



TALES OF THE LOST LANDS



TALES PACK 3

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This Tales Pack is released as a companion to
The Lost Lands: The Northlands Saga Complete



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HARSH WYRDS

BY JEFF PROVINE

GM Note

Spoiler Warning: Light

“Harsh Wyrds” describes the early life and beginnings of the rise to power of Kol the Redhanded, Kønig of Vastavikland. Kol is the ruler of one of the most ruthless and brutal nations of the Northlands, so the PCs may have ample opportunities to run across him or his ilk during their adventuring careers in and around the Northlands. He likewise plays a major role in the final adventure of the *Northlands Saga Adventure Path*, *NS10: The Broken Shieldwall*, so he should be kept alive at least until that time if at all possible. The origins of his rise to rulership does not serve as a spoiler for anything in the adventure and have no real bearing on its play, though the GM should decide if he wants his players to know the intimate details of the Koenig’s background before he allows them to read this story.

HARSH WYRDS

BY JEFF PROVINE



he wind was cold upon Kol Iverson's back as he faced the firelight that spilled from the hall's open door. He pulled his fur cloak tight around his shoulders. Already the snow's chill crept through his boots to his toes. His lank black hair hung long over his eyes.

"But why?" he asked.

"Stop pestering us with questions, boy!" the fat jarl called from the doorway.

Over the fat man's shoulder, Kol's mother whimpered. Her eyes were closed, but tears still flowed from the edges.

Kol shook his head. The black shadows of hair flicked before his vision. "No. This doesn't seem right."

"I say it's right, so it's right!" the jarl yelled. "The winter has been long, and we're running low on stores. Perhaps if you'd worked harder in harvest, we wouldn't have to be doing this now."

Kol released his death-grip on the collar of his fur cloak and looked at his hands. The fingers were red with cold, thin except where his heavy callouses clung. He had worked hard that harvest. While his mother lay in mourning in the house, he did her baking for the next day's bread even after his own fieldwork with the scythe and flail.

The jarl hadn't worked at all in harvest. He had sat in the hall and watched the scribe he'd hired count bushels being carried into the granary.

Kol looked up again with a snarl turning up his face. "There is still salted meat in the larders and a little grain in the silo. A smart ring-giver could manage what—"

The jarl grunted. “Watch your mouth, boy. This is no Thing, and you are no man who may speak his mind.”

“Or if you ate less!” Kol’s voice shook.

The jarl let out a roar and slapped his wide hand onto his belt where *Wolfsbite* rested. He drew as he stomped forward.

Kol winced and turned his head.

His mother cried out. “No, please! I can’t stand to see another of my family slain by the sword! It will surely kill me.”

Kol opened his eyes to see the fat jarl standing still. The sword was in his hand, but its wide blade rested low. The jarl was looking back at Kol’s mother, whose red-rimmed eyes sparkled through tears.

After harvest ended and the time of mourning had passed, the jarl had taken her into his hall. His “charity” he called her as he laughed and groped. He had said nothing to Kol, who slept alone in his father’s house as the nights grew longer and colder.

The jarl shrugged his stout shoulders. “She’s right, boy. Even with an insult like that, I couldn’t kill you outside of *holmgang*. Now, be off with you, for the good of your village and your people! Let wyrd determine your end, so we won’t all starve to death.”

Kol tried to speak, but his voice cowered in his throat and would not be dragged out.

The jarl turned back to the hall’s doorway.

“What if I hunt?” Kol called out. “I could fell a deer and bring its meat back!”

“Be gone, boy!” the jarl said over his shoulder.

“But my father’s house... my inheritance!”

The jarl turned his head and smiled his gapped grin, showing where men had knocked out teeth. He’d always returned worse to them. “Don’t worry yourself, boy. The places of lost men go to the town. As jarl, I’ll care for it.”

Kol tried to speak again, but no words came, only something of a moan.

“Perhaps you won’t die.” The jarl swung himself around, leaning on the door frame. “You know as well as I, it’s whatever wyrd weaves, boy.”

The jarl grabbed his mother by the waist, thrusting her breasts against his chest and his hip between hers. She stumbled on without a word.

The door slammed.

For a long moment, Kol stood and watched the door. Blades of light pierced slits between the door and the jamb. The windows had long been braced against winter with heavy layers of hides tied down with thick cords. Only muffled sounds slipped out of the hall. He did not know how much time passed when a shiver finally woke him from his black stupor.

The sky was so dark with storm clouds that it seemed like night, even though surely the sun shone beyond the gray ceiling of the world.

His chest hurt. He had heard many times of a broken heart in the sagas sung by the skalds, but he thought of it as part of their word-dance. It had never been a true thing.

He turned around and faced the great Mount Jurderheim, which towered over the village resting at its foot. It stood, silent, glowering in the howls of the wind, showing only disdain for the mortal lives that began and ended in a blink of its immortal watch. No man had ever climbed to its summit, although everyone knew the legend of the great wyrm that guarded treasure there in a cave. Plenty of men had died trying to fetch it, their thralls fled down the slope to tell death-tales. There were other mountains beyond, but they were covered in a blanket of shadows.

Kol carried himself to where the land rose steeply to become Jurderheim’s rocky flanks. When his weary legs could walk no farther, he let himself fall to his knees. Then he dropped his face to the ground, pillowed on the thick layer of fresh snow. He pulled his body close under his cloak. Hot tears eroded the snowbank pillow.

The sky grew darker as true night fell. The cold wind bit at his skin. Out in the bitter winter night, a wolf let out its lonely howl.

In utter stillness Kol listened to the sound. When it was gone, he sat up, eager to hear more. Somewhere in the distance, another wolf answered.

There was life in the ice. Kol had known that, of course. *Never be out at twilight for*

dangers of the beasts that prowl, the elders told the children. His father had only allowed him to be out as his helper in the evening hunt, listening for sounds that would never reach his fathers' less-keen ears. When the howls came, the two would retreat to the warmth of the hearth where his mother would have a steaming pot of broth.

Kol let out a sob that shook him. His father was dead, and that fat, disgusting troll of a jarl had his mother. Never again would he work to jump from one of his father's long snowy prints to the other.

Ivr's eyes had been as sharp as a hawk's, and his bow could pick off prey before any other hunter ever spotted it. The town's larders were bursting-full when Ivr lived, but he had fallen in the raid that summer. The death-wound had been in his back, so they said. If the killer had come from anywhere but behind, those sharp eyes would have caught sight and allowed him to make ready.

At least Ivr had lived a full thirty-eight years. Kol only had twelve, and now the winter would take the rest. He wondered if his body would be torn up as a feast for the starving wolves or if it would be frozen solid until the spring-melt came like drunk old Gunní who had gone out to piss in a blizzard. The white had swallowed him up, and it was weeks before they found him, blue-skinned and frost-kissed, staring with a mute scream on his lips.

Wýrd, Kol thought. *That's what they said at Gunní's funeral. He was fated to lose the path and stumble through the blinding storm.*

Wyrd took his father, too. Now it was coming for him.

Kol took in a shaking breath. The frost in the air clawed his lungs, and he blew it back out in a cloud of steam. He watched the fog he made float up and fade into nothing in the face of great Jurderheim.

"It's not fair," Kol muttered, now aloud. Men who dared to climb a forbidden mountain, that vanity was worthy of death. The jarl with his gaping maw sucking up the mead and meat of others' labors while the rest of the village starved, he deserved death. Instead a boy, a deaf warrior, and a man who just needed to empty his bladder were the ones to die.

"If I am going to die," Kol said to the wind, "I might as well do something to deserve it. I'll climb this mountain sacred to the gods — or cursed by them. I don't care which!"

He pushed himself to his feet. They were so cold that he could not feel the ground beneath him for many steps, but he made his legs keep moving. He rocked his shoulders as he walked, throwing his body a little farther with each step. Gradually, he grew warm within the embrace of his cloak. Sweat formed under his long strands of black hair, freezing into icicles in the wind.

The elders said that men always climbed the south face of Mount Jurderheim, where handholds among the many rocks could be found. The north side was all boulders they said, unfit for anyone but a six-legged goat.

A great north wind came up. Kol pressed his face into it. It lashed at his cheeks, but he did not look away.

"Damn this mountain!" Kol said. "And damn you wind, if you'll pit yourself against me!"

The wind howled a reply Kol could not understand. He sneered and marched to the north until he came to the Linnorms's Cleft. It rested like a pinched valley with only a few patches of bare stone stuck out of the snow. It lay like a fresh sheet, bleached white even in the dark. In spring, it would become a rushing torrent to feed the streams in the lowlands below.

Kol drove his numb feet into the thick snowbank. It grew deeper as he began his climb, and soon he was crawling fist over knee through the crunching white. When he looked back, he saw he left a tremendous wake like a broad wound in the mountainside's flawless white skin. The wind wailed above him.

As an hour passed, he pulled himself from the drift and onto the frost-licked stone. His furs were soaked, and heat poured from under his collar. Kol panted. The cold air tasted sweet.

Above him, the clouds were breaking. The wind seemed to be doing its own climb, tearing down handfuls of gray as it reached for the sparkling stars above.

Kol smiled and dug his fingers into the cracks on Jurderheim's frozen face. He climbed under the starlight. Gradually the waning moon appeared and cast brilliant silver rays, soon

joined by the smaller moon, waxing in its nightly course. Beneath the dual illumination of lights — bright silver and dull gray — strange shadows formed amid the crevices and cracks. The juxtaposed interplay of bright and dark gave the shadows new depth and dimension. Under the weird play of light, paths revealed themselves, standing out with a glow amid the shadows where he could not trek.

It occurred to Kol that no one has ever attempted to climb the north face before, and certainly not at night with only the light of the double moons to serve as guide. And guide it did, almost like a gray and silver beacon showing path or handhold where it seemed that there was none. Kol almost felt as if he felt a divine hand guiding his way, showing him sure grip on the slick stone. Perhaps wyrd did guide his steps, bringing him ever closer to a death in the teeth of a legendary dragon atop the summit. He didn't care and pressed ever upward. Let the dragon come.

The wind pushed his back. It caught up under his cloak, lifting him when his foot slipped and sent a cascade of pebbles down the mountain's frowning face. The cold battered his wiry body, but Kol kicked his limbs and hit his own chest to keep shivers from slowing him down. As he came to boulders, he waited for a gust to jump with them, sailing farther just as a longship voyages farther with a sail than a man may row.

The mountain grew narrower and the world wider as it stretched out beneath Kol. The speck of his village slept as a brown stain with a few pinpoints of light amid the snow and trees. Lesser volcanic peaks stood under their plumes of smoke, said to be the forges of Dvergar who drank from the hot-blood of the earth, tempting an eruption if they drew too deep. Valleys spread past the horizon, where other mountains made their own vigil, none of them as jagged and cruel as Jurderheim.

Kol jumped to a nearly square block of granite, scrambled from his knees to his feet, and gripped an outcropping where he could pull himself up. When he did, the mountain's wall suddenly ended, and he found himself looking at a flat clearing amid a grove of standing stones.

It was the summit. Kol stared and gulped the thin air. He had climbed Jurderheim... and he had lived.

The storm clouds mostly below him now, the wind was naught but a weak breeze at such elevation, fluttering his cloak so that it patted his shoulders like the hands of his father had when he had done a thing well. Kol looked north and nodded to it.

When he turned back, he heard a long grumble from a wide crack in the peak. Reptilian eyes glared out at him from the dark inside the cave, the long black slits amid the gold widening and then deepening again. A long, red tongue darted out into the cold air, tasted it, and then retreated back into the shadows.

Kol stared at the Wyrn of Mount Jurderheim. With just a handful of its treasure, he could return to the hall and feed the whole village for years. He gritted his teeth and shook his head. "No, I didn't come here for your gold. I have no quarrel with you."

He turned his narrowed eyes upward and pointed one of his ragged, blood-stained fingers toward the star-studded sky. "I quarrel with the gods themselves!"

The wind suddenly picked up as if making a shriek.

Kol pulled his finger into a fist and shook it. "How dare you curse a boy with a fallen father and then set the winter to steal his life?" He raised his other fist. "How do you sit idle upon your thrones while a fat man takes a widow from her still-warm bed?"

The wind faltered. The night was still.

"If you were here..." Kol's voice began to drift soft, but he raised it again. "If you were here, I'd challenge you to the *holmgang* for the insult you've laid upon me!"

The stars stared down at him.

Kol breathed ragged breaths. He spoke again to assure himself he wasn't sobbing. "Donar, I challenge you first of all! My father prayed to you for protection as he couldn't hear your mighty thunder! You abandoned him in battle, he who honored you with our first-fruits! You abandoned him!"

He struck his fist against his head. "If you are a real god, then show your face and prove this accursed wyrd is somehow justice!"

Thunder began to rumble in the cloudless, moonlit sky. It started as a distant echo, and

it grew louder and closer. Pebbles began to dance, and then then the mountaintop quaked under Kol's feet. Kol had to undo his fists and clamp his hands over his ears to keep out the pulsing noise of Hrym the Boatman beating his oars upon the waters of the sky.

A shrill cry rang out from the wyrm, who then fled deep inside its cave. The wind gusted suddenly from the south and became still again.

Out of the edge of night, a shooting star appeared. It raced toward Jurderheim, bigger and brighter like the dawn. Kol pulled his hands from his ears to shade his eyes. As he peered, the light became the form of two long-horned goats racing across the sky. Thunder continued to rumble, in time not with the Jöttnar boatman but rather with the beat with the goats' hooves.

The goats pulled behind them a golden cart. The man driving it swung his bulging arm to crack a whip that flashed with lightning. He had a curling red beard and hair to match. Locks of yellow shone through the rust of his hair.

Jurderheim itself now shook. Kol fell to his knees and clutched the uneven stones of the peak. Below him, terrible cracking sounds of rocks giving way spurred avalanches that added to the din.

The cart of blinding luminescence came to alight upon the mountaintop, and all thunder ceased.

The driver stepped down. He was somehow the size of a tall man, yet towering like a giant, two images that seemed like shadows of one another at once ye both equally solid and real. It hurt Kol's eyes to see him, but he refused to look away.

Kol realized the crotch of his trousers had grown warm and wet. He didn't know when it had happened. He slid his cloak over his front and pressed his legs together. Pushing himself up from the ice-flecked stone, Kol tried to stand without shaking.

The driver took stolid strides toward Kol, a massive hand resting on a short-handled hammer tucked into a wide and shining belt. The other hand pointed an enormous finger directly at him.

"You, boy? You?" the driver called. "You dare yell blasphemies and question *me*?"

Kol opened his mouth, but his word-vault was empty. He swallowed and finally whispered out, "Donar..."

"Yes, I know who I am," the god said throwing his head back. The streaks of blond flashed amid the red curls like lightning as the sun sets. He narrowed his cold eyes and leaned forward. "And who are you with such a big mouth full of bold words?"

"I," Kol stammered. He looked up at the god and took in a deep breath. "I am Kol Ivrsen, cursed by wyrd."

"Cursed by wyrd, eh?" Donar asked. The god leaned back, slapped his thighs with his broad hands, and began to laugh.

His booming hoots made the rocks shake again. Kol spread his arms and legs to keep his body low and retain his balance.

At last Donar finished his laughing fit and wiped tears from his eyes. "Oh, boy, what do you know of wyrd?"

Kol stammered again.

"You think I am responsible for what wyrd has woven?" Donar asked. "Not even Greatfather Wotan cuts his own cloth! The giantesses, those Norns, they do the work of wyrd as they spin at the foot of Yggdrasil, putting together what they've judged from each child when it's born. But I have a question for you, boy."

Donar leaned close.

Kol's throat closed up, and he gagged rather than replied.

"Who spins the threads of the Norns, eh?" the god whispered.

Kol stared until he had to blink. He had no answer.

Donar stood up and began roaring with laughter again. He brought down a mighty hand upon Kol's shoulder, knocking him to the ice-patched rocks.

When the god finished laughing, Kol picked himself up again. He could feel the bruise on his backside forming.

Donar wiped his eyes again. "See? No one knows these things! Don't go spouting about wyrd this and wyrd that when you don't know a thing about it."

“The elders speak of wyrd,” Kol mumbled.

Donar cocked one fiery eyebrow. “They do, do they? Well, let them. There are a few prophets — or whatever you call those — that know a thing or two about what Skuld’s hand holds, but I wouldn’t speak on it unless I heard it from the lady herself.”

Kol scratched his head and finally nodded.

“Nonetheless, I suppose I shall act as their champion,” Donar said, rolling his head back and forth. “What with you challenging me and all.”

“I what?” Kol blurted.

“You challenged me to the *holmgang*, boy.” Donar’s eyes were still and serious. “Shall we?”

“I...I,” Kol stammered once more.

Donar leaned forward again. “You are a boy of mind’s-worth, aren’t you?”

Kol swallowed his stammering utterance and let out a steady one. “I am.”

“So be it. You challenged, so set up the field!”

Kol looked around. The outcroppings at the edge of the peak would serve as standing stones, marking the line where cowards crossed. Here, the fleeting foot of a coward would lead him straight over the edge and down the face of Jurderheim. Perhaps that would be his death.

“Except,” Kol mumbled. He cleared his throat again, “I have no weapons.”

Donar cocked his eyebrow and stood, waiting.

“Uh, mighty Donar,” Kol said slowly, “do you have weapons we can use?”

The god’s blank face melted into a drunkard’s grin again. “Ha, I thought you were about to argue your way out of it, boy! Wield Loptr’s words to twist your own until my head grew weary. No, you do seek to fight! I’ll oblige such courage.”

Kol watched the god saunter back to his cart. Even though it seemed only large enough to hold the enormous Æsir, he pulled from its corners six greatshields and a longsword. Kol shivered when he saw its blade gleam in the moonlight.

He pounded his chest again and untied the strap that kept his cloak bound around his neck. It flew free, and he felt the crisp air wrap around his body. Kol hoped the god would not mention the stain between his legs. He knelt and laid the cloak flat as the formal middle of the battlefield, just as he had seen Steinar and Geir do after Geir had said Steinar’s wife had the eyes of a goat and a worse smell.

Donar laid out three greatshields painted black with yellow streaks like lightning from the storm clouds on his side of the cloak. Kol’s shields were naked brown lindenwood. The Æsir offered the longsword by its blade. Kol took its hilt.

Donar himself drew on his iron glove and pulled the hammer *Mjølir* from its place in his belt. Kol felt his eyes go wide. He looked away to grab a shield.

“You ready then, boy?” Donar asked as he took up one of his own shields.

Kol tightened his hands around the longsword’s leather-wrapped hilt and then held it as if it were part of his skin, just as his father had showed him. Too tight, and he’d feel the blow up his own arm; too loose, and the sword would fall from his hand. “I am... First strike goes to the challenged.”

Donar chuckled again and jabbed his mighty hammer against Kol’s shield.

It may have seemed like a mere tap to the Æsir, but the blow had enough force to knock Kol backward two steps. Thunder rolled from *Mjølir*, causing pebbles to dance again with fright. The wyrm hissed from the deep shadows of its cave.

Kol kept his footing only by scurrying his boots over the frost-specked stone to find purchase. When he was steady, he took deep gulps of the cold mountain air and raised his longsword high above his head. It would be a foolish attack in battle, but this was the *holmgang*. He needed all the force he could muster to crack a god’s shield. Kol worked his feet two small paces to the left, toward the shield and away from the weapon that had cracked a thousand Jöttnar skulls.

Donar wasn’t even looking at him. His stormy eyes were turned to the crag where the dragon cowered. He stuck his lips out past his red beard and *hmmmed* at it.

“This wyrm here reminds me of a tale they tell inland, where the only waves come in a sea of tallgrass brushed by the wind.”

Kol bit his wind-chapped lip. *He's telling stories?*

A wave of warm rage rose up in his chest, and Kol brought the sword down.

It struck the shield with little more than a dull thud. The blade stuck, and Kol had to bend his knees to yank it out. The god's arm held steady.

Donar lowered the shield, glanced at the divot, and then rolled back his shoulders to stand tall.

Kol brought up his shield. He pressed the wrist of his sword-hand against his shield-arm and spread his feet, ready for any blow.

Donar raised *Mjолnir*. "It's of a man journeying from one land to the other, a trader or some such. Or maybe he's a hunter. Whatever he was, he was all alone when he found himself being tracked by a horrid beast, snarling and spitting flecks as it began to chase after him. He ran for his life, as fast as his weary legs could carry him, but the monster was fast and gaining on him.

"Then he spotted an old well. Without thinking, he jumped over the stone lip. Just as he fell inside, he found one of this one's kin nesting at the bottom." Donar pointed *Mjолnir* toward the wyrm-haunted cave.

"He threw out his hands, grabbing for anything, and his fingers found a root sticking from the muddy wall. His grip was true, and there he found himself dangling between the gaping maw of the monster in the water below and the snapping jaws of the monster prowling above. The only other things in the well were a bit of honeycomb dripping sweetly nearby and a little mouse that came to nibble on the fresh green-root.

"So, boy, the man was surrounded by death." Donar cleared his throat and pushed his curly red locks back with *Mjолnir*'s wide hammerhead. "What would you have done if you found yourself there?"

"I don't know," Kol answered truthfully.

Donar brought *Mjолnir* down square onto Kol's shield. There wasn't even time for him to consider dodging. There was a flash of light and a crack of thunder as the oak shield shattered. Kol was thrown flat onto his back. Splinters fell all around him.

"That's one for me," Donar said. "Get up and have your turn."

Kol spat out the bloody taste in his mouth and pulled himself back to his feet. He brushed what was left of the shield off his arm and took up another. His flesh was cold enough that he couldn't feel any pain beneath his earth-stained skin.

Donar stood with his own shield ready. "What would you do, boy?"

"Do what?"

"Hanging from a root in a well with a dragon beneath you and a beast above?"

"I'm trying to concentrate on the *holmgang!*" Kol shouted.

Donar snorted. "You call this concentrating? Fight with your gut, boy!"

Kol let out a grunt and rushed forward. Donar slid back several long strides before Kol could come close enough for a swing.

"Quit squirming!" Kol yelled.

"I have to!" Donar said with a chortle. "I want to live! Don't you? Wouldn't the man in the well?"

Kol snarled. "We're all marching to death. That's part of wyrd! Wyrd probably sent that mouse to kill the man all the faster."

"So what'd you do about it? Swat the mouse? Risk losing your grip?"

"I," Kol began. Donar was near the edge of the stone floor now, and Kol moved fast enough that he kept the god pinned by his size. "I'd just let go. Wyrd wants me dead, so be it!"

He swung his sword at the mark where he had struck Donar's shield before. The blade met the thinned wood, and it sent a broad crack down the grain. As Kol brought the sword back, the left side of the lightning-crossed shield bent and broke away.

Donar looked down at it on the ground. Then he looked up at Kol. "You fight pretty bravely for someone willing to just let himself die."

Kol's throat was dry. He tried to swallow to wet it.

Picking up another shield, Donar said, "Is that really what you want, boy? To see Hel's glum face? I can tell you, she's no great treat to gaze upon."

Kol just stared at him.

Donar pointed *Mjolnir* past the mountaintop. "If it be so, do it, then. Jump."

Kol looked at the moonlit landscape. A volcano some miles distant smoked sleepily among the sparkling white peaks. Jagged rocks rested in the shadows below. They would break and tear his body apart in an instant, and the fall itself would be as peaceful as an eagle's glide before that quick end.

He turned away. "No."

"Why not? Turned coward are you?"

Kol shook his head. "No, I know wyrd's sentenced me to death, but it's not like that." He raised up his shield. Somehow, a smile settled on his lip. "Perhaps it will be in battle at the hand of a god."

Donar snorted and swung *Mjolnir* as he rushed so fast he seemed like a mist in the wind. Kol heard the hammer hit the shield, but all he saw was the oak fly toward him. It hit him in the face and chest, throwing him onto his back amid the black rocks. Blood poured down from his nose as he coughed and wheezed.

Still, he brought himself onto his haunches. His shield had landed flat against him, so it hadn't broken.

Donar came toward him with plodding steps. "So, you wouldn't just let go after all, eh, boy? What would you do, then? The mouse is chewing up your root, and it's only a short while before you plummet to your doom!"

Kol brought up his sword-hand, but it was empty. The blade had skittered away on the frost-licked rock several feet. He scrambled toward it, his boots slipping, so he walked on his knees.

"You said there was honeycomb," Kol called out to stall the marching god. "Perhaps I would reach out to it, take it, and suck the sweetness from my fingers."

"What good would that do?" Donar blurted from behind his shield.

"It'd make me feel better!" Kol cried.

He swung up his sword, pushing up from his knees so that he brought all the strength in his legs as he rose. The sword's sharp blade bit deep into the wood from its edge. It found a seam and split the wood with a hearty crack.

Kol stood breathing deep as both he and the god stared at the broken board.

Donar laughed as he changed out to his final storm-mural shield. "So the honeycomb, eh? Eating, drinking, spending cold nights warm with a lady by your side?"

It didn't sound like a bad life to Kol. His eyes practically saw the hearth when Donar struck his unreadied shield-arm.

The world spun, and Kol threw out his hands. They didn't catch him; he fell hard, face-first into the rock. His head ached. He brought up his throbbing shield-hand to touch where it hurt worst. Fresh, hot blood matted the black hair that hung in his eyes.

For a moment, Kol rested on the stone floor. The thought of a warm life had only distracted him in the midst of the *holmgang*.

How could I have been so stupid?

A new vision passed before him. It was the fat jarl sitting by the fire: One round hand held a wooden stein frothing with mead, the other held Kol's mother, who fed him honeycomb from her timid fingers.

Rage boiled up inside him. Kol pushed himself first to his knees, and then he rose. Blood pounded in his ears as he turned back to the god. Without a word, Kol brought down a chopping strike upon Donar's shield.

The blows fell hard and fast now. Donar jabbed with the flat head of *Mjolnir*, edging Kol back. Kol charged in close with his own turn to strike. His shield-arm throbbed under the god's assault, and his sword-arm screamed as he laid down his attacks. He would not let Donar enough space to swing his mighty skull-cracker.

"I'll tell you... what I would do... if I were the man in the well," Kol said between sharp breaths and the thunderous blows.

"What's that?"

"I," Kol began, taking in deeper breaths to give strength to his arms. "I would climb that

well wall... I would face that beast!"

"Surely it'd slay you, boy!"

Donar prodded him again. Kol was near the wyrm's crag now at the edge of the peak. If one foot slipped, he would plummet into the shadow of the dragon's cave, where he might catch glimpse of the treasure before it bit him in two. If his other foot slipped, he'd tumble off the lip of the mountaintop, the rocks breaking his bones as he struck them again and again until he landed in Hel's dark hall.

"It could," Kol admitted, "or I could slay it!"

He thrust back one of his legs toward the crag-mouth, catching the sole of his boot firmly against the upthrust rock. In one smooth motion, he jumped with his other foot and brought both of his hands together on the hilt of his borrowed sword as he was in the air. He then thrust his feet out laterally into the rock wall beside him and pushed off with all his strength, the tip of his sword leading his sudden maneuver. The weight of the heavy blade propelled him with even more force than he could have mustered on his own, and he fancied that even a sudden gust of the wind gave him a little push. The tip of his sword bit into the center of Donar's shield with all of the force he had brought to bear.

The shield gave with a violent shriek of strained wood. Somewhere beneath it, the blade met god-flesh, and Donar gave a short bark of pain. Lightning flashed, and stabbing pain ran up Kol's sword arm. He added his own scream to the din. The world flew around him until once more his shoulders met with the hard rock footing of the mountaintop.

He lay there on his back gasping for breath, holding his raw and bloodied sword arm as the wind gusted again.

Donar strode over him. He had set aside his hammer and shield, holding only the little wound on his arm where something like amber Æsir blood dripped.

"Well fought. You've won the *holmgang*, Kol Iverson."

Donar reached out a hand toward him.

Kol wanted to flinch. The god could've flicked his frail human body off the mountain as if he were ridding himself of spent wineskin, yet Kol did not turn away.

Donar's hand stopped and turned over. His fingers beckoned.

Kol took the god's grip.

Donar hoisted Kol off the mountain-edge and set him down back in the middle of the peak. He smiled behind his broad, red beard. "So you think you could slay the beast, eh, boy?"

"Who am I to judge what wyrd weaves?" Kol asked with a shrug.

Donar threw back his head, gripped both sides of his belly, and laughed so that the whole mountain shook. "You're a wise one... even if you did wet yourself!" He added the last slyly stealing a sideways glance towards the boy with the most comical expression of mirth.

Kol tried to laugh, too, but a fresh wave of pain rushed through him with the first gasp. It pulsed from his hand, where the flesh was now burnt wine-red. He could make the fingers move by gritting his teeth enough to endure the pain, but he doubted the scar would ever heal.

"Well, Redhanded, what shall I grant you?" Donar asked. "Half a god's wergild? Some magic trinket? Perhaps you want me to intercede for your behalf before Wotan himself?"

Kol looked directly into the god's stormy eyes for a moment. Then he turned away and shook his head.

"None of those are what the *holmgang* was about," he said. "I asked to see the justice in the tapestry of wyrd. And this," he said, raising his scarred hand, "is enough wergild for my answer."

Donar clapped an enormous hand onto Kol's shoulder. The god's eyes were dark with pride. "I wish to fight alongside you someday, Kol Iverson, perhaps against the world-serpent Jörmungandr itself?"

Kol nodded. "If a valkyrie sees fit to take my spirit to that day, I'll be there."

The god nodded in return. He clapped hands with Kol once more, turned without a word, and climbed into his cart. Thunder boomed as the goats' hooves struck against the mountaintop.

The journey down the mountain lasted until the bright moon began to set. Caked blood rested across one side of Kol's face. His white arms were covered with bruises as dark as the rocks. The ice cooled and staunched his wounds, and the wind helped carry him on his way, buoying his feet over the most difficult parts. He owed them libation upon his return.

Yet before he could do that, there would be one more *holmgang*. Kol Ivorson would challenge the jarl, and he would kill him.

Kol paused in thought as he clung to the rock face of the mountain. He could become jarl upon standing over the fat man's corpse. A twelve-year-old jarl? Could that be so? If so, why stop there? Maybe Vastavikland needed a *køenig*.

"If *wyrd* weaves it," he told himself, and he continued down the mountain back to his village, a square of cloak to stand upon, and a fat man with a *wyrd* to face.

THE BROTHERS OF JARL SKUR SKULISDOTTIR

BY KENNETH SPENCER

GM Note

Spoiler Warning: Light

“The Brothers of Jarl Skur Skulisdottir” is not connected with any particular adventure in the *Northlands Saga Adventure Path*. Its characters and events relate the tale of other heroes of the Northlands, a generation or more ago. It makes mention of the early struggles the newly forming Estenfird faced against the (unnamed in the story) Cult of Shiburauth, which is prominently featured in *NS4: Blood on the Snow*, though in a much later incarnation, and it makes mention of some of the early days of the reaver Sven Oakenfist, who is a major character in *NS3: The Death Curse of Sven Oakenfist*. But in neither case does it detail information pertinent to those particular adventures. Running Northlands characters and burgeoning heroes themselves, it would even be appropriate to allow your players to read this story and learn not only something of Northlands history and tradition but also the tales of heroes who have gone before and the struggles that they faced. Hopefully such a tale can bring your Northlands campaign to life for your players even more.

THE BROTHERS OF JARL SKUR SKULISDOTTIR

BY KENNETH SPENCER



tale! A tale of heroes, of adventure along the whale-road... though you have had neither, skald," the battle-scarred woman called.

Snorri eyed the feasting warriors lounging at their ease around his mother's hall — some mighty heroes, some family huscarls, others... loafers who had spent the winter drinking her mead and eating her bread; loafers, like the drunken Kadlin Ottarsdottir who had wandered in off the moors just yesterday with her band of free-swords and imposed upon the good name and hospitality of the jarl.

"Truth, yes, I have never traveled the whale-road, nor had an adventure. And 'tis also true that I have never seen the world beyond the sight of my mother's hall.

"Once I had an uncle who—"

"Heroes, I said," the woman spit the words as much as she spoke them and underscored them with a dashing of a full cup against the wooden floorboards. "Heroes, not scum like that!"

The band of nameless men who followed Kadlin echoed her words and pounded their tables.

"None about those of his ilk, eh? Perhaps, then, you would rather hear how my uncle died? How in the end the evil in him won through, and his own brother had to slay him? My mother loathes this tale, but she is already to bed for the hour is late and the moon has set. She would surely not mind a short telling beyond her hearing."

"My tale begins 'ere I was born, before the cunning woman drew me forth from my mother's womb, all twisted legs and broken spine. It begins with the birth of twin sons to the former jarl of this hall, Skuli Valison. Skuli's young wife had a hard pregnancy, and the cunning woman did all she could. The efforts of that wise crone were for naught, though, for fair Ingithora died bringing two sons into the world. One screamed and thrashed, his tiny limbs flailing about, the other lay like death, blue of face, and worse, his body was misshapen and deformed, much more so than my own broken shape..."

Through some witchery or perhaps a union between man and Jöttnar in the distant past, Skuli's late wife died birthing a monster, a thing not fully human — a thing part giant. That his wife should die bruised his heart; that she would do so bringing this cursed thing into the world broke it. Skuli ordered the cunning woman to take both the mewling things out into the snow and leave them for the wolves. For if one child be so cursed in the womb, surely they must both be; such was the wisdom of my Skuli Valison.

The cunning woman wrapped the babes together in a cloak and carried them out to be left to die. The next morning all were awakened by the sound of what the hall assumed was a dog whimpering in pain, but it was no dog. The giant-blooded son, his skin pinked and blood invigorated by the cold night air, stood like a child of a year or more, though he was but a day old. His brother, the normal one, lay wrapped in the cloak, asleep and safely nestled between his stubby misshapen legs. The brothers were in the center of a circle of snow, reddened with the battle-dew. The misshapen infant, not only twisted but also strengthened with the blood of the Jöttnar, had fed the eagles well during the night — fed

them with not one but a dozen of Gunnr's horses. These wolves lay scattered about, twisted in death, save those few still trying to drag their wounded frames away and whimpering like pups not yet weaned.

Not even a man completely shorn of heart could deny the courage and might, not to mention the selflessness of such love between brothers. Putting aside the wisdom of the elders, Skuli brought both babes back into his hall and raised them as his sons. The human one he named Diarf, and the monster was called Boë.

The two grew up, Boë much faster than his brother — much faster and much larger, for the blood of the Jötнар seemed to tell the most in him. The twins, though inseparable as children sharing a womb often are, were otherwise like the moon and the sun. The one had a face like an unformed clay pot, capped in a mass of wiry black hair. The other was fair of face and frame, and much admired among the women of the household. Where Boë was monstrously strong, Diarf was lean and limber. Boë never mastered speaking and often flew into rages that only his brother or father could calm, while Diarf learned poetry and fine words, practiced restraint in all things, and showed mind's-worth in hesitation and deed.

Boë's rages grew worse as his body reached terrible proportions and his strength matched that of an entire shieldwall. Only through the intervention of his brother was murder narrowly averted, but even then the jarl had to pay the wergild to those the giant had injured and terrified. The presence of this monster threatened to drive the oath-sworn men and women from Skuli's hall and ruin him in the process, for Boë consumed three cattle a week and by himself drank as much mead as a hall of feasting warriors.

“We all know this, crippled skald. Get to the part where brother slew brother.”

Kadlin's followers pounded the tables and stomped the floorboards, echoing their mistress's words.

“This tale is long, as it should be, for the brothers left home together and sought their own fortunes abroad, giving up all claim to the jarl's lands and oaths to pass to their younger half-sister, born of the jarl's second wife Hildísif — my own grandmother. Diarf put on a brave face and made much of a desire for adventure, but all knew the reason for the parting was to take his brother away. Boë's rages had grown as fearsome as his size, and all feared he would transform into a terrible beast, into Donar's-foe.”

Their father, the Jarl Skuli, was a ring-giver and -breaker of much renown, a stout hearted man who could weather the storm of spears and stand square in the shieldwall of his people. Thus he was a man of great wealth, but this brothers forsook and took only the most meager of provisions to carry, not even a dragon-headed longship would be theirs. Their father, seeing two young men bound for adventure, pushed upon them arms and armor appropriate for the sons of a jarl, and these they did accept.

Diarf was clad in a helm of good steel and a fine shirt of thrice-linked chain. Upon his right arm Skuli placed a strong shield of lindenwood and metal, well painted in red, blue, and green. In his son's left hand the ring-breaker Skuli laid a blood-worm named “Foe Serpent”, and its hilt was adorned with Freyja's tears.

Boë, though not as well loved by the people as his handsome and cunning brother, was no less the son of a jarl. For him was not the chain hauberk, for to clad such a body in linked mail would be as to clad five men in cost and effort. Instead, the jarl ordered a shirt of boiled aurochs hide be made, cut without sleeves and deep in the chest to encompass Boë's broad frame. This was then mounted with squares of iron nailed into the toughened leather. A headland of axeheads was forged and mounted atop a roof pole cut to serve as haft to be given to the monstrous brother, a weapon so large three men had to carry it to him.

So armed and equipped, the brothers set out on their uncle's ship to sail to Trotheim and find their wyrd.

For five years the brothers traveled the Northlands, and in this time Diarf gained fame for his courage and mind's-worth, his skill with the wound-hoe, and his fame as a feeder of ravens. Their first test was at the village of Hallheim in Gatland. There they found the local jarl beset by foes. Northri Ormson's sheep were disappearing. His hunters had found the tracks of strangers deep in the forest and once a cold camp of the kind used by those under the sentence of outlawry. The jarl was ill; he was a man who had seen a four score winters in his hall, and though he did not lack in mind's-worth, he lacked in strength of arm and back. Northri longed to pass his hall and oath-bound huscarls to his son, but could not do so with the threat of the sheep thieves, for all knew this to be no mere wolf but a cunning and vile band of men. He asked the brothers for their aid.

Readily the brothers took up this task, and alone they tracked the outlaws deep into the forest. There they found a large camp, and tracks that leading off to other halls and villages. The outlaws had gathered men and women forsaken by even their kin, and had chosen to add to their perfidy by numbering theft and murder amongst their crimes.

Seeing the camp, Boë wished to rush in and slay as was his wont, but Diarf laid hand upon his brother's forearm and counseled patience. For three days and nights they watched from hiding, all the time Boë fuming and stamping to get to task and bring the wound-sea to the villains.

On the fourth morning, Diarf called out in a loud voice as he stepped forth from his place of concealment and challenged the outlaws. The leader of the band, Guthorm the Ravager — the same Guthorm who had murdered the wife and daughter of Jarl Hialti Bothvarson in the previous summer, known as Guthorm the Rat-Faced by some — strode forth. He laughed to see one lone man — not much more than a down-cheeked boy, really — stand boldly before a dozen armed and desperate outlaws.

The entire band laughed. They laughed at a young man first setting out to seek his fortune and a name for himself. They laughed at Diarf Skulison. They, of course, had not seen Boë still in his concealed position.

Then the battle-sweat flew from outlaw and hero alike.

"You dare to call that monster a hero," Kadlin said, turning towards her men for their reaction. They laughed on cue, bringing a smug expression to the warrior-woman's face.

"Yes, brave Kadlin, for they were both heroes that day, and on many days after. As the outlaws laughed at the courage of a man filled with mind's-worth, they also laughed at a man of cunning, a man who had long mastered the ways of the hnefatafl board. For as they laughed and jeered, Boë crept around the camp to charge them from the unexpected flank. Five outlaws died on his mighty axe in his initial charge, and three more as the blood-ember rose and fell in great arcs once he was among them. Foe Serpent drawn, Diarf rushed to fight Gunthorm the Ravager, and fought as a man in a duel, breaking three of the outlaw's shields before driving him to his knees amidst the wound-sea of his fellows. There he sank the wound-hoe home and brought the sleep of the sword to the vile outlaw. Those few who still lived scattered into the surrounding forest never to be seen again in those lands.

Taking the heads of the outlaws as grisly trophies and driving the stolen herds of sheep before them, the brothers returned to Jarl Northri and accepted the rings of a generous man. One could not tell the sheep of Ormson from the sheep of other jarls, and though courage, honor, cunning, and might-of-arms had won the day, it would be three years of suits before the Thing were the disposition of the sheep was settled. Though the brothers played no part in that different sort of battle.

Next they sailed for a time with Ornolf the Shark-Render. With him they raided the land of the Seagestrelanders, taking many thralls as well as a mountain of Freyja's tears. Then they struck into the Southlands, filling cups with Sif's hair and the Moons' leavings and putting the cowardly Southlanders to flight. The fame of the brothers grew, and with the regular wetting of the grass and sand — aye, and even the waves — with the slaughter-dew of his foes, Boë learned something of quietness in his soul...though not enough.

Among the crew of the *Wyrn Rider*, the sea-steed of Ornof, was a Bearsarker known as Thorvald the Unwashed. While none of that brave crew was frightened of Boë, all were wary of a man who stood tall as the rafters in a jarl's hall, and who could lift an ox and eat the whole thing as well. Only Thorvald the Unwashed cared to speak with Boë, and soon he had seen through to the mind's-worth in the heart of the monster, teaching Boë the ways of Wotan and the sacred madness that calmed the heart as it boiled the blood.

None knew if the All-father would accept a giant-blooded monster as his sworn warrior, but the brothers went ashore with Thorvald the Unwashed to try. For nine days and nine nights Boë hung upon the Tree of Woe, stout spears piercing his wrists, shoulders, thighs, and belly. Anointed with sacred oils and unguents, drenched in freezing water — for the Tree of Woe had been made at the sea's edge — and his body coursing with the fire of the moss Wotan's Eye, Boë suffered and died. Yet he did not die; rather he was reborn. On the tenth morning Boë tore one arm free, and with that hand gouged out his own eye, casting it into the bane of wood that Thorvald the Unwashed had formed at his feet.

Thus Boë was consecrated as a sacred warrior of Wotan and inducted into the divine madness of the cult of the Bearsarkers. Boë became more controllable, if any could name a Bearsarker as such. As Ornof the Shark-Render had no need of two Bearsarkers in his crew, and as isolation and private contemplation are the ways of such men, the brothers soon parted ways with their benefactor and struck out on their own once more.

Much could be said of their adventures after this, of the foes they vanquished together, and of their shared glories. Word filtered back to their father's hall — no longer ruled by Jarl Skuli Valison's but rather now by Jarl Skur Skulisdottir. The twins were seen in the shieldwall at Hrolfdale when the Gatlanders raided the Hrolf coast in the summer of the Falling Sky. Skalds told of their slaying the *nachtjägers* that haunted the grasslands beyond Dnipirstead. It was Diarf and Boë who sailed with Sven Tokison and drove the sea raider Sven Oakenfist from the shores of Hordaland in the autumn of the Year of Leaping Fish. When the great whale Nalithrov harried the ships from the seas, the great heroes Lini the Proud and Raghild Tufisdöttir — named Donar's Hammer by some — called upon the brothers to accompany them into the beast's maw. They came out again with a wealth of ambergris the likes of which the world had not seen before and may never again.

In the fifth year of their travels, the brothers choose to spend the winter in the hall of Jarl Mursi the Halfman, the famed half-Nûklander jarl of northern Gatland. That winter the snows fell heavy and the hall echoed with the merry sounds of feasting heroes. All was not to be so pleasant, though, for the world is a dark and terrible place and winter worse still.

A slåtten — a terrible beast birthed from a man when a Bearsarker falls into madness — burst into the hall and slew the huscarls, carrying off the jarl's eldest child. It is rare for a slåtten to take a prisoner, and this caused even greater alarm in the jarl, more so than his own severed arm and broken spine. Many heroes died that night and in the ensuing hunt for the beast, but the twins pressed forward even after the beast had fled deep into the mountains.

For the rest of that winter and the following seasons the brothers harried the monster from one haven to another. Never had a slåtten, an ever unpredictable monster made from a fallen man, behaved thusly. The twins hunted the creature deep into the mountains, and some say beyond the Northlands and over the Sea of Grass. Such a journey needs be recorded, for none has ever dared so much, the brothers kept no maps or records — even though Diarf was well schooled in the runes — but kept strictly to their task.

The next winter, they finally brought the slåtten to bear, trapped in a dry boxed-in canyon on the edge of a great expanse of sand. The beast had taken the jarl's child and turned it into an acolyte of sorts in a perverted and debased form of Wotan worship that the All-Father had long forbidden. This was not the only such child taken by the beast, for it had formed a small cult of twisted creatures as foul as itself.

Enraged by their long chase and their mind's-worth ablaze with the fury of the gods at such travesty against Man and Æsir, the twins charged in, slaying and hacking through the throng. Bodies heaped upon bodies as the crazed cultists ran with eagerness to die upon

the brothers' blades. As at birth, and for the last time, Diarf was beset by a pack of beasts assaulting him only to have Boë stand tall over his brother's body and defend him with his own life.

But it was not to be Boë's death or even Diarf's that day. Instead the ravens called for the slåtten and his cultists. By savage sweeps of his great axe, the one men have come to call the Three-Man Blood-Ember, the cultists were laid to the sleep of the sword. The swans of blood circled high over the wound-sea and spear-din, and the slåtten readied itself to die or see its followers avenged. And die it did, for as it leapt at Boë, the wounded Diarf rallied his remaining strength and flung Foe Serpent out from the shelter of his brother's tree-trunk legs. The slåtten, caught off guard by the stinging blade of Diarf was unready when Boë's mighty axe fell and split the beast in twain from shoulder to manhood.

Long did the brothers journey to reach home, and long did they travel in silent despair. Though they had slain the beast, they had not saved the jarl's child, and worse, had seen it twisted and perverted by its abductor. What's more, they had been forced to slay the very child they had attempted to save and thus could only return to the dying jarl's hall with the head of his foe and not the laughter of his future. The brothers lived beyond that ill-fated venture, but it is thought by many that there was a dying that day within the soul of the brothers — in one perhaps more than the other.

Nevertheless, the jarl was grateful for their efforts and rewarded the brothers with a sea-steed. This they named it *Fortune's Glory*, and Diarf called to the skalds to spread word of their deeds. Soon a crew of warriors, all long known in the shieldwall and experienced in the spear-din, gathered. These men and women swore oaths to Diarf and pledged to him as to a ring-giver, though he had no hall. With these — his huscarls of a sort — and his brother, Diarf took to the whale-road once again.

While upon the whale-road it was they who drove away a raid by the Jomsvikings upon the village of Hølen, fought through blood and viscera to bring aid to besieged Gats in Otkel's Hall, and sought out the Dark Ones who slew so many in Estenfird.

It was in this last venture that the brothers were finally separated, for the battle for that northernmost land was fierce and the terrain wild and untamed. The hirth had been called out and defeated, and the twins were fated to suffer, for after the Battle of the Lost Holding only one could be found. The missing brother had nearly died in the battle, taking a sore wound, and in desperate pleas — perhaps made in pain-filled delirium or perhaps in fear of death — managed to save its own hide only by breaking all oaths and mind's-worth and pledging himself to the Dark Ones' cause.

The two brothers met only once more after that, for by then both had taken leadership of the opposing armies. When the shieldwalls met, the spear-din rose to reach the heavens and the gods themselves watched as the Last Hirth stood firm against the horde of beasts and beastmen, of savage Jöttnar and foul witches. The battle-dew formed its own river, and the bodies clogged the Ice River for thirteen miles.

As the shieldwall stood against the flood of the monsters, the swans of blood filled the sky yelling for their feast. Many a wound-hoe ripped apart a deformed thing, blood-embers rose and fell with thuds against gnarled and hoary flesh, and the weather of weapons went on for three days and nights.

On the fourth day the two brothers finally met in battle, the shieldwall of men and the hordes of monsters pulling back to give them room like the sacred precincts of the *holmgang*, for all knew that this fight was the one that the gods, both the fair Æsir and the foul Ginnvaettir longed to see — the battle for the future of Estenfird decided in one meeting, one thrust of the blood-worm or the tearing of mighty claws.

One brother fought with resignation and love, for he saw what a foul thing his womb-mate had truly become. The other howled with savagery and fury, for he lusted for his kinsman's blood — sought to right old wrongs imagined or half-perceived. Boë bore a mighty shield made from planks cut from a burned and desecrated gods-wood. Diarf wielded a sword forged in the fiery heart of a volcano. Boë's headland of axes was splintered and sent raining upon the field in fiery shards, giving an opening for his brother to plunge the glowing sword deep into his kinsman's belly.

Such a blow should end any man, but Boë was not a just a man; he was a Bearsarker, one sworn to the All-Father's cause and unwavering in his oaths. Even as Diarf drove the blade deeper into the giant-blooded man, he placed one mighty hand upon his brother's shoulders and one massive fist around his brother's head. Was he seeking the battle harvest or embracing him with one last remembered semblance of a brother's love? Only one could ever say, but either way the result was the same; tearing and pulling, he strained his gnarled and knotted muscles until with a sickening snap and tearing noise Diarf's head came free as one would twist the head from a fish before filleting.

With their champion dead—

"And good riddance," the scarred woman interrupted, "For we all know the lies and crimes of Diarf Skulison the False, oath-breaker to man and gods alike." Kadlin had mounted her table to further press home her point with the skald, amidst the cheers and echoing calls of her men.

"Yes, it is as you say. Diarf did prove false and oath-breaker, but he also did much good in his life before he was broken and twisted to evil. Surely there is place in the vastness of Asgard for some remembrance of what great deeds were once done by him in the All-Father's name," came Snorri's measured response.

"Nay, twisted one. Once false, always false. His foul wyrd was set for evil deeds from the day of his birth. 'Twould have been better had his brother let him die in the snow that first ni—"

"What d'you say?" the halting, rumbling voice rolled like a rockslide from the edge of the firelight.

A shape clumped out of the shadows at the back of the hall. It was a massive, misshapen form in a heavily brocaded tunic, three small children nestled asleep in the crook of his left arm. The head from whence the voice whispered, though his whisper was just shy of a lesser man's shout, was lost in the smoke and darkness near the rafters. With a groaning of floorboards and a creaking of leather, the monstrous form bent down, bringing its savagely gnarled head into the light, one eye bright and the crystalline blue of a winter sky and the other the old scarring of a gouged and empty socket.

"Sister say tuck young'uns in. Tuck Snorri in. D'you need tucking also, woman-with head-like-fish?"

Suddenly cold sober, Kadlin sat back down with a thump, "N..no, I do not. Thank you Lord Boë Skulison, Slayer of the Wyrm of Vardø and Hunter of the Wolf-Beast of Alta-by-the-Sea. I...I do not."

Without another word, Boë swept his young nephew Snorri up in his right arm, Snorri who shared something of one great uncle's twisted frame and something of his other great uncle's way with words. Young Snorri who longed to be a great skald some day and practiced telling the old stories and singing the old songs beside the fire every night that he could until his mother bade him to bed.

With Snorri safely secured among his siblings in his massive arms, the giant-blooded's shadow departed the play of the firelight on the wall like the passing memory of a legend.

FADR

BY KEVIN WRIGHT

GM Note

Spoiler Warning: None

“Fadr” begins in the small Hrolfland village of Byrgisvik before the story travels down the spine of the Andøvan Mountains and out into the Plains of Storms beyond. None of these locations play any part in the *Northlands Saga Adventure Path*, nor do any of the characters described appear in its pages. The story does provide some history and secrets about the Worshipers of the Wyrms, a dragon cult that haunts the Plain of Storms and sometimes besets the folk of the Northlands, but theirs’ is a tale primarily of other parts of the **Lost Lands** campaign setting rather than specifically the Northlands. Players of the *Northlands Saga Adventure Path* can safely read this story because knowledge of the Wyrmist cult provides no spoilers for the Northlands themselves.

FADR

BY KEVIN WRIGHT



he Worshipers of the Wyrms fell upon the village of Byrgisvik at dawn, while the wan light of the Sun, Freyr's sky-candle, shone feebly over that cold and embittered land, and carrion birds punctuated the pale azure skies.

The warriors and huscarls of the village, strong men and women forged in the frosty fire of the Northlands, fell before the zealots as wheat before the scythe. Axe, spear, and blade availed them naught in the face of the overwhelming horde. In the end, their jarl, Geir Bloodyhaft — a seasoned and fearsome swordsman past his prime but still tall and hale — bent the knee before the Wyrms' vile godi. With battered and bloodied hands, the jarl lifted up to his conqueror his own broken blade in token of surrender. Tears, fierce and bright, fell from his cheeks, yet none of his people looked askance at this show of weakness; they knew that with his surrender, he had bought their very lives.

As tribute, the Wyrmspawn claimed no fire-forged weapon, no golden coin or lustrous jewel. Rather, they took that which was far more precious in the eyes of the Northlanders. Going from house to house and even into the sacred mead hall itself, the Wyrmspawn worshipers dragged forth every maiden of the village and lined them up before the Wyrms' godi, that with lecherous eyes and probing hands he might inspect them. Unnaturally tall and full of stony menace, the unholy man went from girl to girl, forcing them to look into his one terrible, sunken eye and the other scar-sealed left eye socket and asking them questions no man should ever ask a maid.

After lengthy and awful examination, he pointed out three of the women: one blonde-haired, slim of waist and broad of shoulder — the very image of a shield maiden — the next raven-haired, her pale face filled with apprehension, eyes wide with fear, and her slender body wracked by sobs, and finally, a red-headed girl, her fiery mane falling in long, loose curls down her back. The godi's callous bodyguard pulled the girls from amongst the others and roughly chained them together. The godi spoke to the horrified and silent villagers, his voice hollow and imperious. "These chits will slake the appetite of Snækol, Scaled and Serpentine Chief of the Frosthelm. Know that the rest of you live at his sufferance. Each year, you will pay a levy of gold, women, and foodstuffs to your overlord. His auditors follow hard upon our heels. Resist them, and you will be expunged."

With that, he turned and left, his servants and his war band following behind. Trailing behind came a train of women, scores of them, the most beautiful maidens from the villages of the North. They were bound together with thick shackles, all wailing at their lamentable fate. In the tumult and confusion no one noticed that, of all the women now enslaved by the Wyrms, only the fiery-haired woman taken from Byrgisvik did not weep. Though her eyes were downcast, the glimmer they held was not one of grief or terror, but of anger.

Three days after the capitulation of Byrgisvik, a band of doughty young warriors rode into town, sunlight glinting from spear-tip and mail and laughter brightly falling from their lips. That laughter fell slack when they saw the wreckage of the village, and stormy apprehension darkened their cheerful hearts.

They rode straightaway to the mead hall where their leader dismounted. This was Magnus, son of Jarl Geir, a warrior just come into the fullness of manhood. Hair glossy as polished gold flowed from beneath his graven helm and covered his jutting chin in

a newly grown beard. He stood a head taller than his tall companions, a group of Helhounds if ever there was one. Magnus' band had recently come from the Waldron Mountains, where they had hunted the onyx deer and fell-boar. With his own hand, Magnus had slain an enormous troll that had come upon them in the night, killing dogs and men alike with mighty sweeps of its sinewy arms. The fire-blackened skull of the monster now lay bound to his leathern saddle.

Magnus' mother strode from the doorway of the hall, eyes glazed over with sorrow. His father followed close behind. His step had slowed since the Wyrms' attack, but now quickened with joy at the return of his son.

Magnus held his weeping mother gently in his arms, taking care not to give her hurt from the weapons bedecking him. Geir approached and gripped his son's arm in welcome, though pain still lingered in his blue eyes.

"What happened here, father?" Magnus asked over his mother's graying head. "Why does grief lie so thickly upon the town?"

With halting tones, the jarl told his son of the coming of the Wyrms, the devastation wrought by his worshipers and his own humiliating surrender. A storm cloud fell over the young warrior's noble features as he heard the troubling tale. As his father recited unto him the names of the fallen, Magnus looked up and interrupted.

"Father, your pardon, but where are my sisters? *And where is Bera?*" Panic rose in his voice with the last question.

The jarl could not meet his eyes. "They were all of them taken by the Wyrms. His de-spicable godi chose them and took them from us. They have gone to the lair of Snækol."

Blood drained from that young warrior's face as he heard the news, and his shoulders shook with anger. His huge fists clenched and his eyes narrowed with his rage. Unnoticed, his mother stepped back from him in dismay. His sisters Ingun and Thorhild were the damsels fair-haired and dark, but she of the fiery mane was Bera, long loved by Magnus, the one whom he thought one day to take as his bride.

He turned to find his men dismounted and seeking out family and friends of their own, sharing in Byrgisvik's sorrow. "Mount up!" he said, wrath burning in every stitch of his being. "No one told you to climb down from those horses. We are going to catch up with our enemies and reclaim our own — though Hel herself bar the way! Mount up!"

The people of Byrgisvik hurriedly shoved food and drink toward their young men as they remounted, gathering what quick embraces and kisses as they could, then rode in a furious tempest of hooves and high-spirited cries toward danger.

On the day after the departure of the young men, a long-awaited ship sailed smoothly into the little bay near the village. She was no longship decked out for war, but was deeper-keeled, a true ocean-going vessel. She was called the *Eye of Munin*, and her voyage had been one of exploration and trade to the warmer Southlander nations. The *Eye* had brought back with her a wealth of exotic spices, rare silks and linens, and precious wines, as well as a small variety of the southern comforts peculiar to those softer lands.

The sailors aboard her leaped from her salt-rimed bow onto the worn docks, overjoyed at their homecoming. Unfortunately, the glad welcome they expected was not to be. Their friends and families greeted them with bowed heads and wounded eyes, clad in the ashen wrappings of mourning. They recounted the sad tale of Byrgisvik's defeat, and the sailor's light and buoyed spirits congealed into leaden horror.

The last man off the ship was decades older than his shipmates, his short hair and beard silvered by time and experience. Laugh-wrinkles splintered the edges of the deep-set eyes that scanned the crowd for someone in particular. As a wounded huscarl told him of the tragedy in somber tones, the old man's face grew grim. He looked through the crowd again and asked the man, "Ærinmund Slodesson, I thank you for bringing me these tidings, but tell me: where is my daughter?"

Ærinmund's face grew dark.

“They have taken her, Kory...taken her to the Wyrm. I am sorry,” he said and bowed his head in respect.

The old man made no reply to the huscarl; he merely clasped his arm tightly. Then he called, “Kollsvain! Leidolf! Hælg! To me!” Three of the young sailors broke off their conversations and moved quickly to his side. In their voyage with the old man, they had learned wisdom at his weathered hand and, finding in him mettle they had never known, had each pledged themselves to his service. Their heads bowed low to hear their elder’s words.

“Here, take this money,” he said and handed to each of them a bag of southern coins. “Go immediately to my home. Saddle all four of my horses and provision them for a long journey. Take you each one of those horses and do as I bid you. Kollsvain, go quickly to the spear-gathering at Trotheim. Seek there a shield maiden by the name of Thorballa Hal-lasdottir. She shouldn’t be hard to find. Say unto her, ‘Ashild’s daughter is in danger. Fly with all haste to Hrapptoft.’”

“Leidolf,” the elder continued. “Travel with all speed to a village called Skøro at the feet of the Andøvan Mountains. Ask around for a cunning woman called Thorkatla Whitehand. Show her all proper respect, then whisper in her ear, ‘Bera needs you. Go to Hrapp’s place.’”

“Yes, *drengr*,” the lad replied.

“And Hælg,” the man continued. “You must brave the dangers of Skuldswamp. Waste no time, but be careful! In the swamp, you will soon find a black squirrel. Say to it — yes, I know it sounds foolish! — yet say to it, ‘take me to Hel’s handmaiden’, then follow it closely. It will lead you to a woman. She will frighten you like no other beast or nightmare ever has; don’t kick yourself for it, it’s not your fault. Ask not her name and do your best not to stare at her. Say merely, ‘The one born in sorrow has dire need of you. You know where to go,’ then get you out of there as if Ymir himself chased you.”

The old man sighed. “When you have done these things, your debt to me will be repaid tenfold with my blessings and thanks. Keep the coins and horses and live rich lives. Marry well and have many children. You will not see me again.”

The young men were distraught at the idea of never seeing their revered mentor again, but they knew how deeply he loved his daughter and touched their foreheads in acquiescence.

Leidolf looked at his friends, then back at the old man. “Kory, is there anything else we might do for you?”

“Yes, there is. Give over to me your brand and your shield. Replace them with the weapons you find hanging above my bed.”

“Yes, *drengr*. What are you going to do?”

The elder turned the blade over in his hand, testing its grip in his fist. “I am going to have words with the jarl.”

The young men hurried off to obey, their spirits kindled with the idea of vengeance and new adventure. The old man, known as Kory the Sleepy, turned and made his way toward the jarl’s mead hall. The dock had cleared off, the folk headed home, seeking comfort from their families. The skies were smudged with the smoke of funeral pyres. The only remaining family Kory had was in chains and was being led to her death. That thought burned within him as he made his way through the village.

Kory walked into the mead hall, stopping to let his eyes adjust to the darkness within. A fire pit lay in the center of the hall, its greasy smoke rising toward a hole in the ceiling. Several folk sat around the heavy oaken tables that lined the walls. Exquisitely woven tapestries, imported from the Southlander duchy of Monrovia, hung from the rafters, crimson and gold scenes of victorious battles and great hunts rendered in richly dyed wool. On a carved seat on a dais at the far end of the hall sat Geir Bloodyhaft. His wife sat by his side in a smaller chair. A handful of people — obviously in distress — stood before the jarl, and he leaned toward them in commiseration. Kory strode toward him, ignoring the greetings of the people he passed.

When he drew near to the dais, the jarl noticed him and rose from his seat.

“Kory! Thrice welcome you are. You have come home to heartache, but your homecoming is treasured nonetheless. Come, take drink with me that our shared anguish might be halved.”

The people in front of the dais rose, bowed to the jarl and left the hall.

“Drink?” Kory asked. “What drink could assuage this burning in my heart? Could even the honeyed mead of Asgard cool my ire? Nay, I’ll not drink with you, Geir the Faithless.”

The jarl froze, taken aback by the sudden viciousness. He had descended to embrace his fellow Hrolflander but stopped cold in his tracks.

“What... What words do you speak, Kory? Know you not that my daughters and your own Bera have been taken by the agents of Snækol the Foul? We are brothers in grief, my friend!”

“I know what happened to my daughter,” said the man, always renowned for his quiet ways. “And I know the one responsible for her fate. When I came to live here, we swore that we would serve you and that you would defend us...even at the cost your own life! When I left on my sojourn, I entrusted my precious Bera into your care — fool that I was! And you failed me, Geir. Worse — infinitely worse — you failed my daughter.”

Tall Geir stood still as an image in stone. “Kory, many of our folk were killed in battle. I myself was grievously wounded. All that could be done to protect Bera was done! Ever have you been a good hirthmann to me, and I know that it is only your broken heart speaking, but I’ll not have any man call me faithless.”

“Ha!” the old man laughed, the sound hard and pitiless. “All that could be done was done, you say? *Then why lies not your body upon the bier?* ‘Faithless’, you say, as if that is the direst insult. Do you think that’s the worst I’ll call you? No and no. I name you coward. Geir Bloodyhaft, I name you *níðingr*.”

The people had gathered around the two men, and they gasped at Kory’s words.

The jarl spoke and anger bloodied each syllable.

“Your words are tripe, you weather-beaten old sack. I’ll prove my valor on your body.” He called to the crowd, “Arrange for the *holmgang!*” The crowd moved to obey, but Kory spoke first.

“Hel take your *holmgang*,” Kory the Sleepy spat. “I hold sword and shield at the ready. Nothing stands between us but air and opportunity. Come and die.”

Longsword and shield were brought and placed in the jarl’s strong hands. Though recently wounded, everyone thought to see Kory die at the first pass. Geir towered over the silver-haired man and he was the younger by almost twenty years. As soon as the jarl armed himself and stepped down from the dais, Kory moved swiftly to the attack.

Geir launched a heavy, downward blow, hoping to quickly beat down his opponent, but before his blade could fall, the older man slipped close with lightning speed, caught the blow on his shield and slashed merciless steel through the jarl’s shin bone. With a cry, the jarl fell to one side, losing his grip on his shield. Kory then battered the longsword aside with his own brand and punched the half-kneeling jarl in the nose with the rawhide rim of his shield. Blood sprayed as the big man toppled over.

The Sleepy placed his foot on Geir’s chest and thrust his sword into the larger man’s throat. He was dead within eight heartbeats. It was a more merciful death than Kory felt like giving him, but he was not one who enjoyed the sufferings of other men. His wrath by no means slaked, he spun on his heel and marched from the mead hall.

“Everyone clear out of Byrgisvík. Load up your families and your households, and get yourselves gone.”

“Why, Kory?” one villager dared to quietly ask. “Why do we gather our families and our things?”

Never breaking stride as he exited the otherwise silent hall, Kory said, “Because if I return, I’m going to burn it to the ground.”

Things hadn’t worked out as Magnus had planned. He’d envisioned himself catching up to the ranks of the Wyrmpawn, forming up a shieldwall with his brethren and routing his foes utterly. Bera would see his glorious victory and come running to his blood-soaked arms, flame-hair flying behind her. They’d return home in triumph and be married in riotous celebration, the villagers casting snow-flowers at their feet.

Instead, he and his band had taken a wrong turn somewhere and ended up wading for three days through some dank marshes, slapping mosquitos and cursing their luck. Coming out of the bog lands, they'd stumbled upon a stink of ogres just as the forest of Hrolfland gave way to the slopes of the Andøvan and fought a pitched battle under bleak, overcast skies. Magnus and his men had emerged triumphant, but they found no treasure on the rank corpses and many of them now bore debilitating wounds that only slowed them further.

They were sourly demoralized as they crossed the hidden trails of the mountains by the time the Wyrms' scouting patrol found them, but they rose to the occasion, banging blade on shield, shouting insults and their war-cries and courageously engaged the foe. It availed them naught, as more patrols arrived and they found themselves outnumbered four to one. The majority of the band were slain outright, but three survived the slaughter and were shackled and shorn like proper thralls. One of those new-made thralls was Magnus, and his hero's heart couldn't decide if it were more outraged at his defeat or surprised at the unexpected turn of events.

Kory kicked open the thick, ornately-carved door to the hunting lodge and stepped inside, shaking the snow off of his cloak and stamping ice from his boots. Night had fallen darkly an hour past, and harsh cold had seeped into his tired bones. He'd ridden long and hard since slaying Geir, running hard errands of his own before coming to Hrapptoft.

He cast off his frigid mantle, propped a long, ash-wood box against the doorframe and looked up to see a circular table in the center of the lodge, lit with many candles. In that pool of light sat three strange women, looking at him with expressions dour, wry, and expectant, respectively. Another form hovered in the shadows behind them. Kory took off his helm, shook the ice droplets from his short beard and approached them.

A more peculiar gathering of ladies could scarcely be imagined. On Kory's left sat the largest woman he'd ever seen. Having doffed her armor, she was clad in a cream-colored padded tunic that stank of sweat and old blood, and bulging muscles in her shoulders and arms threatened to tear through the fabric of her garb. Her cheek-bones were high and wide-set and her eyes were a dazzling blue. Half of her head was shaved to reveal a sword-shaped tattoo on her tanned skin, but the rest of her hair fell in a heavy braid of gold and silver down her back. This was Thorballa, Shield Maiden of the High Seat. She was a jaw-dropping beauty, and she knew it but cared not. Kory drew his sword and touched the blade to his brow in greeting, and she touched her forehead in return, never taking her eyes from his.

The woman sitting on the far side of the table was a slender brunette, fair of skin, clad in a long dress of the deepest cobalt. A coquettish smile graced her flawless face...until Kory blinked. She now appeared as busty mead-wench, straw-blonde curls bouncing on her head, silently laughing at a joke only she had heard. This was Thorkatla, cunning woman and sage. Her mazy mind had led her unto paths seldom traveled by the sane, and she had not returned unchanged. Her aspect was never the same from one moment to the next, ever shifting, ever changing, but whatever form she took was always enthralling. Kory nodded to her, the briefest smile touching his lips. She nodded back, her eyes sad behind her laughing face.

Lastly, to his right sat the strangest figure of all. It was a woman passing tall, and even seated she held herself proudly upright. Half of her body was pitch black and the other half pearly white. This extended to the hair of her brows and lashes, though her head was bald as an egg. Even her eyes followed the pattern, the right eye stark white and left a lustrous black. She was a godi of the goddess Hel and Hel-touched she was. Yet for all her strange appearance, she was every bit as alluring as her companions. "Sæunn," Kory said in salutation. "Kory," the godi answered, no love warming the word.

There was enough beauty seated at the table to stun any man to awed silence, but Kory seemed immune to it. After all, they were his sisters-in-law. For years tragically shortened, he'd been married to their sister Ashild, in his eyes, the fairest of them all. But she'd died

in childbirth, bringing Bera into the world.

Kory took his seat, then looked behind Thorkatla (now a winsome, innocent-faced maiden) and spoke to the figure standing there.

“Hælg! What’s wrong with you, lad? You look as if you’d seen a ghost?”

The poor young man was so far out of his depth he felt as if he was drowning. First, he was sent on a mission by a respected elder only to meet the oddest, most handsome woman he’d ever seen in his life, and now that elder was so changed he was nearly unrecognizable. Gone was the humble old hirthmann of a small seaside Hrolffland village. Now, Kory was dressed as a man of war – and such a man of war! His steel helm was chased in gold and a hauberk clinked under his richly decorated blue-gray kaftan. Gold gleamed on the longsword’s hilt at his side and crimson jewels ornamented the brand’s scabbard. Moreover, a fell and joyous strength seem to lay upon him, and he seemed twenty years younger than when last they’d met. Those oft-downcast, thoughtful eyes now lit with a bright and steely resolve.

“But what do you here?” Kory said. “I thought I told you to escape the Skuldswamp as quickly as you were able. I did not think to see you in lonely Hrapptoft.”

Stout Hælg was more whey-faced than was his wont. “I tried *drengr*, but she...she wouldn’t let me. She made a mule of me to carry her baggage.” And he dared to turn his eyes ever so slightly toward Sæunn. She sipped her mead and shrugged her slim shoulders.

Kory grinned for the first time in days. It felt stiff and unwelcome on his face. “Aye, the daughters of Halla can be difficult to refuse. I can testify to that myself.”

“You look terrible, Kory. The years have been unkind to you,” the godi of Hel said, a sneer in her voice.

The white-haired man met her gaze evenly. This was an old feud, staid and practiced, made no less ugly by its longevity. Kory had not the time for it.

He cleared his throat and looked from one woman to another. “Know you what happened to your niece?”

“Yes, Kory. We heard,” said Thorballa. “And worse news could scarce be imagined.” Her eyes were unreadable.

“The Wyrms’ Get have been filling the Northlands with their stench for too long, growing in might and number. I hate them. I have long thought it was time and past time to crush them under heel.” This from Thorkatla, now a fetching huntress, geared for the hunt and black of hair and eye. The harsh words seemed out of place coming from such tenderly kissable lips, Hælg thought.

Sæunn spoke. “I always had deep misgivings, Kory, about leaving our Bera with you. And now those misgivings have been proven right. ‘Twas only your *gæfa* that helped you win the love and hand of our dear sister, Ashild: it was luck, nothing more. She was foolish for loving you. I *never* knew what value she found in you. No male has any business raising one of Halla’s breed, anyway. One of your ilk could never hope to understand one of us.”

“Enough of that,” said Thorballa. Her voice was a pleasing contralto. “That was decided long ago by the four of us and a good decision it was. Knowing the *wyrd* that lay upon her, she had to be raised in obscurity, hidden from those malevolent eyes that yet seek her. Kory was the only one able and — let us say it — willing to give her the anonymity and shelter she needed. Also,” she said, looking at Kory, “I’ve never seen man love daughter as I saw you love that little girl.”

Kory looked from one woman to the other. “I’ll not deny that I was unworthy of your sister. Nothing but the gods’ own luck, as you say. And I’ll not deny that I could never understand one of you. I never understood your sister; I just counted myself blessed to be in her presence. But, as Thorballa said, Bera needed to lie low until her time came. Now, I fear her time may never come.” Despair darkened his face as the worry and fear for his only daughter threatened to overwhelm him.

Thorkatla’s voice cut through his misery. “So, Favored of Ashild. What is your plan? Shall we meet and decimate the Worshipers of the Wyrms? I think that may be a bit beyond our abilities.”

Kory shook himself “We shall meet them alright, on the Plain of Storms. Hælgil!”

“Yes, Kory?”

“Are you willing to bear another message? This task may be more dangerous than your last one.”

“*More* dangerous?” he said, glancing at Hel’s godi. “If so say so, *dreng*r. I am at your disposal.”

“Excellent. To answer your question, Thorkatla: yes, we shall meet with the enemy, but not to engage in battle. I don’t mean to kill them. I mean to kill their god.”

Thorballa gestured toward the oblong box by the door. “Is that what I think it is?”

Kory just gave a frosty smile and nodded his head.

For long, miserable days, Magnus journeyed with the Worshipers of the Wyrm. All day, he walked stolidly in heavy iron shackles. At night, he did their bidding: carrying water, digging waste trenches, currying their horses — anything he was told. He’d tried to fight them, to defy them, the first couple of days, but they soon broke him of that in ways he shuddered to remember. But always, he kept a weather-eye out for Bera, hoping to pick her face out of the chaotic tumble of humanity around him, but he had not seen her yet. *Maybe*, he thought. *Maybe we can save each other...*

Hælgil wasn’t doing much better. He’d carried Kory’s message faithfully, exactly as he’d been told. He’d walked right up to their encampment and announced himself. “I speak for Kory Vidgisbane,” he’d said. “Take me to your godi.” After that, it took several hours of arguing with one group of officials or another before he finally stood before their imposing priest. By that time, the brave young man had been battered and beaten and every cranny of his person thoroughly searched for weapon or poison. They had taken from him the wooden box Kory had entrusted to him and laid it before their godi’s feet.

With the polished toe of his stolen boot, the Wyrm’s godi pushed open its lid and stared down at its contents. Stony silence fell on all those around. The priest’s lips whitened as he spoke.

“Who did you say sent you?”

“Kory, Slayer of Vigdis. He says he’s going to join you at your Feast of Scales and put an end to Snækol’s worthless life.”

The priest’s breath sucked inward at this proclamation.

“I had not thought that Kory the Vile still lived, though countless times have we burned the branch and called down curses on his name. He will be most welcome at the Feast of Scales, whereat the mate of poor Vigdis may wreak his vengeance upon the frail flesh of Man.”

He looked up and Hælgil saw that his one pupil was a black serpentine slit splicing an amber circle. It was disquieting, to say the least.

The godi stared for long moments at the young warrior.

“Take him away,” he hissed. “Do with him as you will.”

Hælgil refused to wince at these words, though he anticipated torture. Luckily, he only had to endure a spirited flogging before he was chained alongside other downtrodden souls and led away.

For days they traveled, ever southward, down from the cold of the secret ancient ways of the Andøvan highlands and onto a wide grassy plain. Hoar-frost glittered on the expanse as far as they eye could see, a dazzling silver ocean under a cold sun. Hælgil recognized it: the Plain of Storms, and he rejoiced that the end of his journey was drawing nigh. He’d had more luck than Magnus in finding Bera, and he managed to keep an eye on her, far ahead of him, as they walked out of the mountains. For the entire journey, he mentally repeated

Kory's plan to himself as he walked.

Kory and Thorballa stood on high ground watching the approach of those who sullied themselves before Snækol. The coming cultists filled the land before a small plateau at the foot of the eastern mountains, a teeming mass of degraded humanity.

"There are quite a few of them," Thorballa observed, her pleasant voice warming the chill air.

"Yes." He scanned the ranks of the Wyrmistis carefully, hoping against hope to see Bera somewhere among them. The vanguard was even now riding up the steeply sloping sides of the plateau, the leader of the Worshipers surely there among them.

"I'd say at least three thousand spears," Thorballa said.

"Yes."

"I do not think we could've slain them all," she said.

"No."

"I'm glad you had another plan."

"Yes."

"Although, as far as plans go, this one's a bit...suicidal."

"Yes."

"If we come out of this alive, I'm going to marry you."

"Yes...what?" Kory said, turning toward the shield maiden, utter astonishment etched itself on his weathered face.

A horn blew just then, proclaiming the coming of the godi and sparing Kory the need for coherent response; not that he would've been capable of that. He stared at Thorballa open-mouthed in complete befuddlement while she calmly watched the ascending Wyrmistis.

Four huge men — giant-blooded for sure — rode up to the pair on massive destriers. Clad in dark furs and heavy, dark-stained mail, they brandished naked axes as they took position surrounding the two. Behind them, the godi lurked astride an unnaturally pale horse, its hide nearly transparent in its thinness and lack of coloration — Kory fancied he could almost see its skull and skeletal structure beneath the taut-stretched flesh.

"Be you Kory the Vile, famed sneak and thief, backstabber and murderer of Fair Vigdis?" one of the giants growled.

The old warrior did not deign to look up at the speaker. "Well, I *am* Kory, and Vigdis is dead. Those other bits might be contested, though."

One of the warhorses blew its moist breath onto the shield maiden's muscular neck.

"Keep your mutt away from me," she said, "or I'll swat it."

"And you keep your tongue leashed, wench, or I'll saw it from your head!" the destrier's master cried.

Almost laconically, her arm swung around, her massive war-axe somehow already in hand. The blade bit deeply into the upper foreleg of the beast, and it went down screaming. Its shrill neighs were soon joined by the screams of pain from its rider as the heavy mount collapsed sideways, trapping his leg beneath it with a sharp crack that clearly emanated from his own thigh. The shield maiden calmly grabbed him by shoulder and cranium and twisted his head 'til she heard a second sharp crack. She released the suddenly silent rider, and he fell boneless to the frozen earth.

The old warrior had his sword out, menacing the other horsemen.

"Get you back to that cur you call a master. I would have words with him quickly; I've no time to waste on his goat-licking lackeys."

The priest of Snækol rode up before any more of his men could be slain.

"Ho, there, Kory son of Knute. Long have I desired to meet you."

"That, I do not doubt," the old warrior spat. He looked around. "So, this is where you feed the Wyrms? You'd think, fat as he is, that he could find his own meat."

"Speak not of your betters, Meat-for-Ravens! Snækol soon arises and you will learn humility at his coming. His hatred burns deeply for the one who slew his mate. An un-

checked force of malignance now seeks you out. You were a fool to reveal yourself.” “Fool I may be, but I have a proposal for you, Slave of Worms. I will meet with Snækol on this very plateau. If he slays me, my friend here will ensure that you know where to find Freyja’s Pomegranate, the most coveted jewel taken from Vigdis’ hoard. If I slay him, you and your minions,” he said, waving vaguely toward the army of worshipers and their captives, “shall become my slaves to do with as I choose. What say you?”

The godi sat quietly, unmoving as stone, then he barked a queer, icy laugh and said, “That’s it? You journeyed all this way with *this* in mind? I called you ‘fool’ but you are more than fool. O Foolish Man, you have come to the Plain of Storms to die! You have no hope — none! — of surviving an encounter with the Chief of Frosthelm. Especially since you gifted unto me your greatest weapon. But, if death is your wish, then I accept your proposal. My only hope is that Snækol takes his time with you.”

He turned his tall, unearthly horse and rode back toward his followers, the now-reduced giant-blooded in tow. Yelling over his shoulder, he said, “I go to summon the Wyrml!”

The pair were alone again under the blue sky, save for the thrashing of the wounded horse, though even that slowed and stopped as it poured the last of its life’s blood onto the frozen grass from its near-severed leg. Its formerly glib rider was likewise motionless and long past concern, a rapidly cooling heap atop the dying horse.

Kory couldn’t say what made him more nervous: the impending battle with an enormous, lethal serpent or being alone with the beautiful Thorballa. For her part, she seemed as tranquil as a clear mountain lake. She hummed contentedly.

“So... what was that about...?” he began timidly.

“Leave it ‘til after,” she said, smiling at nothing in particular.

“Alright,” he said, a little abashed.

A roar spawned from the guts of Helheim splintered the stillness. Like a thousand panes of glass breaking at once, the ice frozen on countless blades of grass shattered at the roar, adding to the tumult of the war-bellow of Snækol the Scaled. His followers — all the thousands of them — fell to their knees in terror before then leaping up and crying and shouting in near ecstasy.

From the broken and jagged flanks of the eastern mountains snaked a colossal serpentine beast, its body splitting into two long necks, each ending in the head of a foul linnorm. Where the necks separated from each other, four powerful arms extended from the tortuous body, their iron claws crushing the basalt of the mountainside beneath them as if it was the softest gypsum. Its entire length was plated in blackened gray scales that resembled unrefined iron, and from the crevice between each plate came a hellish glow, giving clue to the live magma that coursed within the beast’s veins.

Every year this fearsome creature, the rare and mighty two-headed tor linnorm, dragged itself down, out of the mountain craters to bask in the glow of its admirers and feast on their offerings, to make puny mortals tremble in its presence and to some extent balm the ache in its corrupted heart from the loss of its mate Vigdis decades ago.

Beneath Kory’s feet, the earth shuddered at the linnorm’s charge.

By his side, even brave Thorballa felt a cold finger of fear trace a path down her spine.

“I never realized how big those things are. And you killed one?”

Kory smiled. Now that the dragon had come, the time for doubts and second-guessing was long past.

“Yes, I killed one once... long ago. It was this one’s mate. Listen to me now, Thorballa, and heed my words.” He looked deep into her fair eyes. “When we attack, you are not to kill this beast. No matter how hard the bloodlust drives you, stay your hand from the killing stroke. I must be the one to end Snækol’s foul life.”

“Now is no time to seek glory,” Thorballa began to say before abruptly stopping herself at the absurdity of her own words. This was Kory the Sleepy, father of Bera, widower of wise Ashild. No glory-hound was he.

Kory sighed and looked back to the rushing engine of destruction. It was no more than a half-mile away. “Each linnorm bears within it the seed of a foul curse, released upon its

slayer at the moment of its death. I alone must bear the venom of this malediction. I claim it as my own.”

She looked at him in wonder, then back to the dragon. A figure rode hastily toward it on horseback; it was the godi flying to its lord. The great beast stopped and lowered its two massive heads to confer with its thrall. The warriors saw the man prostrated before the serpent.

Whatever the godi said, the dragon didn't take it well. One head flew up in anger, spouting fire and scalding ash in great clouds into the sky. The other bent low and snapped the man up in its slaving jaws, gulping him down into its boiling maw.

“Well,” said Kory, “that takes care of one problem. I hope he told the others the bargain he struck.”

As the first head now snatched up the terrorized and screaming horse and gave it the same fate as its master, the second fixed its gaze firmly on the pair upon the plateau. Barely pausing to swallow the thrashing mount, the tor linnorm coursed swiftly over the sloped ground, straight toward the butte where the two warriors waited, its heated body leaving a trail of steam and scorched grass as it crossed the frozen ground. In no time, it was digging its claws into the rock and quickly ascending the steep slope. It pulled its bulk over the edge, bared its dripping fangs, and faced the two heroes, hot slaver puddling at their feet.

“Hello, old lizard,” the warrior said calmly.

It reared back both its great heads and vomited a torrent of flaming ash on them. A cloud of smoke engulfed the plateau, obscuring it from sight. The dragon threw itself into cloud, ripping, tearing, and biting with its poisonous teeth, not waiting for the smoke to clear.

When the steady cold breeze off the plains below finally cleared the air, Snækol looked, but could not find the bodies of his prey. Only the steaming remains of two slushy piles of ice stood where the pair had been, quickly evaporating in the suddenly super-heated air.

“Now!” cried Kory from his concealed location on the nearby mountainside where he and Thorballa had stood in conversation all along. Thorkatla's simulacrum of the pair left standing on the plateau had worked; the serpent had and his servants had been fooled by the magic. Kory and Thorballa had never stood before their foes on the now-wasted butte, only magically created constructs that possessed but a portion of their wit and skills had stood on their place to trade barbs and blows.

At his shout, Sæunn, who crouched in concealment on the mountainside not far away flew on invisible wings to the dragon. Swooping low, she laid a hand upon Snækol's steaming hide, almost a caress. Kory grimaced as the shriek of the linnorm assaulted his ears even from this distance. The fire-lit seams along its back darkened as Death itself enveloped them. The linnorm roared in agony, scoring the earth with its adamantine talons.

From her hiding place at the base of the plateau, Thorkatla spoke arcane words, weaving her hands bizarre gestures. She was a redhead now, and had been all day. Kory supposed it was in honor of Bera, or possibly, Bera's deceased mother. A gigantic polar bear appeared on the plateau, a reckless force of nature clothed in blinding white fur. It charged Snækol and raked its throat with heavy paws, but they seemed to have no effect.

Thorballa sprinted down towards the dragon, a deadly greataxe in her hand and murder in her eyes.

For his part, Kory was likewise leaping down the mountainside in great, magical bounds, his feet lent wings by magical boots. “*Hurguð!*” he cried joyously. “To me!”

Below in the Wyrms' camp, there was turmoil and confusion. What was happening? Where was their priest? The oblong box once carried by Hælgi and given to the godi burst asunder where it sat in the godi's tent. A shining spike, gleaming with silver and crimson light, flew from that place to the waiting hand of Kory on the plateau high above. This was *Hurguð*, the Piercer of Scales, a magnificent spear forged of mithral and covered in ruby-encrusted runes. Those runes sang of courage in the face of any danger and of piercing the heart of all dragons. With her, Kory had slain the dread serpent Vigdis, ending her reign of terror in the Northlands. But his victory came at great price, for with her death came the

Curse of Boiling Blood. From that day on, his body had been wracked with great pain as his blood scorched him from within, and he had never again been the warrior he once was.

Hælg, seeing that his time had come, spoke the word given him by Thorkatla. His bonds slipped from him as if covered in grease. He cast them aside and made his way through the panicky crowd toward where he had last seen Kory's daughter.

The battle on the plateau was far from over; Snækol was hurt, but not dead yet. The foul magic of the goddess Hel, worked upon him by her godi, had greatly weakened him but he yet drew breath. He slashed skyward with his burning tail and caught the godi in its fiery folds. She screamed as the scalding scales rent through her armor and into her flesh. Thorballa advanced on the serpent, but it tore at her with a flurry of massive claws. She suffered the clawing wounds, but managed to evade the dripping teeth as they sunk into Thorkatla's magic-wrought dire bear. Fangs from both heads ripping at her creation; it, being made of mere shadow-stuff like the simulacrum before, blinked silently out of existence.

Hælg dove into a swarm of screaming, panicked cultists, punching and biting his way through them. He looked up to find Bera choking the life from one of the taskmaster's with his own whip.

"Die, you cur! Die!" she screamed as her arms, slender but string, pulled and his swollen eyes bulged from his head.

Hælg ran to her and jerked her away from her victim. She tried to claw at his eyes, but he batted her hands away, shouting, "Bera! It's me, Hælg! Your father, Kory...he sent me!" She shoved him backward and said, "Hælg? 'Tis you? Where is my father?"

He grinned, his white teeth flashing through his dirty, sweat-streaked face.

"He's up on that plateau, killing a dragon. Let's go find him!"

Soberly, at the thought of what he had just said, she nodded her head and took his hand.

Kory caught the haft of his flying silver spear and, turning her in his hands, hurled her at the linnorm. The sun caught fire on her rosy runes as she described a perfect arc and drilled into one of Snækol's sinuous throats. *Hurguð* bit deep, and bright, hot blood flew from the wound. The head supported by that neck screamed agony, then flopped gracelessly earthward to hang limp upon its root.

The tail-snared godi called to her goddess and disappeared, slipping into the ether. The serpent's grasping tail clutching nothingness.

Thorkatla had ascended the plateau and wove more magic, reading from a scroll ancient even in the days of the *Andøvan*. A bolt of pure frigidity soared from her hand, striking the dragon along its side and transcribing a line of frost-bitten hide down its flank. Its roar thundered in agony and rage. The big shield-maiden stepped close to the burning beast, greataxe raised, and brought it crashing down on a massive forefoot, again and again, crunching through scale and bone farther with each strike. *Hurguð* wrenched itself out of the wound it had made and flew back to Kory's outstretched hand. He snatched it from the air and hurled it again at his foe. The razor-sharp blade again pierced Snækol's hide, this time through the spine below the bifurcation of its necks, and the great serpent fell limply to the ground with a crash. It rolled its remaining head over the earth, crying out in anguish and rage. Thorballa advanced, greataxe in hand, to crush the life from its throat.

"Hold!" Kory called frantically. "Stay your hand, Thorballa!"

Approaching rapidly from behind, he grasped her arm and, with surprising strength, dragged her away from the fallen linnorm. Returning, he stood over that remaining great reptilian head, its eye rolling in fear as it worked its jaws in an attempt to speak or bite. Kory steadied the spear — point down — in his hands. Inhaling deeply, he started his thrust...and the burning eyes of the dragon gained focus, those deadly jaws yawned wide, and spat a great gout of flame and embers engulfed the old warrior. He shrieked as he was caught in that blistering firestorm, but managed to plunge his spear through Snækol's great eye, smashing through the bone of its socket and deep into its twisted brain. Man and dragon alike contorted in agony, then collapsed to the earth, two heaps of dead flesh, side by side.

At that moment, Bera and Hælgí topped the butte. The girl spied her fallen father and rushed to his side. She threw herself on the ground next to him and clutched his charred hand to her tear-streaked cheek.

"Fadr!" she cried. "Oh...my precious fadr." She rocked back and forth, lost in her grief.

Her aunts silently gathered around her. Sæunn reappeared from the ether, ready to continue battle, only to find despair. Thorballa stood somberly, bleeding from many wounds but ignoring them entirely. Thorkatla appeared next to them, head bowed in reverence. Hælgí stood apart, knowing his own pain, deep as it was, was nothing compared to Bera's. For long moments, Sorrow held them all in her soft, unbreakable grip.

At that moment, a grimy, bald-headed figure, clambered over the edge of the plateau and ran toward the heart-stricken gathering.

"Bera! You're alive! Thank Baldr that I found you!" It was Magnus, shorn of all dignity, pride, and hair. He burst through the ring of mourners and gathered dazed Bera into his arms.

"Oh, my love! I have walked through purest nightmare to find you — but find you I have! Let us away from this awful place and return home."

"Home?" she said, absently.

"Yes! Home, to Byrgisvík. It will be a long journey, but fear not: I will protect you. When we get home, we can at last be married. I know that my father will approve, regardless of your ancestry. He has told me so himself. I will build you the grandest house in town, and..."

"Married?" Bera said, confusion evaporating from her voice, "to *you*? Have you suffered a head wound? Are you mad? Whatever makes you think that *I* would ever be married to *you*?"

Poor Magnus stepped back, raising his hands imploringly. "But beloved, how can...?"

She cut him short. "Beloved? I am not your beloved, you prancing oaf. The only thing you ever loved was the adoration of fools and the flowing locks of your yellow hair. You are no man fit for me. Look!" She grabbed the chain dangling from his throat and forced him to look down at the burnt ruin of her father. "*That* is a man! A man of courage and selflessness and self-sacrifice that a worm like you could not begin to fathom." Her voice trembled. "And I will miss his loving presence every lonely moment of the rest of my days. Only a man like that could win my hand, be he ever a faint echo of manhood such as my father's. But you...*you*..." she snarled and struck him in the face with the length of chain. "You are naught but a puffed-up cur," she said as she thrashed him again and again in the face, "suitable for naught but whipping and blows! Get you hence, *níðingr*. Get you out of my sight!" She struck him again and he stumbled back, befuddled, ashamed, and scared. He fell to the ground, tears in his eyes, then leapt to his feet and fled as fast as they would carry him back the way he had come.

Bera glared at him angrily while her aunts looked at her in grim approval. She collapsed once again at her father's side. Thorballa, Thorkatla, Sæunn, and Hælgí stood the long, silent watch over Kory's body until dawn the next dawn. When the sun broke over the horizon, tinting her hair with flame, the young girl stood.

"My aunts, thank you for holding vigil with me. My father is honored to have such noble souls guard his passing. You, too, Hælgí." She sniffled and asked, "Need we build a pyre for him?"

“The dragon’s breath was a more spectacular pyre than any we could build. Kory was the bravest person I’ve ever known, even though he was but a man.” This from Sæunn, as she stood and brushed the ash from her clothing. “Take Bera’s hand, Thorkatla, and lead her to the home we share. Boy, attend them.” The enchanter took her arm to lead her away, but before they left, Bera turned back and tore *Hurguð* from Snækol’s skull. This she bore away with her, along with her heavy heart. Hælgj walked reverently behind them.

The Worshipers of the Wyrn were long fled, their living idol cast down before their very eyes. Some of them came to their senses in the following years, but most chased one foolish thing after another, filling their hearts with *dross*.

For a time, the godi and the shield maiden ranged throughout the camp, collecting what treasures they found, any weapons that caught their fancy, but ever their gaze wandered back to the place where Kory had fallen. Eventually, they gathered up the plunder in a pile on the ground and climbed back up the plateau. Sæunn called on her goddess’ aid to heal her sisters’ wounds. They slept for a while on the open ground, gathering their strength. When they woke, they spent an hour in prayer, thanking the gods for victory and calling down curses on all evil creatures. Finally, they stood and, holding hands, looked down on Kory’s blasted remains.

Sæunn sighed. “Are you sure about this?”

Thorballa never took her eyes off him. “Yes. Without reservation.”

“When will we tell Bera?”

“I’ll tell her when the time is right. For now a little grief will temper her spirit.”

Hel’s priestess shook her head. “I’ll never understand what you all see in him.”

“No, sister, you wouldn’t. You belong to Hel, Mistress of Death. And there is naught but life to well up in him. Stop wasting time, if you please.”

And Thorballa smiled a joyous smile as Sæunn bent low and began her prayer.

“Oh, Hel,” she intoned, “daughter of Loki and sister to Fenrir and Jormungandr. Mistress, heed my call! I ask that you return one to us, Dread One, from your domain of Death. Send back to us Kory Drakebane to the land of the wakeful living...”