her feet whilst she sucked down precious air. Was this the sword's curse? That nature and Urd itself should turn against her? No. No! She refused to believe that, whatever her father's ghost had claimed.

Still coughing, trying to breathe, Hervor stumbled toward shore. Shivers had built deep in her chest by the time she fell to the beach. Her hand remained clasped around Tyrting, its etheric flames dimmed. She rolled onto her back. The Mist had thickened across the shore, and her torches were now sopping wet. Dawn could not come soon enough, not when this night seemed crafted by Hel herself.

And her head was *pounding*. Hervor froze. The Mist was actually swirling, moving around her in what seemed a maelstrom. Odin's balls. Nature had indeed turned on her, as if the landvaettir were wroth with her for having borne the cursed sword to these shores. She rolled over and rose to her knees, holding the sword out ahead of her.

It wasn't just her head pounding. Her heart seemed to beat in her temples.

Thump thump.

She jerked her head from side to side. Water flew free. She'd lost her helm underwater, hadn't noticed before.

Thump thump.

This was not nature. Not at all. "Who's there?" No one answered. The Mist continued to thicken until she could not see a pace through it. That maelstrom was closing in on her. She swung with Tyrting but met only vapour.

Thump thump.

"Show yourself!"

Something unseen slammed into her back and threw her from her feet. She tumbled end over end, tearing her cheeks along the sand. Luck alone let her maintain her grasp on her sword. The World was spinning, reeling out of control. She rose and swung the sword wildly. The effort cost her balance, and she pitched over sideways.

Thump thump thump thump.

The heartbeat suffused the Mist, echoing in her head like a gong threatening to beat her brains out of her skull—from the inside. She couldn't hear aught else. Couldn't see past the growing pain, the pounding that deadened all other senses. She pushed herself to her knees. "What are you!"

"Old death ... rising ..." The whisper came from all around her, somehow breaking through the sound of the heartbeat, if barely.

"Face me!"

THUMP THUMP!

Another unseen force rammed her shoulder and sent her crashing onto her back again. She kept her hold on Tyrfing and slashed through the Mist again. It parted around the glowing sword but reformed almost immediately.

Hervor screamed. Her vision had taken on a red tint. Like blood. The Mist had become blood, swirling, coursing. No—pulsing, throbbing with each beat of the heart.

THUMP THUMP THUMP!

Her heart, pounding toward the sword. Tyrfing would have blood. It would take life. It must have life. It must have life. And if there was no foe to bleed, then ... Hervor stared at her hands. She had begun to turn the sword backward, twist its point to her own chest. What was she doing?

No.

Stop.

"Don't ..." Her mouth wasn't working right.

THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP!

No. No, no, no. What was she doing? This could not end like this. *Just drop the damn sword. Let it go.* Her hand would not open, would not obey. She had turned the blade fully around, pressed the point just over her heart. The pounding must be stilled. It must be stilled. It must drink, feast, and bring the silence. She had to end it. End it.

From the corner of her eye, she saw a man's face in the Mist, watching her open-mouthed. As shocked at her actions as she was. A vaettr? A sorcerer? The pounding heart was coming from him, too. The moment she focused on him, her muscles responded. In a motion, she reversed the sword and lunged. The blade bit through the man's chest with ease. At once, the pounding stopped, and her vision returned to normal, the rubescent haze seeping away, the Mist turned white.

The man—and he was flesh and blood, no spirit—looked down at the blade, then at her. And then he fell. The swirling Mist parted, eased. Hervor jerked the blade free and stared at it. The pounding in her head had abated, though her own pulse was racing. She tossed Tyrfing aside with a stifled scream. It landed in the sand and lay still. Blood seeped from the blade, staining the beach. She had almost killed herself with that. She had intended to run it through her own heart. She had ...

She slunk to her knees, hand to her mouth. The man's blood had coated her hand, her arm. She stared at her hand, not quite certain what she was seeing. The bandage, aye, some of the blood her own. Some the dried blood of a fisherman. Some that of a sorcerer. Her hand ached from the burns, but not so bad as it had been a few days ago. And she had almost impaled herself using that hand. That was less than ideal.

The sorcerer had bewitched her, tried to get her to send her own soul to Hel. Except ... he'd looked shocked at her actions, caught off guard enough to reveal himself. So, no sorcery of his had possessed her. That meant ... What had her father's ghost said of Tyrfing? That it sought blood. That once

freed, the bloodlust could not be denied. Hervor stared at the sword, lying still on the sand. Its glow had faded and it seemed like any other bloody, discarded weapon. The hunger was its own, as was the pounding heartbeat when she held it. Once drawn, the runeblade would not be sheathed again until it had stilled a heartbeat.

Hervor crawled to the evil blade. Her father had the right of it, she knew: Tyrfing was cursed. But then, Hervor had a great many heartbeats she needed to still, to fulfil her blood oath. So ... Urd must have intended Tyrfing for her hand, after all. For an oath, once spoken, must be upheld above all other things.

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DAYS GONE: SIGYN

799 Age of Man

Sure enough, the eight-legged horse occupied a stall in the stables. Hands raised in supplication, Sigyn crept toward the strange animal. It snorted at her approach, its black eyes never leaving her own. The depth there spoke of worlds beyond Midgard and secrets no mortal had uncovered. Whence came this animal? Somewhere beyond her reach, no doubt. “Shh,” she whispered. “Easy. I’m a friend.”

“Sleipnir chooses his friends with care,” a voice said behind her.

She spun to see Loki had crept up on her, silent as a shadow and twice as mysterious. “And is this horse truly the jarl’s mount?”

“Insofar as Sleipnir could belong to any person, he belongs to Odin at the moment.”

She smiled, turning his words over in her mind. Loki must mean the animal was too intelligent to be owned, which told her something in and of itself. Perhaps the horse was possessed by a vaettr. She’d heard spirits could alter a being’s physical form, given enough time. That could explain it. But still, questions remained. If it was a vaettr, why would it want a horse?

What kind of *vaettr* was it? Did it serve Odin out of mutual beneficence, or did it have some ulterior designs the jarl hadn't considered?

"They are holding a feast inside," Loki said.

Sigyn laughed. "Feast might be a stretch, I think. The winter draws on, and Father cannot hope to feed so many of Odin Borrson's people. Certainly not if he hopes to hold a proper celebration for the wedding. Maybe that was Odin's plan—to shame the Hasdingi or else force us to overextend ourselves."

Loki stared at her with those too-blue eyes, the hint of a smile on his face. "A wise jarl has many plans, without doubt. But to what end would Odin wish to shame Hadding and the Hasdingi?"

"I don't know that yet. But whatever he intends, I will find it out."

The foreign man broke into a true smile now. "Of that I have no doubt. I must join the others inside."

So would she. Drunk men were apt to say more than they ought, especially to a pretty girl. Loki, much as she wished to speak more with him, did not seem the kind to easily unveil his secrets. She'd make time to talk with him later, though. He was almost as much a puzzle as Sleipnir.



TALKING to Odin Borrson's people had proved less illuminating than Sigyn might have hoped. They claimed Idunn herself walked among them. Such fancy made them seem gullible, entranced by a deceptive *völva*. And yet, the jarl had come here on an eight-legged horse, so she could not afford to rule out aught.

By now, many had passed the drinking horn around a half dozen times. A brawl had broken out, turned into a wrestling match, and ended with both men agreeing they needed more mead. A commodity that would run out soon enough at this rate.

Sigyn drifted among the guests, engaging in idle chatter whilst keeping ever conscientious of the conversations around her. Any detail, however ostensibly unimportant, might prove the key to understanding Odin's ultimate purpose. Still, such an undertaking did not require her to remain sober either and she'd accepted the horn a few times herself. Odin's men offered it to her more oft than her father's, who pretended she did not exist. Tonight that did not bother her—not much, at least.

In one corner of the hall, Loki sat in front of Orlun, playing tafl. Sigyn's foster mother had a mind for the game, indeed had been the one to teach Sigyn many winters back, though Sigyn had long since surpassed the woman. Intent on the game, she edged closer until Orlun looked up.

"Here now. My daughter may give you a better challenge, foreigner. We both know where this game is headed." A glance at the board made that obvious. Loki would have her in five moves. Her foster mother rose and motioned for Sigyn to take her seat. She did so while the blue-eyed foreigner reset the board.

"Dark or light?" he asked.

Sigyn settled into the chair, trying not to grin. "You choose."

Orlun leant against a pillar, watching. Like as not, she wanted to see Sigyn thrash the man who had just defeated her.

Loki leant forward. "How interesting a question, especially when you leave it to another to decide."

"As you just did?"

He smiled ever so slightly. "Then I would give you the light."

"You'll play dark, then?"

"One must learn to play both sides to truly master the game."

Sigyn quirked a smile and moved her first piece. "What game are you playing, then?"

He moved in turn, motioning for her to play. "I've studied most games across Midgard. Some are instructive, some entertaining—the best are

both.”

They traded a few more moves. She couldn’t quite pin down his strategy. He blocked off her easiest plays but had not made any advances that might actually win him the game. “You play very cautiously,” she said.

“It’s the long game that matters most.”

She took one of his pieces. “Too much caution can cost you.”

He seemed remarkably unperturbed, continuing to shift his pieces out defensively, not even making counterattacks. After several moves, he finally spoke again. “Sometimes one has to make sacrifices to win.”

She chuckled. “From where I sit, you don’t seem to be winning much of aught.” She claimed another piece.

“Perhaps you sit too long in one place. Everything is a matter of perspective. The changing of viewpoints can illuminate the World in ways we could not have imagined.” He shifted his king, cutting off her plan to hem him in.

Instead, she claimed yet another of his pawns. She opened her mouth to taunt him, then shut it and leant back, taking in the board. Had he just ... No. There was no way he could have planned that far ahead. What, twenty moves? And yet he moved his next piece, leaving her with no choice but to fall back. To precipitate an endless series of counters that would end with him the victor in another ten moves.

Sigyn tapped her finger to her lip. Did he *see* this? Had he set this up on purpose? She moved again, testing. Once again, he shifted another piece, forcing her hand and smiling ever so slightly about it. She rose, shaking her head. “That was ... I’m impressed.”

“Wait, what happened?” Olrún asked. “Is he giving up?”

“No. He’s already won.”

Loki leant back, saying naught, but Olrún sputtered. “H-how did ...? You were winning.”

No. Maybe she never had been. How fascinating. An opponent who could plan even farther ahead than she could. She'd have to improve her game. For now, though, she nodded at Loki in respect. Maybe one more drink, after all.



THE FEAST HAD long since dwindled away. The guests were mostlike to be asleep, but she could use the time to snoop through their belongings. Sigyn crept about the hall, inspecting the drunken warriors. Chances of finding something were slim, but you never knew. The things people carried could tell you a lot about them. Hadding had provided Odin with a room to sleep in, but the rest of the guests lay sprawled around the great hall. Some lounged on benches or slept in chairs, others on the floor. Odin's massive brother lay face-down on a table, snoring into the wood. Sigyn snorted.

Behind her, someone stirred. She spun to see one of the warriors—Tyr—watching her with one eye open. He'd slept leaning against a pillar, as if guarding his fellows. Actually, that must be exactly what he was doing. The way he stared at her made her skin crawl. Not much chance for snooping through anyone's things now.

She hadn't seen Loki. He would have the most answers, but this Tyr was Odin's thegn and champion. He might know Odin's heart well, and it might prove easier to pluck answers from him than from one as clever as Loki. Heart pounding, she approached the warrior, then spoke softly. "You're the one who offered the proposal on Odin's behalf."

Tyr grunted.

She knelt beside him. "It surprised us all."

He chuckled. "Him, too."

Oh? So he had come here without orders from his jarl? How intriguing. Odin had not sent Tyr, and yet the jarl had come here with all his people,

ready for a wedding set to unfold in but a few days. The jarl must place unwavering trust in his thegn, then, enough to accept the man's choice as his bride. Unless, of course, Odin plotted betrayal, adapting his plans to the opportunity Tyr had thrust upon him. "You never truly said what Odin hopes to gain from this."

"A wife."

Sigyn smiled and shook her head. "Perhaps, but he could have found one anywhere. You came here, to Halfhaugr."

Tyr grumbled something under his breath. "Godwulfs are on the move. Threatening the Athra."

Sigyn frowned but nodded. So Odin, or at least Tyr, must know Jarl Alci was her father's brother. Maybe he thought he could pressure his new father-in-law to restrain Alci. If so, Odin was in for profound disappointment. Her father could not protect his own people from Alci, much less some other clan. "Where can I find Loki?"

"Can this not wait until morn?" he whispered, though the crook of his mouth said he thought he knew why a woman would seek a man at this hour.

Sigyn flushed, no doubt confirming his suspicion. Let the man think what he would. Never mind a part of her longed for just that. For anyone who would want her for her. Tyr jerked his head toward the main door. Loki had gone outside? Into the Mist? That was ... unfortunate. Sigyn nodded at the warrior, rose, then approached the door herself. Damned thing would creak on its hinges for certain. With luck, though, all these men were twice over too drunk to wake from the sound.

She should be safe within the town walls. As long as she had fire, she need not worry overmuch about Mist-madness. She edged the door open, then slipped through the crack. Outside, the bitter night air stung her cheeks. She pulled her cloak tighter, but it wouldn't be enough. She needed

a warm bed and a few hours' rest. Maybe Tyr had been right. Maybe this should have waited for the morn. And yet she found herself continuing on.

A breeze blew through town, stirring a drift of snow. Sigyn grunted against the cold and took a few steps outward ere she spotted the man sitting in front of a small fire, staring at it. The flame was between the two of them, but he seemed to be looking at her, or at least in her direction. Was that enough of an invitation? It would have to be. She trudged over, then sunk by the fire, across from Loki. Not even the flames granted enough warmth out here.

"Why did you leave the hall?" she asked.

"That's not what you came here to ask me."

No. Again, he was a bit too perceptive. "And yet, it remains a valid question."

"So it does."

How illuminating. If he wasn't going to cooperate, this was pointless. "Do you want me to leave you alone?"

"No," he said, as though shocked at the question. He didn't want to be alone, and yet he'd slunk away from his fellows to sit out in the cold. The man himself was starting to seem as mysterious as the horse. And Sigyn treasured a good mystery.

"Your jarl, he knows Frigg is a völvá."

The man smiled at her from across the fire—the merest hint of a smile, really—but she found herself returning it. He waited for her to ask an actual question. How clever. Fine then.

"Why does he want to marry Frigg?"

"Is a political alliance not reason enough?"

"You've implied an answer without giving one. Does that work out for you?"

"Most of the time, aye," Loki said, his smile growing.

"And if I request you give me straight answers?"

He sat with hands resting on his knees, legs crossed. “I suppose you won’t know until you try.”

If he wanted to play, she’d indulge him. She liked a puzzle. “Please answer my questions directly.” He didn’t respond to her imperative, just stared at her with those deep blue eyes. So she hadn’t actually asked aught. “Will you give me direct answers to my questions?”

Oddly, he blinked, then stared at the stars. He seemed so entranced with them she feared to interrupt, as though he communed with the gods themselves. “I’ll make you a deal,” he said at last, finally returning to stare into her eyes. “I will answer a question directly, if you will do the same.”

“Deal,” she blurted, then realised her mistake. She’d agreed to a single question only—which meant she’d have to choose very wisely. Something that would answer all Frigg’s concerns at once ... or at least allow Sigyn to deduce the answers to the remaining questions.

Sigyn folded her hands in her lap, smiling whilst she turned possible questions over in her mind. *What is the real reason for the marriage? Does Odin truly care for Frigg? What was Loki’s secret?* Her smile grew. What she wouldn’t give to know that. The man undoubtedly had many, but she couldn’t afford to waste her one question on them. Not after she’d promised Frigg. Still, she hated to leave a mystery unsolved ... No! What could she ask? *Is Odin trustworthy? Why did Frigg dream of spring at Odin’s side?* No—he could well answer some nonsense about a völva’s visions being metaphors. But then, that would tell her something as well. If the vision was a metaphor, and Odin would not become a literal king, that might well sway Frigg’s choices.

“Once again your silence speaks well of you, Sigyn Haddingsdotter.”

“How do you know my name?”

“I—”

“No!” She raised a hand and almost leapt to her feet. “That is *not* my question.” Damn. He could have easily asked after her with any local.

Maybe Orlun had told him after their tafl match.

Loki smiled and nodded. She narrowed her eyes at him but couldn't quite hide her own smile.

She had to ask something about spring. If Odin's future was somehow tied to that, then the urd of all Midgard rested on him. But the question had to be about Odin. Any question she asked specifically regarding Frigg's vision could be vague or unhelpful, even in a direct answer.

"I have my question," she said at last. "What is so special about Odin that he might shape the urd of Midgard?"

Loki's mouth opened as if he hadn't expected that, but his eyes still seemed warm. Almost proud. "What a well-thought question. One, I suspect, that has more depth than even you realise. Since you have requested a direct answer, I'll try to give one that will make the most sense, rather than be the most complete. Odin was chosen by one of the Vanir, Idunn, to receive the apples of Yggdrasil, making him immortal—a gift he can share with a few select others. This gift, and the power and responsibility it entails, would naturally allow—in fact, all but force—him to challenge the current state of the World."

Sigyn's mouth hung open a crack. Of all the things she'd expected he might say, that was not one of them. Her first reaction was to dismiss the implausible claim. The idea of a goddess traveling to a small Ás clan and offering the gift of immortality was absurd. But then, so was a man riding an eight-legged horse or slaying a jötunn. If the gods had truly chosen Odin, then the man was destined for a life of greatness, be it great glory or great tragedy. Sadly, the two so oft went hand in hand. She tried to speak, but only a pathetic gasp of breath escaped.

Loki raised a hand as if to forestall any further questions. "I believe I have upheld my part of our bargain. Now I have a question for you."

Sigyn blew out another breath. "A deal is a deal."

“So it is,” Loki said, his eyes locked on hers. “Consider this. Odin now faces the question of eternity. Ask yourself whether the life you live is one you would be content with for the rest of time, or if, in his place, you would find your existence wanting. Tell me, Sigyn, have you not felt aught missing from your life, as though some part of your soul sought for something you could not quite name?”

“I ...” She swallowed. What did that mean? That she was lonely? Without doubt she was. How could she not be when most people, even her own father, had never understood her? At best she was tolerated, at worst feared and mocked for the very talents the gods had blessed her with.

Loki rose, still smiling. “Thank you for the direct answer, Sigyn. We should probably return to the warmth of the hall.”

But, instead, she sat, shivering, unable to stop running his words through her mind.

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STARKAD

25 Age of the Æsir

Starkad had spent long years in service to the Yngling dynasty, off and on, friend to Yngvi and Alf Alreksons. His path oft carried him far afield, beyond even the North Realms. He had seen things these petty kings could not imagine. And now they called him back. Word had spread through Sviarland that they sought his aid once again. They knew it did not come cheaply.

Starkad made his way over the marshy plain of the Fyrisvellir, Afzal ibn Hakim trailing a few steps behind. Countless treks here had taught Starkad the safest way to pass. These wolds were haunted by the ghosts of innumerable warriors who had lost themselves in the Mist, sunken into the peat. They watched him now, the dead. They did not show themselves, but a man could feel it as they neared, the chill in the air, the hair on his arms standing on end. The dead hated the living, envied them for the life so cruelly snatched from their grasp. Starkad had many enemies among the dead, many he had sent screaming into the Otherworld. Those ghosts would lead him astray if he let them.

Afzal was pointing at a ghost light over the bog. Starkad grabbed the Serklander with a hand on each cheek and spun him around, forcing the man to look into his eyes. “Do not look at the lights. They shall be the last thing you see.”

Will-o’-the-wisps, mere trickery of the dead, but those lights had drawn many a man to his death. So like life-preserving flame a man naturally looked at them, stared deeply, and so became intoxicated with the luminous flames. A man would follow them right off into a pit of peat and drown, still trying to clutch flames he could never hold. Starkad had seen it happen. It was not the worst death he had ever seen, but neither is there much honour in choking on muck.

Afzal blinked, then nodded. “How many times should I owe my life to you?”

Starkad released him, then spit into the bog. “You are free to leave any time you wish. I have not asked for your service.”

“You have it, nonetheless.”

Starkad smiled, just a little. Careful not to look too closely at the wisps himself, he pushed onward. The Serklander had not left his side in ... was it almost nine winters now? Not since Starkad had saved the foreigner when he was quite a young man, having accompanied his father on an ill-fated trade expedition to Holmgard. Starkad had met the Serks at a grand funeral, one which had delayed their caravan. After the years he’d spent fighting their people, he’d found himself with little but bile for their ilk. Yet, afterward, when bandits had set upon their caravan—a whisper in a dream had warned Starkad of that—he’d found himself inclined to save them. To save the boy, at least, for the bandits slew his father and claimed the goods they had borne. And Afzal ibn Hakim had refused to leave his side from then on.

The Yngling hall lay by the river. Though built by modern men, it had stone foundations dating back at least to the time of the Old Kingdoms.

Maybe even older. Mayhap Freyr himself had truly helped build the place, as the Ynglings claimed. A stone wall protected each house in the town, the great hall included. Those gates were thrown wide, though with evening drawing nigh, they would no doubt soon shut. Now though, the Ynglings welcomed warriors from far abroad into their hall. Shouting and raucous laughter rang from inside. Starkad nodded at the guards at the door.

“Who the fuck needs two swords?” one whispered to the other as he passed. Starkad stiffened. This oaf did not even know who he was. Did not know why he wore a sword on either shoulder. His fingers twitched idly.

“Not worth it,” Afzal whispered in his ear.

“Dolt,” the other guard said. “That’s Starkad Eightarms.”

The first guard uttered a satisfying hiss of surprise and perhaps self-admonishment. Enough so that Starkad need not personally introduce himself. He continued on instead. He waded among the throng, accepting the drinking horn as it was passed to him. He took a long swig of it. The Ynglings still had the best mead; he’d give them that. He handed it off to some shieldmaiden without looking at her. She was not worth his time. Women never were. She tried to talk to him, but he ignored her.

“Orvar!” he bellowed, spying the well-muscled man on a bench beside the hearth pit, warming his hands. Orvar had not held what had happened to Vikar against Starkad, leastwise, not after some heated debate over it. He and Starkad had fought together many times, most oft on the same side, though Starkad had once crossed swords with the man at the other’s behest. It had been a short contest, though Orvar remained among the finest Starkad had ever faced. Still, the fastest man was the only one who mattered. And Starkad had grown very, *very* fast with a blade.

“Odin’s spear, man,” Orvar said. “Time does not seem to touch you. If I didn’t know better, I’d think you one of the Æsir!”

Starkad barely stopped himself from spitting. “I am not one of them.” The man had embraced the new gods and would not take kindly to any

insult to them. “I was not certain to find you here. Not after—”

Orvar held up a hand. “Let’s not speak of her.”

“They are always more trouble than they are worth.”

His friend snorted. “Not sure I agree on that one. At any rate, how goes it with you? I heard you made for the Midgard Wall.”

“I wanted to see it for myself.”

“And did you?”

Starkad grunted in assent. Stories claimed the Vanr sorcerer Mundilfari had raised the wall to enclose Midgard, protect it from the forces of Utgard. On occasion, a jötunn or such creature made it past, but the worst of them remained outside the lands of Men. Of course, it also cut Mankind off from the fabled treasures of Utgard. A trade, he supposed.

Orvar had seen the far side of the Wall, had claimed there were breaches. One day, Starkad would find those and see Jötunheim for himself. Starkad’s old friend looked now to Afzal, who was trying to wrangle water from the thralls, much to everyone’s chagrin. “Is that the same Serkland boy from before? He still follows you?”

Starkad shrugged; they both knew he’d never send Afzal away. Not when the Serk was the one person in all Midgard who would follow wherever Starkad’s wanderlust carried him. “Yngvi is here?”

“Alf as well, aye, and the sons of both brothers too. Everyone gathers for this.” Orvar beckoned to a seat on the benches.

Indeed, both brothers sat side by side on thrones. As their father—Alrek—had shared kingship with his brother, so too they had divided the kingdom between them. Mostlike they hoped to avoid hostilities within the family—more than enough hardship had plagued the Ynglings already, causing the split with their kin who now ruled Dalar. Starkad could not see how fracturing the kingdom would end well, though. Whose sons would inherit? Or would the kingdom be yet further divided?

Starkad had served the two kings' father for a winter or so ere tragedy had struck. Alrek and Eric had killed one another, an urd Yngvi and Alf wanted to avoid. Time would tell. All men had their own curses to face.

Thralls brought out great hunks of reindeer as well as roasted carrots and chard. A feast worthy of great kings, certainly. And kings who wanted something. Starkad dug in, pausing only to direct Afzal to a seat nearby. The Serkländer did not taste of ale or mead—despite the insult of continuously refusing the drinking horn. It was one habit Starkad had never managed to break him of. Shame, too. Instead of getting drunk, the foreigner preferred to smoke his strange herbs. Starkad had tried them once and found his stomach roiling like a stormy sea. Never again.

Orvar pointed to another table. Starkad almost choked on his mead. Old Bragi Bluefoot. The skald had to have had a decade still on Orvar, and here he was still, boasting like a young man and slinging insults at warriors half his age. Some things never changed.

“Friends!” King Yngvi shouted as he stood and strode forward. The hall did not grow still, but the noise fell to the point Starkad could at least hear their host. Yngvi was named for Freyr, for it was said the Vanr used that name when he sired the Yngling dynasty. “Friends, welcome! The solstice approaches, and we will soon greet a new year.” Men shouted, raising their mugs or drinking horns or even reindeer bones in salute. Yngvi lifted his hands for quiet. “And this solstice I have word from our friend King Gylfi.”

Starkad snorted. Friend was probably a stretch, though Gylfi was kin to Yngvi. None of the kings of Sviarland much trusted one another, and for good reason. Borders shifted often, and little wars soon grew into bitter feuds. Sviarland had been a divisive and war-torn land since the fall of the Old Kingdoms, and that was not like to change. Sviars fought Gautar, Gautar fought the Skjöldungar, everyone mistrusted the Lapps. Kings tended to have short, brutal reigns, measured most by how many of their fellow kings they could overthrow. Still, Gylfi was a decent king, well

respected. He'd ruled the lands of Dalar a long time. A sorcerer, though, it was said, and thus a man Starkad avoided.

"King Gylfi," Yngvi said, "has had a vision sent by Odin."

That was part of the reason he'd ruled so long. Odin had a penchant for reaching out in dreams to a chosen few, Gylfi among them. As was Starkad, much to his chagrin.

"The great Ás king has commanded his people in Svjarland to go forth and claim Midgard, to spread across all the lands and bring his name and cause to all peoples." This was not news. After overthrowing the Vanir, Odin had revealed himself to Gylfi, claiming godhood and ordering the Svjarlanders to spread his fame. It would never have been enough for the Ás king. If every land in Midgard turned to his worship, the Æsir would no doubt next try to convert the fucking jötunnar themselves. "Odin has revealed the location of a land lost long ago, an island we thought but a myth. The lost island of Thule."

Now Starkad sat straighter. Gylfi oft claimed to have visions sent by Odin, but the aged king probably invented half those visions to enhance his own fame in association with the god's. Still if he had the location of a lost land, maybe Odin truly had spoken to him. Naught good ever came from Odin's mouth, but then, lost lands meant treasures of the Old Kingdoms. Wealth beyond measure for men in these times. And new places, new challenges. Places not seen by men in centuries. Such places held a call of their own, more powerful than the command of even an Ás king. Starkad's fingers fair itched with the thought of it. He could not turn away from a chance at plunder; such was his curse, his urd.

"And so my brother and I," Yngvi said, "we have agreed to partner with Gylfi for an expedition. We seek a crew of the bravest, strongest men in the North Realms. Ones who will seek out Thule and tame it such that a colony might be established there. And to do this, the crew must be able to pass the winter on the island." A great many of the men exchanged glances. Summer

raids were common enough, but Yngvi proposed something else entirely. An expedition not to steal from Kvens or Gautar or islanders, but to tame a land gone wild. What dangers, what fell challenges might lurk on an island not walked by Men in an Age? What *glory* to those first men who took that land. “To this end, I have called my old friend, Orvar-Oddr!”

Starkad’s friend stood, spread his arms, and looked at the gathered warriors. He’d known. The trollfucker had known why they were here and not told Starkad. Indeed, Orvar now spared him the merest glance. Starkad slammed his fist on the table and stood. “No such expedition will leave without me!”

Afzal groaned, then stood. Starkad nodded at him.

One by one, others stood as well. There, Rolf Quicktongue. At another table, the man everyone called the Axe. And old Bragi Bluefoot too, claiming they would need a skald to take note of their deeds and turn them to song. And what a journey this would be, what a tale. They would find this lost island, plunder its ancient riches, and win this new land for the Ynglings.

And Odin could sit and scheme in Asgard until the end of time for all Starkad cared.



THE SMOKE of a half dozen braziers clogged the Uppsaliir hall, flavouring the mead and lending the whole place an air of lethargy. Starkad wished he could enjoy it, but even his relaxed pose—leaning back in a chair, legs splayed—it was a ruse. A front to conceal the nervous energy almost bubbling to the surface in him. What was it about the thought of treasure and death? Why did he feel so damned drawn to it?

Much as Starkad wanted to blame Odin or Tyr or the other Æsir, maybe it had always been inside him. This wanderlust ... this need to claim ...

fucking everything.

Afzal sat in the shadows beside him, puffing on that Serklander pipe, eyes glazed over from those herbs he liked. The Serklander leant forward, bleary eyed as a drunk and yet somehow he tended to remain insightful while in such moods.

“What is it?” Starkad demanded.

“You’ve that look again.”

With a snort, Starkad waved that away. Such was his curse, and Afzal knew it well enough.

Across the hall, King Yngvi broke into raucous laughter, raising the drinking horn in Bera’s direction. His brother’s wife sputtered and snickered herself, almost choking on her own mead. The hour had grown late, and many men had retired, but Yngvi always liked to feast well into the evening. Starkad had business best discussed with few ears to overhear. Besides ... night and sleep did not favour him. Dreams showed him more than one thing he preferred not to see.

“Did you see aught of note?” Starkad asked.

Afzal breathed out a long sigh, blowing discoloured smoke in a stream. “Darkness. Long nights and skies aflame ...” The boy insisted those herbs let him see visions like a fucking völva. Thing was, Starkad had heard enough insight from him not to dismiss those claims, however ergi they seemed. “And knowing you,” Afzal said with another drawn-out breath, “such thoughts only drive you onward. You do not seek the good things in life, Master.”

“Such as?”

“A wife? A family?”

Starkad snorted. No. Such things were not for him. He patted the boy on the arm and rose from the chair to make his way toward Orvar. His old friend was busy wooing a shieldmaiden—waste of time, of course, and

naught Starkad minded interrupting. Orvar shooed him away with his eyes, but Starkad ignored the hint and sat down beside the Nidavelliran.

“We’ve things to talk on, you and I.”

“Not this night, I think,” Orvar said without looking his direction.

“Run along, girl,” Starkad said to the shieldmaiden. “The old man’s cock shrivelled up and dropped off long ago.” The woman glared at him hard enough she seemed ready to take a swing. Wouldn’t that have been amusing. Briefly. Then she rose and stumbled away, drunker than even Orvar.

“Wait,” Orvar called after her. “Eightarms speaks of his own manhood, girl. I assure you mine is ...” He fumbled with his trousers but gave it over when she didn’t glance back. Then he cast a weary glare at Starkad. “Just because you don’t appreciate a woman’s charms doesn’t mean the rest of us shouldn’t.”

“Naught wrong with plowing a trench if the urge is powerful enough. It’s everything before and after I find objectionable. The ... lies ... the false promises leading to inevitable betrayals. All of it. Men and women were never meant to have long-term relations. Fire and ice, we are, the mingling explosive.”

Orvar glowered, took another swig from the horn, and cast it aside. “I see you have become no less tedious in the past few years, Eightarms. So tell me, what do—”

“Because the hour is late!” Alf snapped at his wife, who still sat drinking by Yngvi.

Starkad glanced at the pair. Bera, Alf’s wife, sneered at him, slurring her speech. “You never take time to enjoy the merits of this hall. Always off to bed.”

“I’ve a kingdom to run in the morn, wife.”

“Oh brother,” Yngvi said. “Surely Uppsalir can manage a few hours without us—”

“Stay out of this!”

Starkad chuckled and pointed at the trio who were all now shouting. “You see what good comes from women, aye?”

“You speak harshly to your brother,” Bera said, “when he is no doubt a much better companion for a woman than you!” Alf spat at her feet and stormed out of the hall, followed by Yngvi’s chuckles.

Starkad spread his hands to take in the whole of this debacle. “Behold the loyalty of women, my friend.”

Orvar groaned. “Alf is an abrasive trollfucker, and it surprises you that his wife does not much care for it?” He threw up his hands. “You did not come over here to talk to me of women, I think. Nor, I pray, simply to ruin my evening.”

“No. I didn’t.” Starkad sucked his teeth. “You ought to name me your second on this mission.”

“Really? Here I sit without my lady friend for the night—stones thick to bursting, in case you wish to know—”

“I truly do not.”

“—And no one to blame save you, and you think I ought to bestow honours upon you? Pray tell, Eightarms. Amuse me.”

Starkad pressed his palms onto the table and leant forward. “You ever seen a man faster with a blade than me?”

Orvar drummed his fingers on the tabletop. “No denying that. Probably no man in all the North Realms has as much blood on his blades. Still, I cannot say you’re much in my good graces this night.”

Starkad sniffed. One move always remained open to him, loathe though he was to ever make it. Still, when losing the tafl match, sometimes a desperate gambit became necessary. Finally, he groaned. “He sent me ... dreams of this mission.”

“Who did *what* now?”

“Well, you know of whom I speak.”

Orvar's eyes widened and he stroked his beard. "You would not jest over such a thing?"

Starkad scoffed. Given the choice, he would not bring up the Æsir at all.

Finally, Orvar nodded. "It seems a higher authority than even Yngvi wishes you along. Very well, I will name you second."

"And ... you're going to tell me the truth about what we're seeking on Thule, Orvar. All of it."

The Nidavelliran hesitated, looking like he might try to deny his omissions. In the end, though, he just nodded.

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DAYS GONE: ODIN

799 Age of Man

*T*he pounding inside Odin's head was even louder than the pounding on the door. For a moment he pulled the furs over his face, as if that could cut out the banging. Too much mead last night. Or perhaps not enough—a few more pints, and maybe he'd have slept through this interruption. Besides, the deadening of his senses helped keep the ghosts at bay. Groaning, he rose and stumbled over to the door, flung it open. "What in the name of Hel's frigid crotch is going on?" he demanded.

The servant, a chambermaid, reeled back, her mouth agape. Poor girl was probably no more than fourteen. Gods, Loki had been right. Odin was a vulgar man. It appeared that was something he'd have to work on. "Uh, apologies, my lady. You woke me from a pleasant dream."

The girl stared at her feet. "Jarl Hadding summons ... er ... requests your presence."

What now? "Fine. Run along and tell him I'll be there shortly." Odin rubbed his palms against his eyes, then stumbled over to a wash basin and dunked his head in the chilled water. Gods! That'd wake him well enough.

He shook his head, flinging droplets of water around the room ere donning his tunic. With it over his head, he started, barely stifling a scream at finding a dead woman in his room, watching him. The same old woman he'd seen in the hall the day prior, glowering at Hadding.

"You see me ..."

Little point in denying, now that he'd met her gaze. "Aye." Odin set to strapping on his belt. "Much to my chagrin, I do."

"You are a wizard."

A necromancer, according to Loki. "I come to suspect such terms mean something other than what most think. What would you have of me, ghost? Why linger in halls that hold naught for you?"

"You are to wed my daughter."

Frigg had said she lost her mother, some winters back. Odin wondered if he could ever tell her he looked upon the woman now. "Aye."

"I would speak with her, through you, wizard."

Odin snorted. "I'm done with making deals or oaths to the dead, *ghost*."

Whilst he had, on occasion, seen the living stride through the dead—most oft the dead tried to step around them as if such a thing unnerved them as well—whenever he beheld it, the living soul would shudder, taken by a sudden chill. Odin decided it best to edge around the woman, as he made for the door.

"Wait," she pleaded.

He did not look back. "Even her, a *völva*, would mostlike not thank me for claiming to speak for her dead mother. She would name me a liar, think I jested at her expense. Or worse still, call me *ergi* and I would risk losing more than my marriage. I cannot help the dead, woman. I will count it a great deed should I manage to aid the *living*."

"You spurn the gift given to you!" the ghost shrieked. "You shirk the chance to help those who have no other advocate and claim 'tis not your burden. That, I name *unmanly*."

Odin stiffened, still did not turn. Finally, he strode out to the great hall, where Frigg and Sigyn stood by Hadding's side. The jarl shifted in his throne with poorly disguised pain. The old man squinted at Odin ere speaking. "Jarl Odin, let us not mince words. You have been holding out on your prospective allies. It has come to my attention you hold a great gift, the greatest gift a man could hope for."

This was not mincing words? Odin folded his arms; this was shaping to be an evil morn, if he'd ever seen one. If the jarl wasn't going to be direct, neither would he. "Indeed. My sexual prowess is legendary, so I shouldn't be surprised word has reached this far. Your daughter shall not be disappointed."

Frigg pressed her lips together, barely hiding her displeasure. Sigyn blushed and stared at her feet.

Hadding glowered and rose from the throne, his knees popping as he did so. "I know you have apples that grant eternal youth! Don't you think your allies deserve such—" A cough wracked the man's chest, then he rubbed it ere continuing, "—such considerations?"

How in the burning flames of Muspelheim did he know about the apples? It was too much to hope Odin had kept the secret from his own people, but who would have told the Hasdingi? Of course, every one of them had been drunk last night. For all Odin knew, he might have let that slip in his boasting. Dammit, this was not what he wanted to face. Even if the apple would cure Hadding of his ailments—and Odin suspected otherwise—the man wasn't just old, he was a craven, a weakling. Hardly someone Odin wanted to spend eternity with. Besides which, he had but one apple left, and that was meant for Frigg. He needed his queen by his side.

Odin clenched his fists for a moment ere answering. "Rest assured, Jarl, I will treat my allies right. Those who earn my friendship will get what they deserve."

Hadding nodded, apparently satisfied with Odin's words, though Sigyn frowned. Odin tried not to look at her. The girl had recognised his words actually promised naught. She was a clever one, one worth watching. And if she told Hadding, would he listen?

"Bitch does not belong in this hall," Odin heard the ghost grumble behind him. "Should've housed her in the pig pen, with the other swine." Odin tried not to let his face reveal his thoughts. The dead were so oft filled with bottomless malice. Had this woman treated her husband's bastard child thusly in life? Mostlike, she had. So then, perhaps Sigyn had come to this hall only after the old woman's death.

Hadding coughed again. "Well, then."

"Once the marriage is concluded, our alliance becomes formal. Why stand on tradition? We could well hold the ceremony tomorrow." When Odin turned from Hadding, he caught Frigg smiling at him. It was well she was pleased with the union. Eternity was a long time to spend with an unhappy wife. Odin returned her nod. She whispered something in her father's ear, and he grumbled about it.

"I'm afraid we need at least one more day to arrange the feast," Hadding said.

Odin tried not to let the irritation mar his face. Every moment he wasted with this frivolity was a moment Vé slipped farther from him. If the only way to save his brother was to bed Frigg, that was hardly an onerous task. But they needed to get on with it. Still, arguing over it would only lead to suspicions and quarrels. Odin waved his hand in acquiescence. "If you'll excuse me."

"Tell my daughter I am here!" the ghost wailed.

Odin tensed, tried to ignore her, pretend he could not hear a person right before him. His sympathy for her had burnt away like Mist around flame, incinerated by her vitriol toward Sigyn. As if he could have told Frigg either way. With a shake of his head, he strode off to find Tyr; the warrior was

outside, despite the early hour, shirtless and working through forms with his sword, a daily regimen Odin wished he still had time and discipline for himself. Once, growing up, he'd trained like that with Tyr every morn.

"Come to join me?" Tyr asked without looking his way or even pausing in his strokes. How in Hel's frozen underworld did he do that?

"The jarl has set the wedding for the day after tomorrow."

"Good." Tyr continued swinging his sword, not looking at Odin. A master of the blade, for certain.

"I'm going to ask for a house here, for my brothers. Watch over them."

Now Tyr paused mid-stroke and turned to face him, sweat streaming down his face. "They are men grown."

Odin stepped close to the thegn. He had to trust someone with this. And he *had* named Tyr his champion. How far did the man's loyalty stretch? "After the wedding, I will have to leave, to find these Niflungar. Hadding has learnt of the apples and thinks I'll give him one. I have none to offer him, nor would I if I did."

"Not a strong man. Not anymore."

Odin grunted. "I see you understand me. The jarl will not be pleased. He might even encourage the Wodanar to leave Halfhaugr."

"We need it." They did. Odin had sworn on Gungnir and his father's name to make himself king. And that meant holding a fortress like Halfhaugr.

"Most of our warriors, half the clan, they dwell inside the town walls for the wedding. If Hadding pushes too far whilst I am away, do what you must, but do not lose this place."

Tyr's grumble sounded almost like a growl, but he nodded.

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THE DÖGLINAR

25 Age of the Æsir

*T*he forest around the Yngling town was thick, dense, not unlike woods Hervor had once stalked as a bandit, save for the danger of sinking in peat. That she could have done without.

Arrow's Point was here, talk in nearby towns had confirmed it, and Tyrfing thrummed on her shoulder with thirst for his blood. A great many men had gathered at Uppsalir, heeding some call or other from Kings Yngvi and Alf. She must needs settle with the two kings of Uppsalir, as well, one day. Because of Yngvi and his Hel-cursed daughter, all of Hervor's kin were dead. Hervor was the last descendant of Bolmsö, the last of the royal Döglinar, and it fell to her to avenge her people. Arrow's Point, however, and his friend Hjalmar had been the ones to strike the blows. Her father had felled Hjalmar, but Arrow's Point had somehow escaped the berserk brothers. Nigh unto twenty winters they had lain in restless torment in that barrow.

And now, Tyrfing had come back again, eager for the blood of its enemies, of her enemies. But even so armed, she could not well storm

Uppsalir and face Arrow's Point and all Yngvi and Alf's men at once. So Hervor kept to the woods and bided her time, awaiting the breakup of this gathering. Arrow's Point was a famed wanderer, never lingering in one place too long. It would be his undoing. She could track him through the wilds ... catch him alone. And in the last, he would know who had come for him and why. That, she promised her father. 'Twas not enough, merely to slay his murderer—the Arrow's Point must know how death had come.

Ravens perched in the trees took flight, scared off by something unseen. It was daylight, so that probably meant Men. Hervor ducked behind a tree. A tenuous footpath ran through the edge of the wold all the way to the two kings' shared hall. More men were following it, coming to partake of Yngling hospitality, coming to dine at the table of her enemy, to praise him, maybe join him. Whatever the Ynglings wanted, she would deny them. Take from them everything, as everything had been taken from her own kin. Three men passed by, speaking of some glorious adventure ahead. After they passed, Hervor stepped out from behind the tree and slid Tyrting free of its sheath. It was hungry; its hint of flame shone with it. She didn't need to fear that hunger, though. Not when it could be so easily sated.

One of the men spun at her approach, clutching an axe. "Eh? What's this?"

"Throw down your wealth and run for your lives," she said.

The other turned, and one laughed. "It's one man on three."

She shrugged. Good, they still took her for a man, given she'd found a new helm—though still it rankled, the need to conceal herself, if only for a measure of respect. It chafed raw her nerves until she wanted to hack down every man who dared think himself above her. Besides, she wouldn't know what to do if they *did* surrender. She *had* to kill at least one of them. Tyrting demanded blood. "Not for long." She surged forward, driving the closest man back. He raised his axe to block. She feinted left, then jerked her sword back across his face. The man fell, howling and clutching his split jaw.

The other two were not laughing now. One drew his own sword and charged her. Hervor fell back a few steps, turned, and stuck out her leg. The man's foot tangled on her ankle, and he pitched forward. She hewed a gash into his back as he fell, then turned on the last man. She whipped her sword around in arc, flinging the blood from it. In daylight, its gleam was not as intense, but he'd seen it. He must have, for he was staring now at the runeblade.

"Who are you?"

She shrugged. "You would not have heard of me."

"A man who attacks others without even giving his name is a murderer."

So spoke a man serving the Ynglings. She had been called worse. She had *done* worse. "Tonight, you will not dine with Yngvi or Alf. You may, however, dine with Odin. Ask him—I think he will know my name."

The man with the split face was rising, flailing about with his axe despite the blood blinding him. Hervor stepped around him, advancing on the final man. "You have no name," the man said. "Murderers freeze in the deepest pits of Niflheim."

Hervor lunged at him. He parried, though clearly unaccustomed to using his sword like that. He wanted to reach for his shield on his back. You could see it on his face. Just like he knew she'd gut him if he tried. He fell back under her assault, ever farther from the path. Hervor batted his sword aside, then kicked him in the gut. The man fell on his arse, splashing down in the peat. He sputtered, tried to scramble forward. Hervor cleft in his helm as he neared and he dropped before her, sinking back into the bog.

The axeman roared, charging forward. Hervor stepped back, let him swing wildly, and then knocked the axe from his hand.

"Why has Yngvi called so many men to his hall?" she asked. The man spat blood and pulled his hand away from his face enough for her to see the raw, red ruin of it. A long gash tore open his brow, nose, and cheek down to

his jaw. The bone looked sliced, and a flap of skin was hanging loose. The sight of it turned her stomach.

“Why would I tell you a damn thing, bandit?”

Hervor kicked his axe off into the peat, then allowed Tyrfing’s point to rest on the ground. “Tell me what I want to know, and I won’t run you through.”

The man spat again. “Bah! King Yngvi has called all his thegns and jarls, all men seeking glory and fame.” The man panted and grimaced as he touched a hand to his wounds. “He mounts an expedition to a far-off island, one said to hold great riches and the chance to win Odin’s favour.”

“Who is going?”

“We were going. The king has called upon the famed Orvar-Oddr to lead the voyage. Yngvi seeks the strongest, bravest men in the North Realms.”

Hervor snorted. “Obviously not you lot.”

“Go fuck a troll. I will still go. The skalds will sing of this journey for centuries.”

She shook her head. “No. You’ll be dead.” The man opened his mouth to object. “I said I wouldn’t run you through, aye. But the wound on your face will fester and sap your strength until you wither and die. You shan’t see nightfall. But I will offer you mercy and a quick death.”

Disbelief and anger warred on his face. Trying to decide if she spoke the truth, mostlike. He must have decided, for his muscles tensed. With a predictable lunge, he threw himself at her. She jerked Tyrfing up, slicing open the man’s gut. He stumbled forward and fell to his knees as shit and blood poured out into the dirt, slipping between his grasping fingers.

She had promised him mercy. Hervor stepped behind the kneeling man. Then she cleft his head from his shoulders. Hervor kept her word.



THE KINGS' hall lay several days' walk from the sea and, when the party had left, Hervor had trailed behind them. A great many hard-looking men, all pent up, ready for plunder. One of those men had earned the name Arrow's Point. Nigh to twenty years ago that man had slain her kin.

The sword hated him, too. Or maybe it felt her hatred. Either way, it wanted to be free, to feast upon blood and send his soul screaming down to Hel. But. This was a man who had defeated a small army of berserkir in single combat. He was a force out of legend, and she would not be so prideful as to rush headlong into a fight she wasn't certain to win. No, her father had wielded Tyrting as well, and still he died fighting Arrow's Point and Hjalmar. Hervor needed the right opportunity to face him, a chance to catch him unawares and certainly not whilst surrounded by other warriors, many who had fastened names of their own.

They made their way across the country, Hervor careful to stay just far enough behind so as not to attract attention with her torch. The answer seemed obvious enough. They wanted men for their little adventure, men who could fight and more, men who did not fear to tread into the unknown. And once on that crew, she'd be able to get close to Arrow's Point, very close. Soon or late, opportunity came around to those who prepared themselves for it. It was like laying an ambush in the woods: you didn't have to chase after prey—you waited for them to come to you.

Just a matter of time.



IN THE TOWN, the raiding party spread out, probably gathering supplies for the journey. Their leader, Orvar-Oddr, and the scraggly-haired man with him went to a longship at the harbour, one no doubt prepared for this purpose. The Yngling dynasty had grown either bold or desperate if they were funding such a voyage. In either case, it would be a pitching point,

where the house could restore itself to glory or founder in ignominy. Hervor needed only make sure it was the latter. A weak house became an easier target.

The pair had paused as a third member of their crew was accosted by some woman clutching her bulging belly. “You ought to do your duty is what!”

The crewman smirked. “My dear, my duty looks well done.”

The stupid woman seemed to think the raider would stop and marry her. Or that she’d be happy if he did so. Men were men. Only a fool woman wanted them to behave any other way. Still, Hervor pitied her, would have, under other circumstances, beat the offending man on her behalf.

Hervor’s heart pounded against her ribs as she strode for the party. One of these men would surely know what she was about the moment he laid eyes on her. Distracted by the other woman or not, they’d see through Hervor’s feigned enthusiasm to join the crew, know her for a foe.

One of those people might even be Arrow’s Point. And if he realised her intent ... No. Fuck that.

Confidence, Hervor. Confidence was everything. She had not lost many fights in her life, for she knew how to pick them and was too damn stubborn to accept defeat. “You’re bound for the lost island,” she said. She’d had a lot of practice pitching her voice lower, like a man’s. Leastwise, a young man’s. It had become second nature now, really.

The scraggly-haired man turned on her, looked her up and down. “We already have a crew.”

“You can make room for one more.”

The man scowled a little—just a slight narrowing of his blue eyes. But mistrust was there, she was certain. He spread his hands. “Maybe we could. Why should we?”

The other woman slapped the crewman for whatever he’d said next. Hervor sneered. The bastard was in the wrong place at the right time, and

maybe she could achieve her aim and put him in his place with a single deft blow. “Did this man do wrong by you?” Hervor asked the woman.

The man snickered. “I’d say I did right by her. Repeatedly.” The man bore a golden arm ring, one carved like a dragon. She had taken him for a common warrior, but only a noble or a man of renown would own such a treasure. It actually made him a better target.

With a shrug, Hervor looked back at the woman. “Did he now?” Her right hook caught the man in the gut. He doubled over, lining him up for an easy cross to the face. He stumbled back under her blows. Hervor grabbed him by the arms and flung him outward. He collided with the ship’s hull and then pitched forward into the sea.

The man sputtered and flailed a moment ere getting a hold of the dock and climbing back up. He spit water, fuming. “Thor’s thundering cock of a misfit. This boy-loving, troll-faced son of a donkey’s shit hole—”

“Shut up, Rolf,” the scraggly-haired man said. Orvar nodded at Hervor, then guided the drenched man away.

“This is the type of man you keep on your crew? Gets a woman thick with child and runs out on her? Can’t even fight?”

The man folded his arms. “I’m Starkad. Who are you?”

Starkad ... “The one they call Eightarms?” she asked and he nodded. That gave her pause. According to the tales, Starkad Eightarms was the finest swordsman in the North Realms, if not all Midgard. Some claimed Tyr himself must have trained the man. He’d fastened the name to himself when a man said he moved so fast that fighting him was like fighting a foe with eight arms. A man like that could have been the Arrow’s Point—great warriors sometimes earned more than one name.

“I ...” Her voice sounded a bit high there. “I’m Hervard.”

“Well, you’ve got stones, Hervard,” he said. “Taking on Rolf Quicktongue like that. Have you a name fastened to you?” She shook her head. “Be careful then. Act like that, you’re like to get stuck Hervard

Rockstones. I care not what went on between Rolf and some bitch, but I salute your courage. You wish to come with us to the very ends of Midgard and beyond?”

The ends of Midgard? *Beyond*? Odin’s balls, whither was this expedition bound? She nodded lest he have time to spot her fear or hesitation. She needed to be on that boat when it left if she was to have any chance of felling Arrow’s Point. Especially if they were bound so far away. Odin alone knew when she might again have a chance at the man. Hervor swallowed the sense of dread in her gut, nodded.

Starkad cracked his neck. “Very well, then. This ship will leave at dawn. If you’re here, we’ll take you with us. Prepare yourself—you won’t see this place again for quite some time.” Hervor grunted in assent and turned to go. “One more thing. You may have made your point—but you probably won’t have a friend in Rolf.”

She shrugged. “Doesn’t seem like an ideal friend to my eyes. Rich, though.”

“Oh, the arm ring? Claims some Reidgotaland princess gave it to him as a token of love.”

“Claims? You don’t believe him?”

Starkad scratched his head. “One story claims he raped and murdered the princess. And if he did, he probably convinced himself he was doing her a favour. Ask Bragi about it sometime—when Rolf isn’t in earshot. He’ll tell the tale that Rolf next asked the bitch’s father to pay him for his services.”

Hervor scowled. This Starkad seemed not to care much for women. Or for Rolf. He bore watching. A man with a reputation for killing and one not tempted by flesh could be dangerous. Whether or not he was Arrow’s Point, Eightarms had his own reputation. Hervor would need to watch him—and watch herself. One slipup among this crew and she’d find herself worse than marooned on a haunted island. Maybe Starkad was right about Rolf,

too. Maybe she should not have injured and humiliated him. Sooner or later, shamed men came looking for revenge.

But then, she had learnt a great deal about violence. Sometimes, it was just the easiest path forward. Other times, it was the only way forward. Hervor had an oath to keep.

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DAYS GONE: SIGYN

799 Age of Man

Sigyn pulled the golden headband from Frigg's brow, staring at it a moment. Unmarried noble girls wore these as a symbol of purity. And now she would be wed in mere hours. Traditionally, this ceremony should have taken place the day ere the wedding, but both Hadding and Odin seemed all too eager to speed things along. Their father because he was too blinded by greed for the apples to think of aught else. Odin because ... well, Sigyn had to assume Odin had reasons beyond lust for Frigg. The man sought power. And while he had promised naught definitive in his clever wordplay, he *would* be locked into alliance if he married Frigg. Nor could she imagine he'd want an enemy of the Hasding clan, not after going to such lengths to gain them as allies. And if Sigyn aired her fears to Frigg, it would only further agitate her already apprehensive sister.

"Why are we rushing all this?" Frigg asked again, whilst the maids pulled away her dress.

Sigyn wrapt the circlet with care. If Frigg had a daughter, she'd present this to her one day. "Father is overwhelmed. You know he's not well."

“And you think those apples might save Father?” Frigg suddenly seemed aware of the other women around.

“I cannot say,” was the only answer Sigyn could offer. She had no reason to doubt Loki’s statement, but it all seemed too fantastical. She’d found Loki a few more times over the past day, and though every conversation had been fascinating, none had truly revealed much. “Come.”

Sigyn took Frigg’s hand and led her to the bath the others had drawn. Rocks heated in a brazier decorated the room. Sigyn dipped her hand in the water. It was almost too hot to bathe in, but it would cleanse Frigg of her old life in a ceremony every girl dreamt of, and one Sigyn would never be like to know herself. She flicked drops of water from her fingers on the heated stones, starting a curtain of steam throughout the room. The other five girls did the same whilst Frigg eased into the bath. Ere long, Sigyn was tempted to remove her own clothes as well, for the room had filled with so much steam a sheen of sweat built on her forehead and damped her blouse. Not long of this and she’d be missing the damned snow.

If she was honest with herself, Sigyn envied Frigg. The rituals, the ceremony, the honour, having a man warm her bed ... Frigg, *völva* that she was, was getting it all. And Sigyn *should* be happy for her sister. She *was* happy for her. But being part of this forced her to confront her distance from everyone else. Now she’d lose one of the only people in the whole clan who understood her. Sigyn knew part of Frigg had feared her, feared she would replace her as Father’s heir. Sigyn could only hope this marriage alliance would abate that fear, because Frigg was also one of the few people she truly cared for.

Frigg’s mother should have been here to do all these things. Though Frigg was two years older, it had been Sigyn to comfort Frigg when her mother died. Agilaz and Orlun had been the only parents Sigyn had ever known.

At last they led Frigg to another bath, this one unheated. The icy water would wash away the sweat and warmth and the old life Frigg had known. Sigyn did *not* envy her that ritual. Her sister shivered as she sunk into this tub. She dunked herself underwater briefly, then rose. One maid handed her a towel, while Sigyn watched the other maids gathering Frigg's dress, its deep green fabric embroidered with red knot-work. After Frigg had donned her new gown, Sigyn placed the bridal crown on her head. It was real gold, taken in a raid centuries back, ere the Hasdingi had settled at Halfhaugr. Völvur and skalds spoke of those days, living in Bjarmaland, raiding villages for plunder. Odin's people still lived that way. Sigyn liked to think abandoning the savagery represented progress. Would Odin take them back to such days? Unless, of course, she were to truly believe Frigg's vision of spring, Mist-madness though it sounded. Yet Loki claimed the Vanr goddess had chosen Odin, and, much as she wanted to dismiss it as superstition, the foreign tracker had a way about him, one that bespoke wisdom and truth.

Frigg straightened the crown on her head and examined herself in a washbasin, looking the very image of Freyja to Sigyn's eyes. The woman blew out a slow breath, then stared at herself in silence for a long moment—a silence Sigyn dared not break. What tensions and joys did her sister feel this day?

"I am ready," Frigg said at long last, eyes still locked on her reflection. Sigyn took her by the hand and led her out through the great hall.

"Jarl Odin has already given the bride price and brought a sword," a servant told her.

This was it, then. She led Frigg out into the yard. By now, the sun had risen. Most of the townsfolk had gotten little sleep through the night, but the excitement filtering through town was intoxicating.

Odin's people stood in front of a table laden with gold and silver ornaments. There were necklaces wrought like winding serpents, arm rings of twisted gold, a headband depicting Yggdrasil. Hadding would probably

have accepted an offer of half as much. For the apples, he'd have probably taken a tenth of it. For a dowry, Sigyn's father presented two goats, two horses, and two cows. If Odin took offence at the offer, he gave no sign, nor had he during negotiations. He was so eager for Frigg, Sigyn almost had to wonder if he truly had feelings for her sister. A marriage for love was uncommon at best, skalds' tales notwithstanding. No, impossible. Odin would have come himself ... And Tyr had acted without his jarl's knowledge.

Hadding and Odin clasped hands, accepting the exchange. Odin turned to wink at Frigg. Sigyn couldn't see her sister's face beside her, but she assumed she gave no reaction. Frigg was so poised, so responsible. For the sake of her marriage, Sigyn hoped her sister could show a *little* emotion when Odin was bedding her. The last thing a man like Odin probably wanted was a woman indifferent to his attentions.

Already, laughter filled the air, mingling with raucous shouts. Someone had opened the mead.



THE PROCESSION CONTINUED on to the grove just outside town. Marriages were always held where the fertility spirits could bless it, most especially Freyja, the goddess of sex. If the Vanr heard them at all, Sigyn wasn't convinced Freyja would care. Leastwise, she'd never listened to any of Sigyn's prayers.

Odin presented his ancestral sword to Frigg, a finger ring resting on its hilt. Sigyn's sister hesitated only a moment ere taking the sword and putting the ring on her finger. A maid came and gave Frigg a ring and sword, which Frigg handed to Odin. The jarl took both, slipping on the ring and sliding the sword into a scabbard already prepared for it. He'd wield that for the rest of his life, using it to defend his family—or so the tradition went. In

turn, Frigg was meant to hold the ancestral sword in trust for their first son. Sigyn was no sap, but she liked the custom. The clans were now bound by rings and blades, their urds entwined.

“Now let us feast!” Hadding proclaimed. The crowd cheered and raced toward the great hall.

Sigyn grabbed Frigg’s hand, pulling her along. Unsurprisingly, Odin and his warriors were first back to the hall, meaning the bride’s party would serve the mead. Sigyn didn’t mind. As everyone sat around the table, she moved from one warrior to the next, taking their measure whilst she poured drinks. Odin’s two brothers could not be more different in appearance—the one a mountain bursting with vivacious laughter, the other a short man who stared vacantly ahead. Then there was Tyr, the champion, always solemn, always watching everything. And, of course, Loki, whose eyes followed Sigyn’s every step—she felt them searing into her back as she walked around the table, her cheeks burning at the thought of it.

When everyone was seated and had a drink, Frigg sipped the bridal mead. She wiped her lips, then handed Odin the drinking horn. The Wodan jarl chuckled, and Frigg frowned. Then Odin downed the mead in one swig and slammed the horn on the table. At that rate, the drink would run out ere the honeymoon. Still, Sigyn had to smile at his exuberance.

Servants brought course after course of food to the table. There were platters of wild vegetables gathered in the woods early that day—celery, radishes, spinach. Troughs of butter, curd, and cheese, flatbreads, apples, and plums decorated the table ... If Hadding had skimmed on the dowry, he made up for it in hosting the feast. He had dipped deep into the winter stores, she well knew. Sigyn and Agilaz had done much of the gathering, after all. As the day drew on, thralls brought out oysters and mussels, pike and bream, and all manner of fish harvested from the nearby rivers.

By this time the guests had begun rearranging themselves, finding companions to share drink and talk. Sigyn had sat with Frigg whilst her

sister seemed at odds with Odin, but they sank into deeper political topics, and Frigg at last seemed to find her place.

Sigyn took the chance to bring Loki a plate of radishes. He was the most interesting guest at the party, after all. Few men she had ever known would match wits with her, much less seem to enjoy doing it. She sat across from him and slid the plate over.

“A peace offering?” he asked.

“Are we at war?”

“I should hope not. Where I come from, this was once offered to rivals to stem hostilities.”

“You’re not of the Æsir.”

“Not originally.”

She waited for him to elaborate, but he said naught else, just watched her. “Why did you tell me about the apples?”

“Because you were clever enough to figure out how to ask.”

Sigyn smiled, shaking her head. That had sounded like a compliment. How refreshing. “There’ll be trouble for those apples.”

“Trouble follows all things worth having and many worth less. It is the way of Mankind to fight over scarce resources. And when there is naught scarce enough to fight over, they invent conflicts of philosophy, ideals worth killing and dying over.”

“You make humans sound like violent animals—or trolls.”

Loki grunted. “Trolls? They have more in common with Men than you might like to think. But, no. Mankind is more devious and more glorious. To be capable of villainy, one must first be capable of heroism. Do you call a bear that mauls a child a villain? Of course not. The bear lacks the capacity to be other than it is. But a Man who did the same thing made a conscious choice to do so and made that choice with an understanding of its meaning and consequences. And trolls ... they are somewhere between

bears and Men—twisted and given over to vicious instincts, neither animal nor any longer mere jötunnar, or Men. Victims of their own natures.”

Sigyn leant forward, hands on her cheeks. “And are you a villain or a hero?”

Loki shrugged. “That mostlike depends on who is telling the story, does it not? Most of us try our best to seem heroes to our allies and villains to others. The best you can hope for is to look back on your actions and the intentions behind them and know you did what you did for the right reasons.”

“And can you?”

“Mostly.”

Sigyn tapped her finger against her lip. “Naught ... selfish? Naught you would take for yourself, and damn the consequences?”

“Is that selfish, or mere self-interest? Should we not claim something of life for ourselves? We are so often asked to sacrifice all we can give and more for the future, for the people around us, for the needs of the many. But if everyone spends their life giving and giving and never thinking of themselves, what is the point? There must be balance in all things.”

Her cheeks felt hot and her stomach unsettled, the way he stared so deeply into her eyes made her want to back up and move toward him at the same time. If he was saying what it sounded like, if he felt the same as she did ... “And what would you claim?”

Ere he could answer, Hadding stood and clanked his goblet on the table. “The time has come to consummate the marriage. Attendants, escort the bride.”

Well, damn. Sigyn watched Loki with regret. Now she’d never know what he’d have said. “I have to go.”

She scampered over to Frigg and escorted her to her bedroom. Frigg said naught while Sigyn helped her out of her dress and into her nightgown. If she was nervous, she didn’t let it show. Sigyn set a fertility idol—a

wooden carving of Freyja—by the bed, then hugged her sister. Though Frigg’s expression remained collected, she clutched Sigyn’s hand. Sigyn embraced her. For a moment, it looked like her sister would say something, ask something. But then Frigg just nodded. Sigyn sighed and returned the gesture as Frigg settled back on the bed.

Sigyn slipped out the door.



SIGYN LINGERED by the door until all the other attendants had returned to the party. Then she drifted away. Frigg would be fine, and Sigyn could do no more for her. Still, a vexing wildness roiled in her gut, one not even the mead seemed to soothe. Frigg was married now, and still Sigyn walked alone in the World. Her sister wanted to be queen. Sigyn would have settled for being *anyone*.

No, she didn’t feel much like more drinking. With everyone at the feast, no one would wander the lower halls where the dverggar had hidden their secrets. She glanced around the corner, then headed for the stairs. Frigg’s workspace remained strewn with mess spilled over the floor and filled with foul odours. Her sister must not have allowed any thralls down here—rightfully so, they’d mostlike poison themselves—nor had she come back to clean up herself.

She stared at the runes on the wall, but they slipped round and round in her mind, unwilling to divulge their secrets. Maybe she was drunker than she’d thought.

“I have an answer for your question.” The voice came from behind her, causing her to stiffen. She turned slowly. Loki stood in the shadows of the threshold, not quite in the light of the sconce here and blocking that of the one in the hall. “If you have an answer for mine.”

His question? He had asked her if she was content with her life. In truth, these past days, she had thought of little *other* than that question. So simple, really, and yet so difficult to quantify. So few ever stopped to ask such a thing.

“I’m lonely,” she said before she could stop herself. The words seemed to escape on their own. “I’m surrounded by people who don’t understand or appreciate me, who resent whatever help I offer them. My own sister loves me. I know she does, but she can’t show it ... And I ... I just want somewhere I ... fit.” Gods, that sounded ridiculous. “Why are you so interested in this?”

Now he drifted into the room, looking at the runes ere turning sharply on her. “Because I am drawn to you. You are not like other people, Sigyn. And sometimes you think it’s your curse, but it can be a blessing. And I would claim you, if you let me.”

Sigyn swallowed, uncertain what she had just heard. Was he saying he wanted to bed her? Freyja, she’d take it even if that was all it was. If he wanted more ... No. She couldn’t afford to delude herself. He would go away with Odin and leave her here. But even if for a night, she wanted something more than this life. Frigg would have her dreams. And Sigyn needed to pretend to have her own, if only for a single, bright moment. She took his hand, trying to still the trembling in her own. She shut the door to the workshop then fell back against it. “I want something *real*.”

Loki leant in, his cheek brushing hers. “So do I.” His hands were warm on her face and shoulders as he pulled away her dress, warm as he caressed her breasts. She shuddered. She hadn’t lain with a man in too many moons, and now, this one ... She leapt up on him, wrapping her legs around his back. She didn’t want to be a proper noble lady. She wanted to be herself. He didn’t recoil, just hefted her up, against the wall, kissing her with such urgency she couldn’t breathe.

His body felt aflame as he pushed inside her. Sigyn almost wept for the closeness so long denied. She threw her arms around his shoulders and pulled him closer, trying to drink in every moment until her body at last surrendered. She felt his release, too, hot inside her.

And then something happened, like a surge of energy passing through her, forcing her to arch her back as she climaxed again. She looked into his eyes and saw stars there.

And she fell into the sky, watching the World change and change again beneath the eternal cosmos. Shooting stars crashed through those skies and pummelled the World. Fires burnt, and tides surged, until at last, she stood beneath the greatest tree she had ever seen. Its trunk stretched up toward the heavens, seemingly connecting all the Realms of the World. Along its boughs ran a silver squirrel that watched her with knowing eyes.

From the branches grew a golden apple. She could see within it, not with her eyes, but with something deeper. That apple glowed like sunlight, shimmering with the light of life itself. Sigyn reached for it, and her hand clasped around its smooth surface. It pulsed like a beating heart, tantalising and intoxicating.

She shook herself, suddenly realising she and Loki lay on the stone floor. But she held a golden apple in her hand.

“I asked you what life you’d want to live for eternity,” Loki said. “Odin gave me one apple to give to whom I pleased. One chance to offer someone I wish to spend my immortal life with.”

Sigyn’s hands trembled around the apple. “Me? You just met me.” She couldn’t even swallow. Such events did not unfold even in skalds’ tales, and even such tales always ended in tragedy. The heroes died, oft as not, betrayed. Life offered naught but hardship and a bitter end.

Except for this time. He wasn’t asking her to marry him—he was asking her to spend the rest of time with him. Dizziness swept over her, and she nearly fainted. Eat this and she would become something more than human.

She would be a goddess herself ... She held in her hands the chance for immortality, one that, once taken, would permit no return to the life she'd known. The uncertain future would lie ahead of her, stretching on and on, titillating and terrifying in equal measure. But then, maybe it was already too late. Maybe knowing what she held in her hands, what life *could* be like, would already make this town seem stifling, even suffocating, to know that she could have had more, could have embraced an urd beyond the ken of mortals. And with Loki, she could truly be herself—and he wanted her for who she was. Never in her life had she met anyone like him. And in truth, she knew she'd never meet his like again, never have another chance at such a perfect match for herself.

“Perhaps I just met you,” he said. “Perhaps I knew you in another lifetime. Maybe I have *always* known you, and I’ve waited so long just to find you again.”

A tear formed but she blinked it away. She wouldn't let aught spoil this moment. If it were a skald's tale, then let the drama unfold as it would. She bit into the apple.

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THE VÖLSUNGS

25 Age of the Æsir

*T*he frozen lakes of Sviarland seemed to stretch out forever, the light of a nearly full moon reflecting off the blanket of Mist enshrouding them. It was neither a place nor a time for Men, but then, Sigmund and Fitela had become something more than Men. Perhaps, too, the old shaman they sought was like that, for he chose to linger on an icy shore, far from the bounds of civilisation or the sheltering gleam of flame, in a place where Mist curled in half-seen claws.

Sigmund and his nephew came upon the ruin, one the old man had claimed built by the Skjöldungar in the days of the Old Kingdoms, more than a thousand winters back. All that remained now, eight centuries after its fall, was the foundation of a tower. Stone blocks as high as Sigmund's chest jutted from the snow, enclosing a ring near the lake. On one side, enough wall still stood to offer a hint of shelter. Once, perhaps, this place had been important. Maybe it watched over a border. Maybe it had guarded against rival kingdoms. Now, it was home to naught but a strange hermit

who knew things that had, a time or two, availed Sigmund in his hunt for Wolfsblood's allies.

In the midst of the ruin, the hermit, Vófuthr, had kindled a small fire and sat with his back to it, staring out into the wood as if he had expected Sigmund's visit. Perhaps he did, for the shaman had lore uncanny and unnerving, and once, ere donning the wolfskins, Sigmund would have shivered to speak with such a man. He sat in a grey cloak and a slouch hat drawn low upon his brow, motionless such that a fool might have thought him slumbering. Sigmund knew better, had the sense Vófuthr saw them, even in the shadows of the forest. The man had but one eye, and it *blazed*.

'Twas not only the hermit Sigmund misliked here, he thought as he drew nigh. This place was thick with ghosts, he felt fair certain. Sometimes, in the Mist, he thought he could see spectres drifting hither and thither, half-formed images that would dissipate should he ever look directly at them. Still, he felt their presence, like faint, icy fingers crawling over his skin, bringing chills that had naught to do with the snows. Was that the wolf in him, sensing things a Man could not?

"You return," Vófuthr said, when Sigmund drew into the light of the old man's fire. The hermit had a beard almost as white as the snows, and, though Sigmund had seen little of his concealed face, the man's weathered hands made plain Sigmund dealt with a man of long winters. Sometimes, after taking the wolf inside, it became hard not to see other Men as prey. Always, Sigmund found himself summing up those around him, wondering what threat they posed. The hermit looked fragile, yet his scent ran deep, like the roots of the earth. Aye, there was something Otherworldly crouched inside this one.

Fitela did not deign to join them, rather pacing about the fringe, ostensibly seeking dangers, but no doubt as disquieted by the sense of ghosts here as Sigmund himself.

Sigmund shrugged in answer to the hermit's statement, as if he had not sought out the hermit. "We found ourselves wandering this way and thought you might share the fire, old man."

"You come here oft enough, it seems. You hunt the woods for game and Men, run like wolves and stalk from cave to ruin. It must be a very contented life you lead."

Sigmund scowled. "I am trapped by an ill urd, hermit. You cannot imagine the weight I bear."

"If you find your circumstances loathsome, why have you done naught to change them?"

Sigmund spat in the snow. Anger had always come quick him, and quicker still with the wolf inside, as if something deep inside threatened to wake when prodded. "You would have me march to Valhöll for no purpose save but to see it. Siggeir Wolfsblood has an army of Men, a pack of varulfur, and alliances with at least two others of the Seven Kings. I have myself, my nephew, and—on occasion—the questionable advice of an old man living in the woods."

The old man leant forward, still not showing his face. "Rumours abound that one of those allies takes the road to visit the king of Skane."

"So?" Sigmund demanded. But the hermit fell silent, only deigning to lift his head a hair, giving Sigmund a glimpse of his shadowed face. "Fine," Sigmund said, drumming fingers upon his knee. "So suppose we left the woods and ambushed this caravan ... Wolfsblood looks weak if he cannot protect his allies visiting him." Looks like prey. Sigmund bared his teeth. "A great risk, yes, but a chance for glory."

"If King Gylfi dies to varulfur in the lands of Wolfsblood—the king who claims to have subdued the packs—his allies are like to abandon him, if not outright turn on him."

"Gylfi?" Now Fitela crawled closer. "Gylfi is favoured by Odin. If we act against him, we risk the wrath of the gods."

The shaman scoffed. “Is he now? And is Sigmund himself not so favoured? The stories claim the wizard who granted him the runeblade was none other than Odin. And your uncle *lost* the sword. If so, I would think recovering Gramr is the surest way to recover Odin’s favour.”

“You see a great deal, old man,” Sigmund said. “Too much, I think. But perhaps you speak truth. Perhaps the only way is to strike now and weaken our foe.” Sigmund rose, anticipation of what lay ahead suddenly beading sweat upon his brow. “Aye, perhaps you have the right of it, though. Perhaps, the time of our vengeance draws nigh.”



IN DAYLIGHT, they could not call upon the full power of the wolf spirits inside them. Then again, at night, the wolf struggled hardest for dominance, especially as the moon grew fuller. The moon drove the wolf into bouts of rage, of terrible violence and hunger. At least Sigmund preferred to think the worst of his deeds this past year fell at the feet of his wolf. In his youth, he had never imagined himself turning to banditry and murder. Siggeir Wolfsblood, King of Skane, had made him this. It was not Sigmund’s fault. He played the role forced upon him—no more. This he told himself as he lay awake unable to forget his crimes.

The caravan they had waylaid had fallen in the late afternoon. After all, no one travelled at night. The guards they had killed with sword and shield, with bow, and with the strength and stamina of the Otherworld, of the vaettir dwelling in their souls. Gylfi, thinking himself among allies, had brought too few guards—a mistake Sigmund had once made in these very lands.

Sigmund wiped his blade clean after the last soldier had fallen. Brave Men from Dalar in central Svjarland. Men who hadn’t had much chance as arrows sniped them from the woods. Such tactics left Sigmund feeling like

leeches sucked on his gut. There was no honour in it, but then, how else did two men face more than a dozen?

An aging man, knocked from his horse, now began to rise, balking at the dead guards and cursing when he saw the horse with an arrow in its neck. The man bore once-fine clothes, now stained with mud, and had donned enough gold to reveal himself. Fitela stalked over to the king, tossing the bow aside. "Do you know who I am, boy?" the man demanded.

"I know," Fitela said, his voice a rasp. A varulf could heal from most any wound, but the boy's voice had never fully recovered from the damage Sigmund had done to it. "That's the point."

Sigmund folded his arms, frowning. What wretched creature had Wolfsblood made of him, that he would scheme thus? The blood here, it had him salivating, the wolf spirit quickening, demanding more. Beast, that was his nature, now.

Fitela grabbed King Gylfi by the collar, then rammed his dagger up under his jaw. He jerked it free, letting the king's corpse fall like a rock.

Sigmund shook his head. Was it honour, killing a defenceless old man? He had told himself he only killed men in a fair fight. He had told himself this over and over since he was a boy, training under Father's champions. But since donning those wolfskins, naught had seemed fair, for or against him. Wolfsblood hunted them like monsters of the wild. And thus, monsters they became.

Or perhaps Gylfi was never defenceless. Whispers called him a sorcerer. If so, cryptic dreams and potions did not seem to ward him against a blade through his jugular. Either way, the legend had fallen with so little effort that Sigmund couldn't help but feel disappointed. Where was the glorious combat? Where was the battle for the ages? Instead, a boy of ten winters had murdered an unarmed old man, caught him unprepared and slain him ere he could even steady himself enough to draw a weapon.

Sigmund glowered at the surrounding carnage—almost a score of dead, scattered around the wooded path. A slaughter, aye, but still not quite the effect he needed. In case *more* was required to turn his gorge.

“We must needs wait for nightfall,” Fitela said.

“I know it.” Once the moon rose and they could assume wolf form, they’d need to tear these corpses to pieces. For this to work as ancient Vófuthr suggested, folk would need to blame varulfur.

Oh, he and Fitela had hunted plenty of Wolfsblood’s people over the past few years. They picked them off if they strayed nigh to the deep woods, or sometimes, they even ventured outside the woods, hunting those alone. More murder, all to bring down the worst murderer of them all. As the king’s desperation grew, he sent his men farther afield in search of the mysterious bandits who preyed on his domain. Them, too, Sigmund and Fitela hunted when they could. If Wolfsblood’s men came in numbers, Sigmund and his nephew would vanish into the night, hiding in wood or marsh or the hollows between hills. It was how varulfur went savage, out in the Mist. But had they begun to turn Mist-mad, would they even know it?

Sigmund kept flame when he could, but naught could come between them and the mission. All of these tactics, of course, had come from Fitela. The boy knew what he was about, always plotting and weakening the king.

The king’s varulfur hunted them, though Sigmund and Fitela had become adept at hiding and had had only a few skirmishes with the pack over the years. Now, with Siggeir Wolfsblood losing favour throughout his own Realm, they might never get another such chance to bring down the king and at last avenge the wrongs wrought many years prior. Sigmund owed Wolfsblood pain and suffering and loss. All of these things and more.

Fitela drew him from his reverie by tossing a box from a satchel. It cracked open, spilling forth silver coins. Sigmund scowled, then knelt to examine them. They were stamped from Miklagard. Sometimes the kings

here traded in South Realm coins, but why did Gylfi bear so many away from Wolfsblood's hall?

He looked up at Fitela, who raised an eyebrow. "A bribe. Or else a call for aid."

And that worked in their favour. If Gylfi had come for bargaining and died, it would arouse all the more ire against Wolfsblood. The king lost an ally, but more like than not he also gained fresh enemies. Still, Sigmund did not like seeking the aid of foreign kings to redress this wrong. He was a Hunalander and a Völsung, and vengeance was his alone to claim. "Leave the silver or most of it. Take what you need. Let whoever comes along find it."

Fitela nodded. "This is truly happening?"

For Sigmund, it had been more than eleven years, waiting to avenge the wrongs done to his family. The murder, the betrayal. At long last, the time had come to redress them. Together, he and Fitela would bring down Wolfsblood and his kin.

The Völsungs would be avenged.

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DAYS GONE: ODIN

799 Age of Man

*T*radition required witnesses see Odin remove the bridal crown as symbol of consummation. The sex was assumed after that. All ridiculous, but people lived and died on their traditions. Frigg sat stiffly on her bed, eyes locked on one corner of the room. Was she afraid? Odin sat in a chair across from her, hands resting on his knees. All the women he'd lain with, it had never quite felt like this. He'd always known what to say ere now. He sighed. "I'm glad your father agreed to this union. I hope you are pleased as well."

"I am ... most pleased."

"Good." He banged his palms against his knees. "Good." He looked around her chamber. Rather than a brazier, she had an actual hearth pit, casting warmth and a pleasant smoky aroma through the room. A weaving hung on the wall, depicting a dragon rising from the sea. He pointed at the tapestry. "You've visited the Gandvík Sea?"

"I've never seen it."

“Ah. Shame. Well, we’ll go one day. My cousin lives on the shore. It’s very ... impressive. Very impressive.”

“I’m sure.”

He rose. “So. Should we, uh ...”

She stared into her hearth like it would give her the answer. Uh huh. He drifted over to the bed. Now she did look at him, eyes haunted. A völva bride. As soon as he lay with her, she’d have him under her spell, or so tales claimed. Why, then, did she look to be afraid? Because it was just tales, like so much of what Men thought they knew.

“Stand.” He guided her up, then slid the dress over her head.

She stood there in her shift, hugging herself. “Urd is a heavy weight.”

“Aye.” She had no idea. The weight of destiny crashed down upon him, holding him to so many oaths that threatened to tear him to pieces. If he did this, if he chose this path, he embraced seidr. A choice already made, a needful one.

He unlaced his tunic and tossed it aside, then yanked off his trousers. After removing her shift, he laid her back on the bed. When he looked up, she had her fists clenched around the sheets. Eyes staring off into the darkness again. Seeing things, perhaps, visions dancing in shadows, edging in upon the Mortal Realm.

She cried out when he entered her, even gentle as he tried to be. She wiggled under him a bit, but not as he imagined. She’d gone so stiff this had begun to feel more like work than pleasure. When he finally spilled his seed, chest heaving, she went limp. Odin frowned. He didn’t feel any different. Maybe because she hadn’t taken her pleasure from him. Damn it. How was he to give pleasure to a woman so intensely uninterested in it?

For a while, he lay beside her, tossing around words in his mind and discarding each. Without her climax, he could not claim what he most needed from her. He hated himself for thinking that, but there it was. Vé’s life depended on him drawing out her seidr, to awaken his own. Besides

which, a lifetime—or many—married to a woman this pent up, this reserved, would serve him ill. After blowing out a long breath, he reached over to the sack that lay with his discarded clothes and pulled out the final apple, the last fruit of Yggdrasil. He rolled over, offering it to her. His wife.

“Is that ...?”

“Aye.”

Her hand trembled as she reached for it. “From Vanaheim ...” She mumbled something unintelligible, then grasped his hand with her own and took a bite of the apple. In an instant she sat upright, no doubt shocked by the overwhelming sensation. Her eyes rolled back as she chewed, savouring every moment. Would she experience the same things he had? Bite after bite she took, eating as though driven by some compulsion. And then the core slipped from her fingers and she threw her arms around his waist. Odin let her push him back down on the bed and straddle him. Her body burnt with heat, and the look on her face told him she felt the need as pressingly as he had. Frigg planted kiss after kiss on his face and chest ere mounting him.

It seemed the apples had much the same effect on women as on men. The urgency of her need hardened him far more than the first time. Finally, some fire in her. And then she screamed. No, he was screaming. A convulsive wave of Megin hit him. Shadows moved in the corner of Frigg’s room like ghosts watching him and his wife. The air shimmered, flickering back and forth betwixt colours too vibrant to be real and too dull to hold his attention. Like a draught of the strongest mead, her release had left him dizzy, euphoric, and taunted by strange visions.

His eyes glazed over and shadows danced at the edge of his sight, cutting off his view of Frigg. Nor did he need sight. Somehow she was as much inside him as he was in her. Whispers plagued his mind, like secret conversations just out of eavesdropping range. This was something else, as though he’d seen beyond Midgard and into the Otherworld. Could Frigg

explain all this to him? Could she understand the choices and decisions he now faced? She had the qualities of a queen, if he could but trust her. And he had to—he'd married her because he needed her. And he needed her forever as his queen, as a partner.

At last she collapsed and fell into a daze. Odin stumbled from the bed, eyes burning with the mercurial nature of his new reality. Colour bled from the walls. Reality rippled around him, pressed in on him with a profound sense of the wrongness of the World, of the barest glimpse of alien Realms hostile, angry. Much as those who touched those Realms. Sorcerers, like the Niflungar, trading away their humanity bit by bit for powers drawn from corrupt and twisted worlds like Niflheim. A maelstrom of visions swirled before his eyes, of battles, wars, death. And terrible seidr.



THERE WAS DARKNESS.

An expanse of it, cold, and filled with Mist, and ice beneath Odin's feet as he plodded through the wastes.

He couldn't remember how he'd gotten here, though he might credit the pressure building inside his head and ripping through his insides with distracting him from the circumstances. Or perhaps he dreamt or found himself lost in some prescient vision. Was this the future?

"You have no future." Hel's voice carried through the Mist, all-encompassing, laced with inhuman cruelty and ancient hatred.

A figure was there, in the darkness with Odin, forming up like a behemoth of shadow just behind the Mist. Towering over him, three times his size, her icy limbs reaching out as if to envelop all he was.

Odin's heart clenched. Chilled, feeling almost as if it would freeze solid in his chest.

She was trying to take him. To gain control of his body and supplant his soul.



SHE WAS HEL, he thought then, patroness of the Niflungar. The source of such powers lay in the frozen wasteland of the dead, its icy and perilous queen watching him now. As she had watched her children, broken in fire. And they fled north. Into the islands of Reidgotaland. To one island where they slept for centuries and now awakened.

They called that island Samsey. And he knew. Knew where to find the Niflungar.

He stumbled on the floor, blinking, trying to shut out the blurring, blinding procession of madness. Everything shifted.



IN THE RAINFOREST, the dense maze of roots from the trees helped stabilise the ground, and Odin scrambled onto them ere daring a look back. Women raced past him in that instant, but Odin scarcely noticed them.

An iridescent bridge now glowed white, tinged with blue, crackling as if a river of flame streamed over it. Within that river, Odin fancied he could make out massive shadows, hints of figures, surging toward their Realm, intent on burning everything to ash.

Beyond a towering Tree, a mountain exploded. The sound of it, an instant later, was like the roar of a thousand dragons, mixed in with searing, hissing, popping rage as a geyser of lava spewed hundreds of feet into the air. The sound left Odin's ears ringing, sending him into a bout of dizziness that had him crashing down onto his arse, with one of the women plopping down beside him.

Black smoke billowed from the ruptured mountain.

A shift, a whirl of sights and sounds, smells. The darkness, gathering, as from the churning smoke.

A shadowy court, gathered around a perverse throne room. On that throne sat a pale, dark-haired prince. Besides the prince, Odin saw six other men and several dozen women, all peering up at their lord, none drawing too nigh to the razor-lined columns.

A pale woman brought him in and guided him to where Idunn stood, wrapt in a shroud that exposed little save her face. He felt bile in his throat, knew something was desperately amiss here.

“Are you hurt?” he whispered to her.

She shook her head, though pain lurked behind her eyes. Pain, and fear. When he’d known her back on Midgard, she’d never looked like that. Now she seemed ... smaller. Fragile.

Again, the shift. The churning of the dark, giving rise to inchoate realities, each eager to claw into his consciousness. Razors inside his head.

In the shadows, his brother Vé ran. Raced in bent and twisted woods. Odin chased after him, or thought he did, and Vé spun, eyes glowing red. His teeth had become tusks.

Odin screamed in horror.



HE GASPED, his knees slamming into the floor. He was in Frigg’s chambers, his new wife tossing fitfully. A vile surge in his stomach sent him crawling to the chamber pot, where he heaved up all the mead he’d drunk at the party. Panting, he glanced back at Frigg. His sickness had not disturbed her in the least, it seemed. The World was saturated in gloom, the room had twisted, its corners irregular as if drawn by a quivering hand.

The ghost, Frigg's mother, was there in this grey-blue shadowscape. There were a half dozen ghosts in here, in the room with him now. And Frigg, upon the mat of their marriage bed, she was the one who seemed ephemeral, only half here with him. The old woman wrapt her fingers around Odin's throat, hefted him until he had to stand upon his toes. How was she doing this? How could she touch him ... unless ... had he too died?

"You ... refuse ... the calling ..." The ghost growled at him. "Tell her! Tell my daughter I am here! Tell her!"

She was real, now. Choking, vision blurring, Odin punched her in the face. His fist connected, shattering cartilage, sending the ghost sprawling upon the floor. Odin dropped back to his knees as she fell, gasped for breath. "Think you ..." Breathing hurt. "Think you ... this would endear me to you?"

He blinked, spasmed. Colour seeped back into the world, and the ghosts faded from his view. Odin caught himself on his hands and sat there, sucking down painful breaths. This was not the same as merely seeing, hearing ghosts. His necromancy had reached heights he had not known could exist. Some part of himself seemed to have stepped into their world. Had he walked in the Otherworld? Had something else transpired?

He looked to Frigg. A sheen of sweat coated her brow and she tossed about. Perhaps some part of her knew something Otherworldly lurked nigh, but naught of it had woken her. She had helped him quicken his Sight, aye, but she had not the same gift as him, was no necromancer. Gods, had Loki known this would happen? Was that how the man had gained such insights—had he too fucked a völvá? No wonder men feared the witches' seduction. Such visions would haunt the bravest warrior.

Odin yanked on his clothes and wandered out to the great hall, stumbling twice into the walls. Whilst some still slept off the party, it seemed the sun had risen, because outside he heard music. Sleeping in

Frigg's isolated, windowless chamber had disoriented him. How did these people manage without seeing the sky?

In the town square, some of the men chanted a song to their ancestors, whilst another played the lyre. In their midst Idunn danced, her thin red dress swirling in the air. It caught currents of the winds, flying about like her dark hair, entrancing almost every man and woman in Halfhaugr. If all Idunn said was true, did these same apples make the Vanir immortal? What was a goddess if not a woman untouched by time, blessed with powers others could never understand? He'd seen her vulnerability with Vé that day.

But Idunn was an enchantress. Maybe Loki should have suggested *her* for Odin's wife. Odin shook his head at the thought. Frigg was his wife now. Indulging in such fantasies dishonoured a woman who didn't deserve such treatment. She would be a fine queen. Assuming Odin could bring his ghostly mother-in-law to heel, he supposed.

Idunn turned, smiling at Odin, almost like she knew what he'd been thinking about her. His ears flushed. Damn. Not like every man in the whole town did not envision much the same. The Vanr glided over toward him, placed her hands on his chest, then kissed his cheek. "How was the wedding night?"

"Idunn?"

"Yes?"

"You don't seem like someone who's lived for thousands of years."

She laughed. "Because I talk too much? Or because I'm not afraid to call you out for staring at my tits? Which, by the way, you've been doing again. Yeah, not that I really mind. I know they're nice. Anyway, how many immortal women *do* you know? I know a few. Mostly, priorities change when viewed against a canopy of eternity, you know? False modesty falls away, and you're left with a clearer view of the things that matter in life—happiness, laughter, companionship. Or else ... you become so caught up in

your own existence you forget the lives of those around you. Some of the other Vanir are like that. To them, your lives go by so fast they no longer take notice at all, giving in to solipsistic fancies.” Odin worked his jaw, uncertain what to say to all that. He *had* been admiring her breasts. Again. And she did talk more than he expected a goddess to. But then, so often, her words seemed to hide more depth than her flippant tone would suggest. “So did you give her an apple?”

“Indeed.” It had brought her to him, and thus changed him as well.

“I assume you remembered she’d be needing your sexual attentions right after ... You should probably be with her instead of me. We all have needs.”

“Aye.” He shook his head as he walked away, trying to clear the lingering shadows, though he did not head toward Frigg’s chamber. He needed to find Loki. He didn’t know how, but somehow he understood. Secrets of the World had unraveled in front of him. Maybe his blood brother could explain the visions. And what he’d seen of Vé, what did that mean? After scouring the town, he found Loki and Sigyn sitting on the roof of a house. How and why they had climbed up there Odin couldn’t guess.

“Loki! Come down here, I would speak with you.” The man shared a secret smile with Sigyn. Sleeping together, were they? Odin couldn’t blame Loki’s choice—Sigyn was a beauty, for certain. Irony, that his blood brother would choose his wife’s sister. Irony, or Urd, perhaps. Loki jumped off the roof, landing in a crouch in the snow beside Odin. “How was she?” Odin asked ere he could stop himself.

Loki frowned, sparing a glance back at Sigyn. “I’ve warned you about vulgarity, Odin. I’ve given Sigyn the apple you granted me.”

Odin’s jaw hung open for a moment. Loki had just met the girl. He restrained himself—barely—from asking if she’d been so good in bed. Loki needed her for the rest of time. And it meant the apples were truly gone. “I ... forgive me, brother. I spoke out of turn. If you wish to spend your

immortal life with Sigyn, I wish you happiness.” His mind darted back to the old ghost’s hateful words for the girl. The wretched shade’s loathing for Sigyn made Odin glad Loki treated her well.

“Such is not why you’ve sought me out,” Loki said.

“No. I bedded Frigg, as you suggested.”

“And you’ve absorbed some part of her seidr.”

“I saw my brother ...” Saw so many things. “His eyes had turned red. His teeth had become like ...”

Loki sighed. “Like a troll’s.”

“What?” Odin stopped in his tracks. “What does that mean? Do you know what’s happening to Vé?”

“Aye, I know it. Odin ... whence do you think the trolls come?”

Odin shook his head, taking a step back. “No. No! Trolls are the spawn of jötunnar.”

“You confuse what you wish to be true with reality. They are akin to jötunnar, aye, but Men with jötunn blood are as apt to feel the Mist’s pull as true jötunnar, and it has the same effect upon them as tasting Man-flesh does upon jötunnar. The hunger quickens, and they are changed, even as they long after lives they once knew and seek mortal wives.”

“No!” Odin lunged forward and grabbed Loki’s tunic, shoving him back against the house. “Why! Why didn’t you tell me this sooner? Vé doesn’t ... he cannot have jötunn blood! It’s absurd.”

Loki gripped his hands but didn’t attempt to pry them loose. Instead, his crystal-blue eyes bored into Odin’s, as if seeing his soul. “Because if it happened, there was naught you could do to stop it. This is a war within him, a process not easily halted once begun. As for blood, the jötunnar are, perhaps, not what you think them. An Elder Race, once glorious, now fallen, driven by hardship to give in to their baser natures. And it is not Vé alone who shares kindred with them.”

“You. Should. Have. Told me!” Odin refused to countenance the implication—for if his brother had jötunn blood, surely he and Vili did as well.

“And what would you have done differently? Do you think I would let you suffer if I knew a way to prevent it? There is no averting this.”

“I have a way! I will retrieve the amulet, and the ghost will end this!” Odin shoved Loki against the house again, then stormed off. The ghost had threatened Odin, warned him the price of failure would be those he loved. So this had to be her work. It had to ...

Hadding had given Odin’s brothers a house in town. Odin broke into a run, dashing there and flinging the door open. Vili lay sprawled on the floor, a naked girl under each arm. One looked at Odin as he burst in. He didn’t bother to look at her, instead spinning until he spotted Vé, sitting in the corner.

Odin’s youngest brother held one of the babes—Geri, assuming the embroidered blankets hadn’t been switched—in his arms, rocking the child. In the darkness, his brother’s eyes gleamed, rubescent. He opened his mouth too wide, revealing pointed teeth, a tongue slightly bulbous.

Hel and Freyja, this could not be happening. Odin staggered over and reached down. “Vé. Give me Geri.” His voice sounded hoarse. A bare whisper. Pain built in his chest until he wanted to weep like a maid.

Vé’s eyes darted down to the babe, and his tongue licked the edge of his teeth.

“Give her to me. Now.”

At his commanding tone, his brother handed him the child. Odin took her gently, then backed out of the house. It was all too much. He’d failed again. He’d been doomed all along, maybe. He would not sit by and watch this happen. He would not allow this!

“I’m trying!” he shouted at the sky. “I’m fucking trying! I haven’t given up! I won’t!” Villagers had begun to stare at him, but he didn’t care. “I will

get your damned Singasteinn back!”

At that, Geri began to cry. Gods, where was the other babe?

“Lord Odin?” Frigg asked. Odin spun to find his wife, fully dressed, watching him along with the other concerned villagers. He shoved Geri at her, and she took the babe with a slight hesitation. She tried to speak, but he dashed off, back toward his brothers’ house.

This time, Vili woke as Odin crashed inside. Vé remained in the corner and actually backed farther into it when Odin opened the door. He backed away from the sunlight. He now feared the one thing all Men counted on to protect them from the vaettir. Odin shook his head.

“The fuck is your problem?” Vili demanded.

“Where is Freki?”

Vili looked to a blanket on a nearby cot. Odin dashed over without waiting for his brother. The child lay there, pawing at the air like a wolf in a dream. Mercifully asleep. Pausing only long enough to sweep up the babe, he stormed over to Vili. With one hand, Odin yanked Vili to his feet by his beard. The big man yelped and looked as though he might have punched Odin if not for the babe in his arms.

“Watch. Your. Brother!” Odin glanced at Vé to make his point.

For the first time, Vili seemed to notice the red glow in Vé’s eyes. “Freyr’s flaming sword! What happened?”

“Watch him. And let no one call upon him until I return.”

“Where are you—”

“Just do it!” Odin stormed out to see Frigg, Sigyn, and half the godsdamned town staring at him.

“Are these your children?” Frigg asked.

What? Odin glanced at the babe in his arms. She thought the twins his bastards. “No.” But they were his, weren’t they? He’d taken them from their mother and spared them. And he could no longer count on Vé to watch

over them. “I mean, they are not of my blood. I adopted them. They are mine now.”

“I see.” Frigg’s face gave no indication of what she thought about her new husband taking on wards. Wait until she found out the babes were apt to become varulfur. “I would speak with you, Lord Odin.”

Lord Odin? “Gods, woman, you’re my wife now. I would have thought ...” Odin bit his tongue. He was going to say he would have thought he might have loosened her up a bit last night, but Loki was right—vulgarity had to be beneath him. He had to be a man worthy of kingship. A king to save the Æsir from this madness Hel had visited upon them. “I would have thought you’d be resting, my lady.” Odin had no time to talk with her. He needed set out for the Niflungar without delay. “I have to ride from here. I may be gone long.”

Frigg frowned, examining every detail of his face. “I see. And the apple for my father? It was ... kind ... of you to offer one to me, but his need is immediate.”

Odin pushed the other babe into Sigyn’s arms. “Care for this child as if it were your own.” With that, he grabbed Frigg’s arm and pulled her away from the others, who continued to stare. “I gave the apples to those who were best suited for them, wife. Be satisfied you and your sister were among them.” Even had he another, he wouldn’t waste it on a weakling coward like Hadding. And he had already delayed too long in fulfilling his oath to the ghost. There was time left, but not overmuch. The solstice crept ever closer, now less than two moons away. The swell of his visions promised dark futures, visions of destruction, of death.

First, the burning child ignites a pyre you cannot staunch. A price must be paid for every gain, a hefty weight for each wisdom. Sight for sight, breath for breath. The seed of the one-eyed king falls in betrayal and languishes in Hel. The beginning of the end, time of fire, time of flood. The land trembles and weeps ere the ravages she knows are to come. Axe-time,

sword-time, come the sundered shields, wind-time, wolf-time. Never shall Men each other spare. The sun turns black, and the land sinks into the sea, while a conflagration feasts upon the heavens. Only fires burn pure, only ash will remain.

“I am grateful,” Frigg said. “But now you must give one to my father.”

Odin folded his arms over his chest. She was telling him what to do, was she? “Those apples were entrusted to me by the goddess Idunn. I decide what to do with them, wife.”

Frigg stiffened, her lips very still ere she spoke. “You promised an apple to my father.”

Odin shook his head. “I promised to treat my allies right. The best way I can do that is by giving apples to those with the most to offer.”

“My father is the jarl of the Hasdingi!” For once her words came out blurted, her calm broken. But only for a moment, then she looked aghast at her own outburst. “*He* is your ally.”

“Frigg, I know this is a hard truth to face, but your father is not a well man.”

“Aye, my lord. Such is why he needs an apple without delay.”

He shook his head sadly. “We do not even know if an apple would reverse the ravages he’s already suffered.”

“Well, you have to try!”

The woman had best get control of her temper. “I am a jarl and soon I will be king. I will not be told what I *have* to do, not by you nor anyone else! Your father hides in fear behind his walls, complacent and weak. He has no place in the future I will build.” By now a crowd had gathered around the two of them. Damn her. She’d raised her voice first. Now he couldn’t back down even if he wanted to.

“You *will* save my father, Odin,” she spat, her voice pitched low enough that others couldn’t hear. “Or I will place such a curse on you you’ll wish you had!”

Odin's fists clenched. He caught himself raising a hand toward her and restrained himself. Curse him? He'd had far too much of witches and ghosts and curses. Vé was losing himself, perhaps because of a curse, and now his own wife threatened him with another? "Do not presume to threaten me, woman! You ate the last apple yourself," he whispered back. "Consider that." Her face grew pale and she fell back a step, shaking her head. "I ride for Reidgotaland!" he shouted to the crowd. Without another word he stormed off and shouted for Sleipnir. Moments later the horse came trotting over the hills. Odin leapt onto the animal's back. "Take us north," Odin said. "Far north, hard and fast."

For from his visions, he knew, at last, where to find the Niflungar.

He did not look back as the horse galloped away from the camp. Not at first. Not until he already knew it would be too late to see any of the people he had just left behind.

For the Sight was upon him now, and he could no longer deny his nature, nor Vé's. No, but if Odin was accursed with fateful intuition, was attuned to the Otherworld, a shaman, he would use that. He would save his kin, would save his people. He would become a king, unlike any heretofore known. Even when he must ride into the dark to claim that urd.

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EPILOGUE

*I*n the throes of deep meditation, the mind was left to wander, touching Realms beyond the physical, much as beings from those Realms touched such minds in dreams. Some, practiced in the Sight, sought to harness such sojourns by deliberately projecting their consciousness and soul into the Spectral Realm. Loki found such an idea abhorrent, not least because it would reveal him to the innumerable enemies and otherwise hostile forces awaiting him, and yet he practiced a meditation very much akin to projection. One which allowed him to walk in a space outside of time and between any Realm, where lay darkness and a void in all directions save forward. There waited the Norns, standing before a well that itself stood nowhere and, in a sense, everywhere.

Loki had sent Odin here, in an attempt to goad the man toward his urd—a Northern word derived from the name of one of these very Norns. Urd—Fate—demanded a great deal of Loki, but then it asked as much if not more from Odin. And if the Norns wanted to be found, one might find them in any number of liminal places separating the Mortal Realm from the Realms beyond.

Neither hurry nor hesitation guided his steps toward them. They, of all beings, had patience, if such a term might even be applied to those existing outside of time. In truth, the further one travelled from the Mortal Realm,

the less meaning time held. Or, perhaps, the *more* meaning, as the tafl board became the tapestry of history itself. Loki forever played a long game.

“You wished to see me,” he asked when he finally stood but a few feet from the hooded women.

“Who is—”

“Who was—”

“Who shall be your master?”

Loki folded his arms over his chest, scowling at the exasperating entities. “I am, as ever, a servant of history.”

“Perhaps in the darkness—”

“Blinded by the light—”

“He finds himself mired in the delusions of love.”

Loki kept his face expressionless, much as their comments made him seethe. These beings without time also existed without love or, in the sense the Æsir understood it, without even life. Thus they could not begin to understand the callings of the heart or the power it held over the living. They, in their self-superior ignorance, insinuated Sigyn was his weakness, when she gave him the strength to face the ineffable abominations he had borne witness to in both the past and future.

Without knowing she was out there, born time and again to sustain him, he might have crumbled under the weight of darkness.

Such truths so far exceeded their comprehension as to not even warrant discussion. A better topic lay before them, in any event. “The Destroyer grows stronger more swiftly than we anticipated, barrelling towards his destiny in great, perilous strides.”

“Anticipation is—”

“Was—”

“Will be a limitation of the linear.”

Loki spread his hands. “You speak of limitations, yet, as always, you still need me. It leaves one to wonder if you do not point out such supposed

weaknesses to cover your own.”

“We begin to believe—”

“Indeed to know and to see—”

“A man who grows too attached to the Destroyer—”

“Whose fate remains ever unchanging and bound in darkness.”

“All worlds end, taking with them the one who must bring them down.”

Did they suppose he would try to spare Odin his fate? Would that he could, for Loki truly did love his blood brother. But the innumerable millennia of his life and bitter destiny had taught him that the Wheel of Fate was implacable, and history could never be denied. It plodded forward in a relentless tide, oblivious or uncaring of lives it swept under its waves.

As before, and as always, Odin was damned to his fate.

As were they all, Loki most of all.

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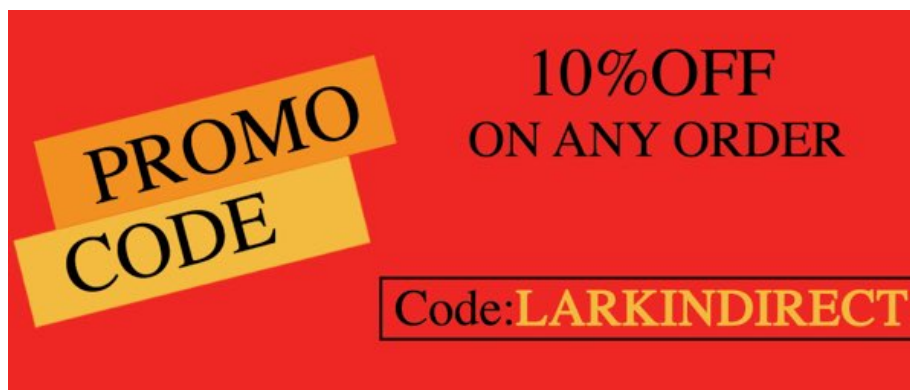
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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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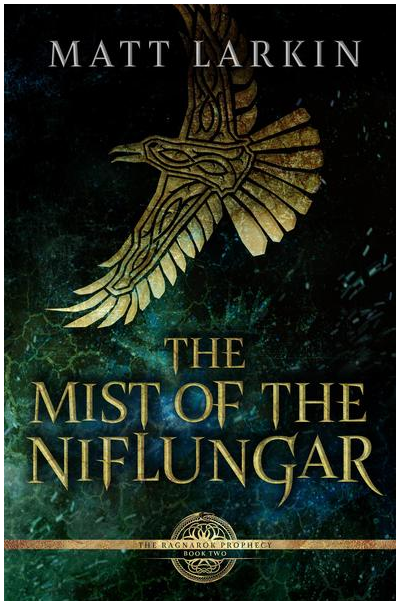
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Yet even if he can survive such a harrowing journey, further perils await him. The Niflungar, worshippers of the corrupt Mist that freezes and poisons the world, are eager to claim him. If they cannot turn him to their side, they will destroy him before he can interfere with their plans.

And the Niflungar are sorcerers, wielding powers the likes of which Odin has never seen ...

The Ragnarök Prophecy recombines material previously published as Gods of the Ragnarok Era, Runeblade Saga, and Legends of the Ragnarok Era, along with new material, to produce a definitive edition of this retelling of Norse myth. Mythology, horror, and dark fantasy meld together in an ice age. For fans of Michael R. Fletcher, Frank Dorrian, and Ben Galley, this is a dark mythological retelling filled with gods and monsters from the Viking Age and beyond. The Eschaton Cycle begins.

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