

Aye, my lords—nine worlds. Nine realms that the Aesir trod, some of them friendly, some brooding and some that held death for them.

First, there was Asaheim, where Odin ruled from his high seat in Asgard by the sea— This was where the Aesir lived, honing their swords for conquest.

Next there was Alfheim—the elfworld, the ancient, where trees grew tall and green and fair. There walked the golden-haired lyos, proud lords of the forests and the searoads.

1 Jotunheim was the blighted home of the hrimthursar, the giants, where no man could endure the eternal cold. Here were fortresses of stone, indistinguishable from the windy crags and the storm-gutted hollows.

Vanaheim was a fair land with broad meadows, gently rolling hills and laughing rivers. The Vanir held sway here in their halls of white stone, reaping a generous harvest.

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Midgard you know—with its greed and its lust, its bravery and its openhandedness, its cruelty and its devotion. Here too the Aesir walked, in search of men willing to fight their wars.

Niflheim was a place apart, all but unknown— Odin named it a world of fog and misery, decay and corruption, where the lights in the sky had died long-ago.

Svartheim was where the dark elves lived, a honeycomb of tunnels, where they mined for gold and for silver. But it was iron they forged into weapons for the

Aesir.

Utgard, it is said, was set spinning in the void by Odin himself. Here, he mixed mortal men and elves and giants in a cauldron of war for his pleasure.

And finally there was Nidavellir—where nothing might live, for the mountains here never stopped vomiting lava over the black and tortured terrain. The sky was a roiling fury of smoke and ash and fire.

The Aesir ranged far and wide across these nine worlds, my lords, for Odin had built the gates—the nether-paths from world to world—for conquest and for adventure, for the gathering of wisdom and the spreading of his empire.

But always the Aesir returned to their city by the sea, for Asgard's splendor cannot bear description....

Sin Skolding
Hiesey, A.D. 439

II

The sun was on his face, drawing his skin tight over his ageless skull. The wind lifted his hair and ruffled his beard. He closed his eyes and, for a moment at least, he dreamed.

Once, men had burned pieces of sheep and wild boar on his altar. They had labored to cut his name into the runestones that they erected in their burial grounds. They had collected the scraps of coarse leather left over when they made their foot coverings, and kept them safe—for it and was said that out of such bits and pieces his boots had been made.

And without those boots, the legends said, he could not have split the wolf Fenrir's jaw.

Men had held him high, as if he were a god. Him and his kinsmen, the Aesir, who had plucked the sturdiest fighters from men's midst—then bid them wage an eerie war against hulking hrimthursar, in a land where the sun brought no warmth, and there was no wind that did not

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sear the skin. They fought gladly, men did, for they thought that they were in Heaven.

But what did the Aesir hold high? Only Asgard,
He opened his eyes, slowly.

And it was Asgard that rose beneath him now like so many fountains of stone, achingly graceful in their ascent, glistening like molten silver in the soft light of the early spring sun. The water that girded the city on two sides was alive with whitecaps and deep blue, like the sky when the air is clear and the day is nearly spent. Mountains stood guard on her north side, shrugging off waterfalls, and only in the west was she undefended—open to a wide plain called Idavollr.

The wind that filled his nostrils was redolent with memories. It was the smell of freedom, of pride, of power. It was the taste of his youth, spent among Asgard's towers and in the shade of Asgard's woods.

He felt strangely at peace. Even though Odin stalked below—perhaps had already gathered hidden forces and lay in wait for his enemies. Even though there was a rising wave of discontent among his own armies now. Even though the dissonance of war still rang in his ears, and there would be more wars to come before he could lay down his sword—even with all this laid out before him like a wild and unfinished tapestry, a feeling of calm still washed over him when he looked down on Asgard,

Vidar felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Vidar?" It was Eric's voice, tentative.

"Aye," he said, and a moment passed in which there was only silence. Then the one called Eric spoke again.

"Vidar, the Asgardians... they're saying that they won't follow you...."

But Vidar was weary, so weary, and he did not hear the rest. "Do you know," he asked, "how many hearthfires I've gazed into and seen Asgard in the heat of the coals?" An eagle glided up from its eyrie among the peaks and wheeled on the upper airs. "As she was before the thursar

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tore down her towers and spilled blood in her streets—and took torches to the ruins."

For a moment, a scene rose unbidden behind his open eyes—charred spider-things that once were children, rubble and dust and red flames that flickered like wolves' tongues— A river dyed red, pools filled with blood, A ghost-city, unpeopled and dead, empty but for the carrion birds that sprouted on corpses like death's black blossoms. Then he blinked it away, with some difficulty, and gazed again on Asgard as she was.

Proud, sturdy towers reared up against the hard, crystalline heavens, connected one to the other by great, sky-spanning bridges. The sun glinted on the green symmetry of her gardens.

"And Vali has resurrected Asgard as I would not have thought possible," he said, forgetting to whom he spoke. Vidar stared at her black stone walls, as high as those Loki had built before Loki tore them down again. "The bastard. From here, she looks exactly as I remembered her."

"Vidar—listen to me," said Eric. "Please." There was an undercurrent of urgency in his voice, though Vidar did not hear it, "They're talking about deserting...."

"So familiar," said Vidar. "I can even see the tower that was built to resemble Vidi—my home, my hall—where I would be lord today if I'd stayed to help rebuild her." He shook his head slowly in the caress of the wind. "Damn. I wonder who's living there now?"

Eric gripped his shoulder more tightly, shaking him, but to no avail. He was mesmerized by Asgard, it seemed.

"But it does not matter now," Vidar whispered. "It's someone else's hall. Aye," he breathed, "someone else's." He licked his lips, watching the seas churn around Asgard, and reflected as if through a haze on the circuitous path that had brought him back to this place.

It had begun in Woodstock, where he sculpted metal and wood and stone, and sold his work to bankers' wives. There

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was some peace in that, a peace he'd traveled long and hard to find.

Sometimes, while he wrested form from stubborn formlessness, he could forget the bloody work his hands had done. Sometimes, in those moments of creation, he could forget all the destruction. •.

And as far as he'd known, Asgard had forgotten him as well.

Then came the discontent, the numbness. He blamed it on his breakup with Alissa, but knew that it was something else—something that called to him out of the gray past, reminding him that he had not always been a sculptor.

And on the heels of that numbness, the call from Modi—Thor's son. The need that brought Vidar to Utgard, a world Odin had created for his amusement. The threat of Ygg, who was bent on tearing Utgard in two—and who could say that Midgard-Earth was not next on his agenda?

But when Vidar came face to face with Ygg, he discovered that the destroyer was Odin himself. Odin, who had been seen to perish in the last battle with the hrimthursar. And he was mad, scarred horribly in both body and soul, so that he only wanted to crush ail he had made.

Vali, lord of Asgard now and Vidar's half brother, managed to strangle Odin's uprising. But when Vali's armies overran his father's stronghold—a city of thursar priests—Odin was gone. He had passed through a hidden gate from world to world.

They had followed—Vidar and Vali and Hoenir, their uncle, along with the armies of Asaheim and Utgard—but their forces had been divided. The gate had sent them to two different worlds. Vali and Modi and half their troops were missing when Vidar and Hoenir found themselves in this cavern overlooking Asgard.

Which way had Odin gone? Hoenir had found the mask that Odin wore as Ygg—here, in the cave. And if Odin had

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come this way, he must have had some cache of power here, ready to be claimed by him alone.

Asgard looked peaceful from this perch in the mountains. But who within its walls might have long ago sworn allegiance to Odin—the Lord of the Ravens, who built Asgard in the first, slow strokes of time?

Indeed, who lived down there now? The descendants of those Vidar had known and abandoned to live in Midgard. Descendants twenty times removed from his brothers and

their sons. Strange faces, for whom Vidar the Jawbreaker must be a name tinged with cowardice. Vali would have done little to make Asgard see him any other way.

"Vidar?" Again that voice. "Answer me, damn it!" cried Eric, and Vidar smiled grimly as his eyes focused on the boy's face, half in sunlight and half in gray cave-shadow. Ah, yes, Eric. Even in this strange, pleasant haze, Vidar saw how Eric had changed since they'd first met in Skatalund, when Vidar was unaware that Eric was Skatalund's prince. He'd been through war and magic, captivity and wonder, and he'd grown older beneath the crack of those whips. It was no wide-eyed stripling that now commanded an army of men, in place of his father, who'd been wounded in the taking of the priests' fortress—Eric looked like a youth until one looked closely. Then his eyes showed his true age.

What was the expression on his face? He looked angry—but why? No matter. It was nothing.

The harsh scrape of boot-leather against stone made Vidar turn then. He looked up at the face of Hoenir, his uncle. Hoenir seemed to glare at him, too. "That's the trouble with you healers," he said. "You're like drunkards. Indulge too much and you get stupid—like sheep." "What's the matter with him?" asked Eric. "He's spent himself, that's all," said Hoenir, and spat, "He has withdrawn. Inside his own head, he sees clearly. But you won't be able talk to him for a while—unless I try something I haven't done in a long time."

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"What's that?" asked Eric.

"Stand aside," said Hoenir. The boy stood and took a step backward.

Hoenir grabbed Vidar by the front of his woolen tunic and brought him to his feet. Vidar stood reluctantly, but did not show any signs of understanding. His face was as blank as that of a newborn.

"I hope you forgive me for this," said Hoenir. "After all, you're bigger than I am." Then he brought his fist back and drove it into Vidar's jaw. The blow sent Vidar sprawling into the shadowy recesses of the cavern.

For a moment, he lay there, moving his head experimentally. Then he propped himself up on his elbows and peered at the pair that stood over him—

"Hi, guys," he said. "I guess I overdid it, huh?"

"Praise Vali that you've come to," said Eric, coming over to extend his hand. With an effort, he pulled Vidar to his feet. "There is grumbling among the Asgardians, Vidar— They say that they're home—and until Vali comes back to tell them otherwise, they're staying here."

"Aye," added Hoenir. "And neither one of us is in much of a position to command their respect. You're a deserter from way back, and my philandering is legend even in Asgard."

Vidar felt his jaw. He was still more than a little weary after doling out his vitality in so many small doses, to heal those who had broken limbs or suffered worse injuries in their fall through the gate. For it was a vertical passage through which Odin had escaped, and it had been inevitable that there would be some poor landings on the other side. Fortunately, the only fatalities had been the horses who had come up lame, and had to be put to death in the deepest parts of the cavern.

But he had heard the complaints even as he had administered to the injured. The Asgardian troops wanted no part of him, with Vali gone. And with Asgard in sight, it would be difficult to keep them up here much longer.

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But if the Asgardians suddenly poured out of the hills, they might find a ravening maw instead of their beloved city, and its teeth the spears of Odin's followers. How deep might Odin's influence extend, how high? How many in Asgard might have been swayed by the tales of mighty Odin, and inspired by his sudden reappearance among them? How many dissatisfied enough with Vali's reign to seek an alternative?

"Did you find the Aesirman you spoke of?" asked Hoenir. "And explain the situation to him?"

"Yes," said Vidar. "He agreed to do as I asked, although he thought I was jesting, at first, when I told him who Ygg was. He said it would not be easy."

, Hoenir shrugged. "He doesn't know how convincing you can be. Jawbreaker." He paused for a moment, smiling. "I'm just sorry that I can't come with you. But there are a few black marks on my name in Asgard, and this would be an awkward time for an accounting."

Vidar found himself listening for hidden motives in his uncle's words—There was always the game, the war of suspicions. Perhaps the strangest part of becoming reacquainted with his family's penchant for dissembling and intrigue, Vidar mused, was the realization that he himself could be mistrusted.

But in this case, there was more to it than that. Vidar remembered what Odin had boasted of in the fortress of the thursar priests—that Hoenir had begun to lean his way in the struggle. He'd said the same of Magni, Modi's brother. Were Odin's boasts rooted in truth? Or were they deceptions intended to shed doubt on Hoenir's loyalty, and Magni's—to drive a wedge between his enemies?

But in Hoenir's case, this much was certain—he was

Odin's brother. Odin's blood. His pedigree alone made him someone not to be trusted. In the end, Hoenir was aligned with no one but himself.

"Remember," said Vidar. "If I'm not back by morning, something went wrong."

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"I'll remember,"* said Hoenir. "I hope that I can keep the natives quiet that long." Then he turned and merged with the darkness inside the cavern.

"I don't trust him," said Eric, when Hoenir had gone,

"You're learning," said Vidar, "even as I am." He brushed some dust from the black, woven breeches he'd been given back in Skatalund, "But now I've got to find Ullir again."

Eric nodded. "But we don't know which of the chieftains may be in league with Odin, do we? What if Ullir's father has thrown in with him?"

"I think that Ullir would have suspected as much, if it were a possibility."

"And UHir?" asked Eric. "Can you trust Aim?"

Vidar turned toward Asgard and listened to the far-off surf breaking on the rocks. He sighed. "Sometimes," he said, "you've just got to take your chances."

HI

The descent from the mountains through the foothills took the rest of the day. and they found the road to Asgard in the thin light of early evening. Ullir had said little to him, since they were concentrating on keeping themselves hidden from the watchers on Asgard's wall, and not on pleasantries. Even when they reached the narrow stone highway, they had to conceal themselves in the woods alongside it, until there was a gap in the string of travelers and they could join them without suspicion. Then they pulled their hoods up, lest Ullir be recognized.

There were wagons filled with grain and driven by old, straw-haired farmers, who seemed to bear only the slightest resemblance to the Aesir of Vidar's youth. Mostly, they looked like mortals, the descendants of those earthly warriors who had survived Ragnarok and taken to the lands around Asgard. Such as these did not live in the city itself, Ullir told him—that was only for those who still traced their lineage to Odin's sons.

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There were youths on horseback, led by a dark-eyed

master-at-arms. He glanced fiercely at any one of them who diverged from their tight military formation. These, Ullir explained, were the sons of the outlying lords, sent to Asgard to learn the craft of war and the textures of politics. Not all the highborn chose to live in the city, hut they, too, swore their allegiance to Asgard.

There were straight-backed lyos, who traveled alone or in pairs. Gentle traders with satchels full of precious stones and silver or ionely figures who kept their secrets to themselves. The elves were not uncommon in Asaheim, according to Ullir. As in Vidar's time, commerce and diplomacy had tied the Aesir and the lyos together—and besides, Vali's nephew Magni ruled the elfworld.

But those whom Vidar found the most interesting were the slaves—otherworlders whose homes Vali had invaded in his need for conquests to match Odin's. These were the prisoners he had brought back in fetters, or the tribute he had exacted for suffering their world's surrender. This was how he had kept Asgard strong—or so he'd told Vidar in Skatalund. By finding new foes to beat down, by directing Asaheim's energies toward victory after victory after glorious victory.

Slaves were the side effects of those conquests. Most of them belonged to a tall, lean-muscled race, with skin as black as obsidian. They were hairless but for a strange white plume that began at the crowns of their heads and ran down to the napes of their necks. Their hides were sleek in the dying light, their eyes as dark as the rest of them. They wore only ragged loincloths, said Ullir, because that was all Vali would permit them. No dagger could be concealed if there were not a place in which to conceal it—but the black ones shivered as if even the slightest breeze were like ice against their skin.

"Muspellar," Ullir whispered, when there was no one around them to overhear. "They have proven stronger than Vali had thought. The raids and counterraids were still

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going on when Vali decided to direct the majority of our troops into Utgard. The gate that leads into Muspelheim is closely guarded now, or was when I left. In fact, all the gates were guarded, by Vali's own order. Even the gate to Alfheim, because some of our enemies might find a way to Asaheim through the elfworld."

"And those?" asked Vidar, gesturing casually toward the next-largest group of slaves. These were more powerful looking than the muspellar, with short, stocky bodies, long, muscular arms and skin that looked as if it had been boiled in scalding water. Their hair and beards were thick and dark, their eyes bloodred slits above broad cheekbones.

"Gag'ngrim'r," said Ullir. "They would not give up their world to Vali, so he destroyed them. Utterly. Those few who survived he brought back to work in the mines,

like the other slaves- Soon the mountains will be hollow, and Vali will have to find other work for them."

Vidar looked at him. "These are all that are left?" '

"These," said Ullir, "and their brothers enslaved elsewhere in Asaheim. But I am told that on their own world, they were numerous once,"

Vidar bit his lip. Other, smaller clots of slaves went by them, spurred forward by Aesir and Vanir guardsmen that kept their hands on the pommels of their swords to show their intent. One race looked almost human but for the yellow-green scales that covered breasts, backs and shoulders; another resembled the thursar, but they were smaller, and they had four arms instead of two.

The slave march had almost passed them entirely when one of the scaly beings faltered and fell. At once, a Vanirman was upon him, his arm raised to strike. The slave got to one knee, but no more.

"Get up, you scaly bastard," the guard said.

Vidar's hands balled into fists, but he restrained himself. At his side, Ullir whispered, "Easy, my lord. There's too much at stake."

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The guard's arm fell, and his pommel thudded into the slave's skull. He felt again, and this time he did not rise.

Another guard came over. "Is he dead now, Laerad?"

The first guard bent over him. "No, I think not. Let's get a pole over here, and his brothers can bear him the rest of the way to Asgard."

"Aye," said the second guard, and left to fetch a pole.

Vidar felt his molars grinding together, and he relaxed his jaw only through concentration. He breathed deeply once as they walked by the fallen slave, and exhaled savagely when he saw the blood.

The guard glanced at them as they passed, but said nothing. It must have been a commonplace occurrence in Vali's Asgard, as it had been in Odin's.

But Vali's aggression had created a new web of worlds—new gates, new enemies—which Odin could use to his advantage. If he were to give the muspeilar a new direction from which to attack Asgard—for no one was as adept at making gates as Odin—how much more dangerous these enemies might become.

In a way, it was better that Odin had returned to Asgard, where his counterstroke, when it came, would be bold and brazen. He was much more of a threat roaming

from world to world, setting off powder kegs as he'd done in Utgard.

As dusk fell and the sun set the sea ablaze in the east, Asgard's towers gleamed fiery red in a soft, violet sky. The two-hundred-foot-tall iron gates stood open, giving Vidar a glimpse of glory within.

As they had planned it, he and Ullir reached the city after the day had yielded to night, and the moon risen over the sea. In the dark, there would be less chance of their being discovered. If Asgard were Odin's now, on the surface or under it, their lives depended on their anonymity.

When they came near the gates and the armed sentinels, both Ullir and Vidar pulled their hoods lower over their faces. There was no one that could identify Vidar—only

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their long-ago forebears knew him. Yet he bore a family resemblance to Vali, and anyone who had a good look at his face might put two and two together.

They fell into line with others who had been on the road, for the gates were not open so wide that more than two could walk abreast through them. As they passed the sentinel, he leaned toward them to get a better look at their faces. But Vidar thought that they were home free until the watchman grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Wait—you two," he said.

Vidar turned to look at him. "Aye?"

The sentinel—a red-bearded Vanirman—peered at Vidar's shadowed countenance. "You're an Aesirman," he said finally.

"Yes, my lord."

"Then don't go around all bundled up like an elf. The way you wear your hood, I thought you were one of them—although I should've known better when I saw the size of you. Where are you from?"

"The north," said Vidar, "beyond the mountains. My father owns a farm back there"

"What are you doing in Asgard, lad?" The watchman was just being friendly now—or so it seemed.

"Visiting a kinsman," said Vidar.

"Well," said the Vanirman, "be careful to stay away from the elf-gate while you're here."

"Why's that?" Vidar asked.

"There's been some kind of rebellion in Alfheim. It seems that they've overthrown Magni. And now this murder."

"What murder?"

"Oh, that's right," said the watchman. "I forgot you just got here." He shook his head. "One of the sentinels by the elf-gate, murdered just last night. We had only a few swords there—though we should have had more. But who expected that they'd be attacked from Asaheim's side of the gate? Taken by surprise, they were. All of them were

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hurt pretty badly. One died. Just a lad, too. I knew his father—one of those that went off with Vali. They'll be lighting his pyre any moment now, with the moon up, poor boy."

"Why would anyone in Asaheim attack them?" asked Vidar.

"To get to Alfheim, of course," said the sentinel. "Aye," said Vidar slowly, playing the country bumpkin. "I've got some ideas, too," said the Vanirman. "Maybe a pack of elves, sympathetic to the rebellion—or sent here as spies before it broke out, to see if we would help Magni in a pinch. Of course," he said, his voice lowering to a conspiratorial whisper, "we've not got much to help with right now. Vali took just about everybody that could bear a sword. Outside of the sentinels, you understand." "Aye," said Vidar, his mind racing. "So we're sifting through the elves at the gate to the city," said the watchman, "instead of guarding against the muspellar and some of those demons." "Maybe Magni will put the rebellion down." "I doubt it," said the watchman. "They say he's dead." "Pity," said Vidar. "Then Odin preserve us." "Aye," said the watchman, if a bit uncomfortably. "But I've never heard anyone use the old king's name so, lad. In Asgard, it's Vali that preserves us. If you start calling on Odin, people will know that you're from the hinterlands, and they'll try to get the best of you."

"Aye, my lord," said Vidar. "Thank you." And he moved to go.

"Hey," said the redbear, "doesn't your friend talk?" "He's my brother," said Vidar. "He was kicked in the head by a horse when he was little and he hasn't been right since."

The Vanirman nodded in sympathy. "That must be why he wasn't called to war." Then the watchman's brow furrowed and he sized Vidar up warily. "And why weren't you called, tad? You look right enough to me."

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Another second and the sentinel might have attracted some attention—but Vidar reached deep into the Vanirman's mind and made one small adjustment. It was a talent he'd inherited from Odin, though he had avoided using it on Earth.

"Oh," said the guardsman. "Well, be careful, like I told you."

"We'll be quite careful, thank you," said Vidar. Taking Ullir's arm, he led him past the gates.

He sifted through what the redbear had said. Rebellions didn't just spring up—but it might seem that way if Odin was behind it, pulling the strings. Back in Utgard, Odin had told him that Magni was his ally—but the Lord of the Ravens had lied to him before— Had Odin lit a fire of war under Alfheim as he had under Utgard?

At any rate, he'd not made his move yet in Asgard. If he was here, he'd gone underground—which meant that they were not too late to stop him.

Vidar turned toward Ullir to share his thoughts with him—but he found unexpected anguish in the Aesirman's eyes. All the color had drained from Ullir's face. "Vidar," he said from beneath his hood. "I have a son who guards the gates." A chill climbed the rungs of Vidar's spine.

"There are many gates," said Vidar, "and many youths guarding them, Ullir."

"But that watchman—he knows me, Vidar. And he said that the dead youth's father had gone with Vali." Ullir grimaced suddenly. "Come," he said. "I want to see the pyre."

They crossed the space between the first set of walls and the second, and passed through the inner gates without challenge. It was full night now, a black dome of sky full of stars, and the flames had already begun to leap from a wooden pyre in the center of the market square. Ullir made a way for them through the crowd of onlookers, his eyes never leaving the slim figure on the funeral platform. The blaze was reflected in his pale blue eyes.

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"Ullir..." said Vidar as they drew nearer to the platform.

"I can't tell," he said, suppressed agony in his voice. They pushed even closer.

But the flames had climbed too high. The corpse was surrounded by them, consumed by them. Beneath Ullir's hood, Vidar saw the face of horror.

"By Vati, I cannot see ..." said Ullir. Then he whirled

suddenly and gripped someone in the crowd.

A woman's face turned toward him, awash with the nickering light from the pyre.

"Tell me," said Ullir. "Who is it? Who is he?"

The woman just stared at him for a moment. Then, as understanding crept into her face, she said, "Ingvi. Ha name was Ingvi," ^

Ullir's eyes closed and he breathed one deep breath, a faint smile on his lips. Then he opened his eyes and thanked the woman. "And pardon me," he said. "I thought that it was someone I knew once."

The woman nodded and moved away.

"It's not your son?" asked Vidar.

"Not my son," echoed Ullir.

Vidar wondered what gods there were for an Aesirman to thank. None. There was only Vali, their king. Then he noticed that the woman Ullir had spoken to had turned to look at him again.

"Let's go," said Vidar. "I think you've been recognized."

Ullir pulled his hood down farther over his face. "This way," he said, indicating a way out of the marketplace. They freed themselves from the press of the crowd and found a cobblestone road between two great towers. The edifices that these towers replaced had been used long and long ago to scan the plain that stretched east from the city. The road took them over a small bridge, past the narrow rush of the river Thund, where the warriors in Valhalla's practice yards used to quench their thirst. It was not

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uncommon, Vidar remembered, for one of them to lean over too far and find himself downstream suddenly, outside the two-hundred-foot-high walls.

They wound their way deeper into the city, beneath fierce, bright stars and bridges that leaped from tower to tower. As they walked, the stones beneath their feet began to glitter in the moonlight, for there was indeed gold in Asgard's streets—small chunks of ore that had been unearthed with the other stones and set just as they were.

Vidar found that Asgard was returning to him in a rush, too quickly for his senses to put up any defense. He saw stalwart Breidablik, Baldur's hall, and it threw back the light from its pillars of ruddy gold, and from its roof of beaten silver. It was built on a broad lawn, between rows of yew trees. Vidar could almost see Baldur standing at the threshold, pondering a gnat's misfortune—for all things

were of concern to him.

They passed Breidablik, and the streets were all but empty. Only a few dark shapes had business that could not wait until morning. Perhaps some still rushed to see Ingvi on his pyre—or his ashes, at least.

But for Vidar, Asgard was choked with ghosts—his brothers, Hermod and Tyr, Thor and Heimdall, Bragi the poet and Baldur. Vidar could hear their laughter, see their faces. And yes, even Vali and Hod seemed to walk beside him, for they had often walked together before Hod slew Baldur and Vali set out to hunt him across the nine worlds.

The memories of his youth crowded the night-dark streets—Frigga, the only mother he'd ever known, for his own had died at childbirth. Freya, the beautiful, the dangerous, and her brother Frey. Their father, Niord, for whom Odin had built a hall in Asgard, a symbol of the alliance between the Aesir and the Vanir.

Sif, the wife of Thor, with her tumble of hair that was like pale, spun gold. Idunna, the gentle, who tended Asgard's apple orchards by day and gladdened Bragi's heart by night. Sad Nanna, who had watched her husband

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Baldur's funeral ship vanish on the seas that spread from Asgard to the horizon.

Vidar pulled his cloak about himself more tightly, for now the stars were blotted out by Valaskjaiff—the high tower from which Odin surveyed Idavolir and the mountains and the waters about them, the dark place to which he retreated when the court at Gladsheim mired him too deep in government. Vidar recalled that it was the one place where Odin would brook no disturbance, where even his sons dared not enter, nor Frigga. It was the place where he kept his ravens, Hugin and Munin, the birds he took into battle to frighten his enemies. Even now, on the far side of time's span, Vidar shuddered at the prospect of Valaskjaiff.

Ullir led him deeper into the city, where the quiet was a thing nearly tangible. The slap of their footfalls on the stones and the occasional cries of swift swallows were the only sounds—though the squares of light in windows high above the streets told them that Asgard made other noises within the thick walls of its dwellings.

But wait—there was another sound, after all. Vidar heard its murmur, its whisper, and recognized it finally—the waterfalls that came down out of the mountains to create cool, frothy pools at Asgard's feet. A few of the falls were so close to the city that they poured down inside the walls, and oak trees grew thick about such places.

Here, memory flinched—for it was by such a cataract that Baldur had been found with Hod's arrow in his breast.

AH, Baldur, Vidar sighed in his mind. If Baldur had survived, who knew what the nine worlds would have been like?

Then Ullir said, "Here, my lord. My father's hall."

Vidar knew it. Frey and Freya had lived here once—or rather, had lived in a hall that stood on this spot. Yet the noble Sessrumnir that Vali had erected from debris and ashes was an exact duplicate, down to the oakwood gates

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and the white stone of its walls. It shone in the moonlit eventide with a soft, milky light.

They trod the path of flagstones that led them over the lawn to the white stone steps. Vidar looked about to see if there were any witnesses, but he saw no one. They ascended the steps and Ullir knocked softly on the door. A moment later, one of the gates creaked open. A head appeared, that of a wizened old man.

"It is late," said the man, squinting at them. "What help can we be to you, travelers? If you're seeking the inn near the marketplace, you've come much too far."

The Ullir flung back his hood, revealing his yellow-bearded visage. The old man's eyes widened, as if it were an otherworlder come to cut his heart out.

"My lord," he breathed.

"Let us in, Folvir, and quickly," said Ullir. "I must see my father."

The old man hesitated for but a moment. Then he shumed to one side and opened the door wider. Ullir slipped in, with Vidar right behind him. They stood in the darkened vestibule, whispering like thieves.

"Are there guests here tonight?" asked Ullir.

"N-No, my lord," said Folvir, stammering.

Ullir took off his cloak and handed it to the old man. Vidar did likewise, but quickly turned away, so that Folvir would not get a clear look at his face.

"This way," said Ullir, crossing the room to a sturdy oak stairway. Vidar went with him.

"But, my lord," said Folvir, in great discomfort, it seemed, "may I tell your father how you've come to ... ? If you will wait but a minute ..."

Ullir said nothing, but continued up the stairs to the next story, where a broad hall opened up. Here, the floors

and the walls alike were constructed of that rare white stone, though covered with rugs and tapestries. On the southern wall, large windows showed the stars, and braziers flamed and smoked between them. Doors were set

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into arches in the wall opposite, and one of them stood open now.

Ullir crossed the hallway and stood at the threshold of the open archway. Vidar stood behind him, in the shadows.

Those inside the room sat around a long, heavy wooden table. Behind them, a firepit blazed, and above it a spiyed, half-carved boar- At the far end of the table, nearest the firepit, sat a broad-shouldered man whose hair, like Ullir's, was yellow-but it was streaked with white at the temples and at the corners of his beard.

There were three others alongside him-a woman with light brown hair bound in a braid, a young boy with hair the same color and an older woman whose dark red hair was gathered in a knot.

The older woman was the first to look up and see them standing there in the doorway. She gasped and dropped the knife she'd been using to cut meat for the boy. The rest of them turned as one. The younger woman screamed, while the man at the head of the table rose suddenly, his chair clattering on the floor as it toppled.

The boy Just stared wide-eyed for a moment. Then he pushed away from the table and ran into Ullir's arms. The blondbeard picked him up, kissed his face and put him down again gently. Then the younger woman rose and came to him. He embraced her wordlessly, and she wept into the hollow of his shoulder.

"Hush, Enda," he said finally. "It's no ghost you see before you." He looked down the length of the table at the older man. "I must speak with you, father. And quickly, for we have not much time."

His father's brows met over the bridge of his nose. "Where is the rest of the army-the army that rode with Vali to Utgard?" There was both anger and uncertainty in his voice.

Ullir put the younger woman from him, though gently. "Take the boy and my mother, Enda. We must talk."

"I would stay," said the younger woman.

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He looked into her eyes. "Please," he said. "There is not much time." The woman-Ullir's wife, it seemed-low-

ered her eyes, took the boy's hand and left the room. The older woman followed, stopping first to press Ullir's hand, and then to glance suspiciously at Vidar. She closed the arch-doors behind her.

"My son," said Ullir's father, "I do not understand."

"I'll answer your questions, father," said Ullir, putting a hand on Vidar's shoulder. "But first I want you to meet someone, so perhaps you will believe some of the other things I have to tell you."

Vidar stepped out from behind Ullir. "Lord Heidrek of Sessrumnir, heir to the Odinsons Heimdall and Bragi," said the blondbeard, "meet the lord Vidar, son of Odin."

Heidrek's face twisted in disbelief—then with some other emotion. Vidar read it as contempt.

"Vidar?" the older man repeated. "Odin's son?" His eyes narrowed as he surveyed the figure at Ullir's side. "Aye," he said finally. "It would seem so."

"May we sit down?" Vidar asked.

Heidrek nodded, fixing Vidar with his stare. He reached back and righted his own chair, then joined them as they sat.

"The army?" Heidrek asked.

"Closer than you might think," said Ullir. "At least, half of it. You see, father, Vali was victorious in Utgard. But Ygg—the one we thought was Hod—escaped during the battle through a gate only he knew of. Vali, Modi, Hoenir—who had turned up to help—and Vidar here gathered their forces, the Utgardians as well as our own people, and led them through the gate in pursuit. It was believed that wherever Ygg had fled, there might be another army there waiting for him."

Heidrek nodded, folding his arms. "Of course," he said.

"But when we emerged from that gate, my lord, we found ourselves in the hills that overlook Asgard."

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The older man shook his head, eyes wide. "Then why all the secrecy? Come down out of the hills."

Ullir shook his head. "We cannot. When we arrived in Asaheim, we found that we had gone through a split gate." He leaned forward. "I never knew that such a thing existed either, my lord—but it's true. Vali and Modi and half our forces are somewhere else—where, I cannot say. But the other half lies concealed now in the hills awaiting our return...."

Ullir would have gone on, but Heidrek held up his hand.

His brow knotted and he rubbed one eye with the knuckle of his forefinger. "All right," he said. "I understand now why the Utgardians, at least, might wish to remain hidden. Without Vali to vouch for them, who knows what kind of welcome they would receive? After all, there are giants and elves that dwell there—I understand all this. But why should those who were born in Asaheim remain hidden from their families and their friends?"

"There's a good reason," said Vidar. "Their families and friends may not have their well-being at heart right now. We believe that Ygg might have a following here."

Heidrek's temples worked furiously, and he seemed not to know whether to laugh or take offense. "Here?" he said. "In Asgard? Never!"

"So you may say," Vidar continued. "But the fact remains that this is the place to which Ygg fled."

Heidrek glared. "Unless it was that other place—where you say Vali was transported."

Vidar nodded. "If it was the other place, then that's Vali's problem now. But we can't assume that. Lord Heidrek. We must act on the possibility that Ygg escaped to Asgard—and that he had a motive for coming here."

"But who in Asgard would throw in with Hod?" asked Heidrek. "Who would be mad enough to risk Vali's wrath?"

Vidar looked at Ullir, and then again at Heidrek. "Ygg

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is not Hod," he said. "We discovered that back in Utgard. In fact, if Vali were here, he would tell you so himself."

Heidrek laughed suddenly. "A moment ago," he said, "I thought I knew which way the seawinds blew. Now I find myself caught in a maelstrom. Before I get any dizzier, tell me who Ygg is, if he's not Hod."

"Odin," said Vidar. "My father."

The color drained from Heidrek's face. He stared at Vidar, then Ullir, and then turned to Vidar again—seeking a smirk, perhaps, or a wink that would give away the jest. But he searched in vain.

Heidrek cleared his throat. "I want to believe you. In truth, I do. But I cannot. It's not possible."

"He survived Loki's flames by opening a gate to Niflheim," said Vidar. "All this time, he's hidden there, gathering his strength." He paused. "But we have no proof to offer you—only your son's word—and mine."

Heidrek peered at Vidar strangely. "My son." he said, "has never lied to me. I trust that he is not lying now."

Vidar said nothing.

The old man looked at Ullir. "If what you say is so—and I still find it difficult to believe—then I see why you have come home like a thief, by night." He took a deep breath. "What is your plan?" he asked. The torchlight played grotesquely on the deeper wrinkles in his face.

"First, we wanted to know if Odin had been detected here," said Ullir. "It seems that he has not. Second, we wanted to arrange a meeting with the council of chiefs. Tonight, if possible. One of them may have seen or heard something suspicious—something which may lead us to Odin."

"And what about the chiefs themselves?" asked Vidar. "Can we be sure that Odin has not already laid claim to one of them?"

"You can be sure," said Heidrek, not bothering to disguise the hostility in his voice, not for his son's sake nor for that of his own safety before a full-blooded Aesirman. "I

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have known them all their lives," he added. "We have had our differences—but it ends there. Not one of them would betray Asgard or Vali—not if their youngest child's life depended on it. Those who defend Asgard now are not traitors, my lord."

Vidar read between the lines, supplying the rest of the sentence in his own mind: "... as you were."

Heidrek frowned and shook his head slowly. "As for a meeting tonight—it can't be done. Gagni and Njal are off to visit kin in the mountains, and neither will be back until tomorrow. If you want me to call a council, you must wait until then."

"We cannot," said Ullir. "We left word with Hoenir that we would return by daybreak."

Heidrek wiped at the air with the back of his hand. "I'll send a messenger, then, to tell him you're staying here this night. Tell me where to find your army, and I'll pick someone I can trust."

Vidar shook his head. "We must return. Otherwise, we might have a mutiny on our hands. Hoenir can only hold the reins so long by himself."

"Then you'll have to return without speaking to the council," said Heidrek. "But don't expect me to speak for you. They may believe that Odin is alive—and bent on Asgard's destruction—if they hear it from the mouth of

his own son. And then, they may not. But they will not believe me. They'll think that I've had too much to drink, or become senile. Or both."

Vidar scowled. He didn't like the idea of leaving Hoenir to fend for himself—but Heidrek was right. There was little choice in the matter. Finally, he nodded. "I'll give you a message such that Hoenir will know it came from us. But the messenger must be trustworthy."

"Well and good," said Heidrek, rising. "And I hope that you have as much luck convincing the other lords of your tale as you have had with me." He stared frankly at Vidar. "Courtesy dictates that I offer you the hospitality of my

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hall. But do not think I offer it eagerly, Vidar Jaw-breaker." Then he strode past them, out into the hall.

"Father ..." said Ullir, as Heidrek went by. He turned to Vidar, as if to apologize.

"That's all right," said Vidar, smiling. "I didn't expect to win any popularity contests here."

IV

Perhaps you have had your fill of skalds, my lord. But be careful whom you thrust from your hall and the warmth of your fire—without, I might add, so much as a goblet of mead or a chicken leg to eat. For the Aesir have been known to visit the halls of men in the guise of mortals. Yes, my lord, the Aesir—for it is they who wrote the laws of hospitality, in order that wayfarers should not go cold and hungry.

In fact, there is a song of Odin and his brothers, Hoenir and Lodur, who came to Midgard one day to see how well men treated their guests. After wending their way for hours through well-kept fields and green pastures, they came to a rather large farmhouse. It was plain that whoever lived here was a man who had grown rich on Odin's bounty.

The All-father himself knocked on the door, and the lord of the house answered it. He was a tall man, with a flaming red beard. "Who are you?" he asked.

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"Only three wanderers who've grown tired and hungry on the road," said Odin. "We thought perhaps that you could spare some bread and mead—if that's not too much trouble."

The farmer looked none too eager to invite the travelers into his house, but he did so anyway. They sat

down around his hearth, where the farmer's wife brought them bread for their hunger and mead for their thirst. But the bread was as hard as a hrimthursar's skull and the mead as thin as an idle man's sweat.

"Is there not a more edible loaf of bread around?" asked Hoenir. "I'm not ready yet to lose my teeth."

"And perhaps you can find some stronger mead than this," suggested Lodur. "It tastes like water that's been stagnant too long."

"You've got gall for men who do nothing but mooch from honest men's cupboards," said the farmer. "That's the best I can do for the likes of you."

"What about Odin's law?" asked Odin himself. "That guests should be seated higher than their host and offered the choicest fare in his larder?"

"Fie on Odin," said the farmer. "He doesn't nave lazy beggars at his door every other day."

"Fie, is it?" laughed Odin, and with his bare hands, he extracted a burning log from the hearth. "No house will I leave standing where guests are not welcome." And he used the log to set the turf room ablaze. The lord of the place made no move to stop him, for when he saw him wield the naming piece of wood without hurting his hands, he Jmew his guests were of the Aesir. He barely had time to roust his wife and children before the house burnt down.

The three brothers set forth again, in an ill humor this time, for neither their hunger nor their thirst had abated. If anything, they'd grown worse. In time, however, they came to another farmhouse, surrounded by even richer lands than the first.

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Odin knocked, and the owner opened the door. He was a broad man, with an iron-gray beard. "Who knocks?" he asked.

"Only three travelers who've grown weary on the road," said Odin. "We hoped that we might find a kind host here, who would offer us bread for our bellies and mead for our throats—since we have been traveling long, and the road has not been kind to us."

The farmer was not overjoyed to see them, but he asked them in anyway. They sat around his hearth and his daughter saw that they had bread and mead, as they'd asked.

But the bread was moldly, and the mead sour.

"Perhaps you can spare some younger bread," said Hoenir. "This loaf may be older than Midgard itself—

and greener."

"And while you're about it," said Lodur, "there might be some sweeter mead. This stuff is as sour as an old maid's disposition."

"Who are you to refuse what I give you?" stormed the farmer. "I don't see you offering to work for your board,"

"What about the law of hospitality?" asked Odin.
"The Aesir have told us to treat our guests as if they were our own grandfathers."

"Easy for the damned Aesir to make laws," said the lord of the house. "They don't have to abide by them."

"Damned Aesir, is it?" laughed Odin, taking the centerpole of the house in his fists. "No home will I leave standing where travelers may not find some kindness." And with that, he heaved the pole right out of the ground, so that the roof collapsed all about them. The farmer knew then who his guests were, but it was too late. He didn't even have time to save his family from being crushed—only himself, and then by a whisker.

Again, the Aesir-in-mortal-guise took to the road. This time, it was not long at all before they came to a dwell-

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ing. But it was not much of a house—in fact, it was only a shack, with some hard, half-tilled earth close by.

Nonetheless, Odin knocked on the door. A man answered, but he was so painfully thin that it hurt Just to look at him. "Who is it?" he asked, peering at the travelers.

"Only men, like yourself, who've not eaten nor slaked their thirsts all day," said Odin. "Can you spare some bread and some mead?"

"Truth be told, I cannot," said the man. "But I'll share with you what I planned to have for my own poor meal. The land is not generous here, and I've not been well of late—but come in. You're welcome to all I have."

The three sat around a cold, empty fireplace, and the farmer's wife—as thin as he was—brought them bread and mead.

It was not plentiful, but it was fresh and good. The farmer and his wife sat and watched while their guests ate, and did not partake themselves, though they looked as if they would have liked to—When Odin and his brothers had broken their fast and quenched their thirsts, they thanked their hosts.

"But we are not what we seem," said Odin. "We are Aesir, disguised so that we may test the generosity of

mortal men. And while your neighbors mistreated us and felt our wrath, you were openhanded with all you had. For that, you shall receive my blessing. This house will stand forever—so says Odin."

And that is the reward for those who know how to treat travelers, my lord. What's that? No, the couple did not fare well under Odin's blessing. A flood took them the very next spring.

But their house still stands, my lord, which is more than can be said for those of their neighbors.

Sin Skolding
Rogaland, A.D. 339

v

When Vidar first saw the redbear enter Heidrek's meeting room, a shock of recognition sent shivers up his spine. He had never met the chieftain called Njal before—but he had seen the bearing and the visage in the forms of his sons.

They had been charged by Vali to keep him imprisoned in Skatalund, but Vidar had had other ideas. Before he left, three of them had been slain—one by his own hand, and one by Eric's. What's more, he had disgraced the eldest of the nine brothers—disabled him and forced him to swear he'd not lift a sword again against Vidar—so that he had watched helplessly while his kinsmen were cut down.

The Vanirman leaned forward now over the oakwood table, his murky blue eyes squinting on either side of his broad, fiat nose. Was it the glare of the hearthfire or suspicion that made him squint so? Perhaps more of the latter than the former, Vidar mused.

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There were eight of them that sat around Heidrek's longtable, warming by the widest hearth in Asgard. Vidar, Heidrek and Ullir sat with their backs to the flames, while the other five chieftains faced them.

Njal sat in the center. By custom, this meant that he was the most powerful of the chiefs. On his right hand, the place of next highest honor, sat Gagni—an Aesirman, by the look of him, but dark-haired. Vidar marked his heritage. Despite the hair that shone like polished wood in the firelight, he bore enough of a resemblance to Tyr to show that he had more of Odin's blood than Earth's.

The other three seemed to have traces of Heimdall and Hermod and Bragi in their features, but their human forebears had had the greater influence in their making. None looked like Vali—for he had never sired an heir, not

to Vidar's knowledge.

The wind blew fiercely at the windows. It had grown steadily colder all day, and though it was early spring, winter still asserted its rule by night-

"So," said Njal. Vidar was close enough to see the fine webbing in the skin around his eyes. "Why have you come back, Lord Vidar--to claim the crown of Asgard in Valfs absence?" He was blunt, anyway.

Vidar shook his head. "That's not why Heidrek called you here, if that's what you're thinking." Five sets of eyes followed every movement of his face, no doubt fascinated by this piece of living history which had suddenly appeared on their doorstep.

"Then what is it you do want?" asked Gagni. He appeared to be the youngest of the chiefs, and his speech was curt and clipped.

"I need your help," said Vidar, "to seek out an enemy in your midst."

"In Asgard?"

"Aye," said Vidar. Then he described to the council, as Ullir had to Heidrek the night before, the circumstances which had brought them to this pass.

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"And since when are you Vali's friend, my lord?" asked Njal, "I don't remember you riding out from Asgard at his side." He paused for a moment. "You say that Vali and Modi were transported elsewhere when they went through the gate. Convenient, is it not? Our liege lord's absence is explained as neatly as you please, and his new ally turns up to speak on his behalf. Perhaps to assume the throne Tor a short time--in Vali's absence, of course, for the lord Vidar is of Odin's blood, too. Only until Vali returns--no longer. If he returns."

"We joined forces in Utgard," said Vidar. "And I have no interest in his throne." The last was a lie, of course--for Vidar had vowed to B'rannit the elfqueen that he would no longer let Vali have his way with Asgard. Now, as then, it seemed that Vali's overthrow was the only way to put an end to the wars he had started. And if it meant that Vidar must assume the throne to insure peace thereafter, then he would do that, too.

Njal's eyes narrowed to slits. "Aye," he said. "So you say. But I sent nine sons with Vali. Is there not one of them among you, up in the hills, to vouch for the truth of what you tell us?"

"None of your sons came through the gate to Asaheim," said Ullir. "In fact, not a single Vanirman came through on this side. But you know me, don't you, Njal? Gagni?"

Torvi? Have you ever known me to deceive you?"

"Nine sons," said Njal. "All of them gone with Vali. Convenient and more convenient."

"Ullir does not lie," said Heidrek then, an edge of rough anger on his voice. "Remember whose board you sit at, Njal."

Njal met Heidrek's glare. "Forgive me," he said. **I meant no insult to your house. Lord Heidrek. But we are all familiar with our lord Vali's ability to shape a man's mind, are we not? It's a talent all of Odin's sons had. Perhaps Ullir's mind has been shaped so."

"It has not," said Ullir.

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"But how would you know if it had?" asked Gagni, looking not at Ullir, but at Vidar. "Indeed, how would you know?"

Vidar saw that even Heidrek's face was plagued by doubt now. At this rate, he'd accomplish nothing. Frustration and anger began to rise in his throat.

"Aye," said Vidar. "I could have done that. I have the power. But I could just as easily have bent all your minds to my will, if that had been my aim. Shall I show you how easily?" He paused, but his speech was attended by silence. "Good. Now, perhaps, you'll hear me out."

Vidar cleared his throat. He seemed to have gotten their attention. Now for the hard part.

"We have reason to believe," he said, "that Ygg may be in Asgard. It can't be coincidence that he appeared here. This must have been his goal all along—to defeat Vali in Utgard, then return to Asaheim to claim his prize. And to do that, he must have a following here in the city."

"Here? In Asgard?" asked one of the chieftains, half-smiling. "It's incredible."

"Aye," said Gagni. "Who would follow Hod? His name has been poison here since before Asgard fell to the hrimthursar."

"But Ygg is not Hod," said Vidar. "The one who fought Vali in Utgard, and escaped—the one whose mask we found in the hills above Asgard—is not Hod. He's Odin—the one who ruled here before even I was born."

In the blank, empty space that followed, Vidar could hear kindling snapping in the hearth. Then Njal began to laugh, a harsh, dry laugh that went on for what seemed like a long time. A thought surfaced in Vidar's mind—

could it be that Njal himself was in league with Odin?

"Have a care," said Vidar, hoping that he sounded dire enough. He fixed his gaze on Njal. "Don't forget who sits across this table, my lord. Not some lackey, but Odin's son, who slew hrimthursar before your grandfather's grandfather was even weaned. I see scrawny creatures

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walking in chains here, and you call yourselves conquerors—but I remember the days when Asgard was Asgard. I'm not used to laughter when I warn Asgard's stewards of danger in their own city." He paused for effect. "Or do you yourself have a stake in Odin's success, Njal?"

The redbear rose stiffly from his seat, no longer laughing. His face was fiery red above the burnished copper of his beard. And his hand had come to rest on the hilt of his sword.

"I do not fear you," he growled. "Once, you may have been a prince here. But you are a prince in Asgard no longer. You chose to turn your back on her when she needed you most—to flee and hide in lowly Midgard. Treachery, my lord—it's your creed, not mine. And now," he said, his voice growing low and ugly, "I warn you—remember to whom you speak. Do not accuse me of betraying VaH. Tricks won't win you into Asgard, nor will this joke you tell—that Hod is not Hod, but Odin. Odin is dead, rest his name. Do not sully it, or you'll have all the Vanirmen in Asgard to answer to."

"You knew Odin, then?" asked Vidar. "If he walked the streets of Asgard, you'd know him in a crowd?" A couple of the other lords chuckled.

"No, but..." Njal sputtered, his hands trembling with anger. His face was the color of blood. "I'll teach you to—"

"I knew him," said Vidar, calmly. "And I know that he is alive."

Vidar tensed as Njal's sword slithered out of its sheath. He'd brought no blade to Asgard—for on whom would he use it?

"No!" cried Gagni, gripping the redbear's wrist. The sword stopped, halfway out. "Put your blade away," said the dark-haired chieftain.

"Not until I've had his heart out on a spit," said Njal.

"Be reasonable, Njal," said Gagni. "He's full-blooded Aesir. He'll tear you apart if you give him half a chance."

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"But he blasphemes," said Njal, never taking his eyes off Vidar.

"No," said Gagni. "I believe him."

Njal's brows knit as he looked at Gagni. "You what?"

"I believe him," said Gagni. "I did not become a chief by not knowing the truth when I hear it. If the lord Vidar had wanted us to smell danger where there was none, he could have thought of a much simpler lie. Now, sit down, Njal—"

The Vanirman looked to the other chieftains, but they all seemed to agree with Gagni. Slowly, he shoved his blade back down into its sheath. The fire drained from his countenance, and he sat.

"We're letting the wolves into the sheep pasture," rasped Njal. "But I shall listen to them pant and growl, along with the rest of you."

Vidar relaxed a bit—

"What do you want of us, then, if this is all true?" asked the one called Torvi, a tall, rangy man with a walrus mustache the color of iron.

"To scour the city," said Vidar. "Use your spies—you all must have them. Folvir, for instance—I don't know whose he is, Heidrek, but he's a spy if I've ever seen one."

"Aye," said Heidrek, nodding, "but still a good servant."

"Then use people like Folvir to search out the nooks and crannies. If Odin has a following of any size, he won't be impossible to find. And even if his allies are few, there's still a chance you'll stumble over him. Then, should all that fail, I'd conduct a search of the city—house by house."

The lords all moved uncomfortably in their chairs.

"He must be found," said Vidar. "Your privacy is nothing compared to what will happen if he's not discovered in time."

"What if he's taken to the countryside?" asked Gagni.

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"Then it will be harder to flush him out," said Vidar. "It will mean sending search parties abroad...."

"Wait," said Torvi, stroking his chin. "I wonder if..." His voice trailed off. A log snapped in the hearth.

"What is it, Torvi?" asked Heidrek.

The chieftain shrugged. "Perhaps nothing. But those of my men that watched the gate to Alfheim—where the murder took place—say that the lyos who surprised them there were uncommonly powerful. For elves, that is."

"Aye," said Njal. "They were surprised. When you don't expect him, any enemy seems uncommonly powerful."

"No," said Torvi. "I think not, Njal. I know these men well—a couple of them are my sister's sons. They said that the elves were quite large, too—and I thought this strange when I heard it. Now, I wonder ..."

"Odin," said Ullir, turning to Vidar, "His eyes were alight. "It could have been him, Vidar—with some of the thursar priests. If Odin could escape through the split gate, so could they,"

Vidar flushed.

"Could be," he said. Of course. Why hadn't he thought of it sooner? Odin could have used Asaheim as nothing more than a bridge—by which to reach Alfheim.

But that did not mean that Asgard was safe. Not by a long shot. The All-father might have paused here long enough to light a fuse.

"Yes," said Vidar finally. "It makes sense."

"What are you saying?" asked Gagni. "That Odin passed through Asaheim and is gone again?"

"That would explain the elves' sudden distaste for Magni," said Heidrek. "Odin could have planted his seeds of dissent there in preparation for his arrival."

"There's no way to know for sure," said Vidar slowly. "He may have stayed here—or he may have gone on to Alfheim. We can't ignore either possibility."

"But why," asked Gagni, "would he go past us to

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Alfheim, where the rebels have already woo, and where the lyos care nothing for the All-father of old? Here, his name might be a powerful force—there are those who might listen if Odin appeared in our midst."

Gagni was no fool. It was a good point.

"Unless," said Torvi, "there were a powerful prize still to be gotten in Alfheim."

"Such as?" asked one of the other chieftains.

"Frey's sword," said Heidrek, picking up on Torvi's thought.

"Indeed," said Njal, who'd been silent until now. "Our long-dead monarch seeking a long-lost sword. Phantoms chasing phantoms."

"Has the sword turned up?" asked Vidar. He'd thought Frey's blade lost at Ragnarok—but he'd also been away a long time.

"No," said Torvi, shaking his head. "But it's been said that the lyos preserved it somehow. Brought it back to Alfheim, against some future need." His brow wrinkled. "Vali has searched for it—even as recently as my grandfather's time, so there must be some truth to the rumor."

"And the Lord of the Ravens might succeed where even Vali has failed." It was Gagni speaking again. He turned toward Vidar. "He would have ways of finding the sword—would he not?"

"Aye," said Vidar. "He might. No one knows the extent of his abilities."

Njal laughed. "Good. Then take your army through the gate," he said. "Take it to Alfheim. Begone after your-Odin."

"And we," said Gagni, looking meaningfully at Njal, "will do our part here. I give you my word. By tomorrow night, the city will have been searched,"

"We'll march as soon as we can, then," said Vidar. "But I have a favor to ask of you."

"Ask," said Heidrek.

"We have wounded among us—Asalanders as well as

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human, dark elves and thursar. All fought under Vali's banner in Utgard, and all followed him through that treacherous gate—but not all dropped through the gate safely."

"Thursar?" whispered one of the chieftains.

"Aye, thursar," said Vidar. "But city-dwellers like you, that serve a human lord in Utgard. And Vali did nofturn them down when they pledged him their swords."

"Is there no limit to this effrontery?" asked Njal, looking to his peers. "Now he asks us to keep monsters under our own roofs."

None of the other chiefs said a word. Then Heidrek spoke.

"The Asalanders we'll take in, of course. And the humans. The others I'll see to—though not here, in the city. I have lands on the other side of the mountains, where the wounded can heal and await your return."

"Thank you," said Vidar.

"Don't," said Heidrek. "I do not wish for your gratitude. It is for Vali that I do this."

"If he were here," said Vidar, "I'm sure that he'd be touched, Lord Heidrek." Then he rose from his chair and looked from face to face, "Until we meet again, gentlemen."

"Aye," said Njal, his eyes slitted like a cat's. "Until we meet again, my lord."

VI

The trek back seemed much longer than the trek out, but it may have seemed so because he gave Asgard up so reluctantly. Perhaps it was only that it took longer to climb the hills than to descend from them.

Vidar reached the cavern, with Ullir, by morning, but the sun had already risen free of the water's grasp. No one was still sleeping—certainly not in the din they heard as they approached.

"Then tell us why," a voice demanded, rising above the others, "we should not throw you off a cliff and abandon this wild-goose chase?"

"I told you why, you son of a slug," came the return. Vidar recognized the second voice as Hoenir's. It was followed by laughter, but there was an ugly nut of suppressed violence at its center. "For one thing," Hoenir said, "I could crush your skull like a robin's egg before you came within a sword's length. And for another, Ygg is still on the loose out there, perhaps in Asgard itself. You

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pledged your blade to Vali's cause, right? This, my friend, is still that—Vali's war—and I'll brook no deserters."

"If it's Vali's war, then where's Vali?" roared someone else. "And my brothers? Where are they? If I knew that, then I'd be headed there, not cooped up in this cave counting the times my stomach growls!" ^

"Forget your stomach, Ranni," came a hoarse reply. "I pledged my sword, and here I stand."*

"It's Asgard we're pledged to defend," cried another, "so let's go down to Asgard! What are we waiting for?"

"Try it," said Hoenir, his voice low and dangerous, "and I'll spit you like a pig. Personally."

As Vidar stood by the cave-mouth, it took a few moments for his eyes to adjust to the semidarkness within. The scattered light of torches glared off the low ceiling, where slick, red-orange stalactites hung in clusters, like chandeliers in a great hail. Below them, stalagmites rose from the gray rock floor like hunkered-down demons, and in some places the formations met, creating smooth, hour-glass-shaped columns.

The spaces between and among the mineral accumulations were crowded with warriors—Asalanders, humans, dwarvin, thursar—and in a small, cleared space in the center stood Hoenir and a handful of Aesirmen. A few stood with him,—the majority against. As yet, there had been no swords drawn, but it would only take one and the cavern would be a bedlam.

"Enough," said Vidar, just loud enough for his voice to carry above the murmurs of the assemblage. All eyes turned toward him. "Let them go, Hoenir, if they've no more stomach for war. Some dogs are born gutless. I don't want warriors who are too homesick to fight." He spat. "If they want to go running back to Asgard to tell brave tales—let them."

There was a brief silence as Vidar's words rang throughout the depths of the great cavern. Then one form sepa-

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rated from the others that had stood against Hoenir. Vidar had seen the face before—one of Vali's field captains.

"Gutless?" he bellowed, and the echoes broke like waves on a stormy beach. "We want to return to Asgard," he said, "not run away from her—as you did. Lord Jaw-breaker. I, for one, will not listen to a coward call me a coward."

Good, Vidar thought. That was the best he could have hoped for—the distillation of all the Asalanders' venom into one single drop. If he could survive that drop—that champion—then he might stifle their dissent. At least, it was worth a try.

"You know," said Vidar, "I'm getting a little tired of being called a coward. Who dares to say it this time? What's your name?" he asked, climbing into the flame-shot gloom of the cavern.

"Thakrad," said the warrior, taking a step forward, his hands balling into fists.

"Take off your swordbelt, Thakrad. Then we'll see who is the coward."

"Let's not play at fighting," said the Asalander. "If we're to stand against one another, let's do it with our blades in our hands."

Vidar shook his head. Thakrad knew that Odin's son had been Asgard's wrestling champion long ago, and he was smart enough not to fall into that trap. But it also gave Vidar a chance to make his victory more resounding—if he could elude the edge of Thakrad's longsword.

"Then keep your blade," said Vidar. "You can see I carried none into Asgard. I'll fight you without it."

The warrior's face twisted in the torchlight. "The hell you will," he said. Thakrad held his hand out to one side, palm up, and after a moment one of his friends laid a hilt in it. The Asalander tossed the weapon at Vidar's feet, and it clattered noisily against the stone floor.

Vidar regarded the sword, then looked up. "I imagine

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I'll be using one of these soon enough, in pursuit of Ygg. I won't use it on an Aesirman, though."

Thakrad glared at him. "Suit yourself. Lord Vidar. I offered, and you refused. Everyone here heard that. When I bury my iron in your gut, you'll have nothing to complain about."

Vidar shrugged off his cloak, letting it fall to the floor. "AH I hear is talk, Thakrad. Put your money where your mouth is."

Although it was plain that Thakrad had never heard the expression, the meaning was clear enough. He dropped his own cloak and slid the length of his blade from its sheath.

"Careful, Vidar," Lhlir whispered behind him. "He's one of our best swordsmen."

"Don't worry," said Vidar. "'I'll keep both eyes open."

Then the combatants closed to within a sword's length of one another. Thakrad held his blade before him in both fists. He circled slowly to his left, and Vidar circled likewise, descending into a crouch.

The first stroke caught Odin's son by surprise, however, and he barely flung himself backward out of harm's way. Thakrad was on him in a moment, much quicker than his bulk would suggest. Vidar rolled to one side, and his opponent's blade scattered sparks as it struck the base of a stalagmite.

Finding his feet, Vidar braced himself for the next onslaught—Thakrad advanced on him, feinted, advanced again. This time, however, he telegraphed his attack—and when he brought his blade up, Vidar darted in underneath.

Before Thakrad could deliver the blow, Vidar had driven his shoulder into the warrior's midsection. Thakrad grunted and reeled backward, Vidar's fingers closing around the wrist of his sword-arm. They hit the stone floor hard, Thakrad above, Vidar beneath him, and the weapon flew out of the Asalander's grasp.

Unarmed, Thakrad groped for Vidar's windpipe. They rolled once, then twice, legs splayed, arms knotted, each

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striving for leverage. Finally, Vidar broke Thakrad's hold, and before his opponent could seek to do damage elsewhere, he brought his fist down across the warrior's face. Thakrad relaxed, seemingly stunned.

But Vidar was taking no more chances. The Asalander had proven to be stronger than he looked. Getting his feet under him, Vidar took Thakrad by his belt and the front of his woven shirt and, standing, hefted the big man's body over his head. Thakrad began to struggle weakly, but to no avail. Then Vidar strode over to a stalagmite he'd noticed before and straddled it. The corresponding stalactite hung over them, a dangerous point that gleamed bloodred in the ruddy torchlight.

Vidar lifted Thakrad until that point pressed against the Asalander's throat. Thakrad ceased struggling. Vidar could feel the sudden tautness in the man's body, as he felt the stalactite against his Adam's apple.

Vidar glared at the multitude that had watched their struggle. "Shall I take his life?" he cried. "Or have we had enough strife among ourselves?"

For a time, the only sound was that of harsh breathing—Vidar's, deep and free, and Thakrad's—hoarse and confined, lest he drive the point of the rock formation deeper into his throat. Then an Asalander stepped forward.

"Let him down," he said. "We'll follow you—until we find Vali again."

Vidar sighed with relief, though it must have sounded like exasperation. He let Thakrad fall to his shoulder, then eased him to the floor. Immediately, the Asalander raised himself to one knee. He glared at Vidar, but said nothing.

What could he say? Words would be hollow now. But Vidar could tell that Thakrad was not one to let bygones be bygones. Finally, the warrior stood and turned away.

"Then let's prepare to leave this hole," cried Vidar. "We march on Alfheim."

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A murmur threaded its way through the crowd, doubled

and redoubled in a tapestry of echoes.

Hoenir came over and clapped Vidar on the shoulder. "What a performance," he said. "Such verve, such realism. But why Alfheim?"

"First of all," said Vidar, "Magni's been overthrown. They say that he might be dead."

"That's bad news, Vidar." Hoenir appeared to be genuinely saddened. "Odin?" he asked.

"So it would seem," said Vidar. "Then, recently, the guards at the elf-gate were attacked—from this side, not from Alfheim. One died. The assailants were thought to be spies for the rebels, trying to return from Asaheim. But one of the chieftains said that the murderers were too big and strong to be lyos"

Hoenir cocked an eyebrow. "I see. Odin and some thursar, perhaps, gone to see to the revolution personally."

"That's the conclusion we came to."

Hoenir paused for a moment, folding his arms across his chest. "But why would he need to oversee an uprising that had already succeeded? He couldn't attack Asgard through the elf-gate—it's too easy to defend. No, nephew, if I were Odin, I'd stay in Asgard, sowing my seeds, and waiting for the harvest."

"So would I," said Vidar, "unless I thought I could lay my hands on Frey's sword."

Hoenir could not conceal his surprise. "Frey's sword, you say? Has it turned up, then?"

"No," said Vidar. "Not necessarily, anyway. But it's rumored that the sword's hidden in Alfheim, and if anyone can find it..."

"Odin can." Hoenir smiled. "The bastard."

"Aye," said Vidar.

"So it's Alfheim, then?" said Hoenir. "On the thinnest thread of evidence."

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"It's either that or break out the beer and the poker chips."

Hoenir's face puckered. "The what?"

"Never mind. I just meant that I'd rather do something than nothing." He surveyed the turmoil of shifting shadows deeper in the cavern, as the troops set to whatever preparations they had to. "And I've made arrangements to

leave the wounded in Asaheim."

"Good," said Hoenir. "Even the thursar?"

"Aye. Even the thursar."

"Amazing," said Hoenir. "You're a born politician."

"Don't let Vali hear you say that," said Vidar. "He'll think I have designs on his throne."

"Do you mean," said Hoenir, smiling, "that you don't?"

Vidar smiled too, then. He thought of Vidi, the hall he'd once occupied, and wondered again who lived there now.

"No more than you, my lord," he said. "No more than you."

In the west, the hills from which they'd come were etched in black silhouette against the pure, molten gold of the sunset. What clouds there had been were gone now, leaving the high, blue-green heavens to their perfect glory. The sun perished, but the loftiest towers of Asgard caught the last of the light and shone like spouts of flame.

An army as large as any the hrimthursar had ever brought to sack Asgard passed between the city and the mountains that brooded over her. Watched from the walls, it moved slowly, like a monstrous centipede. At its head rode Hoenir, whom older Asgardians remembered, and younger Asgardians only wondered at— The Asalanders rode after him, waving to tiny figures on the walls, who may have been friends or family. Behind them came the humans, led by a youth, although he seemed to command the respect of his troops—and among the humans, thursar, their great size unmistakable. The people of Asgard peered

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at the giants, the fears of their childhoods suddenly given form before their eyes.

But they were not so enthralled by the sight of the Utgard-thursar that they failed to notice the black-garbed contingent that followed on foot—or the fair-haired figure that led them. "Vidar Jawbreaker," they whispered, some with contempt. "And his dwarvin—a fit match."

The army wound its way beneath waterfalls that fell from the cliffs and pooled outside the massive black walls of the city. The wind was gentler now, with the coming of dusk, barely ruffling the hair of the watchers. Vidar glanced at them from time to time, but the dwarvin behind him had pulled up their black hoods to shield their eyes against the rays of the dying sun, and they looked only straight ahead.

The search for Odin had not borne fruit, Vidar mused, or the chieftains would have sent word. Soon, they'd be sending parties out into the countryside, if they kept their

part of the bargain. Vidar suspected that they 'would, despite Njal's stand on the matter.

The wounded too would be cared for as promised. Those who could not walk had been carried down from the hills on makeshift litters, and left outside the western wall with those who could.

A dark elf came up beside him—N'arri, who'd defied Odin in Utgard and lost his tongue for it. His face was set in stern lines, for Asgard fairly radiated mistrust—but his eyes danced with an emerald fire, the birthright of his people. With an inclination of his head and a widening of his eyes, he indicated the lofty towers. They gleamed now with a more sullen light.

"Aye," said Vidar. "It's a sight, all right."

The dwarvin searched Vidar's face silently. Then he nodded and turned away.

In time, they came upon an apple grove among the small, dark pools, and Vidar recognized it for the one that Idunna had tended. Sunset turned the trees' fruit to gold

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and the leaves to bronze, though shadows had already worked their way into the spaces among the lower branches.

Idunna's gentle face came to mind. She had still lived when Odin and his sons returned to find Asgard in smoking ruins. She'd survived just long enough to see her husband, Bragi—and then let out her last breath, and with it her life.

Bragi refused to leave, to seek revenge with the others, until he had found her limbs—for the hrimthursar had scattered them along with the less precious debris in the hall. He wept like a child, fussing as if he could make her whole again—yet he was among the first to charge into Jotunheim, for no one had a greater score to settle than Bragi.

So, apple trees grew again near Asgard, and someone tended them. Somehow, Vidar found that quite pleasing.

The army slithered into the foothills like a great, dark and ancient snake, slow and ponderous but persistent. Though they ascended, the light soon left them, and then even the tops of Asgard's towers were abandoned to darkness. The stars appeared, tentative at first, and then more brazen, until they littered the entire sky.

Well up the trail, Vidar could see Hoenir as he reached the gate to Alfheim. Much higher, the same trail came to a stop at the gate to Jotunheim—but it was no longer used. There was nothing in Jotunheim now—not even thursar.

For a time, there was a delay at the gate. Perhaps Hoenir was ironing out a problem with those who stood watch there—or the Asalanders that followed him were exchanging news with the guardians. In time, however, the army moved again, as its foremost portion—the head of the snake—disappeared into the darkness that led to Alfheim.

The path twisted, bringing Vidar and his dwarvin closer in toward the sheer gray cliffs, and half the shimmering stars were blotted out by the bulk of the mountains' bones.

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The humans ahead of them had dismounted and were leading their horses, since they were not used to heights like these. The wind grew bolder, rustling the branches of the few shrubs that had found purchase in the solid rock. They worked their way around a shoulder of smooth black stone—the kind of stone that Asgard's walls had been fashioned of—and the humans were lost to their sight. But in the east, the moon rose over the sea.

Finally, they passed between two huge boulders and came in sight of the gate again. The last of Eric's men were filing into it—but Vidar could see by the looks they exchanged that they'd rather be risking their lives on the battlefield.

Time enough for that, Vidar told himself.

The gate was much as he remembered it—a tall, narrow crack in a sheer granite wall. Vines grew thick about the aperture, and moss and small red and yellow flowers.

The handful of watchmen at the gate were stone-silent—all but one, and that one just a youth with pale yellow hair and his grandfather's wise eyes. "Ho, Lord Vidar," he said. "My father bade me wish you luck."

"Thanks," said Vidar. "You, too," he added, remembering the relief in Ullir's eyes when he saw that it was not this young man on the funeral pyre.

As he stepped into the cave darkness, he drew his sword, knowing that there might be an elvish ambush waiting for them in Alfheim. He heard the Utgardian horses nicker nervously, for they must have sensed the strangeness of the road they traveled. Behind him, the elves murmured among themselves.

Suddenly, the sounds of horse and hoof, the subdued comments of the dwarvin, the shuffle of boots and the clatter of arms—all died in whispers. Then came the humming, filling Vidar's ears as though all the bees in Asaheim had been roused. With one step, the ground was solid underfoot. With the next, he walked on nothing.

Slowly, he put one foot before the other, ignoring the

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uncomfortable absence of anything beneath him. It was just an illusion—wasn't it? Vidar walked, bereft of sight, smell and touch, and eventually sound as well—for the humming seemed to merge with his skull until he was no longer aware of it.

The ground was restored to him first. Next, the humming died, replaced by thick, impenetrable silence. Then that too gave way, and he could hear the welcome sound of his own breathing. No matter how many times one traveled the gates, there was no getting used to them.

A few more steps, and a few more. The sound of hooves striking stone echoed softly in the darkness. He went forward.

The merest sliver of light appeared before him. It widened until Vidar could make out a world in the light. Then he reached the opening that framed that world, his fingers tightening about the hilt of his sword—at once comforted and repelled by its deadly solidity.

But there were no elves there to bar their path. None at all.

Alfheim's pale, silverish sun hung on the lip of the high ridge to their right, cloaked in morning mist and fringed with lush green foliage. An equally high ridge rose sharply on their left. Once, perhaps, a river had run here, fed by a cataract from the cliffs behind them. An ancient river, which had deepened its channel year after year until this canyon had been carved into the rock. But that had been long before Odin found his way to the world of the lyos.

There was no river here now. Its source had dried up or been diverted, having found an easier way through the humpback hills. In its long absence, vines and moss and hardy willows had found crevices into which to weave their roots. Greengrowth sprouted in tufts all along the walls of rock, haunted by mist as if by pale wraiths, and a carpet of tough, short turf covered most of the canyon floor. Though the sun of Alfheim could only wedge its light into the old

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river's channel for a short time each day, life had found a way to thrive here.

Ancient was Alfheim, old beyond even Odin's telling. Older even than the lyos, for another race had walked this world before the fair elves. The too-sweet smell of decay cloyed at Vidar's nostrils. It clung to the rocks in this place and the branches of trees, distracting the senses and making the mind wont to wander. But he knew too well that

this canyon would be their grave if they tarried too long inside it.

If the ground above them was not bristling with elvish archers, it did not mean that they were safe. Odin might have laid some less obvious trap.

Eric's men peered above them, even as he did, shading their eyes with their free hands and holding their blades or their bows ready in the other. Behind him, he heard the shoosh of arrows being slipped from quivers—sounds which told him that the dwarvin were even more cautious than the Utgardians.

Then Vidar saw Hoenir making his way backward along the length of their army. He was scowling beneath his fine gray brows, his breath a small white mist on the air.

"Nobody here to greet us," said Hoenir, when he and Vidar stood face to face. "I'm disappointed."

"Strange, isn't it?" said Vidar. "One would have thought there'd at least be a few bowmen set to watch the gate to Asaheim."

Hoenir shook his head. "Damned elves. They never did know how to wage a war."

Vidar watched the faces of their warriors—all frowning, all uneasy. But all they heard from above was the sough of the wind and the cries of jaybirds.

"If I remember right," said Vidar, "it's only a couple of days' ride from here to Prey's hall—now Magni's hall. Odin will be waiting for us there, if he doesn't meet us sooner. It's a place easily defended, and if he wants to gather his forces, that's the place to do it."

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"Aye," said Hoenir, scanning the ridges on either side of them with narrowed eyes. "And this canyon stretches most of the way, until it turns toward the sea. Nor does it get much shallower than this before it bends—so that if we want to keep our horses, we must travel within it." He laughed a hollow laugh. "Just perfect for an ambush. All they have to do is drop a few boulders in our way, to block our passage—if they haven't already—and they can rain down arrows at their leisure."

Vidar chewed on his lower lip, assessing the walls of the gorge. "Well, it's true that we can't get our horses up there," he said finally. "But we can send up some troops on foot, to guard our flanks and scout ahead." He turned toward Hoenir. "Got any better ideas?"

fy Hoenir shook his head. "Not a one, nephew."

I "I'll take the right flank with my elves, then, if it's all

"I the same to you. And I think that Eric's men should take

^ the left flank. Next to the dwarvin, they're the best archers
{ we've got."
I "As you wish," said Hoenir-

| "Are you sure that you'll feel secure down here with us
f up there?" asked Vidar.

Hoenir met Vidar's eyes. "Why, nephew," he said, "are
^ you implying that I don't trust you?'" He smiled crookedly.

("Just because you've been gone for centuries, working who
knows what kind of mischief in Midgard? I trust you about
? as far as you trust me—which is to say, I don't. But on this
little jaunt in the countryside, we need each other. So let's
put our family rivalries aside for the moment.")

^ "Fine with me," said Vidar.

\y Hoenir's smile widened. "Don't take it personally, Jaw-
^ breaker. After all, you were my third-or fourth-favorite
^ nephew."

- 1- Vidar clasped Hoenir's shoulder. "I'd like to say that
I you were one of my favorite uncles," he said. "But I didn't
j have any." Then he turned and saw to his elves.

VII

The war between the Aesir and the hnmthursar went
on and on, until it seemed that there had been nothing
before it and it would endure until the end of time. But
the giants were not Odin's only foes.

Indeed, he once fought against the Vanir, who watched
as his spear clove the clouds above their armies, but
would not give an inch before his fury. At first, they had
been friends—Odin and Niord, the foremost lords of the
Aesir and the Vanir. Then they became enemies. The war
was bloody and it ravaged both realms.

Yet in the end, Odin won. He held the point of his
spear to Niord's throat, and since he knew that the
Vaninann would rather die than yield, he offered him a
truce. Ten score of the best warriors in Vanaheim would
come to Valhalla, where they would await the call to
fight hnmthursar in Jotunheim.

But as proof of Odin's good intentions, he would send
his brother, Hoenir, to Vanaheim to serve as Niord's

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counselor. More, he would build two halls in Asgard, one
for the Vanir king himself and one for his valiant son
Frey, whose sword had taken its toll on the warriors of
Asaheim.

Niord thought that this was an eminently reasonable

bargain, especially since his only alternative was to gorge himself on the tip of Odin's spear, and there were still maidens whose charms he had not tasted. In fact, he said, he thought so much of this arrangement that he would send Frey to live in Asgard permanently—and his lovely sister Freya as well.

It was agreed that both lords were Just and generous, and each so trusted the other that he would place his kin in the other's hands. But neither lord had such trust—for not even mortal men rise to power when there is not a five- or sixfold purpose in everything they do. Niord knew that no Aesirman would ever think of attacking Vanaheim again when pretty, young Freya might be distressed by it. Such was her power over men.

For Odin's part, he knew that he would not have to worry for long about his brother's welfare in Vanaheim.

From the start, Hoenir was a popular figure in Niord's court at Gullvang. He was tall and good-looking, and he always had a kind word for the Vanir chieftains. But it was with the ladies that he shone the brightest. It seemed that there were always three or four of Vanaheim's red-tressed daughters trailing after the Aesir prince, while he regaled them with tales of Asgard.

"And then I granted the hairy-pelted giant his life—just so I could do battle with him all over again," he'd say, flashing a roguish smile.

Or he'd shake his head, and bemoan the lack of truly great adventures. "We've Just run out of dangerous worlds to conquer," he'd say, watching sidewise to see which of the ladies showed the most interest.

It was after it had become apparent that he'd captured the hearts of the Vanir women—wives and daughters

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alike—that the warriors of Vanaheim began to tire of Hoenir's boasts. Nor was it long before jealousy turned to suspicion, and suspicion to outrage. For though Hoenir had never been caught at any of his indiscretions, it was plain that he was cuckolding the Vanir at every opportunity.

Finally, a warrior by the name of Byggvir, a cousin of Niord himself, volunteered to lay a trap for the Aesirman, with the help of his good wife, Beyla. Like all the ladies of Gullvang, Beyla had received meaningful glances from Hoenir. But unlike some of the others, she had not returned them—not, at least, until her husband asked her to do so. The plan was for her to allow Hoenir into her bedroom, if that was his wish, and then to sound the alarm—so that Byggvir and his men could rush in and work their revenge.

Beyla was no Freya, you understand, but Hoenir prized variety, and she was one fruit he had not yet tasted. So when her interest in him suddenly perked up, he did not question it. Rather, he charmed her as a fisherman charms a fish—reeling her in an inch at a time, until he had drawn her out of her element and into his own. He regaled her with tales of his bravery— He told her how beautiful she was in the moonlight, and he looked deeply into her eyes with an intimacy that few women could resist.

"And how is Byggvir, your husband?" he asked.
"Alas, he's away. He's gone hunting," she said, as she had been instructed.

"In that case, may I see you home?" asked Hoenir.
"Why, that would be kind of you," said Beyla—again, following Byggvir's plan to the letter.

At the door, Hoenir said, "It's so cold out here. Perhaps I might come in to warm my hands by your fire?"
"Please," said Beyla: "My house is yours."
The two went inside—and Byggvir led his men around to the front door— They drew their swords and waited.

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Indeed, it was cold out. Before long, snow began to fall. Byggvir and his kinsmen huddled in their cloaks, and the minutes passed slowly. After nearly an hour had gone by, Byggvir's younger brother, Eldir, suggested that they break in and catch the rascal.

"No," said Byggvir. "Beyla has not yet sounded the alarm, and that can only mean that Hoenir has not yet pressed his purpose. Perhaps he's not as randy tonight as usual."

The snow caked on their hair and their brows, and Eldir's teeth began to chatter. He sneezed, and his breath froze in a great white cloud before him.

"Surely, he's had enough time by now," said Eldir.

"No," said Byggvir. "What use is it if we catch him having tea? We've waited this long—let's do the job right."

The snow grew thick and fleecy on their heads and their shoulders, but still there came no sound from within. Shivering now, Eldir said that he'd had enough—either he'd storm the door now or go home and warm his bones.

"Indeed," said Byggvir, "he's had enough time to raise a family with her. All right, then—and don't let him slither away."

They broke in the door and tumbled over one another in their eagerness to catch Hoenir red-handed. But when they burst into the bedroom, Hoenir was nowhere to be seen.

Only Beyla, who slept with the sweetest smile on her face—until she started at the clamor of their weapons, and sat up, clutching the bedclothes to her rosy breast. She flushed deeply when she saw the look in her husband's eye, and seemed to melt into the bed itself.

The window hung ajar—as if someone had opened it and forgotten to shut it behind him.

In the end, however, Byggvir and his kinsmen got their wish—much to the relief of the Vanir, and the

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disappointment of their wives and daughters. For Hoenir had vanished suddenly from the court of Niord, and it was a long, long time before he was ever seen again in Vanaheim.

Sin Skolding
Algron, A.D. 362

VIH

Once up on higher ground, Vidar found that Alfheim was colder than it had looked— He guessed that it was late fall or early spring, but for the life of him he couldn't remember how Alfheim's seasons corresponded to Asaheim's. The winds swirled about him in a frenzy, coming to rest now and again in the lush, high grass through which they stalked.

But it wasn't the weather that bothered him most—it was the nearness of the forest, from the depths of which elvish archers might pick them off at any time.

The dwarvin did not need any warning from Vidar to remain alert. They moved like cats, emerald eyes glinting beneath their dark cowls. Although their garments and their cloaks were too thin to do more than take the bite out of the wind—for they were made for the heart of under-G'walin, where they molded swords in the blaze of their forges—the dark elves paid no attention to the cold. If they

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were shivering, they gave no sign of it. Not even when the sun dropped out of the mist and hid behind the trees.

The day darkened and Vidar's eyes began to play tricks on him. Now and again, a branch would move, or the mists would billow just so, and he'd think that he saw a fair-

haired bowman stalking them along the fringe of the woods. But as dusk approached, nothing had happened.

The dwarvin went warily, sometimes stopping altogether to peer into a darkness in the forest. When they were satisfied that there were no lyos at its heart, they went on.

So it was that when the attack came, finally, they were ready for it. N'arri was the first to fall to one knee and make the sign of danger. Vidar had seen nothing nor heard a sound, and his Aesir senses should have been sharper than N'arri's—but seconds after the dark elf had given the warning, a flight of arrows whispered from out of the forest—

"Down!" cried Vidar, although he might have been the last to dive for cover in the high grass. A shaft slithered by within inches of his outstretched fingers and he pulled back his hand out of reflex. A second arrow missed his head by a sword's-breadth.

Nearby, a dark elf moaned and cursed, then fell still—But Vidar dared not lift his head to see if he could help. The lyos' shafts cut the air all about him, and every time he thought that the barrage might stop, another arrow slashed through the grass.

If it had not been for the height of that grass, they'd all have been killed already. Vidar had no doubt about that. But the lyos' shafts would find them eventually—unless they did something, and quickly.

Suddenly, a figure staggered out of the woods, an arrow protruding from his breast. With a sigh, he fell forward. Vidar raised his head just enough to see the dwarvin archer who had gotten up to fire into the forest. Instantly,

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the black-clad figure sprouted a coat of feathered shafts—a reward for his marksmanship.

But in the same instant, two more 'dwarvin sprang up to fire at the same time. They dove for cover and three more rose to loose their shafts. In moments, the tall grass was alive with shadowy bowmen that rose and fell like a dark tide.

Some of the dwarvin were cut down, but the cries of the lyos in the misty fringe of woods outnumbered those of the under-elves. Vidar felt helpless, for he had no bow, nor a throwing weapon—until an elf who had taken an arrow in the throat collapsed not far from him. When Vidar reached him, he was dead, his eyes frozen like green gems in the graceful, pale contours of his face, and blood streaming from the corner of his mouth. But his bow had fallen only a few feet away.

Odin's son edged his way closer, snaking along the cold,

wet ground on elbows and knees, until his fingers closed about the warm, supple wood.

He crawled a little bit farther and found the elf's quiver. Plucking a shaft from it, he turned over on his back and fitted it to the string. Then, in one motion, he turned, rose to one knee and fired. There was nothing to aim at anyway—only a wall of distant trees.

He hugged the ground again and reached for another arrow. He rose and fired. This time, a short, ugly scream rewarded his effort.

By the time Vidar had nocked his third arrow, the lyos' barrage had thinned out a bit. This time, when he took an additional moment to try to pick out a target, he saw the flash of pale yellow hair and cut the elf down.

Then Hoenir was in his brain, the heat of his concern dulling the battle around him. "Vidar! What's going on up there?"

"We're under attack," said Vidar. "Archers in the woods."

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"Aye," said Hoenir. "Eric's got the same problem on the other side. Can you hold them?"

"I don't know," said Vidar. "So far, so good. But I don't know what kind of numbers they've got back there."

Hoenir was silent for a moment. "Vidar," he said then, "which way is the wind blowing?"

The wind? Suddenly, Vidar saw Hoenir's plan. "Torches?"

"Exactly."

In time-honored fashion, Vidar licked his finger and held it up to the wind. Perfect—the skin facing the gorge behind him was cold, where the saliva had dried.

"Send them up," said Vidar. "But hurry—if the breeze shifts, we're sunk. Or smoked, to be more precise."

"I hear and obey," said Hoenir. "Torches, coming right up."

But it seemed like forever before Vidar saw the Aesirmen that carried the torch-bundles. They slithered through the grass, past the dwarves. The dark elves continued to draw the lyos' fire while the Asalanders crawled closer and closer to the trees. Finally, when they'd gotten close enough, they used their flints to set the sticks ablaze, and flung them one by one into the lush, green spaces where the lyos hid.

The woods did not catch fire. The trees were too slick with mist for that, and too full of the sap of life. But in moments, a dozen slim pillars of smoke had appeared among the trees—and soon, they'd thickened like trees themselves do over the years, until their branches had spread in ghostly billows, and mingled with the leaves of the true trees.

Vidar could hear the racking coughs of the lyos as they found themselves suddenly surrounded by the smoke. He raised his head cautiously, just high enough for his eyes to see above the tops of the grasses, and what he saw was confusion. Even through the mist and the smoke, he could make out elvish bodies lurching this way and that

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They would have been easy marks for the dwarvin. if the dwarvin had chosen to fire on them. But as Vidar looked around, he saw that the dark elves only watched—as he did. Bows at the ready, they knelt in the high grass, but not a single arrow was loosed at the helpless lyos.

"I knew there was a reason I liked you guys," Vidar muttered to himself.

The ambushers fled. One by one, they vanished into the woods, and the wall of smoke—for it was a wall now—ascended beyond the tops of the trees into the silver-gray heavens.

"They're gone," Vidar said to Hoenir.

"Aye," said Hoenir. "I accept your gratitude."

"What about Eric?"

"The lyos seem to be withdrawing there, too," said Hoenir, "though for no apparent reason."

Vidar pondered that for a moment. "Unless this was just a delaying lactic—to slow us down, while the main body of Odin's forces gathers to meet us elsewhere."

"Mmm," said Hoenir. "Perhaps."

"Then let's keep moving," said Vidar. "I don't think they'll be taking potshots at us for a while on this side."

"We're moving down here already," said Hoenir. "We never stopped."

"Good," said Vidar, feeling a little foolish, and broke contact. He watched as one of the dwarvin strode to the edge of the forest and hacked down a sapling. His first thought was that if a lyos had managed to endure the smoke somehow, the dwarvin's life wouldn't be worth much now. But he was not attacked, not even when he laid the sapling on the ground and cut off its branches, then whittled away until he'd fashioned a point. He had made a

spear, Vidar noted—one with which he could consecrate the fallen.

But it was not to Vali that the dwarvin entrusted the dead. The dark elves did not pray to Asgard's lord as the humans and city-thursar did. Perhaps long ago, when

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Utgard was still young, the dwarvin had adopted the custom without the meaning.

The elf finished his preparations, sheathed his knife and uttered a few words while the other elves listened. Then he took a short step and hurled the spear over the river of tall grass. It traced a graceful arc and stuck, quivering, where it fell to earth. The mist gathered about it, as if out of curiosity.

But that was all the time for ceremony they could afford. The moon came up behind them, vast and fish belly-white, as they set out again for Magni's stronghold. It nested in the silvery mists like a pale, bloated bird, now cloaked in luminous clouds, now stark against a blue-black patch of night. By its haunted, shifting light, they waded through the hip-deep grass and munched on dry grain-cakes, which they washed down with water. There would be no time for a real meal.

Even while they ate, they strained to see past the ever-present mist and tried to listen for the sudden sound—the snap of twig, the thrum of a bowstring. Yet all they heard was the occasional hoot of an owl, voicing its displeasure at their passage, for it would find no prey tonight in this turbulence of two-legged creatures.

Finally, when the moon sat high in the sky, Vidar found what he had been looking for—a place where the river of grass widened and the forest withdrew. Here, they might rest without fear that the lyos would pick them off in their sleep. No one could hope to hit anything at this distance—and there would be guards posted to watch for arrows that strayed out of the sky.

Vidar called to Hoenir, and it was agreed that they would make camp. N'arri silently volunteered to take the first watch, and a few others said that they would Join him. No one had a tent or a fire, but there was a cloak for each weary body, and that would have to be enough against the cold, wet ground and the chill of the elvish night. One by one, the elves gave themselves up to the high, green grass.

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Vidar, too, hugged his cloak to him and stretched out. He was weary, for he had not yet recovered completely from his healing marathon in the cave, but he found that he wasn't particularly sleepy. The moon hung directly

overhead, but as he stared at it, he saw Odin's scarred visage instead.

"Only Magni has had the wisdom to see it all. Nothing matters, nothing...." The All-father had said as much while he held Vidar prisoner in Indilthrar, the city of the thursar priests.

But if Magni had allied himself with Odin, would there have been any need for a rebellion in Alfheim? The elfworld would already have been his pawn.

Then Odin must have been lying about Magni—either to Vidar or to himself. The flames with which Loki had attacked Odin at Ragnarok had consumed half his face. It had driven him mad. Perhaps Magni's allegiance was a fantasy,

Or—there was a third possibility. Magni could have pretended to join Odin in order to buy time for a counter-stroke. If such had been the case, and Odin had discovered Magni's ruse, the All-father could have turned to an alternate plan—a rebellion he'd prepared long ago. An ace in the hole if Magni had refused his philosophy outright.

In any event, it seemed that Magni had tried to oppose Odin's mad desires. To tear down all he had created, to destroy until his destruction was complete....

And if Odin had lied about Magni, perhaps he had lied about Hoenir's allegiance, too.

Finally, Vidar's eyes began to close. He felt Alfheim close about him, smelted its ancient breath... blossoms and decay....

Soon, they'd reach Hargard, Magni's hall, and Prey's before him. More than likely, he would meet Odin there—

Vidar's fingers wandered to the hilt of his sword. The muscles in his jaw clenched.

Yes. If he had the chance, he'd kill him.

IX

It was growing late, my lady, and the light was fading when Frey realized that he was lost. He'd started out hunting early in the day, for the hunting was good in Alfheim, and best in the mountains—but now the day was running down into dusk and he'd had no luck. The mists of the forest rose thick about him, as if to engulf

him.

Nor was he unconcerned about his plight, for he'd held sway in Alfheim long enough to know what dangers lurked in the mountain glades. Soon he heard the howling of the gray wolves. Darkness tightened about him like a fist, and he stumbled through the woods, first

thinking he saw a path this way, and then seeing none. All he succeeded in doing, however, was getting himself more and more confused—more and more lost.

Niord's son drew his sword, the fell blade called Angrum, and settled against a tree trunk. There, he resolved, he would await the dawn, and defend against

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whatever wild creatures came to test him. But as the night wore on, and the wolves did not appear, he began to doze. In time, his eyes closed completely and his head fell back against the rough bark of the tree.

Suddenly, he started awake, trembling. But it was not the snarl of the wolves he heard close by. It was a lovely melody coming from somewhere in the deep woods. Someone was playing a harp and playing it well.

Frey stood up and followed the music as if it were a well-cleared trail, followed it as gratefully as a hungry man follows the scent of food. And at its source he found a small stone dwelling. Here the music was more vibrant. more compelling, and Frey was charmed by it.

He trust his sword into his belt, his eyes dazzled by the stars that had appeared in the mists, and a childlike smile opened in his handsome face. His cloak fell from his shoulders, and he let it lay where it had fallen.

Frey knocked on the door, for it alone was made of wood, and it opened. But there was no one standing in the doorway to greet him. Only the vast, sweet melody and the shadows within. Frey wandered into the low stone house, but there was no one inside. Yet the music came from this place—
Then did Frey's eyelids grow heavy. His smile faded, and he sat down to rest—for a sudden weariness had come upon him. It was as if the music itself had wrapped his limbs in its own, and sucked the strength from his bones.

He dreamed, my lady, and in his dream an elvish maiden came to him, and made him a gift of her passion. All night long, he dreamed of her embrace, of her long, pale-golden hair, and of her eyes that glowed like emeralds. In the morning, when he woke, the music and the maiden were both gone—but he could almost hear her hushed voice, and smell the fragrance of her hair.

It was a cruel fate that had befallen the son of Niord, for he had been fettered as surely as if with iron chains.

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The elvish maid had bound him to her, and he vowed that he would not rest until he held her flesh in his arms, and not a wisp of a dream. Dazed by fatigue—for he felt as if he had not slept at all—and by hunger—for he had not eaten since breaking his fast the morning before—he headed westward. That way stood Skir'nir's hall, on the fringe of the forest. No one knew him better than Skir'nir, the elflord. No one would be quicker to help him in his time of need.

But the journey was much longer than he'd reckoned, and the day yielded to night, and again to day. Yet he dared not stop, nor could he rest until he'd satisfied his heart's desire.

When Frey finally appeared at Skir'nir's door, mad-eyed and bedraggled, it was dusk again. A servant brought him to the lord of that proud house, and Skir'nir got to his feet in distress when he saw the Vanir prince in such sorry condition.

"What ails you, my lord?" he asked. "Trust me with your sorrow, my friend."

"I love an elf," cried Frey bitterly. "What would Odin say about that? And not just an elf—for she came to me in a dream. In the morning, she was gone—how do I know she even exists?"

Skir'nir heard his liege-lord's anguish, and he took him by the shoulders. "I know a way to relieve your torment," he said.

"Do not lie to me," said Frey. "Is there truly a way?"

"This time two nights hence," said Skir'nir, his green eyes glittering like ice-chips, "you will have what you desire."

"Then I'll give you great rewards," said the son of Niord. "A sword the dark elves made for me." He took it from its sheath, and it gleamed as he turned it in the sunset light that glowed at the window. "There's no sword like it in the nine worlds. This," he said, "and a pair of black ponies that run swifter than the wind...."

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And he would have offered more, but Skir'nir stopped him.

"I want no gifts," said the elf. "Especially that sword of yours. I have no need of such fell weapons. Lifting your sorrow will be gift enough."

And in the morning, when the sun squatted on the horizon and the woods came alive with birdsongs, the two set out into the forest to search for the low stone

house. The day came and went, night ran its ebon course and the sun rose again through the trees. They did not stop for food or drink, nor for sleep, but made their way higher and higher into the folds of the mountains.

Then, as if Skir'nir had known exactly where to find it. they came upon the music as the SJH fell behind the peaks on the second day. First, the faintest strains, then the same enchanting song that had snared Frey nights earlier. As though it were a thread, they followed it through the thick, misty woods, and Frey's heart grew bigger in his chest as the melody grew stronger and stronger. He could almost taste the elvish maiden's lips beneath his own, feel her soft hair between his fingers and smell the nearness of her.

Finally, they found her dwelling--and here the music was almost more than Frey could bear. He would have entered the house again, to lie down and wait for her to appear, but for Skir'nir. The elf held him back.

"Wait," he said. "Stay here, my lord, or you'll be no better off than when we started." So though his every muscle wanted to move toward the entrance, Frey held his ground fiercely.

And then, wonderment of wonderments, his elvish lover appeared inside the stone house. She was just as Frey remembered her. Nor was he dreaming, but wide awake.

He turned to Skir'nir. "Thank you, my friend. You've made me happier than any Vanirman alive."

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"Nay," said Skir'nir, still holding on to Frey's arm. "Not yet."

The elvish maid smiled, her gaze inviting Frey to paradise. She moved passionately, holding out her arms to him.

"Hear me, G'errda." said the elflord. "It is Skir'nir, the son of S'ookva, who spared your life long ago. Let my lord loose of your spell, and I'll give you anything you want. Golden rings and armbands, necklaces of silver for your throat, jewels for your hair."

"Gifts do not move me," said G'errda coldly, "but your friend does."

"Let him go," said Skir'nir, "for he is Frey of the Vanir, and he rules this land now. He's built his hall at the mouth of a gorge, and he's called it Hargard. He speaks for the elves in Asgard, where the Aesir chieftains meet."

<<! care nothing for his crown," said the enchantress, "only his loins."

"Then hear me. G'errda." said the elf, his voice turning harsh. "For I've a sword that will part your head from your shoulders, and what good will your lover do you then?"

The maiden's eyes narrowed and she spat. As Frey watched, entranced, her looks faded. Her hair turned gray and shrank close to her skull. Her face grew square and soft, receding into a space between her shoulders, for she had no neck. Her eyes became mere slits beneath her pulpy brow, and her lovely body seemed to cave in on itself, until he saw her for what she was—a misshapen monster.

"Once, her kind ruled Alfheim," said Skir'nir, "but the lyos wrested it from them."

"Mokkurkalfi," murmured Frey.

"Aye," said Skir'nir, "mokkurkalfl." He turned to Frey. "And so I keep my vow. You're free of her."

But Frey was the lord of Alfheim—all Alfheim, and all

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its denizens. Nor had Niord failed to teach him some kindness. He sat down cross-legged at the threshold to the stone house, seeing G'errda as she was—a gray, fleshy creature bereft of company. On her lap, she held a harp.

"Play," said Frey.

Sin Skolding
Samsey, A.D. 414

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Vidar woke, and for a moment, he did not know where he was. Then the call of a dwarvin voice jolted him to alertness. Other voices piled on top of that one, shattering

the stillness.

"Here—careful! Surround them now! There's nowhere they can go!" Swords clattered—there was no mistaking the sound. "Aieeee!" The cry of pain brought Vidar to his feet, sword in hand.

It took him only a moment to join the circle of dark elves that had formed at the edge of the clearing. The dwarvin had gathered around a trio of intruders. Two of the dark elves lay within the circle—both dead. One of the lyos sprawled on the ground beside them, his neck half severed from his shoulders. But the three that still stood with their backs to one another, swords drawn, did not look eager to

give their lives up cheaply. Beneath hoods nearly as dark as those of the dwarvin^ their lips were drawn back wolflike over their teeth.

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"Come on then," spat one of the lyos, who stood with his back to Vidar. "Show me how brave you are when the rest of your army is not around."

"Hold," said Vidar to the dark elves. As prisoners, these lyos might be able to tell him something about Odin's preparations. And if he could save some few lives, all the better. "Put down your swords," he told the intruders, "and we'll spare you."

"Aye," said the tallest of the lyos, who did not dare turn toward Vidar to see who spoke. "So you can spit us and bring us back to Skir'nir."

Skir'nir? "I know of no Skir'nir," said Vidar. "Now lay down your swords. It's the last time I'll ask."

"Tricks," said the elf who stood with his back to him. "If you want our carcasses, you'll have to pay for them."

"Wait," said the third intruder, peering at Vidar from beneath his hood. He indicated the Aesirman with his sword. "This one is no elf."

"What?" said his companion, who glanced quickly at Vidar.

"He's no elf, I say- No elf, tmt an Aesirman."

"Aye," said Vidar. "With Asaheim's armies behind me. Your rebellion is doomed," he said, in the most ruthless tone he could muster. "So put down your weapons and save yourselves."

The third lyos eyed him warily. "**These are Asaheim's armies? These are elves, though strange ones."

**They are dwarvin^" said Vidar. "And they've sworn their swords to Vali. Now, my patience wears thin...."

The intruder held up his free hand. "Say no more then. I think that we have all made a mistake." With that, he stuck his sword into a sheath at his hip. "I do not lay down my sword these days," he explained, his voice like music. "But I gladly put it away if Asgard has come to rescue us."

Rescue? Were these elves still loyal to Magni, then?

The other lyos eyed Vidar, and finally let their own

points drop. "I don't like this," snarled the taller one. "Could not an Aesinnan have joined Skir'nir*s rebellion?"

"No," said the one who had dropped his sword first. "Skir'nir would have no friends among the Asalanders once it was known what had happened to Magni. He's Vali's nephew, after all."

"As if," said the one who'd had his back to Vidar, "the Aesir were not known for their treachery." He glanced at the other lyos. "My apologies. I did not mean Magni. too."

"And to whom do we surrender?" asked the one who'd recognized Vidar as an Aesinnan. "A friend, I hope?"

"My name is Vidar. Yours?"

"Sif, Magni's daughter, named after my grandmother."

Her companions winced.

"Enough," she told them. "Someone must trust someone, Var'kald, or we'll stand here playing guessing games all night, and why would the Aesir place their trust in a common elf-girl.?"

Vidar nearly dropped his sword. He looked more closely at the hooded figure then, and saw by the bulges beneath her tunic and the swell of her hips that this warrior was indeed a female. He felt himself flush.

But Magni's daughter? Neither Vali nor Modi nor anyone else had ever said anything about Magni having a daughter.

Vidar stepped forward, and the dark elves stood aside to let him go by. He stopped in front of the elf-girl and gently removed her hood—gently, so that the other lyos would not mistake his intentions. Her hair spilled out like ruddy gold in the spectral moonlight. And she was beautiful, in a way that neither elf nor Aesir could be beautiful, for she was obviously a mixture of both. Vidar observed the contours of her face, the slightly slanted green eyes, the proud tilt of her head, and saw the influence of her elvish mother. But the rose color in her cheeks and the copper in her hair spoke eloquently of Magni.

Beyond that, Vidar saw how young she was—or seemed

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to be. If this were an elf that stood before him, he'd have said that she had no more than forty or fifty years to her. But with Magni's blood in her, she might be much longer-lived than that. Only one thing was certain—this Sif was somewhere between girlhood and womanhood, for if she had been a bit more mature, Vidar told himself, he'd have seen sooner that she was a female.

"Well?" she asked, for patience was obviously not one of

her virtues. "Have you come to save us from Skir'nir or not?" Despite the flippancy of her words, there was tension in her face as she spoke.

"We've come to Magni's aid," said Vidar. "If you're his daughter, then we should be allies. But that does not explain why you've slain two of my watchmen."

"We were on our way to meet others loyal to Magni," said the one Sif had called Var'kald. "When we saw archers standing in the tall grass outside the forest, we thought that we would see what kind of force Skir'nir had amassed in that place. We wandered too close, and your watchmen found us. After that, we were protecting our own necks—nothing more."

It sounded reasonable. Vidar laid his hand on N'arri's shoulder. "See to it that these dead are buried. The lyos[^] too. I don't want to leave our enemies any clues as to what happened here tonight."

"No," said Sif. "We do not bury our dead. Leave Dey'in in the gorge, where the wild animals can claim him."

Vidar winced at the thought of what Hoenir might think if they did that. "That's not such a good idea," he said. "We have men down there." He neglected to give her any more details, for even if she was truly Magni's child—and it seemed she was—then how had she escaped the rebellion that had claimed him?

"Then we shall leave poor Dey'in in the brush," said Sif. "Either way, there will be little left of him for our enemies to guess at. They'll think he was only a hunter that the beasts took down."

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"As you say," said Vidar. N'arri nodded—it would be done.

Sif knelt then, touching the brow of the fallen lyos. She was silent for a moment. Finally, she rose. "All right," she said. "You can take him now."

Vidar met her gaze. Her eyes were soft and shining, but she did not weep. "Come with me now, Magni's daughter," he said. "I'd like a word alone with you. I think there's much you can tell me."

"Aye," said Sif. "But my companions will come with me. I'd hate to leave them in strange company, no matter how friendly."

She was used to having her way, it seemed. But a daughter of Magni would be accustomed to such things.

Nor could Vidar see a reason to refuse her her companions' company. "Fair enough," he said, and led them into the center of the dwarvin camp. By now, no one was still sleeping, and those that stood in the vicinity moved away to give them some privacy. But Vidar noticed that the dark elves glanced his way now and then, perhaps not trusting the intruders entirely.

"Sit down," he said, and they sat. "Now tell me—what has happened here in Alfheim?"

Sif expelled a long breath, and her fingers wandered to an intricate silver necklace she wore at her throat in elvish fashion. "Where to begin? With Skir'nir, of course...."

"I heard you mention that name," said Vidar. "It sounds like one I heard long ago."

"Aye," said Sif, "it might. There was a Skir'nir ages ago, who companioned Frey in Alfheim. He was a powerful lord here then, second only to Frey himself, and a powerful name to conjure by. This Skir'nir I speak of is his descendant and his namesake. Like his ancestor, he was popular among the people, well loved from Ilior to Dindamoron." Sif bowed her head. "Even I loved him." She looked up. "He was my brother. Not by birth, for both his parents were elves, but because we were raised under

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one roof. My mother took him in when both his own parents were killed in an avalanche, and he had no other kin to shelter him. Skir'nir was very little then. I remember when he came to sit at our board and share our wealth. We loved him—even my father, who does not give love easily. And I believed that he loved us."

"The treacherous whelp," spat Var'kald.

Sif was silent for a moment.

"What happened?" Vidar prodded. "What did he do?"

"About a year ago," Sif said, "my mother died. She had been our strength for so many years, we failed to notice that she'd been growing old. Skir'nir had been very close to her, and when she passed from us, he began to act strangely. He'd spend weeks at a time away from Hargard, hunting—he said—and roaming over the mountains. Each time he returned, he seemed more and more distant—more hostile, especially toward Magni. As if a poison were eating away at him from within."

"He was sowing the seeds of rebellion," said the taller lyos. "Subtly, of course, so that Magni would not know. But where he found a spark of dissatisfaction, of resentment that an Aesirman should rule in Alfheim, he fanned it into a flame. In time, he had enlisted conspirators from

the mountains to the sea."

"Aye." said Sif. "One day, Skir'nir was gone. The next, he'd returned with sword in hand, and half of Alfheim behind him. He took Hargard in a day and a night."

"No one escaped," said Var'kald.

"I fear," said Sif, "that my father may be dead, for he would never have stopped fighting as long as breath remained in him."

That sounded like the Magni that Vidar knew. A reckless fighter on the field of battle, a strange and silent lord off it. As a youth, apart and aloof, Magni had fled from Asaheim after the slaughter of Ragnarok—even as Vidar had. But here in Alfheim, he'd claimed the realm that Frey had relinquished with his death.

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It was hard for Vidar to picture Magni as a ruler—but time works its changes, and more than a thousand years had passed since he'd last seen Thor's son.

"G'lann and I were staying with Var'kald," Sif went on, "so we were safe from Skir'nir—at least for the moment. But we knew that he would search for us at Var'kald's hall, so we fled. We hid in the woods and in the hills, hoping that Asaheim might have gotten wind of our trouble, and that Vali would send help."

She smiled halfheartedly, for her bravado seemed to have melted with the telling of her tale. Still, it was a brave smile, and a beautiful one. "I see," she said, "that our hopes were rewarded. Here you sit, an Aesirman—and named after Odin's son, so you must be a great captain. And these dark ones about us—recruited from some other world, I trust, to save us from Skir'nir?"

Vidar did not elaborate—either on his own identity or on how they'd come to be in Alfheim. "Who," he asked, "is

G'lann?"

Sif smiled. "Forgive me," she said. "Of course, you would not know that I have a brother."

A brother? The plot thickened.

"Only our uncle Modi knew of us," said Sif, perhaps noticing Vidar's surprise. "Our father said that there were those in Asgard who might wish us harm if they knew about us. That's why we lived with Var'kald."

She frowned. "Now, of course, there's no reason for secrecy—Vali is our only hope. If we must be known in Asaheim now, then that's a chance we must take." She

glanced at Vidar as if he were one of those in Asaheim who might have wished to do away with her.

Magni had been wise to keep them hidden. Vali might have been uncomfortable with the existence of too many relatives in Alfheim, where he could not keep an eye on them. Modi's loyalty was unshakable; Magni's questionable, but he seemed satisfied with his elvish domain; Hoenir too much of a wanderer to bid for power; and all Vidar

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had wanted was to be left alone on Earth. But two young elves, fired by Odin's blood and enticed by the glory of Asgard... that might be more of a threat someday than Vali could allow.

"A brother," said Vidar. "And what happened to him? Where is he now?"
"My lady..." said Var-kald.

"We must trust" she answered, turning to the elf. Turning back toward Vidar, she added, "We have no choice. G'lann is in the hills. He's raising an army there, calling on all those we believe are still loyal to Magni's house." She hesitated, searching Vidar's eyes, then went on. "We were to meet tomorrow night, after I had scouted the forestlands to see where Skir'nir's forces were positioned—for it seemed that a great many of his troops were here in the woods. Now," she said, "I know why. To stop you from reaching Hargard."

"Aye," said Vidar. "We've met some of those troops already."

"Tell me," said Sif, her eyes lighting up suddenly, "is Modi on his way here, too?"

Vidar shook his head, and the light in her green eyes faded. "Nor is Vali. They had other wars to fight, as urgent as this one."

The taller lyos seemed to be weighing his words, sifting through them for a hint of treachery. These companions of Sif would do well in Asgard, Vidar mused.

"Then who leads this army?" asked Sif.

"I do," said Vidar. "And Hoenir, Odin's brother."
Sif's brow wrinkled. "Hoenir," she repeated. "He's one of the reasons my father kept us hidden." She paused, sizing Vidar up anew. "But Modi never mentioned a chieftain by the name of Vidar, not one important enough to lead an entire army. Unless..."
Vidar nodded. "Unless I'm the genuine article."
A smile spread itself over the elf-girl's face. "Good," she

said. "My father spoke well of you, though not often. He told us of your prowess as a warrior."

Vidar shrugged. That was a long time ago, and a reputation he was no longer proud of.

"You say that you're to meet your brother one night hence. But there must be more of you about, seeking out Skir'nir's troop strengths."

Sif nodded, though Var'kald shook his head in frustration- "But we're scattered throughout the woodlands, and not meant to see each other until we all meet with G'lann."

'Then stay with us," said Vidar. "Tomorrow, you can guide us to your meeting, and we can make a plan to coordinate the efforts of your lyos and our armies. Together, we'll be stronger—and we'll free Hargard more quickly.'

Sif met his gaze frankly. "Aye," she said, "but I would rather only you came, and perhaps a few others. It is not that I do not trust you—only that Skir'nir's helpers will spy the passage of an army as big as yours, and follow it to the gathering. Better not to attract attention to ourselves any sooner than we have to."

Vidar nodded. "Yes," he said. "You're right. I'm afraid that I'm a little rusty when it comes to troop movements and martial strategies."

Sif's eyes narrowed in thought for a moment. "Midgard, wasn't it? That's where you went off to rule by yourself?'

Vidar smiled. "That's where I went, but not to rule. Just to protect."

Sif smiled, too. "As Magni protected Alfheim."

"More or less," said Vidar. He shrugged. "We'll decide in the morning who is to accompany you. In the meantime, just find an empty spot and catch some sleep. Here,** he said, and removing his cloak, he offered it to Sif. "You'll be more comfortable with this."

"No,** she said. "I cannot. Besides, I have a cloak.*'

"Take it." said Vidar. "That thing is made for skulking

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about in the forest, not for warmth. It's my turn to stand watch, anyway."

Sif shook her head from side to side.

"Listen," said Vidar, standing, "how will I ever explain

to Magni that I let his daughter freeze to death?"

Sif considered for a moment, then accepted the cloak.
"You are kind, my lord—even to mention my father as if he were alive."

"We've no proof that he is not," said Var'kald.

"Aye," said Vidar. "Until we know otherwise, we can hope."

"There's always that." said the tall elf sarcastically.
"Now come away, my lady. Perhaps we can salvage some sleep, if Var'kald and / do not freeze to death.'*

"In a moment, H'limif," said Sif. Then, unexpectedly, she stood and kissed Vidar on the cheek. "It's good to find that you have kin in times of need," she said.

Vidar felt himself blushing. He didn't know what to say, so he said nothing.

Then Sif and her companions stalked off in search of an empty patch of ground. Vidar watched the mists swirl about them.

Nice to have kin? Funny, he'd not looked at it that way. Not recently, anyway.

XI

Thor and his son Magni rode at the head of a long line of Aesirmen, making their way through the gray, frost-rimed mountain passages of the hrimthursar's domain. The place they sought was called Grotunagardar, a four-comered stone citadel set into a barren mountain hollow by the river Vang. A chieftain among the giants, Hrungnir by name, lived there—and in his complacency, he had boasted that he'd break Odin in half one day soon, then feed him to his own ravens. Beyond that, he said, he'd push Asgard into the sea and carry off its women.

It was true that Hrungnir was the largest and strongest of the giants of Jotunheim, but it was also true that he had the biggest mouth.

Odin's sons could brook no such boasts. Besides, Hrungnir had a herd of wild white horses that the Aesir coveted. So they crossed over into the bleak world of the

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hrimthursar, the always-whiter home, to teach Hrungnir a lesson. '

It was Magni's first adventure, for he'd been too young to fight giants until now, and he fingered his swordhilt

nervously. Or at least, it seemed so to Thor.

When they arrived at Grotunagardar, Hrungnir and all his warriors were waiting for them. The giant was as brazen and boastful as he'd been reputed to be.

"What have we here?" he cried, as if amused, "Little Aesirmen, come to lose their lives? Well, we'll oblige you, if that's really what you want."

"It's you who will lose his life today," said Magni, who could not forget that his mother, Sif, was one of the beauties that Hrungnir had vowed to carry off.

"Who are you?" returned Hrungnir. "Why, you're the littlest pipsqueak of all."

"I'm Thor's son," said Magni, for it was too late to take back his words. "And a match for anyone in Jotunheim."

"Really?" said Hrungnir. "Then perhaps you'd like to try your luck against Judnir. We make fun of him here for his inability to fight—but he should be a pleasant diversion for so great a warrior as yourself. At least, until we can find some greater fighter to test your mettle."

Thor sat his horse, tight-lipped. He could not intervene, for his son's honor was at stake.

"Very well, then," said Magni, dismounting. "Bring forth this Judnir."

At once, a burly, hulking hrimthursar separated himself from the others. He seemed grim even for a giant, and his muscles looked as hard as rock. His chest was as broad as Magni's leg was long. Only Hrungnir himself was bigger and broader.

Magni crouched, sword in hand, and the giant fell upon him, brandishing a huge spear. Judnir's first pass came within inches of the Aesir youth's cheek. When he tried again, he missed Magni's ribs by only a hairs-

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breadth. But the third time, Magni hacked off the head of Judnir's spear and buried his blade in the giant's belly.

Judnir stood there for a moment, looking quizzically at the sword that protruded from his stomach. Then he toppled forward, and the ground shook.

A cheer went up from the Aesir. Then Thor raised his hammer and said, "Don't grieve for Judnir, Hrungnir—you'll join him soon enough in death."

"I think that I have something to say about that," roared the giant. "I'm not afraid of your hammer, Thor. You're known far and wide for your empty boasts."

That was all the Thunderer needed to hear. With a cry of rage, he vaulted from his horse's back and charged at Hrungnir. When they clashed, it sounded like a mountain splitting in half. But Hrungnir gave way, little by little, until he stood on the threshold of his stone citadel.

Then Thor drew his hammer back and struck the hrimthursar square in the middle of his forehead. Hrungnir's skull shattered like an overripe fruit, and blood flew all over. But Thor was blinded by the giant's gore, so that he did not know Hrungnir was done for. Flailing wildly, he struck the doorpost of the stone fortress. Lightning flashed, and with a terrible tremor, the stone walls crumbled in on themselves. The noise was deafening.

The other Aesirmen, meanwhile, had slain or driven off Hrungnir's comrades. But when they looked around for Thor, to congratulate him on his victory, the Thunderer was nowhere to be found.

Only Magni spied his father's foot sticking out of the rubble of Grotunagardar. Frantically, he hauled a great chunk of stone away, and uncovered red-bearded Thor, gray with dust.

The Aesirmen breathed a sigh of relief when Odin's son stood up, even if his legs were a little wobbly. And the first thing he did was crush Magni in his arms—holding the youth away from him, he laughed.

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"You've earned something today, my son. I promised Odin the pick of Hrungnir's horses, but Odin will have the second pick. You will have the first."

Magni cast a glance at the wild white beasts that roamed in the barren valley. Then he showed his father that he had sense as well as skill with the sword.

"No," said Magni. "Let Odin have his choice of the horses. No beast is worth the jealousy of the Lord of the Ravens."

Sin Skolding
Radsey, A.D. 480

XIII

The sun writhed in and out of the leaves overhead, so that they walked alternately in bright light and morning's gray shadows. Here in the forest, the mists were not so thick—but the trees and the bracken underfoot still glistened with wetness.

"I don't know how my father does it," said Eric, frown-

ing. "I hear a thousand and one opinions on how to light a fire, when to break camp, what to eat and where to sleep... and that's only the beginning."

He swiped at a spiderweb.

"One man urgently reports the theft of his cloak. He says he knows who took it. When I confront the man, he denies it. 'I did not/ he said. *He's lost his damned cloak.' •Then where is it?' asks the first man. *How should I know?' says the second. 'I'll spit you like a pig,* says the first. *Come try it,' says the second."

Eric sighed- "On and on-it's enough to make me wish I were back in Skatalund, guarding the damned gates. This

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business of leading armies into war is not all it's made out to be."

Vidar smiled a conspiratorial smile. "Aye," he said, under his breath. "I wonder if I'm still cut out for this myself. The dwarvin are a loyal and lighthearted lot, but I get little tired of having to call a halt every time I want to relieve myself."

There was more to it than that. There was the dread of having their blood on his hands—but Vidar did not speak of such things.

"I'd always thought," said Eric, "that a man obeyed the whims of his lord- It seems it's the other way around—unless I'm doing something very wrong." He laughed. "I can't tell you how good it feels to walk freely, even here, where we may be turned into pincushions at any moment. I never prized my liberty so much as I do now."

Perhaps by the time Eric would have to take the reins in Skatalund, he would have hardened himself to the exigencies of command. After all, it was what he'd been bred for, Vidar mused.

But what of Vidar himself? He, too, had been born to vie for power, and he'd thrown that away to find a life in Midgard. Yet he'd promised B'rannit that he'd no longer be a distant spectator in the affairs of Asaheim, that he'd tear Vali off his throne to stop his bloody empire-building.

And now that he'd taken the pulse of Asgard's politics, he wondered just how difficult that might be. With such as Njal about, Vidar would be hard-pressed to even find a dwelling within the black stone walls—much less a loyal following. But Gagni seemed reasonable, and so did Torvi. Perhaps in time, Vidar could win them over....

Of course, there was another possibility. Invading Asaheim with a host from somewhere else—perhaps one of

the worlds Vali had enslaved—but the prospect of spilling Aesir blood, even for the best of reasons, made Vidar's stomach turn—
Then what makes the iron so strong?" At the sound of

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that question, Vidar turned to see who had posed it. He saw that it was Ullir, his brow furrowed, and deeply engrossed in conversation with N'arri. The elf spoke with his hands as best he could, but Ullir still looked puzzled.

Only a dozen of the troops Vidar had led had been chosen to follow Sif into the hills. There were, four Aesirmen, including Ullir; Eric and another human, plus a couple of his Utgard-thursar; and four of the dwarvin who followed Vidar. Together with H'limif and Var'kald and Sif herself, the group was a bit larger than Magni's daughter would have liked—for it would be difficult to travel through the woods unnoticed. But Vidar wanted to be able to put up a fight if they were discovered—and besides, politics dictated that each group be represented in such a mission. In the end, Sif agreed that it would be good to have a few good bowmen around, despite the risk.

Hoenir had grumbled, of course. He was no more comfortable than Vidar at the head of an army, but he understood the situation. He knew that as a gaut—a creator, like [Odin—he was the most qualified to fend off an attack if it came.

Hoenir's reaction to meeting Sif had been a little more complicated. Perhaps he had only been surprised to see that Magni had a daughter. But the way he'd stared at her...

Then again, it might have been his basic lechery showing through. Sif was their kinswoman—but she was not unattractive.

They'd left about an hour after first light and headed due north. The going was slow, for the forest was thick with vines and brush, and there was always the fear of a sudden barrage.

Once, something had come pounding through the trees, churning the dark earth and fallen leaves—and Vidar's hand had closed around his hilt before he saw that it was only a wild boar. The beast snorted and was gone in an instant, probably more startled than they were.

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In time, the ground rose and the forest thinned out a

little. The mists fell away to gather in the hollows, so that the way before them was mostly clear. There was a scent of pine and the sharp fragrance of cedar, and the air grew colder in their lungs.

Vidar felt at home here, for the woods of Alfheim were not all that different from those around his house back in Woodstock. Without warning, images of Earth flooded his mind like a river overflowing its banks.

Alissa. whose brave, accusing smile still cut at him when he thought of her. The little gallery where Frank Cerucci sold Vidar's sculptures—if he hadn't yanked them out by now for a more profitable exhibition. Phil—whose warm family life was Vidar's greatest joy. These images were at once the core of his longing and his fear—his reasons for keeping Midgard inviolate from Odin. And from Vali as well.

But there were other images, too. Lurking beneath pleasant thoughts of Phil and his prosaic life were the bloated faces of suffering and death. In nearly two thousand years on Earth, Vidar had seen more pain than anyone—even an immortal—could live with. So he thrust it all into the darkness again, the dreamy afternoons along with the madhouse shadows—lest they eat wormholes in his sanity.

The slope grew steeper, the trees leaned farther apart, and by midday they had emerged from the deep woods into a land of long green meadows and blunt brown hills. Stands of birch and pine cut broad swaths across the countryside, but mostly the ground was open and honest. That meant trouble, of course—for their party would be easy to spot if there were any of Skir'nir's lyos about.

They paused for a few minutes in an island of pine trees, clustered close in the cool shade and the pine needles, to eat cheese and graincakes that they'd brought with them from Utgard. Both were getting a bit hard, but they were still edible. They passed from one to another a bladder full

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of water that one of the thursar had carried, and though the lyos darted curious glances at the giants and at the dwarvin, they all seemed to get along well enough.

Ullir, who appeared to have an interest in smithing, still pressed N'arri and the other dark elves for their forge secrets. One of the Aesirmen, Gilling, traced his lineage back to one-armed Tyr for the benefit of the expressionless thursar.

Sif and Eric huddled by themselves, their frozen breath mingling in the air. They sat so close together that it was difficult to hear what they were saying—but both were

smiling as if war had never come to Alfheim. Vidar envied them.

Suddenly, there was a cry just loud enough for them to

hear. They pressed themselves into the carpet of pine needles. Vidar looked up and saw Var'kald pointing north. Then he saw the one who had cried out through the trees.

It was a lyos on a white horse, and some fifty or so archers trailing behind him. They streamed through a depression between two hills, and their leader called back orders to them.

"F'orri," said H'limif, and there was no mistaking the venom in his tone.

"Aye," said Siff, her voice little more than a whisper. "And he rides one of my father's horses." Absentmindedly, she twisted her silver necklace around her fingers. "At least the beasts survived."

"Perhaps we can surprise them," said Eric. "They haven't seen us yet."

"No." said Vidar. "There are too many of them—and we've got too much to lose. If we don't reach G'lann, he'll never know he has help."

"Then what do we do?" asked Gilling.

"Nothing," said Vidar. "We wait—and we keep our mouths shut." H'limif muttered something, but it was difficult to argue with Vidar's reasoning—especially when Eric, Sif and Ullir voiced their assent.

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In a few minutes, the lyos had passed by them, but not close enough to spy them through the trees. Yet Vidar did not breathe easily until the last buckskin-clad bowman had disappeared around the slope of a hillock.

Slowly, they rose, still careful not to make any loud noises. "I would that Forri and I had met alone here," said Sif. "He'd not be riding my father's horse for very long."

"It's the breed that Magni got in Jotunheim, isn't it?" asked Vidar.

"Aye," Sif sighed. "Long ago. My father's gift from Thor."

"I know," said Vidar, getting to his feet. "I was there.**"

Sif glanced at him. "Were you?" She smiled. "I forgot how long you have lived."

"When you put it that way," said Vidar, "it seems like a lot longer.**"

"Forgive me, then," said Sif, in earnest.

"Forgiven," said Vidar.

So they went on, and the hills grew higher and more humpbacked, while the spaces between them broadened. As the day dwindled, the isolated patches, of woodland grew sparser and, finally, grew not at all. They climbed the green slopes and the mists returned, coiling about their feet and their knees. The air began to smell of grains and growing things, and once or twice, in the distance, they could see the fields of some elvish fanner basking in circles of golden sunlight.

Then the sun succumbed to the horizon, lending the clouds an edge of fire. The wind picked up a little, and it hinted of mountain frost and ice-locked lakes. The sun spread its wings of red-gold and burned like a phoenix, leaving the sky desolate and sullen in the end.

Darkness fell, and the stars appeared, wavering in the mist. The moon rose. no longer full, but diminished on one side.

"My lady.**" said H'limif, after they had traveled for hours in silence and night. They had come to a ridge that

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rose between two wide valleys. "The gathering was to have been just beyond that next rise—but I hear nothing."

Sif's brows knit. "Aye," she said. Then, "Perhaps they were prevented from meeting. Perhaps Skir'nir got wind of the gathering and they met elsewhere—or not at all."

But Var'kald cast a look at H'limif that did not inspire hope.

Sif hastened down the side of the ridge, the rest of them trying to keep pace with her, and halfway to the rise ahead of them, she broke into a run. The others ran, too, and Vidar felt an icy premonition trickle down his back.

Sif was the first to reach the hilltop, and her hands flew to her face. When Vidar came up alongside her, he saw why, for all that had gathered to meet them on that sudden stretch of rocky gray slope were the carrion'eaters and the dead.

H'limif reached back into his quiver and drew out an arrow. He nocked it and let fly, and a thick black cloud of the corpse-eaters rose into the air like smoke.

The bodies were strewn all over, abandoned as they had fallen. Vidar's gorge began to rise, and he swallowed hard. Sif just stood there, expressionless, her hands covering her

mouth as if she would scream otherwise. But tears stood out in her green elvish eyes, and her jaw worked as if she were chewing hard, bitter fruit.

"We must search," she said finally, the slightest tremor in her voice. "To see if G'lann is among them." Then she descended the slope before them and approached the field of corpses.

"Wait," cried Gilling. "There's someone moving there," he said, gesturing toward the far side of the carnage. As he spoke, a slim silhouette rose from among the dead.

"Who are you?" cried Sif, and her voice echoed despairingly.

The spectral figure was silent for a moment. Then he called back. "Ar'on, my lady, son of Ar'vid." And in that voice, too, there was desolation and grief.

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"Ar'vid." said Var'kald. "It was by his farm that we were to meet."

The one who named himself Ar'on threaded his way among the corpses to reach them, and Sif waited patiently, though he walked slowly and once or twice staggered.

It was only when Ar'on stood before them in the ghostly mists and the moonlight that Vidar could see how young he was, and how the sword he bore was made for a bigger warrior than he. Even Sif looked old next to Ar'on, whose pale cheeks were wet with tears of grief.

"My lady," he said, and fell to one knee.

"Stand," said Sif, "and tell me what happened here."

The youth looked at her, his eyes as green as hers, and as wide with horror. "It was Skir'nir," he said. "He knew, and he came with a great army, such as the tales tell of. We had no chance, but we made a stand anyway." He paused and blinked, as if he were seeing the battle again before his eyes. "We fought—but there were, too many. I... I must have gotten hit on the head. Only I woke—I, out of all these." His outstretched arm swept over the field of death. "While my father and my two brothers spilled their blood into the earth." At last, his voice cracked with anguish.

Suddenly, Sif embraced him. Then, gently, she put him away from her.

"I grieve with you," she said, "Ar'on Ar'vid-son. But one of my kinsmen fought here this night, too. Tell me—did you see G'lann?"

Ar'on shrugged and shook his head. "I saw him at the start of the battle, my lady, when we lined up against

Skir'nir*s charge. But not since."

"Then you don't know if he fell or not?" asked Var'kald.

"No, my lord."

Sif's shoulders quivered, as a pang of dread took hold of her. "Rest now," she told Ar'on. "I must go to search for my brother as you searched for yours."

With that, she walked by him, down toward the sea of

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corpses. "My lady," said Ar'on, turning, and he began to follow her. Sif stopped to look at him. "I can help you look. I would know him if I saw him—and there are many corpses to search through."

"It's all right, lad," said Var'kald. "We'll help her, H'Hmif and I."

"No," said Sif. "Ar'on will help, too, if he wishes."

So the four of them went down to walk among the fallen. Eric followed them, but only as far as the place where the grass ended and the stone emerged. He knew that he could be of no help to her, but something drew him after her all the same. As she made her way from one fair-haired corpse to the next, Eric's eyes never left her.

The place reminded Vidar of a thousand battlefields. It reeked of blood, and there was something in the attitudes of the slain—the ways in which they had sprawled—that bespoke an inexorable fate, a beast-thing they could not avoid. It always seemed that something other than their enemies had slaughtered them—something ravening, never sated.

From atop the rise, Vidar could see that it would not be easy to find even a brother's face amid all the others—not after the crows had torn them apart. But more than once, Sif paused to kneel next to an elf's body, where he'd fallen facedown. Var'kald or H'Hmif would roll it over so that they could see who it was. Each time, Sif turned away and went on, her face a mingling of disappointment and relief.

Vidar found himself searching also—for signs that the enemy might be returning. But from his vantage point, he could see the mist-laden terrain only so far. If Skir'nir did come back, they would not have much warning.

Perhaps two hundred lyos had fallen here. Sif had seen every one, it seemed, before she started her trek back across the battlefield. In those few moments, her regal bearing faltered, and she looked like what she was, after all—a child forced to bear the heavy weight of war. Var'kald and H'limif supported her at the last, for it

looked as though her knees might crumple and stretch her out on the hard, cold stone beside the fallen. Ar'on walked behind them, his head bowed.

When she reached Eric, she slumped into his arms. He held her for a moment while she regained her strength. Then she left him too, and made her way back up the rise. Her eyes were red-rimmed and her skin was like candle wax,

She looked up into Vidar's face, stopping before him. "He is not among them," she said. Then she looked down and shook her head, perplexed. The wind dragged at her hair and it bannered out in a glory of copper threads.

"Did anyone escape?" H'limif asked of Ar'on.

Ar'on shrugged. "I do not know. When I awoke, everyone was dead."

"G'lann must have escaped," said Var'kald. "Or we would have found him here."

"Unless," said Sif, raising her head, "unless Skir'nir claimed my brother's body."

There was silence for a moment,

"We should have been here," said Sif. "To help. If we had not tarried overnight.. -"

Var'kald snorted. "What help could we have been? It is fortunate that we were not here when the attack came, my lady. At least we still live to continue the fight."

"Aye," said Sif. "The fight."

"Only a portion of those loyal to you lie here," said H'limif. "We'll gather somewhere else, where Skir'nir won't find us so easily."

But Sif would not be encouraged. "I think not," she said. "How many will dare to defy Skir'nir now? How many will answer our call--after this?" Even as she stretched out her arm over the battlefield, the carrion birds were descending again on the corpses, squawking and fluttering as they divided up their claims.

Suddenly, there was the sound of hooves clattering on native stone, and a handful of riders crested the far side of

the slope. When they saw Vidar's band, they reined in their mounts and regarded it, heads turning to talk to one another. Then one rider struck out from the rest, his piebald stallion spurred to a gallop. He rode along the

fringe of the slaughterfield, just outside the area where the bodies lay.

N'arri fitted a shaft to his bowstring, and the other dwarvin were only a moment behind him. He brought the notching to his cheek and sighted.

"No!" cried Sif, grabbing N'arri's wrist. And a moment later, "It's him! It's G'lann!"

The rider was upon them in seconds, slipping off his horse's back before the beast could stop itself, and running toward them like a wolf in pursuit of prey. Sif held out her arms and he hugged her around, lifting her into the air and swinging her about him until she was dizzy. Finally, he put her down on the ground and released her. "I knew," he said, "that you'd make it."

Vidar saw that G'lann had more of the Aesirman in him than the elf. He was bigger and broader than any lyos alive, and he had neither Sits grace nor her fineness of feature. His visage was blunt, harsh, as if it had been carved out of stone, and masked now with the grime of battle. His hands were dark, too, still black with dried blood. Only the green depths of his eyes, the paleness of his skin and the strawlike color of his hair bespoke his mother's elvish heritage.

After Sif, G'lann embraced Var'kald, and then H'limif. A necklace of silver, like his sister's, jangled as he moved. When he was finished with greeting those he knew, he surveyed the rest of the company with cool detachment.

"Strange friends you have," he said to Sif, and his voice was deep but melodic. His eyes wandered over the dwarvin and the thursar. "I've never seen such friends." As he spoke, the rest of his companions rode up behind them. They dismounted, though warily at the sight of the offworiders, and Sif embraced each of them in turn.

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Vidar stepped forward and held out his hand. "You must be G'lann," he said. The elf's eyes narrowed grimly in his dark, soiled face, but he took Vidar's hand. If Vidar had had any doubts as to G'lann's parentage, the strength of his handclasp dispelled them.

"**Aye," said the elf. "I'm G'lann. Magni's son. And you?"

"My name is Vidar."

Sif came up beside Vidar then and took his arm. "He's the one that they called Jawbreaker before Magni left Asgard," she explained. "Our grandfather's brother."

G'lann's eyes widened. "Odin's son? That Vidar?"

"Aye," she said. "And these with him are humans,

thursar and dwarvin from Utgard, allies of these Aesinnen." She indicated each group in its turn. "But there's a whole army of them on the other side of the forest, G'lann--big enough to stop Skir'nir, perhaps, even without the lyos who are still loyal to us."

G'lann smiled bitterly at his sister's hope. "No," he said, "no army can help us now."

Sifs fire died. "Why not?" she asked.

"Aye," said Var'kald, "why not?"

G'lann held their gazes. "Because he's gone after the sword."

"What are you talking about?" asked H'limif.

"Angrum," said Vidar. "Prey's blade, right?"

G'lann turned toward him with more than a little surprise and suspicion in his eyes.

"Aye," he said grimly. "But how did you know that?"

"Because we believe that Skir'nir may have an ally--someone called Ygg. He started just such a rebellion as Skir'nir's in Utgard, and we've tracked him to Alfheim. Ygg would not have come this way unless a great prize were at stake here. And we believe that he may know where to find the sword."

G'lann nodded tiredly. "He does," said Magni's son, "if he travels with Skir'nir."

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"Skir'nir?" asked Var'kald. "How would he know where the Vaninnan's blade is--or even if it exists?"

Sif and G'lann exchanged glances. Then Sif turned to Var'kald-- "Forgive us," she said. "It was a secret. Not even Magni knew of the sword. Skir'nir found out its whereabouts from his father, for the knowledge had been passed on from the first Skir'nir through the generations. Our brother shared the secret with us--because if he had died without an heir, the sword would have been lost to Alfheim forever."

"That," said G'lann, "was long before he went insane." He looked back at the corpses and the black, moving skin of the carrion birds that covered them. He wiped at his face with the back of his hand. "He told us that Skir'nir, Frey's companion, had sworn to pick up the blade if Frey ever fell, and carry it in Alfheim's defense. When Frey was slain at Ragnarok, the elf did as he had sworn. But the battle had made all weapons seem like poison to him, and after he had smuggled it back to Alfheim, he found that he could not bear its company."

"Aye," said Sif, picking up the tale when her brother's voice dropped off. "He had never wanted to wield such power. But he had vowed that the sword would guard the elfworld. nor could he let Angrum fall into the hands of Alfheim's enemies. So Skir'nir broke part of his promise to the Vanirman, but kept the rest. He brought the sword back to Alfheim under his cloak, but he hid it high in the mountains. None could find it but his kin, to whom he entrusted its whereabouts."

"And if Skir'nir knew where the sword was," said Var'kald, "he may have gone after it. For the measure of legitimacy it would have given his rebellion—and to be able to meet our rescuers from Asaheim with a weapon great enough to turn them back."

"He has gone after the sword," said G'lann. "After this... horror, we who escaped—fled when all was lost—saw which way Skir'nir's army went. And it was headed

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for Lofni Pass—the way into the mountains that would bring him to the sword." He looked at the faces around him, the familiar ones and the strange ones, and his green eyes glittered like ice in the moonlight. "But there is a way to find the blade first—if we move fast enough."

"I'm listening," said Vidar.

"We all are," said Ullir.

"Good," said G'lann, and his mouth twisted into a grim smile. "We can't overtake him in the mountains. He's too far ahead." He met the eyes of Vidar, Var'kald and then Sif. "But if we pass through the gate on Munarvag, we can journey through Nidavellir instead of the mountains, and reach the place where the sword is hidden well before Skir'nir."

"Nidavellir?" asked Eric, a bit uneasily. "Is that the same Nidavellir we name to scare children in Utgard?"

"Yes," said Vidar, as G'lann's plan unfolded before him. "Not a nice place, not even to visit."

"A dangerous place," said Sif. "Very dangerous." She stared at her brother and sighed.

"What does he intend?" asked Gillig of Vidar. "You seem to have an idea."

"Munarvag is an island," said Vidar. "West of here and west of the coast— There's a gate there that leads to Nidavellir. And if I recall correctly, there's another gate, elsewhere in Nidavellir, that leads back to the vicinity of the highest peaks in Alfheim."

"Aye," said G'lann, his fists clenching. "It's dangerous—but it can be done. One gate is not so far away from

the other, and it's the only way to keep Skir'nir from beating us to the sword."

"The gates are not that far apart," Vidar agreed. "But if the lava's flowing in an inconvenient direction, the way will be impassable. If we take that route, it will be all or nothing—we beat Skir'nir to the sword, or we give up every chance of stopping him. If we follow him through the mountains..."

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'Then we'll never catch him," said G'lann. "This is the only way.' He looked at Sif. "It's the way I'm going—with or without anyone's help."

Vidar frowned. Try as he might, he could see no other possibilities with a real chance of success. "You'll not go alone," he said finally. G'lann turned to him, wolfljke.

"Good," he said simply. But Vidar felt his gratitude.

"And how can I allow someone else to share my brother's peril before me?" asked Sif— G'lann smiled a sad smile.

"Then count me in, too," said Eric.

There was an uncomfortable silence for a moment, as each looked to everyone else, assenting without words. "Well," said Var'kald, "is there anyone who does not wish to visit Nidavellir with us?"

No one spoke.

"Then we must find horses and ride—now," said G'lann. "For the coast. We can't wait for Agard's army—and it would not help us much where we're going. Speed is more precious to us than strength now, and fewer can travel faster." He stopped for a moment, his eyes narrowing, and then turned to Ar'on. "Did your father have horses, lad?"

"Aye," said Ar'vid's son. "Enough for all of us, my lord. If Skir'nir hasn't driven them off. Or stolen them. Or worse."

"Lead us to them," said G'lann. But before he left to follow Ar'on, he wheeled to survey the field of death once more. Vidar saw the elf's shoulders rise once and fall, and he thought he heard him mutter something.

So they left the carrion to the carrion birds and followed Ar'on to his father's steading, a stone house with a layer of turf for a roof. The horses had not been touched by the marauders, to Ar'on's relief— As he had said, there were more than enough beasts to go around. But after Vidar had swung up on top of a dark brown gelding, he saw the youth disappear into Ar'vid's house.

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Nor did he emerge until a couple of minutes later, a leather sack slung over his shoulder.

"What's that?" asked G'lann.

Ar'on peered up at him in great earnest, a country lad confronting the lord of the land. "It's my harp, my lord."

G'lann shook his head from side to side. "There's no place for a harp on such a journey," he said. "You can't carry a harp in Nidavellir—it will slow you down."

"No," said Sif. All eyes turned to her. "What better place for a harp, G'lann, than in Nidavellir? We'll need something to lighten our hearts there."

G'lann's blunt features softened. "Bring it then—as my sister wishes."

But Vidar had seen Nidavellir before. Even an orchestra couldn't lighten hearts in that place.

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It was two days' ride to Ilior, on the western sea, where G'lann believed they would have the best chance of stealing a boat and sailing it to Munarvag. The terrain in between was mostly long, graceful meadows, farmlands and low, round hills. They cut across them at a gallop, resting only when they came to a stream from which the horses might drink. But the air was cool, and Ar'vid had bred his horses well—they did not falter or shorten their strides, but consumed great distances with the churning hunger of their hooves.

Their company numbered twenty-three after they'd sent a lyos—who knew the countryside—and an Aesirman—whom Hoenir would sooner trust—to deliver their plan to Hoenir. Vidar knew that his uncle would balk at Vidar's prolonged absence, which left him sole leader of the army. But if he followed Vidar's directions and pursued Skir'nir through Lofni Pass—as insurance—he'd be too busy to get mad.

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If Nidavellir proved uncooperative, and Skir'nir got to the sword first, Hoenir might not be able to stand against him. If G'lann's plan worked, and he reached the sword first, there might be no need for Hoenir. But there was always the chance that his forces might come in handy up there in the mountains—and on this vast chessboard that Odin had created, one moved one's pieces as best one

could. Only if Odin got his hands on Prey's blade would it be checkmate, for that was the move to be feared most.

Did Skir'nir believe that Odin would allow him to keep the sword after he found it? Perhaps at first he would. But in time the blade would find its way into Odin's hands. The All-father would never let an underling have such power when it could be his for the taking—that had been his way even before he'd gone mad.

The dew was thick and plentiful in the morning, and the slopes often slippery, but G'lann led the way with skill and patience. Gentleness was not a trait Vidar would have associated with the elf, but with the horse that bore him, he was gentle indeed.

Vidar rode up alongside him. "You handle horses welt," he said, and not entirely out of tribute to G'lann's horsemanship. He was more than a little curious about this son whom Magni had kept hidden for so long.

"It's my father's talent I've inherited," said the elf. "He's the one who taught me to treat them as I would treat myself—with fairness and with patience. Once you've mastered that trick, you've mastered horses."

He paused, frowning. "We had two dozen horses in Hargard, of the kind that my father had stolen from Jotunheim."

"I remember their forebears," said Vidar.

"Then you know how beautiful they were," said G'lann, an undertone of ferocity building in his voice. "And they're probably dead now, or driven into the wild if they had enough luck to escape Skir'nir's madness." His mouth

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twisted, and he turned to Vidar. "For that alone, I could flay Skir'nir alive. Perhaps I'll yet get the chance."

"Well," said Vidar, "if it's any consolation, at least one of those horses still lives. We saw someone called F*orri riding it on the way to the gathering."

"F*orri?" asked G'lann. He smiled thinly. "Aye. His was one of the families that Skir'nir enlisted first—and that animal was his reward." He snorted in disgust.

"What made him turn on you like that?" asked Vidar.

G'lann shrugged. "I do not know. Does it matter? There is no excuse for what he's done—what he did back there, at Ar'vid's farm. I will make him pay dearly for that—and for Magni's death as well."

Vidar let a moment fall before he asked the next ques-

tion. "You think that Magni's dead, then?"

G'lann nodded. "Var'kald and H'limif say that there is hope—but I think not." His brow writhed over his elf-green eyes. Then he turned toward Vidar and said, "Enough of me. What about you, Vidar Jawbreaker? Sif tells me that what my father said about you—that you exiled yourself to Midgard—is true." He searched Vidar's face for a moment. "Why?"

"Because," said Vidar, "I'd grown to dislike the smell of blood and iron. I'd had enough of that. Asgard had crumbled. All my brothers—or almost all—were dead. There were just more reasons to go than to stay."

G'lann grunted. "Have you ever had second thoughts?" he asked.

"As a matter of fact," said Vidar, "I have. Why?"

The elf smiled grimly, rising and falling with the rhythm of his horse's gait. His necklace of silver plates jangled like wind-chimes, "Not long ago, I asked to come to Asgard," he said. "Not to stay—just to see what it would be like to walk the streets that Magni walked as a youth. The streets that Odin walked even before that. Some of the lyos go back and forth through the gate to Asgard all the time—or did until Skir'nir turned this land into a battleground."

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G'lann paused, gathering his words. "My uncle Modi agreed that it would be a good idea for me to see Asgard. He said that I would be ill-advised to go there openly, as Magni's heir—but I would only be another lyos unless one looked closely, and then there are elves living in Asaheim whose fathers were Aesir. I told Magni of this, but he still forbade my going. I reminded him that we are no longer defenseless children, Sif and I. We need no protection—not from anyone, in Asaheim or elsewhere. Magni laughed. He said that I would not boast so if I knew Vali as he did."

Vidar shrugged. "Vali is a tough customer."

"But the world has changed," said G'lann. "Magni is dead now. You know of us. Even Hoenir, whom Magni singled out as one we should look out for—even he knows of us. When this is all over," said the elf, "I shall see Asgard. And not concealed under a cloak, but as the son of Odin's grandson."

Yet G'lann looked haggard as he said this, the pain of his father's loss rending him more than he cared to show. How different he was from Sif.—who let her emotions flow freely. She concealed almost nothing—he, almost everything.

Late in the afternoon, they found a river that ran across their path beneath steep, grassy banks. It was not easy to find a way down one bank and up the other, but G'lann did it, and the others followed. On the other side, they decided to rest the horses and take something to eat. Some, including Vidar, ate standing up, for he was not used to long rides on horseback, and his hindquarters reminded him of that fact.

But Eric and Sif ate together, off to one side, beneath a tree that overhung the riverbank. By the way she laughed when Eric jested with her—and the way she regarded him when he turned away—Vidar knew that there was more growing between them than road companionship. Perhaps it was their youth that had forged a bond. for Sif was

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young as her race counted the years. Perhaps it had nothing to do with youth.

But Vidar noticed, and he was not the only one. G'lann, too, glanced at his sister and Eric from time to time, and 'he did not smile when Sif did.

Before long, they had mounted again, following the pale sun into the western sky. They did not see any of Skir'nir's lyos, and Var'kald surmised that most of the rebels were either in the mountains with Skir'nir or holed up at Hargard.

But the hills did part to reveal the stone walls of elvish farmhouses, distanced by mist, which was growing thicker every hour. They gave these places a wide berth, for no one could be sure where allegiances lay these days in Alfheim. Especially, thought Vidar, in the wake of the slaughter near Ar'vid's farm.

The afternoon grew old and chill. The sun ignited the edge of the hills as it settled amid the mists, finally yielding to nightfall. Vidar and one of the thursar—a behemoth by the name of Jam—kept the first watch.

At first, the giant said nothing, looking out over the still, silent meadows and rubbing his huge, hairy hands together for warmth. His small black eyes glistened in the moonlight, as inscrutable as the stars. Finally, Vidar spoke.

"Long way from home, isn't it?"

The thursar nodded, turning toward him and regarding him in that stone-faced way that characterized his race. He looked as if he would answer, but only his lips drew back, exposing his beastlike fangs. His eyes were dark pebbles beneath the surface of a shallow stream.

"Have you a family back in Skatalund?" asked Vidar.

"Aye," said the giant, nodding his shaggy head. Vidar stilt found it strange to stand and chat with a thursar, when his youth had been spent sizing them up across the length of his blade. The thursar of Utgard, after all, looked no different from the hrimthursar that had torn down Asgard. They only acted differently.

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"Two sons and a small daughter, my lord," said the giant. His voice was like rocks grinding together. "My mate died in childbirth with the youngest."

"Sorry to hear that," said Vidar. He knew that the thursar could feel grief—his sojourn in Utgard had taught him that. The giants had emotions—they just could not show them. In a way, they were like G'lann.

Jam breathed deeply, his great chest expanding, his flared nostrils expelling twin clouds of steam. He stared at the moon. "My sister will see to the young ones while I am away," he said, as if that were all that was important.

"You know," said Vidar, "my own mother died in childbirth." The giant's head tilted, as if that were of some interest. He turned toward Vidar again. "Her name was Gridh. One of Odin's concubines."

"I thought," said Jam, "that the Aesir were deathless, my lord."

Vidar smiled. "We are—until we die. In childbirth, of poison or at the point of a sword. There are as many ways for Aesir to perish as there are for thursar—or for humans. You've been listening to your Utgardian priests too long, Jam."

The thursar grunted. His savage, skull-like face didn't move at all, but Vidar could see the flicker of turmoil in Jam's brain all the same. It had been the same way with Stim, Vidar's giant companion in Utgard. He, too, had had some difficulty looking his deity square in the eye and accepting him for a thing of flesh and blood. In Utgard, the Aesir were still worshiped as gods.

"We were taught to fear the Aesir," said Jam. "To hold VaU in our hearts, and to fear him."

Fear, Vidar mused, was a different matter altogether. Considering his family's track record—starting with Odin and proceeding right through Vali's reign—a little fear wasn't a bad idea—

"The elf," said Jam. "G'lann. He is Aesir, too?"

At first, Vidar wasn't sure whether it was a question or

not, the giant's voice was so devoid of inflection. But he said, "Yes."

Jam nodded, but he did not say anything more.

When morning came, it was cold and wet, for the mists had gathered about them more closely. The sun was only a vague brightness in the gray sky. •*

Their breakfast consisted of—what else?—barleycakes and water. Vidar's mouth watered at the memories of veal sorrentino and Peking duck, but he settled for the dry wads of grain, promising himself a dinner even a king would envy when he got back to Earth.

They rode, and the day passed slowly. A light rain fell to meet the mist that came up from the ground. It felt as if they moved in the silent grip of a dream, their faces numb with the wet and the cold, their bodies rising and falling with the hypnotic regularity of their horses' gaits.

In time, however, brief conversations punctuated the stillness, lifting the blanket of gray sameness a bit. Thanks to Sif, Ullir and Eric, the newcomers among them—the lyos that had escaped with G'lann—were beginning to fit in with the others.

Only G'lann himself remained aloof. He counseled with Var'kald and with Sif. and with no one else. On occasion, when it was necessary, he said a few words to Vidar, for most of the company followed him. But that was all. The thursar, the dwarvin, the humans and the Aesirmen might just as well not have been there.

The elvish sun was starting its descent along the wheel of the sky when Vidar heard harsh words behind him. He turned and saw G'lann glaring at Eric, with Sif trying to wedge her steed in between them.

"No," she said. "I go where I please, G'lann—and I do what I wish. Neither you nor anyone else can tell me whose company I may keep."

G'lann's surprise was genuine. "But... he's a human, '*

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he stammered, as if that were a complete argument in itself. "Not even an Aesirman, but a human."

"And what of it?" asked Eric. "Is that a crime in Alfheim?"

"Hold your tongue, boy," said G'lann. "You're on my

world. A crime is what I say it is."

"Then punish me for it," said Eric. "If you can."

"No!" cried Sif, "I'll not have you fighting over this."

Vidar reined his steed around and urged it up to a spot

in the circle that had formed about the argument.

"Aye," said G'lann. "There's no need to fight. No need

at all, as long as this whelp agrees to stay away from you."

"Forget it," said Eric, his eyes flashing. "I don't need

your permission to be with Sif."

*That's where you're wrong," said G'lann. "You've got a lot to learn about Alfheim-human."

Now Eric smiled. "You can't keep us apart, G'lann. In my world, my family rules—but people do as they like."

G'lann shrugged. "Then I'll teach you to stay away from her."

"G'lann!" cried Sif again, and she grabbed his wrist for emphasis. He turned toward her.

"Do not stop me," he said, "I do this for you, Sif."

"But I don't..."

G'lann shook off her restraining hand and faced Eric.

"It does not matter what you want," G'lann said to her.

"Something has begun here and it must be finished."

**Vidar," said a low voice at his shoulder. It was Ullir's.

•G'lann will kill him. He's half-Aesir."

Vidar's impulse had been to intercede for Eric from the beginning—but he held himself back. "No," he said.

*There's more to Eric than you might think. And if we stopped it now, it would only erupt again later. Better now than in Nidavellit,"

Ullir whistled. "It's a good thing we healers are about."

Eric swung his legs over his horse's flank and vaulted to the ground. "What are you waiting for, then?" he asked,

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looking up at G'lann. "I'm as eager to see this to its end as you are. Be my teacher, G'lann—if you're man enough."

G'lann smiled. "Gladly," he said, and slipped from his horse's back. "Where's your blade, whelp?"

Vidar tensed.

Eric hesitated for a moment. Then he drew his sword and tossed it away. "I need no blade," he said, "to deal with you."

Good! thought Vidar. Eric was only doing what he'd

seen Vidar do in the cave with Thakrad.

G'lann's smile faded. "As you wish." He too drew his blade, handing it up to Ar'on. "No need to dirty good iron, anyway."

Sif rode between them. "Stop it!" she said. "I forbid it." But neither G'lann nor Eric seemed to hear her. They sidestepped her mount and approached one another, crouching. The circle about them widened, to give them room. Finally, Sif said nothing, but brought her horse about and forced her way out through the circle.

G'lann made the first move, dropping down to kick Eric's legs out from under him. Eric fell, but rolled to one side in the same motion and found his feet again before G'lann could press his advantage. Vidar noted their tactics. Once, he'd been Odin's wrestling champion.

The elf's silver necklace sang as he shifted his weight, feinting, looking for an opening. His eyes were alive, fierce with anger and with hate.

Then Eric struck. Quickly closing the distance between them, he delivered a roundhouse blow to G'lann's jaw. The elf staggered backward and Eric went after him. Before G'lann could recover, he hit him again. And again. But it was Odin's blood he faced, and he could have rained blows on him all day. It was past the strength of any human to bring G'lann to his knees.

Though off balance, the elf lashed out and caught Eric's wrist in one hand. Then, pivoting, he pulled him off his feet and flung him to the ground.

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Again, Eric got to his feet. But this time, G'lann did not let him get away. As Eric stumbled backward, he brought his fist down against the human's temple. It was only a glancing blow, but Eric hit the ground hard. Once, he tried to rise, but slumped again.

"Get up," G'lann rasped, wiping away a thin trickle of blood that had gathered at the corner of his mouth.

Eric just lay there.

"Get up!" said G'lann. "I'm not done with you yet."

"Enough," said Vidar. "You've had your fun."

G'lann whirled on him, as if he would challenge Vidar, too. Their eyes met, and G'lann's were wild. He half opened his mouth, but thought better of it. A slow smile spread across his face. "Aye," he said. "For now."

In the meantime. Jam had dismounted and bent over Eric. The boy moaned, and a couple of G'lann's lyos laughed softly. With incredible gentleness for so hulking a creature, the giant turned his lord's son over onto his back. A cut had opened over Eric's eye, and the grass was stained a deep red where his head had rested against it.

The thursar glared at G'lann. Then he lifted Eric to his feet, and held him up patiently until the boy could get his legs to support him on their own. The other thursar, Hymir, regained Eric's sword.

"I'm all right. Jam," said Eric, trying to shrug the giant off. Eric turned toward G'lann and stared at him. Then he looked away and clambered back onto his horse.

One of the lyos nudged his steed out of the circle. It was Var'kald. He rode up to Eric, with all eyes upon him, and held out his hand. For a moment, Eric looked at it, dazed as he was. Finally, he reached out and clasped it.

"Well fought." said Var'kald. "A valiant effort." He looked at G'lann over his shoulder. "Your opponent won—but he did not win much."

G'lann spat. "Could I have done anything else, Var'kald?" he cried. "I had to defend my sister's honor."

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"*I thought you were the one,*" said Var'kald, "who told Magni she needed no protecting."

G'lann frowned. He was about to retrieve his sword from Ar'on when he heard his name called. The word sounded different when shaped by a thursar tongue, but not so different that he did not recognize it.

"You said you were not done," said Jam. "Neither am I." The giant plucked his blade from its sheath and plunged it into the ground.

G'lann raised an eyebrow. Perhaps he was a bit less eager to grapple with the thursar, especially after the pommeling Eric had given him. But he turned to face the giant anyway.

"Good," said the elflord, the breeze lifting his straw-colored hair. "Let's not waste any time. then."

They closed a moment later—the lithe, lean-muscled son of Magni and the grisly, god-fearing giant. The elf tried to kick Jam's legs out from under him, the same trick he'd used on Eric. But the thursar was quicker than G'lann imagined, and he leaped at just the right moment. G'lann recovered and went into a crouch, circling to his left. The giant circled as well—not as gracefully, but his reach more

than made up for that. It was plain that G'lann had never fought anyone nine feet tall before. He seemed at a loss as to how to attack.

The elflord feinted, but almost lost his head for it. As soon as he'd darted into reach. Jam lashed out. G'lann was slippery enough to roll with the impact, but still he staggered sideways. Jam swung at him again, but G'lann's staggering turned out to be more bluff than anything else. He ducked the blow and came in under the giant's arms-- Then he planted his fist solidly in the thursar's ribs, and with the fingers of both hands interlocked, he hammered at Jarn*s belly.

The giant doubled over. G'lann reached back and Vidar saw the final blow on its way. He couldn't let that happen again.

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Reaching out for G'lann's mind, he flooded it with a random thought--the sight of F'orri on top of the white horse. It was all Vidar could conjure up on a moment's notice, but it worked. G'lann's mouth twisted involuntarily and he stopped, with his weight on his back foot, his fist half-raised. By the time he thought again to hit Jam, the giant had recovered a little and straightened to his full length.

G'lann struck, but Jam moved backward, out of reach. The elf cursed and rushed the giant like a linebacker going after a runner in the backfield. He buried his head in Jam's midsection and they fell, rolling in the wet grass, each grappling for leverage.

That was a tactical mistake, thought Vidar, if he'd ever seen one. For in a contest of weight, G'lann was no match for the thursar. Jam came out on top. one long, heavily muscled arm pinning the elf, while the other rose with savage intent. Jam roared with the exertion, for it was not easy to keep Magni's son down. Then he brought his fist down across G'lann's face once. and again. His fangs dripped saliva like a wolfs. A third time, he raised his hand--but he never delivered that third blow.

G'lann had lost consciousness.

Jam's breath came in ragged, wheezing gasps. As if a mountain rested on his back, he rose to one knee, and then straightened his mammoth body. Standing over the elfiord, he looked down for a moment.

Jam grunted--all the victory cry he had in him.

He plucked his sword from the ground and restored it to his sheath. Looking back, he saw that G'lann was beginning to stir. The giant spat. Then he clambered back onto his elvish pony, which had all it could do to bear his

weight.

No one moved to help G'lann—not even Sif, who sat her horse outside the circle of onlookers. It would only have stung his pride to be helped now to his feet. He rose slowly and glared at Jam, and for a moment, Vidar saw Vali's

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look in the elf's eyes—the gaze of the avenger, patient but powerful. Then the anger seemed to dissipate, and a calmer mien took hold.

In a curiously ceremonial manner, G'lann inclined his head toward the giant. "I hope you'll fight like that against our enemies," he said. His voice was toneless, controlled, but embers still burned in his eyes.

Then G'lann found his horse and took back his weapon, and mounted again. He said nothing more, only urged his steed with his heels, and guided it toward the west, where the light was slowly dying.

XIV

If Skir'nir had suspected that they'd try for Munarvag and Nidavellir, he'd have fortified Ilior. But when Ar'on returned from the coastal town and rejoined them in the hills that overlooked it, he had good news—a light force had been left to guard the port. They would have a good chance of stealing a ship by night, if they were careful about it. Nor was there any shortage of ships from which to choose, because there was a storm pushing northward up the coast, and no one wanted to try his luck against it.

"That's good news?" asked Var'kald. "A storm?" His brow wrinkled as he surveyed the southern skies, where an edge of gray cloud had only just appeared on the seaward horizon.

H'limif looked to G'lann, then to Sif, and finally to Vidar. "Perhaps we should wait until it blows over."

Vidar shook his head. "We can't delay. It'll just give Skir'nir that much more of a lead on us."

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"Though his words are strange," said Sif, "my kinsman speaks the truth. We'll take our chances."

G'lann nodded, watching the gray rim of the sky. His hair whipped across his face in a sudden wind, and the air was momentarily chill against their skin.

Ilior lay spread out below them, a haphazard tangle of

narrow stone buildings with stout wooden doors. Vidar could smell the salt in the sea and the fish that the last, daring crew had brought in. It was the middle of the day, but the sunlight that penetrated the haze in the sky was thin and cheerless. Skir'nir's men were easy to spot. Aside from a few seafarers trading tales, they were the only ones out in the cold of the wharf.

The company waited with a certain uneasiness—an expectancy—until the light gave way to dusk. Meanwhile, the rim of gray cloud became a curtain, and when the sun set, finally, it was only a hint of gold behind the overcast.

"Soon," said G'lann, half to himself, but the word was heard by the rest of the company. Vidar came up beside him, anxious and tired of waiting.

"Look," said G'lann. He pointed to a sturdy ship with a gracefully curved prow in the shape of a dragon's head. Its sail was lashed to a cross-piece two-thirds of the way up the mast, but when it was unfurled, it would display its owner's blazon. It must have been designed for long journeys, Vidar mused, for it bore eight oar-ports on either side. The oars had been pulled in, of course—but they would be needed to fight a storm, in which the sail would be more hindrance than help.

*'She's a beauty," said Vidar.

"Aye," said G'lann. "And you've already met its owner. I don't need to see the sail to know that's F'orri's vessel. You can tell by the carving of the prow."

The darkness deepened, relieved only by a few guttering torches down by the wharf. Finally, G'lann said, "Now," and they came down from the hills like a plague of strange insects, keeping to the shadows until they were on a level

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with the town. The lyos led the way—it was their world, and most of them had been to Ilior before.

Once in the maze of winding streets, they walked through the small spaces between the stone buildings. Vidar noticed the bright pigments that the elves had used to paint decorations on their doors—a fleet of yellow-sheeted dragonships on one; a netful of red and blue fish on another; the sun and moon and stars on a third, coloring the sea that was painted below them with trails of light.

Yet they met no one. Perhaps Skir'nir had imposed a curfew—but Vidar began to feel uncomfortable. It was almost too good to be true.

When they came in sight of the wharf, they were able to count the number of elves that stood between them and F'onfs ship. It seemed that Skir'nir's guardians were slightly more numerous—but the thieves would have the advantage of surprise. G'lann whispered orders to his lyos.

They began to fan out, slipping between the stone buildings, and as they moved, they drew arrows from their quivers. Sif and the dwarvin went with them, for they too were good shots.

Of all the elves, only Ar'on stayed by Vidar's side, for he had no bow. He had only that sword that was too heavy for him, and the harp he'd brought, which he had strapped to his back in its leather sack. Vidar tried not to look at the youth—not to wonder if he would survive this battle. For if he looked and saw Ar'on's face, it would only bring to mind the faces of all the other youths he'd led into war. He wanted no more memories, no more ghosts.

The other swordsmen gathered behind him—Ullir, Gil-ling and an Aesirman whom they called Tyrfingur—Eric, another human named Gunnar—and the two thursar. Jam and Hymir. They had been left to launch the frontal attack.

Skir'nir's troops didn't smell a thing. They lounged about on boxes and against the pilings to which the ships were lashed. All the fishermen were gone now. Only the

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warriors were left, to trade tales and laugh at their own adventures.

Until an arrow caught one in the throat. A second fell, clutching at the shaft that had suddenly sprouted from his belly, and then another was pinned to the piling behind him. The victims cried out in their surprise and their fear. Feathered death seemed to whistle at them from all directions. Perhaps a dozen of them fell in the first few seconds.

Then Vidar and the others darted out from hiding, taking advantage of the confusion as they'd planned. Out of the corner of his eye, Vidar saw G'lann rush out along with them, first to put away his bow and take out his sword.

G'lann fell upon Skir'nir's followers as a hawk stoops to snatch at a field mouse. He cut one of the lyos down with a single stroke, then battered aside the blade of another to sweep his head off his shoulders.

Vidar was right beside him, though he had no desire to kill if he could avoid it. There were less final ways to dispose of an enemy. When an elf thrust at him, he cut at the warrior's shoulder—and the iron bit deep enough to bring him to his knees, defenseless. A second lyos made the mistake of coming too close and Vidar smashed him with his hilt. He'd wake with a broken jaw, but he'd be alive to tell of it.

Then the cries of the elves brought reinforcements. More of Skir'mr's rebels poured out of the alleyways, blades drawn, shock on their faces. Some of them were met by the archers that still knelt between the buildings, but

some got through. The battle spilled out, congealing into clots of individual combat.

Vidar saw Gunnar fall, pierced by an elvish blade, and as he caught an enemy's sword on his own, he nearly tripped over the outstretched form of Tyrfingur. But the archers had taken their toll, and none of Skir'nir's troops could stand against G'lann or Vidar, or the thursar. The wharf grew slippery with blood, and the numbers of those

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who stood between them and the ship dwindled. Some even leaped into the sea rather than confront G'lann, who fought with the fury of a berserker.

When Sif buried her blade in an elf's breast, the last obstacle was gone, and they were able to swarm onto Forri's ship. Vidar was the last to climb aboard. First, he cut the hawsers that held the vessel fast—and then, with a great heave that churned the sea to froth all around it, he got the ship moving away from the wharf. Finally, he leaped, but he was a moment too late, catching only the gunwale in his outstretched fingers. He clung there like a salmon left out to dry until Jam reached over and hauled him onto the deck.

In the old days, Vidar knew, he'd have been able to clear the deck by himself. He was more than a little rusty after his long stay on Earth— Getting to his feet, he saw that the others had already taken places by the carports and thrust the oars out for rowing. Var'kald stood by the mast and called out a cadence. Ar'on sat across the ship from Glann, wrestling with the sea to little avail, so Vidar sat down beside him—

"Let me give you a hand," said Odin's son. The youth nodded, relieved to have the help. Vidar took the oar in hand and pulled against the water, in time with Var'kald's call. The ship lurched forward, as if it drove over the waves and not through them. With oarsmen like Vidar and G'lann, the thursar, and even the Aesirman, there was more strength at the benches than the vessel was designed for.

Within a few strokes, however, they were moving at a steadier clip. Vidar looked about, taking a quick accounting—and was grateful to find that they'd lost only a few of their comrades in their theft of the ship. Besides Gunnar and Tyrfingur, only two of G'lann's friends were missing. Many of the others had sustained wounds here and there, —Imt it seemed that none were grievous enough to keep them from rowing.

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So far, luck was with them.

"Aiiir' cried one of the lyos. It was a shout of victory. Some of the other elves joined him, but not G'lann. He rowed with a vengeance, silent and sullen, as if there were still more killing left in him. Nor did Sif cry out, for sorrow was etched too deeply into her face, and Vidar thought he could guess why. Were the lyos she'd slain less kin to her than the comrades who'd helped her slay them? Sif knew that these were elves they fought—and therein lay her sorrow.

They were fast approaching the mouth of the harbor, where two narrow headlands seemed to come together like black pincers. H'limif steered the boat, and he had all he could do to work the tiller with such strength pulling at the oars. Besides that, he bled from a head wound. But he managed to guide them toward the opening between the strips of land.

Then one of the dwarvin cried out, standing at his bench. "Two sails off to the left! And another one off to the right!" A murmur washed over the benches, and some stood to peer over the gunwale, Vidar among them.

He saw the ships. One was yellow-sheeted, the other two bright green. They were not all that hard to spot, even with the moon and stars mostly blotted out by the blossoming underbelly of the storm. But had they seen the stolen vessel yet? With its sail furled, it might have gone unnoticed until now.

The stolen ship swept forward toward the narrow space between the headlands, and as far as Vidar could tell, the other vessels had made no move to stop them. He sat again and strained against his oar, which he'd left Ar'on to manage all on his own.

Then something bright caught the edge of his vision, and he turned back toward Ilior in time to see a flaming arrow reach its zenith and fall into the sea. A second arrow followed quickly on the trail of the first, dropping snakes of fire as it climbed toward the heavens.

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A signal from Skir'nir's forces in Ilior— remained of them. A warning to the ships that guara^ che harbor mouth.

Vidar looked back to the ships. Sure enough, the bright, elvish sails were beginning to move against them.

It would be a race, too close to call.

Vidar heard Var'kald's call over the rush of the wind. "Pull! Pull!" He dug his heels into the base of the bench ahead of him, where Eric sat, and grunted as he tugged at the oar.

The wind grew bolder, blowing his hair and beard this way and that, as they left the lee of the mainland. It took on a hooting, hollow sound, like giants blowing through the bones of their victims.

The sea became feistier, too. It surged beneath them like a team of wild horses pulling a wagon. For a time, it seemed that they fought the sea itself, toe to toe, strength against strength, as the storm roared landward. They heard the drone of distant thunder, but the lightning was still hidden from them. Then with a release like passion itself, the ship broke free of the headlands and fled westward.

The bright sails were waiting for them, close enough now for Vidar to make out the insignia on them. The yellow sheet displayed a red boar; the green ones were identical, each bearing a design of three golden swords and three silver stars. The ships themselves were harder to make out. All Vidar could discern of them were low, slithering edges of darkness near the molten surface of the sea.

Lightning leaped in the cauldron that was the sky, and for a moment, the entire scene was illuminated in stark relief. Then the curtain of night fell again and a chaos of thunder trundled over their heads.

When Vidar's eyes recovered from the lightning flash, he found a fiery arrow protruding from the deck not more than a few feet from his bench. Leaving his oar, he reached

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over and plucked it out, ignoring the flames. There was a thud, and when he looked up, another torch had taken hold in the deck.

A third caught in the sail, and though it was wrapped tightly, it began to smolder. One of the dwarves started to shinny up the mast, and Ullir smothered the other arrow in his cloak.

But soon the slate of the sky was streaked with trails of gold, and many of the shafts found their marks. In moments, the deck was studded with them, their brilliance turning the ship's night to day. Here and there. Vidar's companions dragged in their oars and tried to stamp out the fires. The vessel lost speed and, despite the urgency of Var'kald's call, the enemy began to surround them.

"No!" cried Vidar. "Back to the benches!"

"We're burning!" returned one of the lyos.

"Aye," said Vidar, joining Ar'on at his labor again, "but with any luck, we'll leave this ship behind us." He turned to H'limif at the helm. "Steer us straight for the yellow sail—then fall off alongside it."

"The yellow sail," shouted H'limif, "and soon enough."

"Now put your backs into it," Vidar cried. "And have

your swords handy!"

"Pull!" roared Var'kald. "Pull!"

The ship gathered speed again. It started to bear down on the yellow sail before the enemy could do anything about it. As the vessel loomed before them, Vidar could see the startled elvish faces on either side of their dragon prow. The stolen ship was like a fireworks display now, and the enemy looked none too comfortable so near to his own handiwork. The wind was savage, and it threatened to spread the flames from one ship to the other.

Then, at the last moment, when Vidar believed that H'Umif had miscalculated and they would broadside the other ship, the elf swung the rudder wide. With a shuddering and a groaning of the timbers, the vessel turned and found a heading that would bring it alongside the yellow

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sail. Vidar's heart pumped to Var'kald's beat, his head swimming with his efforts.

"Quickly now," cried Vidar. "release the oars—and get ready to board her. And all those on the port side, head for the center, or your oars will snap your heads off!"

The rowers responded. Bows were useless at such close quarters, so they all unsheathed their blades. Above them, the sail burned furiously, and the deck around them was littered with tiny infernos. It was a garden of fire, a springtime of names.

All went as Vidar had hoped. As they edged up alongside the enemy's ship, their oars began to break against its prow. Splinters flew, and with each oar that snapped, they lost a little more of their momentum. Finally, the churning seas threw the ships against one another, timbers shrieking with the friction. But they had slowed down enough for a warrior to leap from one vessel to the other.

Vidar leaped to the gunwale, and the faces of the enemy seemed maniacal in the light of the flaming ship, suspended like masks above their thick, gold-studded shields. Their silver helms glinted and their silver byrnies shone like stars, but their iron swords seemed instead to absorb the light.

Vidar jumped across the space between the ships, and a cry erupted from his throat that he had not intended. It was the cry of another Vidar, in another time and place, and it frightened him more than the elvish swords that ringed him about.

At first, the lyos gave way before this fool berserker, so that he landed in their midst like a beast at bay. Then they closed in on him, and Vidar whirled this way and that, hacking and thrusting with his back against the gunwale. For a paralyzing moment, his blade lodged between the

ribs of an elvish attacker—but he wrenched it free in time to deflect a brand that whistled for his head. He'd never been harder pressed, not even in Jotunheim. The lyos

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swarmed about him, and the only thing that saved his hide was the way they crowded one another to get at him.

Then Vidar sensed other battles around him, for some of the elves were drawn off in different directions. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a black-garbed dwarvin spring onto the deck like a cat of misfortune. On the other side, a drumbeat of thunder that could only mean a thursar had joined the fray. There was a clang of metal upon metal, the sharp crack of -blade cleaving bone.

Waves dashed against the hull—a geyser erupted in the space between the ships, spraying saltwater on the combatants. The deck grew slick with blood and foam. Lightning flared and thunder bawled. Sky and sea roiled together, one gray, churning mass, the ship heaving in the capricious grasp of the storm. Blades flashed and met in a burst of sparks, rose and fell, cut through elf and outworlder.

Vidar caught the wrist that guided a swooping sword and flung its owner over the side. He struck at another and sent him reeling, but the impact of iron against iron tore a piece out of his blade. Then he turned and battered at a bright elvish shield and clove it in two—but in turning, he paved the way for another attacker, and had it not been for Gilling, who stepped into the breach, he might have left his head in Alfheim.

Finally, the tapestry of the battle wore thin. Corpses cluttered the ship as if some grim kindergarten teacher had called for a sudden nap time. Vidar found, with giddy surprise, that there was no one left to fight. He clung to the gunwale as his battle-fever ebbed and the deck pitched violently. The ship they'd abandoned had drifted away—downwind, mercifully—and by now it was a conflagration. It looked like a funeral ship searching for its burden of dead flesh.

Then Vidar looked about his feet, and had to look away again. There were enough corpses here to satisfy a dozen funeral ships.

Lightning seared the dark confusion of sky and the

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thunder followed closely on its heels, droning loudly in Vidar's ears—a long roll from heights unknown to the shrugging seas.

One by one, Vidar found the faces he was looking for—G'lann and Sif, Ullir and Gilling, N'arri and Ar'on. Jam

and H*timif and Var'kald. Some of the elves, both light and dark, had fallen—and there was no sign of Hymir, no sign at all, leading Vidar to guess that he might not have made it onto this ship in the first place.

But where was Eric? Vidar's heart stormed against his rib cage like a savage bird when he realized that the boy was not among those still standing.

Eric—dead?

Then he thought of the other ships, and turned from the carnage to find the bright green sails. Finally, he spotted them against the backdrop of the purple-bellied clouds. They were far downwind, and it looked as if they were striving not to run aground on the rocks that jutted out from the coastland.

^ But they, too, were being swept in that direction, at the mercy of the gale. Perhaps the added drag of the stolen vessel had slowed them down for a while, but now they were being pushed north as surely as the others.

"To the oars!" cried G'lann, as though reading Vidar's thoughts. The wind snatched his words away, and the tumult of the storm buried them beneath its weight.

"The oars, damn it!" cried Vidar, adding his voice to G'lann's. He waved his arms. "Now!" Looking around, he found N'arri standing nearby—breathing hard, but whole. Vidar pointed to the sail. "Let it down!" he shouted above the din of the elements. "Or we'll be pushed back into the rocks!"

N'arri signed that he had heard. Sheathing his blade, he enlisted the aid of another dwarvin. Each of them grappled with one of the lines that held the yellow sail taut against the wind. In moments, they'd mastered the knots, and the sail began to sag.

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The other battle-weary specters heard Vidar's words, too, or at least his urgency, and dropped onto the benches. Var'kald took his place at one of the oars this time, but still he called out the cadence. Vidar found an empty seat opposite Jam. H'limif corralled the wildly swinging tiller, and suddenly there was a semblance of order—though it was painfully obvious that there were now fewer rowers than oars.

"Pull!" Var'kald's voice was barely audible as thunder dragged across the sky-road. It sounded like an avalanche. "Pull!"

At first, the ship did not seem to respond, caught inexorably, it seemed, in the grip of the storm. Then Vidar could feel them move against the grain of the tide. The timbers creaked. Again, they seemed to slip crosswise against the wind. The sail abruptly collapsed in on itself, and a faint

cheer went up from the ragged, weary throats about him. N'arri and his companion had done their job.

Now their progress was more sure, more steady. Rain sheeted down on them, sudden and chill, but it was invigorating after the first cold shock. Then the downpour came, drenching them to the skin, and the wind seared their faces like fire born of ice.

Vidar tugged at his oar, intent on the sound of Var'kald's voice. His world narrowed to that one effort, the thrust of his legs and the pull of his arms. If he had suffered any wounds, he did not feel them, for he kept the predator-pain at a distance with the heat of his striving. And if the faces of the elves he'd slaughtered would rise up in his nightmares to clutch at his heart—that, too, would wait. For now, there was only the hardness of the bench before him against his feet, and the feel of the time-worn wood in his bands.

The storm passed more quickly than he'd feared—or did it only seem so? Vidar had lost "his grip on time, as he'd submerged the other elements of his consciousness.

When next he looked about him, he saw only the limp,

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sodden figures that strove with the oars, a far cry from the eager warriors that had descended into Ilior with him. They were on the last of their strength. Var'kald's voice was almost gone—a whisper. Everything seemed to move in slow motion.

Then Vidar saw one pale-haired form that did not pull at the oars, but knelt on the deck, as if to pray. Sudden anger rose in Vidar's throat, and he lurched free of his oar, not caring if it fell into the sea or not. Which of the lyos dared to rest while the others fought the sea for him?

It was G'lann. Vidar's mouth twisted into a curse, but before he could utter it, he saw the body over which G'lann huddled. It was Eric, covered with blood like a baby freshly sprung from the womb—and Magni's son was trying to heal him. Vidar struggled to keep his feet against the roll of the sea, and watched. The elf could not have had any training as a lifting, a healer, for his father was stromrad—an elemental. There had been no one to teach him.

Yet the need in him was so great, the urge to heal so mighty, that he'd knelt beside a human in the midst of death, and shared his Aesir-born vitality with him.

Once, Odin had said that a lifting could be no more kept from healing than a salmon from swimming upstream. Perhaps he'd been right.

Nor had G'lann's efforts gone for nothing. Eric grimaced and groaned, his eyes shut tight against the agony

of his wounds—wherever they were. He was so spattered with blood that Vidar could not see where he'd been cut. But for all his pain, he still clung to life, and he had G'lann to thank for that.

Vidar stood so, watching G'lann's ministrations, for a moment—many moments. Then he too knelt beside the youth, and wiped some of the blood off Eric's face with the knuckles of his swordhand. G'lann's expression was intense, his face like a fist. Sweat had traced trails of purity through the gory mask he'd acquired.

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There was a gasp behind him, and Vidar turned to see Sifs anguish. She must have known he had fallen, but only found him this instant. Sif, like her brother, was elbow-deep in blood—some of it her own. But her fear was all for Eric,

G'lann moaned involuntarily, caught up in the deadly grip of Eric's struggle. He shuddered as Vidar himself laid done, before he'd mastered the lifting's art.

"Easy, G'lann," said Vidar, his voice a harsh whisper. "Don't try to do too much too quickly."

The elf seemed to heed him. His eyes narrowed, but he stopped shaking. A sureness asserted itself in the set of his jaw and the firmness of his touch. The battle went on in the tortured ruins of Eric's flesh, but G'lann fought with greater skill now, growing in confidence, in power—until a smile spread itself over his haggard visage and a cry erupted from his throat. The heavens seemed to resound with his triumph, though it was thunder, in truth. But the effect was about the same.

Eric's eyes stood open for a moment, then closed—but not in death. He slept. His chest rose and fell peacefully, like the swells of the waves beneath them, for the fury of the storm was past. G'lann got slowly to his feet, still grinning with satisfaction. He took a deep breath, his nostrils flaring.

"Oh, G'lann," said Sif, dropping her sword and reaching around his middle to hug him. She could not have seen healing before, but it was plain that G'lann had brought Eric back from death's precipice.

Suddenly, Sif staggered beneath her brother's limp weight. His first attempt at being a lifting had drained him of his strength. But even as he slumped against her, startled Sif, he grinned like a wolf in a sheep pasture. When Vidar finally wrested G'lann from his sister, and lowered him gently onto a rower's bench, the smile still had not faded. It seemed that he might go on grinning like that forever.

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Vidar knelt again beside Eric and tore away the youth's tunic. His wounds were ghastly—a savage cut that had laid open his chest, and a deep hole in his abdomen where an elf had buried his blade. But thanks to G'lann's ministrations, the wounds had already closed, and the initial danger was over. The rest would be mostly up to Eric—for death had not relinquished its claim on him. It had only been beaten back for the moment.

Vidar pulled a cloak off a dead lyos and covered Eric with it. It would be all too easy to fall prey to pneumonia out here, despite the energy that G'lann had imparted. Thoughtfully, Vidar laid his fingers against Eric's temples and added his own flagging strength to that which G'lann had given him. Vidar gave as much of his vitality as he could spare—and more.

There. That would keep him safe, Vidar mused—for the time being, at least.

When Vidar stood, Sif was by his side, and Jam and N'arri, who'd shared a torture chamber with Eric not so long ago. N'arri could not ask the question, for he'd lost his tongue in that torture chamber. Jam would have, perhaps, in his own ponderous way. But Sif could not wait for the giant to speak.

"Will he live?" she asked, her eyes bright with fear for Eric.

Vidar shrugged. "He's got a chance now, but only a chance. G'lann gave him all he had to give, but those wounds were awful. Without the healing, he'd be dead now, for certain."

Sif's brow wrinkled. "What did my brother do? I've... I've never seen anything like that."

"He healed," said Vidar, smiling slightly at the intensity of Sif's wonder. "It's the power of liftings—to share the pain of those afflicted either by disease or by the sword. A talent those of Odin's blood have—some of them." He paused. "Like your father's power to command the storm."

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It means that he's stromrad—and that Odin's magic took a different turn in him."

Sif nodded, but did not look satisfied. Her eyes narrowed as she pondered what Vidar had told her. Then she dropped to her haunches and touched her fingers lightly to Eric's brow. "He's hot," she said. "Very hot."

"It's all right," said Vidar. "The fever means that he's fighting—though mostly with G'lann's strength and mine, right now. Before long, he'll have to muster some of his own." Vidar did not have the heart to mention the alternative.

Sif nodded. "I do not feel anything," she said. "No flow of life from me to Eric." She frowned and looked up at Vidar, "Am I doing something wrong?"

Vidar shook his head. He was about to say, "Not everyone is lifting." But just then, Eric raised a wavering hand and laid it on one of hers. Sif smiled and used her other hand to caress his cheek. A tear filled the corner of each emerald eye and her lips quivered.

Vidar turned away. There were liftings and there were liftings, but was there anyone in the nine worlds that did not have the power to heal someone?

Away, off in the distance, there was thunder. 'Neither the coast nor the green sails were anywhere to be seen. The sky had gone from a cavernous black to indigo, and now ragged patches of stars showed through.

Vidar slumped against a bench and yielded to his fatigue.

XV

In the morning, the sun rose on a ship out of nightmare. Though the bodies of friend and foe had been tossed overboard—some with more ceremony than others, according to the survivors' individual customs—the deck was still thick with gore.

Sometime before Vidar woke. someone had hoisted the sail aloft again. A stiff, clean wind reached over their stem and blew them due westward. Ilior was behind them—ahead, Munarvag.

A tent of cloaks had been constructed for Eric. Vidar clambered to his feet and joined the small knot of companions that had gathered alongside it. G'lann, he noticed, was not part of that group. He stood at the tiller and looked out to sea.

Perhaps G'lann was embarrassed. A full-grown warrior, unaccustomed to the experience of healing, might not know how to handle the totality of giving. After all, one's

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life-force was very personal thing, and G'lann had shared it with one of the humans he looked down upon.

Ullir sat beside the youth. He too was a healer, though not of Vidar's caliber, for Odin's influence was not so strong in him.

"How is he doing?" Vidar asked.

Ullir shrugged. "Perhaps not as well as we might hope."

"He'll make it," said Vidar, but he wished he was as confident as he sounded. Eric's breathing was uneven, his face ruddy with fever.

Ullir looked up at him, knowing the gravity of Eric's plight. "Aye,** he said, perhaps remembering the sight of the youth on the pyre in Asgard. "He'll be fine."

"You know who healed him?" asked Vidar, sitting at Eric's feet

Ullir nodded. "So G'lann is lifting;9

**So it would appear," said Vidar. "He sprang to Eric's aid as if he'd been doing it all his life."

"And not out of love," said Ullir. "There's no bond between those two."

Jam, who towered above them, grunted in agreement.

The sail snapped and boomed, bright yellow against the soft blue sky. The wind was fierce—but Vidar looked out past G'lann and wondered how long it would l?e before Skir'nir's forces in Ilior could launch a pursuit. They would not have to guess where this ship was going, for Munarvag was the only sizable island in the vicinity. For a moment, Vidar let the wind wash his face in its cool, salty embrace. Then he turned back to Ullir.

"The wind's strong, but we ought to help it with some rowing," said Vidar. "Our friends in Ilior won't give up on us that easily."

Ullir smiled tiredly. "You're a cruel taskmaster, my lord—but you're right, of course." Sighing, he stood.

"Then let's row in shifts," said Vidar. He'd gotten everyone's attention by now, and what a haggard bunch they were. "You and I," he said to Ullir, "will take the first

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shift, along with the dworvin. In the meantime," he added, glancing at the others, "someone should see to cleansing this deck. Otherwise, the stench will drown us before the sea has another chance."

H'limif grumbled at that, but Sif brought him up short. "^^ must all do what is asked of us," she said. She looked at the gore-blackened deck and grimaced. "I'll look for some buckets in the hold."

Vidar left Jam to tend to Eric and took his place on the bench— He wrapped his fingers around the wood. Although his hands were already raw and cracked from rowing the night before, sleep had restored some of his Aesir strength, and it actually felt good to bend his back against the ponderous weight of the sea. This time, Ar'on called out the cadence, seeing that Var'kald was in need of a rest.

As he rowed, he looked about the ship. They'd lost some friends the night before. Of the lyos, only seven had survived—G'lann, Sif, Var'kald, H'limif, Ar'on and two others. Ullir and Gilling still lived, although Gilling was limping with a half-healed gash in his thigh. N'arri had performed a funeral ceremony for two of his companions, shooting an arrow over their bodies as they sank into the sea, for he had no spear with which to consecrate their deaths. That left only M'norr, his third companion. Finally, there was Jam, and Eric—if he pulled through.

The day passed quickly. Vidar saw to Eric in between his turns at the oars, and if the boy got no better, at least he got no worse. In the gloaming, they broke out their dwindling supplies of graincakes and water, and huddled about Eric's tent. It had become the gathering place for all who were resting.

When night fell, Vidar slept. But it was not a peaceful sleep. He dreamed of a farm he once knew, a green, old farm by a sweet-sounding brook, where he'd tended the sheep for the farmer's widow. The ages fell away from him, and he was that shepherd once more. The land was

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fine and broad, the days blue and restful, and it suited him to stay there awhile.

Some wiser part of Vidar tried to thrust the memory from him, but it could not. The dream flooded him like a tide, undeniable.

For two years he tended the flock, and under his hand, it prospered. He grew to love the sound of the sheep's bleating and the smell of their wool, and the color of the sky in the evening, when he returned with them from their pastures in the hills.

For her part, the widow was kind to him. Once, she'd been a handsome woman, just a girl when her husband had taken her to his bed. He had been middle-aged even then, and only a few years later he'd died and left her the richest farm in the valley. When Vidar met her, a wayfarer begging for bread, she'd looked as beautiful as any woman he'd ever met. Even after the haze of the whiskey had lifted, she'd struck him as fair.

At night, he'd strummed a harp and sang, for in another life he'd been a minstrel named Sin Skolding. The breadth of his repertoire made up for what his voice lacked. When he'd done with his songs, she'd asked him to stay, for the flock needed a shepherd after the last one had run off.

But never had she given him reason to believe she wanted him for anything other than tending sheep—and he was content with that. He needed peace more than he needed another lover.

One day, a neighbor woman came to share her woes. Her son had returned from lands south, where he'd worked in a port hauling cargoes on and off the ships. But he'd not been well. Only a week after he'd come home, having earned enough to marry, the skin around his armpits had turned black with carbuncles. Perhaps Vidar could help him, the woman suggested, for he'd known what to do when her husband fell off the roof and cracked his skull.

Vidar agreed, of course, but when he saw the lad—a boy of no more than twenty—he was half-gone, beset by fever

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and terribly red in the face. The boy moaned as if a demon were eating him from the inside out. His eyes stared, glassy, as if he saw Death's own visage. Vidar pulled back the blanket and saw that what the woman had said was true—abscesses festered in the skin about his armpits and his groin, and the rest of his flesh had gone dark, as if his blood had turned to coal dust. His breath came in ragged gasps. He shuddered and shook even after Vidar replaced the blanket.

Vidar wiped the beads of sweat off the boy's forehead and placed his fingers alongside the lad's temples. Meanwhile, he kept the woman busy making poultices and such, as he had before when he'd healed her husband. For if she suspected how his healing worked, she might brand him a witch—and that was trouble he'd as soon avoid.

After a time, the fever calmed. But despite Vidar's strivings, it would not break. The disease that had taken hold was too fierce to be denied.

For ten days, Vidar pitted himself against the Death—for it came to be known as the Death after others in the countryside contracted it. Ten days—it was twice as long as the other victims lived. But in the end, it consumed the boy, too. He lost his battle at that eerie hour when the sun has not yet yielded up the last of its light. Vidar pulled the sodden blanket over his face. It was rank with sweat.

On the way home, he recalled, the sun had turned the slopes to gold, and then dropped beneath them. The world had seldom been so dark.

When the widow, his employer, saw the look on his face, her head fell. Vidar saw the tears drop silently on her breast. They turned her dress dark where they fell.

Without thinking, he moved to comfort her. Her eyes glistened, not only with sadness, but with fear. Vidar recalled how she had pulled his mouth to hers, whimpering like an animal caught in a trap. He held her, and stayed that night in the bedroom where the farmer had made her ^- a woman.

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The next morning, she made him his meal as always,

and as always he took the sheep to pasture. They'd grown lean munching on the shorter grass near the farm. But in the evening, when he returned—wondering whether it would be as last night or as before with them—he found she'd taken sick. Her face was ruddy with the fire that burned from within. She was weak, and found it hard to stand.

He put her to bed.

In the next couple of days, terrible wounds opened by her armpits and by her pelvis. She clutched at him until she had no more strength to do so, and then she only groaned.

Like the boy, she lasted ten days. Such was Vidar's power in the face of this plague—he could give its victims but a few more days of life. Before she died, she reminded him of Baldur—trapped in a limbo that was neither life nor death, neither glee nor sorrow, but an emptiness that beat like a drum when Vidar listened. Hod had released Baldur from his hell—now the Death released the farmer's widow from hers.

He buried her and burned her house. Then he slaughtered the sheep, one by one, for they, too were tainted. He left, went north....

He woke, murmuring. Sif's face was above him. Her hand lay cool and gentle on his own, and her face was a welcome sight, even as pale as it was with fatigue. The sky above her was still dark.

"My lord," she said, "it is your turn to row."

Vidar shook the cobwebs loose in his head.

"Aye," he said. "Thanks for waking me." He got to his feet.

"I wish I did not have to," she said.

"That's all right," said Vidar, stretching. He glimpsed the lonely form of G'lann at the tiller, silhouetted against the gradual lightening of the sky where it met the sea. "Has he steered us all night?" he asked Sif.

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"Aye," she said.

"Then perhaps you can find a replacement for him."

Sif shook her head from side to side. "He will not sleep."

Vidar shrugged. "Probably can't wait to mow down a few more of Skir'nir's warriors."

Suddenly there was a small, strong grip on his arm. "You cannot speak of him that way," said Sif, her eyes

green and fierce. Then, in a calmer voice, "You are not fair to him, kinsman. You do not know him."

The image of G'lann hovering over Eric's bloody flesh came to mind. "Perhaps I do not," said Vidar. Sif let her fingers relax and she let go of his arm.

"He's not the bloodthirsty berserker you think he is," said Sif, a sadness coming on her. She turned to look at her brother, but he looked out to sea. "It pains him to slay lyos—as much as it pains me. Perhaps more, I think."

"Well," said Vidar, "I must say he doesn't show it. In fact. I haven't seen anyone so eager to leap into battle since Thor fell at Ragnarok."

Sif turned back toward Vidar. "Don't you know why he fights so fiercely?" she asked.

Vidar shook his head. "No."

Sif regarded him, puzzlement arching her brows. "In truth,* she said, "you do not. Then let me tell you. My brother ran from the field near Ar'vid's farm. Did you not hear him say it himself? He fled while others fell and died for him. *When all was lost,' he said, but it gnaws at him all the same. And now he tries to make up for that flight. He's slaying all those he might have slain back there—when it could have made a difference."

Vidar pondered that for a moment, and he understood. It was a bitter mixture of shame and hatred that spurred G'lann—and love, too, perhaps, for it seemed that Magni's true children had loved their rebellious elf-brother once.

Not too different from someone else I know, he mused. Someone who fled when he was needed most, who had

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resolved to slay his own kin to save his world. Only in me, thought Vidar. there is no hatred.

Isn't there? another voice inside him asked. No hatred? Not for Stints death and N'arri's maiming, not for the hundreds that died in the siege of Indilthrar?

Well, perhaps a little.

"I see." said Vidar.

**Nor will he rest until he slays Skir'nir, too."

"You know.** said Vidar, "it's possible that Skir'nir is not even to blame for all this,"

"What?" asked Sif. "I wish it were so, my lord. but after what happened near Ar'vid's farm..."

"Do you remember my mentioning the one called Ygg?"

Sif nodded, smiling grimly. "Aye. The one whom you followed into Alfheim, when I thought you had come here to help us." .

"Actually," said Vidar. "the result is the same. We came to Alfheim to protect everyone from Ygg. He has the power, Sif, to mold someone's will into whatever form he needs. It's the same skill that the Aesir have, only it's stronger in Ygg than in any of the Aesir—even Vali."

^Then he could have made Skir'nir his... his puppet?"

"Aye," said Vidar. "Or it may be that they are allies, after all, and Skir'nir*s deeds are his own doing.**

"How can we know?" asked the elf-girl. She looked perplexed, and her fingers toyed with the hilt other sword. "He was gone so often into the mountains...." Her voice trailed off.

"Yes," said Vidar. "He could have met Ygg there and fallen under his influence—or merely found an ally willing to help him overthrow Magni. But I won't know whether Skir'nir was a willing accomplice or an unwilling one until we find him."

"And you'll know then?" asked Sif. "How?"
Vidar smiled. "I'll know. If Ygg used his power to gain control of Skir*nir's mind, I'll find evidence of it there."

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Sif peered at him from beneath troubled brows. "You can see that?"

Vidar nodded.

"And if he is under this Ygg's influence? Can you then free him, my lord?"

Vidar wanted very much to oner Sif hope, for she clutched at it so desperately. But all he could do was shrug.

"Perhaps," said Vidar. "But Ygg's spell will be a strong one. and difficult to break. All I can do is try."

Sif sighed, "Then I'll be grateful for whatever you can do." She paused, thinking. "Who is this Ygg, my lord? Is he Aesir, that he could lay such a powerful spell on

Skir'nir?"

**I don't know," Vidar lied. "He only turned up in Utgard recently, but he could be Aesir—or Vanir or human or elf. We only know that he's not big enough to be a thursar."

**I believe," said Sif, with some finality, "that Skir'nir must be his pawn. How else could it be? What could Ygg have offered him that he needed in order to overthrow Magni? He had plenty of swords "behind him. Why take on an ally?"

"It may be," said Vidar, "that he offered him Magni - himself. Ygg could have disabled your father, while Skir'nir did the rest."

Sif's brow furrowed. "Aye," she said. "There's no way of knowing, is there?"

"Not until we meet Skir'nir face-to-face."

Sif did not speak for a moment, as she considered what Vidar had said. In the uncertain light of early morning, she looked as though all her strength had been spent. Her cheeks were hollow, her eyes dull.

Then a cry shattered the quiet.

"Vidar! Sif! He's awake!"

They turned to see Ullir as he emerged from the tent of cloaks they'd made for Eric. His face was full of joy beneath his pale yellow beard as she stood and stretched

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out his arms. "The fever is broken," he called. "He wants to speak with you—the two of you."

Vidar hesitated.

"Come on," said Sif, and there was an emerald flame in her eyes again. "He wants us!"

Sif took him by the arm and led him to the tent. Vidar realized only then that he hadn't thought Eric would make it. He could scarcely believe it now— As he found his joy, he clapped Ullir on the shoulder. Kneeling along with Sif, he stuck his head underneath the tent of cloaks—and in the warm, close darkness, he saw Eric's face. It was not the face of someone who'd been wounded and near death only a couple of days ago. The boy was sitting up, resting on his elbows. His cheeks were ruddy, his eyes clear. He looked as if he'd just had a long night's sleep.

"I don't know exactly what happened," said Eric, his voice the only thing that betrayed his weakness. "But I

gather that I was hurt pretty badly." He smiled at Sif.

She smiled back-

"You were a mess, all right," said Vidar. "I don't think the fish would have bothered with you if we'd thrown you overboard."

The boy's smile faded. "And the others?"

"We lost a few,"* said Vidar. "Hymir was one. And Gunnar fell back at Ilior, before we took the ship."

Eric nodded. "Yes. I remember Gunnar's death. What about N'arri?"

"He's fine," said Vidar.

Eric looked to Sif. "And G'lann?"

"He lives," said Sif. "Var'kald, H'limif, Ar'on—they're all well."

Eric looked back to Vidar. "I guess I owe you thanks, my lord."

Vidar scowled. "I told you to cut out the *my lord* crap back in Utgard. Besides, I only helped out a little. It wasn't me who healed you when you were slipping away."

"Ullir, then," said Eric.

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Vidar shook his head. "No. G'lann. He found you on the deck when there was only a spark of life left in you, and he kept it going. He's a healer, though he never knew it until now."

Eric's brow knotted. "I owe—him—my life?" He sank back into his bed of cloaks. "Pardon me, Sif, but I did not expect—that such a..."

"Forgive him his shortcomings," said Sif. "Perhaps G'lann has much to learn—but he is learning. You can help him now as much as he helped you."

Slowly, Eric's brow smoothed over. He laughed. It was a good sound. "All right, then."

"Good," said Vidar. "And now I'll leave you two alone."

*Thanks, Vidar," said Eric. He reached out and squeezed the hand of Odin's son.

"Damn," said Vidar. "I know when I'm a third wheel."

He withdrew from the tent and stood up. ..

Jam was standing there, along with Ullir and Var'kald and Ar'on. "How is he?" asked the elder elf.

"Who's doing the rowing?" asked Vidar.

"Curse the rowing," said Var'kald. "What of your friend?"

"He's all right." said Vidar. "By the time we get to Munarvag, he should be able to look after himself."

"Good," said the elf. "He's too brave to die so young."

Jam just grunted. It was as close as he could come to expressing jubilation.

N'arri was taking his turn at the oars, but he was looking hopefully in the direction of the makeshift tent. Vidar walked over and put his hand on the dwarvin's shoulder. "Hell be fine," he said. N'arri had no tongue with which to voice his joy, but his eyes shone even in the predawn light. "Me, too," said Vidar.

The bench opposite N'arri was empty, so Vidar sat down there and took up the oar. He pulled in time with the others—by now, they needed no one to call out the cadence—and somehow he seemed not to be rowing at all.

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All he did was grasp the oar and lean back, and he could feel the ship surging forward. It was as if the oar drew strength from the sea, and his arms, in turn, drew strength from the oar.

Of course, it was Eric's return to the land of the living that lightened his heart, but it was more than that. It was their first good fortune since they'd left Ilior, and the crew was awash with the intangible aura of Eric's luck. Each face was bright with it, each back girded by it. The ship itself seemed to skip over the sea with a new eagerness, like a young deer with spring quivering in its nostrils.

Before Vidar knew it, Ar'on had brought out his harp. At first, the melody he played was nearly indistinguishable from the sound of wind and water. Then it grew apart from it, crested and broke with an abandon and a courage that made Vidar's heart leap. It was a defiant tune—and it defied Death to quell its spirit.

There were words to it, and when the melody began again, Var'kald and H'limif and the other lyos were singing—their voices as pure as individual flames. The dwarvin M'norr joined his voice to the others, for the elves' languages were not so different from world to world. N'arri sang with silent lips, but he sang, too.

Then Vidar found his own voice, though the words felt

strange in his mouth, and their meaning took time to come across. It was a war-song, a song of triumph—but nonetheless a glad song, for it was neither the victor nor the vanquished that the song was about, but the joy at the end of the conflict. Therein lay the victory—that the bloodshed had ended. It put the songs that Vidar had sung as Sin Skoldtng to shame, for the things made by men and even Aesir must pale by comparison to the beauty of things elvish.

Ullir sang, and Gilling. Only Jam and G'lann did not take part. Thursar had never been known to love music—but Jam listened intently enough, and perhaps his black

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eyes gleamed with some emotion. G'lann had his own reasons for his silence, whatever they were.

Death fled that sound, leaving the vessel to the living. It fled, Vidar imagined, with its tail between its legs like a jackal driven from the doorstep.

Sif emerged from the tent of cloaks and wondered at the singing. She looked about at the singers, both those at the benches and the others, and found the one she sought leaning against the tiller. She beckoned, and G'lann stared at her for a moment, uncomprehending. Then H'limif took over the tiller and G'lann came to her.

She said something to him. For a moment, he looked at his sister and said nothing. Then they both crouched so that they could crawl into the tent.

The song leaped and faded. As the voices grew quiet, the pale golden rim of the sun edged over the limits of the sea. A memory gripped Vidar—a good one—as Ar'on worked the last of the melody out of his harp. He'd been sitting in front of his fireplace in Woodstock with Frank and Alissa and the others—perhaps only a few months ago—and someone had been strumming a guitar all night. It seemed that there was always someone strumming a guitar in Woodstock. They had watched the sun come up over the tops of the trees on the eastern slope, and a stillness caught them unawares. In that moment, they'd been as happy as children.

When the dawn came full, that same kind of stillness held them—lyos, dwarvin, thursar and Aesirmen. The oars drove them westward like dragonfly wings.

XVI

Thor fancied himself a fisherman, and perhaps with good reason. Whether he dragged the river for salmon or dropped his hook into the sea, it always seemed that he came away with the biggest catch and the best. Nor did Odin's son keep it a secret, for there was only one thing

he liked better than fishing, and that was telling the tale of it.

Once, in Gladsheim, an elf spoke over his ale of a fish that no one had ever succeeded in catching. Thor was more than a little interested. He leaned closer to the lyos and his eyes narrowed as he listened, for he was also more than a little drunk, and he seemed to think he could hear better when he squinted.

"And what is it called?" asked the Thunderer.

"Militor." said the elf, a pale-haired youth called Thi'alfi. "A huge, slimy fish, and one whose sheer monstrous size would set your teeth to chattering."

"My teeth?" roared Thor. "Hah! This I must see—a

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fish that could strike terror into Odin's son! Even a horde of hrimthursar cannot do that."

"A horde of hrimthursar wouldn't make a dainty meal for Militor," said the elf.

'*But Militor will make a meal for us in Asgard," said Thor, pushing bravado to its limits— He got to his feet, though he staggered a little, and lifted his ivory drinking horn. "fr swear," he told all those assembled in Gladsheim, "that we'll feast on this elvish fish as soon as I can find him!" The Aesir and Vanir about him cheered— for they were as tipsy as he was— But the few elves in the hall said nothing, only glancing slyly at one another.

"And what if you don't?" asked Thi'alfi, the only /yos there with enough nerve to call Thor on his boast.

Thor's brows raised and he laughed long and loud at the elf's audacity. "If I don't?" he bellowed. "Then I'll leave in Alfheim the thing that's claimed more lives than anything else in the nine worlds."

By this, of course, Thi'alfi guessed that Thor meant his mighty hammer Mjollnir—for the Aesir had lost count of the giants that had fallen beneath its weight. A murmur made its way through the crowd in Gladsheim—for that was a wager that Thor would never have made sober.

"It takes the bravest of heroes to risk such a weapon," said the elf, lest Thor come to his senses and back out of the boast. "But if I bring you out to sea and you fail to catch the fish, you'll yield your life-claimer for good?"

"Aye," said Thor, and drained his drinking horn. Wiping the ale from his mouth and the beard around it, he glared at Thi'alfi. "And what will you give me when I

land this Mili... Militoon?"

"Miliror, my lord," said the elf, stalling for time. All he owned was what he wore—his clothing, his sword and his silver bracelets. Hardly enough to wager against the Kkes of Mjollnir.

Yet it was his father's-wealth which he traded in

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Asgard, and that wealth was not his to give away. If by some slim thread of a chance Thor prevailed, he could lose all his family's fortune.

"The noble Thor has no need of jewels and precious ores," said the Jyos carefully. "I will not insult him by offering mere baubles against the value of his 'Ufe-claimer. Instead, I'll pledge my services to you for a year—for a year, I'll be your thrall, your servant—should you catch Militor."

All present agreed that Thi'alfi, too, had had too much to drink.

But neither Thor nor the elf forgot their boasts when they woke up the next morning, and they set off together for the gate that led into Alfheim. Thor was not in the best of spirits, however. His hangover only accentuated the headache he'd created for himself. To catch a fish that was uncatchable—huge and slimy.... Never mind the price if he lost the wager—what about his reputation as a fisherman? There was much at stake.

Once in Alfheim, Thi'alfi procured horses for them, and they made their way to the coast. When they reached the slate-gray sea, however, under a low, dark gathering of clouds, Thi'alfi showed Thor the boat he was to fish from—a small skiff, with room enough for only one.

"What?" roared the Thunderer. "No warship? No crew for such an adventure?"

"That," said Thi'alfi. "was not part of the deal."

"Perhaps not." Thor growled. "But I'll not row out there alone—for when I pull in this Militor, the ship won't be large enough to hold it."

Thi'alfi considered for a moment. It was a fine point, but he didn't want to give Thor a chance to slip off the hook. "All right," said the /yos. "Take my father's warship. But I don't know how you'll row it."

"I won't have to," said Thor. "You said that you would

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bring me out to sea—or did you just let your tongue flap in Gladsheim?"

Thi'alfi cursed himself for his choice of words—but Thor was right. Begrudgingly, he assembled a crew, and brought it to the wharf. Finally, they set out after the much-vaunted fish, but Thor felt more comfortable with a warship beneath him.

It seemed that the fish was accustomed to a particular part of the sea, southwest of the place where they'd hoisted their sail—so that's the direction in which Thi'alfi had his helmsman steer. The sky grew darker and the sea grew darker, too, but hours after they had started out, there was still no sign of Militor.

Thor was ready to lose patience with the elf, and then one of the rowers sighted a strange, scaled bulk far off the starboard bow. Thor's eyes narrowed as he tried to focus on it, for he was still a little bleary-eyed.

"That's funny," he said, after the fish had brought its huge head up out of the water in a very unfishlike manner. "This Militor looks a lot like a dragon." And it was only then that he realized how he'd been duped. Turning to Thi'alfi, he grabbed the elf by the front of his tunic and half lifted him off his feet. "Is it a dragon that Tm fishing for?" he asked, barely able to suppress his rage.

"Of course." said the tyos, unruffled. "Did you expect this would be so easy?"

- Thor muttered and swore, but there was little he could do about the situation. He had pledged to bring back the creature called Militor for Asgard's cooking pots, and the fact that the fish was not a fish—but a dragon, and a big one at that—didn't alter the nature of his vow.

The helmsman steered them toward the dragon, which raised its head higher and higher out of the gray, sliding waters as the boatful of elves approached. Its neck must have been twenty feet long, its snout as long as a man was tall, and the size of its bronze-scaled shoulders only

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hinted at the monstrous body that still lay concealed beneath the waves. Its eyes followed them, and they gleamed like firepits beneath the homed ridges of its brow. The terrible head stooped to sea level; the dripping jaws opened and closed in anticipation of a tasty meal.

Thor unwrapped his hook from the oiled clothes in which he'd wrapped it. The dwarvsn had made this hook for him in their caverns in Svartheim, promising him he'd never need bait to lure a fish to it. But a dragon might be a different matter, so Thor slid a mighty salmon onto it and tied the hook to a long, slim line. This, too, the dwarvin had made for him, assuring him that there was no strength that could pull the rope asunder—but it could be cut as easily as butter, should

Thor ever want to break it-
When they came close enough to the dragon to reach it with a long cast, Thor whirled the hook around his head as he'd done so many times in the past, and flung it out as far as he could. The baited hook flew straight for the beast, and Militor plucked it right out of the air with a snap of its jaws—as if it were some seabird that had come too close.

The hook caught somewhere within that cavern of a mouth. As soon as it felt the discomfort, Militor whipped its head from side to side—but it couldn't dislodge the hook.

Thor pulled the line taut and quickly wrapped it about the mast. The next time the dragon snapped its head back, the ship half leaped out of the water. The line did not break, however. Again, the creature struggled against the line, and again the ship was tossed about. The elves cried out and dove from their benches, to lock their arms about anything that would not move.

Enraged, Militor spun around and tried to flee—but the elvish vessel dragged after it, skipping over the waves like a flat stone on a still lake. Thor clung to the mast and laughed so hard that tears came to his eyes.

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"Unleash the dragon!" cried Thi'alfi, drenched by the water that rushed at them over the prow. He feared it would drown his crew and sink his father's ship. "Cut him loose!" he sputtered.

"What?" roared Thor. "And take a chance of losing my wager?"

"Forget the wager!" cried the elf.

"I cannot," Thor bellowed back. "It's a matter of honor."

Thi'alfi saw what the Thunderer was getting at. "All right," he shouted, but it turned to a gurgle as his mouth filled with water. When he'd finished coughing, he croaked, "You win! I'll concede and be your thrall."

Thor grinned. "Perhaps you're right," he said. "This is getting rather tedious." So saying, he borrowed a sword and cut the line. The ship bounced to a stop, flinging them all forward, and the remnants of the line disappeared after the dragon. Once he knew he was free of his burden, Militor dove—so that Thor's favorite hook was never seen again.

"Pity," said the Thunderer, gla'ring at his new servant, Thi'alfi. "We'll both miss that hook."

"Why should I miss it?" asked Thi'alfi.

**You must have wanted it," said Thor, "or you wouldn't have wagered your freedom against it. That's the life-claimer you would have gotten if you'd won the bet."

Sin Skolding
Sacverstod, A.D. 520

XVII

Ar'on was the one who first spied their pursuers. Just before evening, three distant sails emerged from the indistinct line of the horizon, oars lifting and falling in a steady rhythm. With Vidar's company pared down to less than a single complement of rowers, the hunter ships would overtake them by morning—and according to Var'kald, they were still almost a day away from Munarvag.

Vidar wished he were a stromrad then, like Magni, so that he could plague their pursuers with a devil of a sky-serpent. But neither he nor UUir knew enough stromrad lore to conjure up a nasty breeze, and Gilling did not have enough Aesir blood in him to have received any training at

all.

That night, there were a dozen oars going at once. Eric called out the cadence—since he was not yet fit for more punishing tasks—and M'norr worked the tiller.

Vidar's bands were no longer sore. The rowing he'd done already had raised a crop of thick calluses, thicker than

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those he'd had when he'd twisted raw iron into sculptures. His muscles, too, had become hardened to the task. so that each day's exertion seemed less tiring than that of the day before.

Halfway through the night, Eric's voice faltered and he fell asleep in his cloak. But the beat was imprinted in their blood by then, for they still rowed with the same rhythm.

When morning suffused the edge of the sky with a pale silver light, the sails were not much closer than they'd been before dusk. But the rowers around Vidar were all tiring quickly—except perhaps G'lann, who showed no signs of slowing down.

Jam sat a couple of benches forward of Vidar. He watched the giant's huge muscles bunch up and flatten out as he tugged at the oar—but even Jam was getting tired.

There was no way that they would elude their pursuers this way. They would waste the last of their strength at the benches and have nothing left with which to defend themselves.

From nearby and behind, Vidar heard H'limifs voice. "I hope your sword-arms still have some fight in them," he said, echoing Vidar's own thoughts. His guts tightened again at the thought of more killing. Back home, he'd carved wood and stone into fierce sculptures that suburbanites could show off in their living rooms—here, he carved elvish flesh.

He felt the smoothness of the oar in his hands—and inspiration struck. Perhaps with the kind of carving he preferred, he might avoid the other kind of carving today....

Suddenly, Vidar stood and dragged his oar in through the lock. Propping it up on the bench he'd occupied, he drew his sword and hacked at it.

"What are you doing?" cried Var'kald. "Are you mad? We're nearly in sight of Munarvag and you play at whittling! Rest yourself for the fight we may face."

Vidar stood in the chill morning wind, watching the

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distant sails of the elvish ships. "With any luck," he answered, "this whittling will keep us from that fight."

Rolling the oar so as to get at the other side. Vidar hacked away again. Splinters flew about the deck. He chopped at the oar until he'd fashioned a point where the handle had been. Satisfied with his handiwork, he lugged another unused oar out of its lock.

When he propped it up against the bench like the first one, he found Eric beside him. The boy laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Don't worry," said Vidar. "I'm not crazy."
*That's what you say," said Eric. "But if you're not,

then what are you doing?"
"You'll see." said Vidar. "Hold this steady for me, will you?"

Eric held the oar steady and Vidar took a swipe at it. He told Eric to turn it. He did, and Vidar took another swipe at it. In a few moments, he'd carved a point even sharper than the first one.

All eyes were upon him as he straightened up. "Well," he said, "you can all take a break now. It's too fine a day to work so hard."

G'lann glared at him. "If you won't row, at least leave us alone. Or will you hack up the other oars now?"

"Perhaps," said Vidar. "But if you don't slow down, our friends will never come close enough for me to wreck their sails."

G'lann's eyes narrowed as he glanced at the sharpened oars, and then at Vidar again. H'limif laughed, and Gilling murmured a curse.

"Are you saying," asked G'lann, "that you will heave those oars through their sails?"

"That's the plan," said Vidar, "exactly."

G'lann shipped his oar and stood up. He turned back toward their pursuers for a moment, then faced the son of Odin again. "By the time they get that close," said the elf.

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"we'll be bristling with their arrows. Better to row and take our chances."

"You underestimate me," said Vidar. He strode over to another empty bench and drew a third oar out of its lock. Leaning it up against the bench, he cut at it with a short, chopping stroke. Then he looked up. "It's our best chance, G'lann."

"Perhaps it is," said Sif. "I saw him launch us at Ilior, G'lann—even Magni could not have done that."

"But if he fails," said Var'kald. "it will be too late to save ourselves."

"He won't fail," said Eric. Even G'lann did not challenge that. though he scowled and looked to the hunter ships again.

"All right," said the elflord finally. "We'll take that chance."

"Good," said Vidar. hacking at the third oar. "Now slow your rowing, as if you're too tired to keep up the pace. Don't stop altogether, or they'll suspect something."

The oars slowed, and Vidar heard fewer grunts from his companions. For a little while, the sails seemed to remain at the same distance. Then they approached with frightening quickness—smelling the end of their long, arduous

hunt, perhaps.

Vidar put the finishing touches on his three spears and drove his sword back into its sheath. Then he picked up the three oars in a bundle and carried them to the stern.

The ships' emblems were plain now, despite the mists that clung to the sea like phantom flocks. The foremost sail displayed a dark blue serpent on a field of white. It writhed as the sail bulged, its belly full of wind. It was flanked by the other ships—one that showed a red hawk on a field of pale blue, and another with a black boar's head against a yellow sheet.

A few moments later, he could make out figures at the serpent ship's prow. They were helmeted and armed with k<g elvish bows. Smoke began to rise in front of the sail-

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and Vidar knew by that sign that they were going to try the fire-arrow trick again.

Sure enough, one of the archers lifted a ball of fire toward the heavens and let it fly. It fell just short of their stern.

Vidar netted one of the huge spears he'd fashioned for himself and measured the distance. Still too far away.

The rowers pulled at the oars, but with only a fraction of the strength they had left. It grew unnaturally quiet. Even the wind faltered, as if the sea were holding its breath. Vidar felt the wetness of his palms, and watched another fire-arrow fly. This one was wide to the starboard side.

A third arrow found the deck, and Ar'on stamped on it. The hunter ship was near enough now for them to hear tht;

jeering of the elves gathered at the prow, Vidar felt that he could wreck the sail with a well-placed toss—but the other ships were still out of his range. He wanted a shot at them, too, before they could see what he was doing and hold back.

"Damn it!" cried H'limif. "What are you waiting for?"

"Quiet," said Sif. "He knows what he's doing." But she didn't sound that certain of it herself.

Vidar forced himself to count to ten. Two more arrows thudded into the deck. N'arri put one out and Ullir flung the other into the sea.

... four, five...

The blue serpent loomed, huge and terrible. A naming shaft found the sail, but continued on through it, falling harmlessly on the foredeck. Another arrow imbedded itself in a bench near Gilling's hand. He plucked it out, both

rage and surprise etched in his face, then returned to the sham of rowing.

... seven, eight...

The elvish sails crowded the sky. The foremost ship was near enough to set their sail ablaze if it had wanted to—but the naming arrows had stopped. It seemed that Skir'nir's friends wanted to have their revenge for the slain

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at Illor— They'd put their bows aside and brought out their clean, bright swords.

... ten.

Vidar raised the oar, drew it back like a javelin and let it fly. His heart leaped as its course became plain to him. Like a bolt of lightning, it drove into the heart of the sail, rending it down the middle when the wide part of the oar stuck and the fragile fabric couldn't sustain the weight. There was a great commotion. The warriors at the prow fled toward the gunwales and the rowers slipped off their benches, seeking shelter. The oars dragged in the sea—and with a crack that even Vidar could hear, a couple of them snapped under the pressure of the ship's momentum.

Flames leaped amidship—the flame pot having tipped over in the confusion—and they spread quickly along the deck. Vidar could not have hoped for a better reaction—especially when the hole in the sail was not big enough to slow them down very much.

Meanwhile, the other two vessels were doing their best to steer wide of their harried leader. Vidar lifted a second oar and hurled it at the red hawk. It pierced the sail entirely, splintering the deck beyond it where it struck. Lyos scattered and ran for cover. Again, oars were left to dangle in the water and shatter.

Vidar raised the last spear and sighted his target. He drew it back. But just as he was about to release it, his own ship lurched on an unexpected swell and his aim was thrown off. The mammoth spear embedded itself in the third ship's mast, short of doing any damage.

^Damn!" he muttered, for the black-boar's-head sail was bearing down on them. But the sudden growth of a giant spear in the mast caused that crew to scurry for cover, too—much to Vidar's relief. When bolts fall from the sky, he mused, one can never be sure where the next one will land. Oars dragged in the sea and cracked like whips.

Vidar whirled and saw a tired lot of grinning faces. Even

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G'lann was laughing. "Now, row!" he cried. "Before they figure out what hit them!"

He turned back toward their pursuers and saw the flames trace a red path along the lower edge of the dragon sail. As he watched his handiwork with more than a little pride, the red-hawk vessel wheeled helplessly and collided with the lead ship. Only the crew under the boar's-head emblem seemed to have recovered any semblance of order on the deck.

Vidar dropped onto the nearest bench and dipped his oar into the water. Spray wet his face as their ship picked up speed. Within moments, he'd fallen in with the rhythm of the others.

"Pull!" cried Eric. "Pull!" But when Vidar looked for the source of the voice, he found Eric hauling at an oar three benches up. His first impulse was to drag him off the bench—but they needed all the help they could get.

They rowed. Little by little, their speed increased—aided by a wind that filled the sail to bursting—and they broadened the stretch of glittering sea between themselves and Skir'nir's forces. The colorful elvish sails fell farther and farther behind, dwindling in size. But Vidar could tell by the red blaze and the dark plume in the sky that at least one of the vessels had caught fire—
When he judged that they'd opened up a safe enough lead, Vidar called to Eric to slow the pace. He could almost hear backs creaking as they rowed. But on Ac bench opposite him, N'arri grinned, his eyes dancing with delight at Vidar's trick.

Vidar grinned back. "I've got a million of *em," he said. The sun came up in the hazy east and climbed rungs of white cloud toward the zenith. After little more than an hour had passed, the yellow sail bloomed again, growing larger by the minute. But it was alone.

The morning grew old and Skir'nir's lyos narrowed the gap. By midday, Vidar left off his rowing to make another spear out of an unused oar.

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But he never got a chance to use it. Just when it looked as if the black boar's head would come within range of his cast, it slowed down—until it was only keeping pace with its prey. Obviously, their pursuers had developed a certain respect for his prowess with the javelin.

Vidar could see the array of pale, grim faces on either side of the curved dragon-prow, and he wondered what it was they they wondered. By now, they knew that they were headed for Munarvag—they could never have tracked them if they hadn't figured that out. But they must have some doubts as to just whom they hunted. Perhaps that

was another reason they were content to tag along—they feared an equal battle.

Vidar surveyed his crew—a motley lot of bedraggled warriors now, sore with their exertions at the benches and hollow-eyed with lack of sleep. If Skir'nir's friends knew how tired this bunch was, they'd have borne down on them in a minute, giant spears or no giant spears. Looking at them reminded Vidar of his own fatigue.

Still watching the faces under the black boar's head, Vidar laid down the oar he'd been working on. Then an unwelcome thought invaded his consciousness, like a blackbird coming to roost. Could Skir'nir have left a force on Munarvag, just in case G'lann were to try something like this? Was that why their pursuers were suddenly so patient?

No, Vidar told himself. They would have met with more resistance in Ilior if the renegade had anticipated their plan. Vidar knuckled his eye-sockets. His mind felt a little fuzzy.

G'lann came up beside him at the stern. The elflord's face was streaked with sweat. His eyes reflected the rising light like the water around them. His pale elvish hair was matted against his forehead and his neck.

"We're going to have to fight them eventually," said G'lann. He inclined his head toward the yellow sail. "I know the one who guides that ship—Vett'r. He's not one to

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give up easily." He looked at Vidar meaningfully. "Let's strike at them now, when they least expect us to. If we wait until we reach Munarvag, tired and outnumbered—we'll be at a disadvantage. In the narrow space of a deck—who knows?"

"Perhaps," said Vidar. He considered G'lann for a moment—watched the green, slitted eyes, the shift of blunt, hard features. The kid was shrewd—he had to give him that. "You know," he said, "you think like Odin."

G'lann's expression softened. "I'm not sure." he said, "how to take that."

Vidar laughed a dry laugh. "It's a compliment—this time."

"Then thank you," said G'lann. "This time."

Vidar nodded. "But I don't think we'll do it."

G'lann's brow furrowed. "Why not?"

"Because," said Vidar, "I think they're wary of attack—

ing us. Look at their faces—I've been in enough battles to recognize those who are eager to fight, and those who are not. Maybe this Vett'r doesn't want to lose face with his warriors, so he's going through the motions. Maybe he's just biding his time, waiting for the right moment. But if we keep this distance between us, we can make it to Nidavellir before they set foot on dry land. And I'm willing to gamble that he won't follow us through the gate."

G'lann regarded him. His eyes narrowed again. "Perhaps," he said.

And Vidar wondered if he believed that argument himself. Did he really think Vett'r would stop at the gate? Or was he just too sick of killing to turn and fight when there was a chance it could be avoided?

As his eyes met G'lann's, he felt that Magni's son knew what he was thinking. But the elf voiced no protest. Perhaps he even had faith in Vidar's observations.

As the day wore on, the yellow sail kept its distance. Vidar had the rowers ship their oars. Why waste energy rowing when Vett'r would only match them stroke for

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stroke? Better to conserve their strength—and let Vett'r wonder what they were up to.

After a while, Vidar smiled. The hunter vessel had shipped its oars, too. It came no closer than before.

Finally freed of their tasks, Vidar's crew stalked about the deck and fidgeted. Only the dwarvin slept. Jam leaned against one of the benches and looked as if he were dozing, except that his eyes were open. H'limif drew his sword and felt for nicks with his thumb. Sif and Eric talked quietly by the prow, and even now, it seemed, he could get a smile out of her. Ullir, normally the gregarious sort, just watched the black boar's head in silence, his hand resting on his hilt.

Var'kald had said that they would reach the island
^ before dusk, but when the sun spread into a bright puddle
on the horizon to the west, there was still no sign of it.
Vidar began to wonder if his elvish companions had set
^ them a true course.

^ "The wind has been less than fierce," said Var'kald, a
i little miffed at Vidar's questioning of his seamanship.
"Nor have we rowed much today. We'll find Munarvag
before long, though—rest assured of it."

But as darkness fell and the moon rose like a mottled piece of pale flesh, even Var'kald's face began to show the strain of doubt. He measured the stars and sighed a lot. Everything hinged on their finding Munarvag—more, in

fact, than the elf realized—and if the island had managed to elude them...

"Vidar! G'lann!" It was Sits voice, shrill with excitement. All eyes fell on her. She pointed to something off the port bow.

Vidar followed her gesture and saw what they might have otherwise missed—a long, low silhouette, dark and vague, barely distinguishable from the gray surface of the sea.

He'd seen it before—long and long ago, when he'd come ^ to visit Alfheim with his brothers. Frey had brought them

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here to show them Nidavellir—for it could only be reached through the gates of Alfheim. Vidar recalled how he'd led them into that place of fire and molten rock, and how their faces—Frey's, Baldur's, Hennod's, Bragi's and Tyr's—had seemed to glow with a ruddy light, as if they were but candles blazing from within. The memory was Ufce a strong brew in Vidar's blood. Those were simpler days, innocent days in a way.

But it was more than the memory that made Vidar smile. For the sight of Munarvag meant that their voyage was almost over, and they had so far eluded failure. Another silhouette, the hills that rose just beyond the rocky beach, took definition as the first silhouette wrinkled with detail.

Then the second shadow also solidified, became a run of barren slopes, broken only by the long, white veils of water that fell from the heights, and an occasional bush that had found purchase in the rock. Finally, a third silhouette appeared behind that, stealing form from the chaos, and this was where the highest peaks rose, blotting out the stars. They were lofty crags for so small an island, treeless slabs of gray stone.

Vidar glanced behind him and saw that Vetfr had his lyos rowing furiously all of a sudden. He, too, must have spotted Munarvag, and wanted to close the gap as much as he could before the ones he hunted found land. It didn't matter now if Vidar wrecked their sail or not.

Vidar fell onto a bench and began rowing again. The others found oars as well, and within moments, they were flying toward the island with all the speed they could muster.

Vidar's teeth grated as he pulled for all he was worth. It would be a race to the gate—and he was determined to win it.

XVIII

The gate to Nidavellir was not far from the beach where

they grounded their ship—hidden among the foothills of the island, alongside a narrow waterfall that emptied into the sea. That was how G'lann described it—and how Vidar remembered it.

Magnis son led them up among scattered boulders and over the loose rubble of a long, dark slope, until they could hear the cataract that they sought. When they reached the top of the slope, they saw it—a cascade that fell from the cliffs to their right. The crevice that would let them into another world was somewhere up there, concealed by foreboding crags—perhaps only a ridge or two away.

Vidar granted himself the luxury of looking back and saw that their pursuers had also found land. The silver armor of Vett'r's elves glinted in the moonlight as they leaped from the vessel. Somehow, it seemed that there were more of them than the ship could possibly have held.

Two of G'lann's lyos took the lead now—presumably,

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two who knew this island better than the others. They picked out a twisting trail, but it was also the quickest. Jam brought up the rear, but Vidar was not worried about the giant's climbing abilities—his ancestors had dwelled in Jotunheim, where the gentlest slope made Munarvag look like an English lawn.

They came to a wall of solid rock that jutted out from the rest of the escarpment. The first elf leaped up and caught the rim of it with his hands, then pulled himself over the edge. His companion did the same, hooking a leg over the rock before he could gain the other side.

Then all hell broke loose. Vidar heard a shout of terror, obliterated by what sounded like a roller coaster coming around a steep turn. Small stones and pebbles pelted him as they rained over the brink, and he pressed his body into the coarse surface of the slope lest he be dislodged from his perch. Vidar heard a scream above the roller-coaster roar. Something was catapulted into the air—an elf. The lyos flailed at the sky in desperation, still screaming, until he fell onto an outcrop below them. Then he lay still like a red bag of bones.

"Help!" cried the other elf, from somewhere above them.

Vidar leaped and took hold of the top of the wall. He dragged himself up just high enough to peer over the lip of the rock. What he saw might have been the biggest lizard that Alfheim had ever spawned, its scaly bulk glittering like a mountain of pennies in the moonlight, its tiny eyes burning like coals.

It was huge. Its tail alone was a good twenty feet long,

and its long-snouted head bobbed on a neck three times a tall man's height. It must have been that tail that had swept the elf off the plateau, for it snapped at the stone floor now as if restless.

Vidar had seen dragons before, in Alfheim and in Vanaheim, but never so close—and never out of the water. He remembered Thor's description of his sea battle with

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one of these monsters, and he marveled anew at the redbeard's strength.

"What is it? cried G'lann, and the others shouted their own questions. Magni's son sprang onto the wall next to Vidar. His eyes opened wide.

As luck would have it, the lizard sat right in their path.

G'lann cursed under his breath. "It's a dragon," he called back to the others. "The biggest one I've ever seen—there must be some eggs underneath her."

"They lay their eggs on land?" asked Vidar.

"Aye," said G'lann.

Then they both dropped down from the edge of the wall, for the mammoth tail had come sweeping toward them. The tip of it could be seen amid a cascade of falling rocks as it snapped at the place where they'd been.

"The lyos," shouted Gillmg from below. "We've got to get going or they'll be right on our tails!"

As if to punctuate his words, a shaft skittered off the rocks not far from Jam.

"Help, damn it!" cried the elf who was trapped above them. "It'll find me soon!"

Vidar pulled himself up over the verge again and eyed the dragon, wondering how in hell he could move it. Letting himself down, he slipped his sword free. He'd have to use it soon enough, either on the dragon or Vett'r's men.

Meanwhile, the elves below him—lyos and dwarvin alike—had wriggled their bows off their shoulders and were fitting arrows to the strings. The first of Vett'r's warriors had gained the top of the lowest slope—but Vidar's archers had the advantage of gravity. Just as Vidar made that observation, N'arri placed a shaft in the midst of their pursuers, scattering them.

Vidar turned to G'lann. "Any ideas?" he asked.

G'lann scowled, his strange, blunt features becoming even less pleasant to gaze upon. "A pity," he said. "There are so few left, and the beasts are as old as Alfheim itself.

Still," he added, his voice dropping, "it killed E'lig, and

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Usk'ur is still up there somewhere." His jaw set. "If you can distract it," he told Vidar, "I can slay it." He paused a moment. "But don't harm the eggs."

Vidar envisioned the lizard's swaying head with its maw full of jagged teeth. He could hear the monster's tail slapping at the rock above, as if in anticipation.

"All right," said Vidar. "Ready?"

"Aye." said G'lann.

Vidar needed no other signal. Before he could think twice about it, he sprang up over the lip of the rock onto the small plateau. Instantly, the lizard's eyes blazed and a trumpeting roar like an elephant's escaped its throat. Then the massive tail lashed at him, sweeping across the rocky table like a noisy bulldozer.

Just before it would have reached Vidar, it seemed to accelerate, and his only chance was to leap high in the air. The thick, coppery whip passed beneath him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a figure dart out from concealment and circle around to the creature's right.

Again, the tail lashed at him, and the ground trembled with sudden thunder. It was as if the earth were moving beneath him. This time, Vidar barely cleared the monstrosity, and one foot brushed against it.

But G'lann had made use of the time to clamber up onto the dragon's haunches, and the creature seemed not to notice.

Vidar waited for the tail to come at him again, but it only slithered impatiently, coiling and uncoiling, in a mesmerizing dance of golden-bronze scales. He was so hypnotized by the snakelike tail that he saw the shadow of its deadly jaws too late.

But it was not toward him that the dragon's maw descended. Something like a groan erupted from the lizard and it threw its head back, Usk'ur writhed in its mouth for a few moments, then fell still. Only then did the dragon open its jaws and let the elf's corpse drop to the ground.

By then, however, G'lann had reached the ridge of its

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back. He clung there now, spread-eagled, while the mighty lizard shifted its weight. Its head stopped moving when it caught sight of Vidar again, and the red-coal eyes seemed to transfix him. Suddenly, its open maw fell toward him.

Vidar flung his sword up. He saw its tongue, long and pink. He could smell its breath, like a mountain of three-day-old fish left in the sun. Just as the dragon's jaws were about to close on him, he hacked at them with all his strength.

The mighty jaws snapped and bowled Vidar over. For a single, terrifying moment, all he could see were stars in a deep, black pit. Then his vision cleared and he realized that the monster's head had retreated, leaving him whole. In fact, the dragon had grown a new appendage. Vidar's sword had stuck in the creature's chin, jutting out like a mandarin's beard, and a reddish-brown slime dripped from it.

By then, G'lann had reached the dragon's massive shoulder, and he was making his way across the rippling landscape of its scales like a surfer riding the waves at Malibu. The ruby-dark eyes had not seen him, so eager were they to make a meal of Vidar. Its breath rasped in its throat and the tail started to swing toward him once more.

But the dragon soon had other things to worry about. G'lann had grabbed the knobby growth at the base of its neck, and even as that bludgeoning tail reached for Vidar, the elflord thrust his blade into the soft, white flesh of the lizard's throat.

It was as if he'd wounded a mountain. The creature's entire body convulsed, snaking in agony. Blood gouted from its wound. The dragon writhed uncontrollably, its tail pounding the stone of the plateau as if it could stave off its doom that way, and its head swung from side to side, trumpeting its dismay.

Then, with one furious lunge at an unseen enemy, the creature's neck collapsed and its head crashed at its short, webbed feet.

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For a long moment, there was only silence. Slowly, it was filled with distant cries—and other cries, not so distant. Vidar approached the wreckage of the dragon, saw its eyes, their ruby glow dimmed, and the burnished brilliance of its armor. Its fish-smell was strong in his nostrils. But there was no movement amid the hills and valleys of its scaly hide.

Finally, something moved. It was G'lann. He stood up from behind the sweep of the monster's haunch.

"Come on," he said. "Signal the others." Blood dripped from his temple down the side of his face, but he looked to be all right otherwise.

Vidar plucked his sword free of the lizard's chin, sheathed it without cleaning it and started back toward the

brink. But his companions had already begun to thrust themselves up onto the ledge. Eric whistled when he saw the dragon. The others were no less awed—not even Sif. N'arri and M'norr were the last to climb up—but when the others began to scale the slope just beyond the creature's splendid carcass, the dwarvin remained by the edge of the plateau.

"Let's go," Vidar called to them.

The dwarvin looked back at him. N'arri shook his head from side to side. Then he turned and sent an arrow whistling down the slope.

"Come on," Vidar shouted. But he'd seen the expression in their catlike eyes. They were going to sacrifice themselves so that the rest of them could make it to the gate.

Vidar hesitated for a moment. Then he descended on Usk'ur's corpse and took the elf's bow, along with a handful of arrows from his quiver. Darting over to where the dwarvin had made their stand, he knelt next to N'arri.

The elf glanced at him, his expression troubled, as he nocked another arrow. Pulling back, he let it fly. Down-slope, a lyos cried out and fell. M'norr picked off a second one.

Vidar drew back on his own bowstring, aimed and fired.

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His shaft came close to one of the elves' pale-haired heads, but he hit nothing.

N'arri glanced at him again and frowned. He tried to push Vidar away with one hand, pleading with him in wordless desperation.

"Go, my lord," said M'norr. "We'll catch up."

"Don't give me that," said Vidar, fitting another arrow to his string. "I know that you two will sit here until either the enemy is dead or you are. And my money's on the enemy—there are a lot more of them, and they keep getting closer."

As Vidar spoke, a shaft glanced off the face of the rock right by his knee. Again, N'arri urged him to follow the others.

"Nothing doing," said Vidar. "Either we all go or we all stay. I'm as expendable as you are—except that I can't shoot as straight."

The dwarvin's eyes grew wild with exasperation. He , whirled, releasing one last shot at the lyos below them. ^ Then he tapped M'norr on the shoulder and took off after their companions.

M'norr and Vidar were right on his heels.

They vaulted over the dragon's tail and followed the last of the company up a crevice in the hillside. G'lann and a { couple of the others had already disappeared into the hole at the top of the crevice before Vidar recognized it for the gate to Nidavellir. His skin seemed to tighten in anticipation of that place—he thought he could feel its intense heat already, though the waterfall beside them flung a cool spray in their faces.

Vidar was the last to crawl through the narrow space between the rocks. It was dark very quickly—much too quickly for his eyes to adjust to it. There was no torch to light the way, so he had to feel for turns in the tunnel with his fingers, and he stumbled into M'norr ahead of him more than once in his haste. The way widened suddenly, and the place echoed furiously with the scrabbling of their

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boots against the stone floor. The curses that they muttered were hurled back at them over and over again, in diminishing whispers.

Then sound slid away. The air became thick and close about them, and the barely audible buzzing that surrounded the world-bridge infested their brains. The ground they trod sloped downward for a time. Finally, it seemed to vanish altogether, so that they felt nothing below their feet but Ginnungagap—the abyss. The darkness was absolute, impenetrable.

Vidar's head filled with the buzzing. He felt light-headed, disembodied, deaf and blind.

But in time, the buzzing ceased, and the ground began to grow solid again underfoot. A spark of brightness appeared at what seemed like a great distance. Slowly, as they went forward, it widened into a deep red name. Soon after, Vidar's hearing was restored, but all he could hear was a savage hissing.

They came to the end of their tunnel. A wave of sudden heat smote them like a giant hand and Nidavellir opened before them—a vision of hell that would have given Dante nightmares. The lavascape flowed and shifted like a sea of frothy blood around the dark upthrusts of higher ground. In the distance, ebon peaks spewed out red geysers. The angry crimson clouds roiled overhead, blotting out whatever stars might have shone on them, and the acid stench of molten metal singed their nostrils. The incessant hissing was punctuated with sharp whip-cracks—boulders that had fallen into the lava rivers being split open by the heat.

Eric looked back toward Vidar, caught between fear and wonder. "How will we ever make our way through that?" he asked.

"There are ways," said Vidar, feeling his skin crawl under the touch of that all-consuming inferno. "I just wish that I could remember one."

The company had emerged on one of the dark, jagged

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peaks that rose above the molten sea. G'lann led them down to the edge of the peak, where it nearly touched the side of a much smaller hunk of rock. He stopped at the brink, looking around, squinting at the tableau— He looked perplexed and angry. "It has changed since I saw it last," he said. "The tide of lava was not as high."

"Well, we can't wait for it to subside," said Var'kald. "We'll have company soon."

Vidar surveyed the place—the dark tablelands and crags that receded into the red haze of distance. Sweat ran into his eyes. "I hope you can find the way," he said to G'lann. "I don't remember this at all." The soles of his boots were starting to heat up.

G'lann spat and his saliva hissed where it struck the rock, turning to steam. "Aye," he said. "I think I do."

He raised his arm and pointed to an island perhaps a couple of hundred feet away. Vidar peered at it, the sweat now streaming down his temples to his jaw, where it tickled the skin beneath his beard.

"That's it?" he asked G'lann.

"Aye," said the elflord, "Be thankful it's not drowned in this molten sea."

"I'm thankful," said Vidar.

It was a good thing, too, that the rocky upthrusts were clustered here—for by going from one to the next, it appeared that they could work their way to the gate. That is, if G'lann's memory served, and the island he'd picked out was the right one.

Something like thunder rumbled beneath the churning clouds, and a great gout of flame shot out of a black crater. Lava bubbled over its lip, pouring out in a torrent of red, steaming magma. The sweat in Vidar's eyes began to sting, and he wiped it away— Standing here was like standing in a furnace.

' Without another word, G'lann backed up a few steps and leaped onto the hunk of rock before them. Landing

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like a cat on all fours—perhaps a bit more cautious than he'd needed to be—he gestured the others to follow.

They followed.

When Vidar's turn came, he could not help but glance at the roiling flood that flowed between the two rocks. He, too, leaped just a touch farther than he had to. Just in case.

Jam came last. He hesitated for a moment, for even a short jump was not an easy task for someone of his bulk. His graven-stone face was caught in the sullen strobe effect of Nidavellir, so that it reflected crimson flares one second and fell shadow-dark the next. When he jumped, however, he spanned the flood without a hitch.

They crossed the island, careful not to step into a tiny crevice or stumble on a sudden rise. The surface of the rock was jagged in places, treacherous, and they could not afford for one of them to go lame now. A volcano boomed behind them, and the acrid wind carried sparks past. Vidar pushed his hair back where it had stuck to his cheek, and tried to blink away some sudden smoke. He coughed, choking on cinders.

Then they reached the far end of the isle, and this time the gap they faced was a good deal wider. The far cliff was lower than the one on which they stood, however, and the difference in height gave them some needed assistance.

G'lann went first again. This time, he measured off at least a dozen paces before he took off and sailed through the air. He landed on the other side with a few feet to spare.

"Come on," he shouted back,

Eric went next. He eyed the gulf, took a deep breath and ran down the edge. At the last moment, he leaped, his legs bicycling in the air as he fought for balance. But he landed right next to G'lann, and the elf helped him stay upright when it looked as if he might stumble backward. Somewhere below, a rock shattered-

The rest of them followed, H'limif and Var'kald, N'arri and M'norr. Gilling and Ullir and Sif and Ar'on. Before

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Vidar took his shot at the gap, however, he reached up and gripped Jam's shoulder. He didn't have to read the thursar's expression to know the fear he felt.

"You can do it," said Vidar. "You wouldn't want those sons of yours to miss you, or that daughter."

The giant spat. "Aye," he rumbled.

Vidar turned toward the task at hand. He picked out a relatively clear path on which to build up his momentum. Again, he wiped the sweat from his eyes. He ran. He leaped.

And he came down on the other side, as more helping hands grabbed at him than he had things to grab.

"Okay," he said. "I made it."

Then everyone's attention focused on Jam. The lava sea hissed and bubbled, as if eager for the giant's body. Jam seemed to glare at them with his deep-set, black-pebble eyes. He didn't move a muscle. All at once the thursar lurched into motion. He took a long, running jump—but even before he left the ground, Vidar knew it would be close. The giant was silhouetted for a moment against the red fury of the sky. Vidar's heart clenched like a fist in his chest, for the giant was losing momentum too quickly.

Jam stretched out his huge arms in desperation and gripped the edge of the cliff, his body crashing into the smooth wall below it. His fingers slipped—but Vidar got hold of one wrist and G'lann the other. For a long moment, it was uncertain as to whether they would drag him up to safety or he would drag them into the soup. Vidar felt someone grab his waist, someone else his ankle. Finally, they hauled the thursar up, falling backward in a tangle of arms and legs.

Slowly, Jam got to his feet, brushing black rock-powder off his hands. He peered back across the chasm. Sweat poured from his face and his bare arms, and his tunic was dark with sweat. Jam's breath came in gasps, for he was a thursar. Like his forebears in Jotunheim, he was made for . extreme cold—not extreme heat.

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He turned back and caught Vidar's eye. The giant grunted. "They'll have no reason to miss me now, my lord."

Despite the searing heat and the burden of fatigue it brought with it, Vidar smiled. "I guess not," he said.

G'lann was already climbing, looking for the safest, path to the other side of this rock mass. The rest of them plodded after him, wavering before Vidar's eyes like a desert mirage.

They clambered over a sharp ridge and came down a sudden, steep escarpment. But carefully—for if they slipped on the loose rocks underfoot, the slope ended as a black beach in-the molten sea. Their first slip would be their last.

Vidar went slowly, crouching, trying to keep his weight distributed evenly. He could hear Jam's tortured breathing in front of him and it reminded him of the irritation in his own throat. The air was almost too hot to breathe. Cinders stuck to their eyelids like a dark paste.

They made their way down the escarpment at an angle, for the place where this rock came closest to the next one

was off to their right—a place where the slope dropped off suddenly, as if a mammoth meat cleaver had split this from another piece of rock. It was not as difficult a leap as the test one, though they were closer to the level of the bubbling, spitting sea now, and that made it much hotter here. The real problem would be getting any kind of running jump on this slippery incline.

G'lann pointed to a rocky peak two islands away. "That's where the gate is," he said. His pale elvish hair was dark with smoke and cinders. His face was dark as well, but sweat had carved out fissures in the darkness, tracing a mysterious pattern. Vidar looked around at the others. Each one wore his own sweat-struck mask, so that they looked like some primitive tribe of painted warriors. Vidar wondered briefly what he looked like himself.

As before, G'lann was the first to brave the gap. He

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crept upslope a few yards and then pelted down, crossing the span at an angle. It made the distance between the rocks greater, but it also allowed him to gather some momentum. He landed on the far side.

Sif went next, following her brother's lead. She hurtled through the air for one heart-stopping moment, and then she stood safely beside G'lann. In the distance, a volcano boomed, and a red flare bloodied the sky.

The rest came afterward. Some had more trouble than others. Ar'on, being the lightest, made it with the least effort—although it might have been even less trouble for him if he'd left his harp behind. But he insisted on carrying it with him, slung over his back in its leather sack. Gilling, whose wounded leg had begun to give him some pain again, despite Ullir's ministrations, cursed and sweated and bounded across in the end.

Only Jam and Vidar were left. The thursafs face gleamed with his exertions. His breath came harsh and ragged, and he looked fearsome in that ruddy light.

"Come on," said Vidar. "One more leap like the last one."

"Aye," said the giant. He turned toward the abyss, facing it like a two-legged enemy. Slowly, he made his way backward and up the slope, still facing the span. Then, without another word, he charged the brink and took off like some ponderous bird of prey. His legs churned mightily and a cry tore from his throat.

Miraculously, he landed with both feet on the edge of the far rock. He fought for balance, trying to throw his considerable weight forward, away from peril. Vidar marveled at Jam's strength, and at his courage.

But before anyone could get a grip on him. Jam

straightened suddenly to his full nine-foot height. He was as rigid as an oak tree, and Vidar saw why. A shaft protruded from Jam's back—an elvish shaft.

Slowly, hypnotically, the giant began to pivot, as if mocking the chasm. Vidar saw his face, as expressionless

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as ever. Then he plummeted with sickening quickness into the molten flood.

Vidar flattened, looking back over his shoulder, and an arrow whizzed by his ear. More clattered about him on the coarse black rock. He peered into the volcanic distance and saw that Sidr'nir's lyos—a few of them, anyway—had gained the ridge at the top of the escarpment.

Rising suddenly—for there was no time to make a running approach—Vidar took two steps and jumped as far as he could. The white-hot flood yawned beneath him, hissing and gurgling, splitting boulders open in its fury. As the other side loomed before him and he caught a glimpse of his companions, he felt himself falling. His heart sank as he realized that he wouldn't make it. He missed Eric's outstretched hand by inches, slammed into the solid rock face and fell—

No! His teeth grated as his fingers and feet sought purchase on the sheer wall of stone. No!

Something happened. It took a few moments for Vidar to realize that he had stopped falling. He tasted blood in his mouth, and he spat it out. He tried to stand. He stood, and saw that he'd landed on a ledge that jutted out from the rock mass. If he'd had any gods, he would have thanked them.

When he looked up, he could have burst into laughter—despite the elvish shafts that broke on the rock face all around him. His companions leaned over the edge just a couple of yards above. And the elves hadn't come far enough down the escarpment to see the sitting duck that Vidar had become.

"Hey!" he yelled. "How about a little help?" There was a brief council up above, and before it was over, some of his companions were returning the lyos' fire. Then Vidar saw a pair of feet stick out, followed by legs and a torso, and realized that H'limif—the tallest of them, except for Vidar and G'lann—was being lowered like a living ladder.

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When the elf's ankles came within a couple of feet of Vidar's grasp, he leaped up and took hold of them. He winced as an arrow shattered against the rock just a few inches from his left hand.

The others pulled them up with dizzying speed. H'limif

complained that he was being made to bend in ways his body did not condone, but he was at least hauled up before he could be perforated by Vett'r's archers.

Vidar felt himself seized—by his tunic, his hair, his armpits, his wrists, anything that offered a handhold. He sprawled on the surface and lay there a moment, wondering at his incredible good fortune. Then he got up and took off after G'lann, who had already picked out a way for them across this island.

It was the most treacherous going they'd yet encountered in Nidavellir. The black rock thrust in every direction, as if there had been an upheaval on this isle, and nothing had settled in its original place. Every shadow seemed to hide a crevice, every protrusion a razor-sharp edge. But the jumbled terrain had its advantages, too, because they could use it for cover against Vett'r's bowmen. They bugged the rock and elvish arrows sang in their ears.

Only G'lann could not hide himself. He darted between two dark pillars up ahead, turned to make sure that the others could see the path he'd chosen and plunged on.

Vett'r and his elves had begun to clear the gulf behind them. More and more arrows fell about Vidar and his companions, splintering when they struck Nidavellir's black bones.

Then Var*kald cried out, and Vidar knew he'd been hit. Ullir was nearest to him, and then Sif. The Aesirman tended to the elf while Magni's daughter guarded them with a couple of well-placed arrows.

Vidar hesitated. Finally, after what seemed a long time but could only have been a few moments, Var'kald rose again with Ullir's arm about him. Seeing that, Vidar

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continued to climb. The small of his back suddenly felt very vulnerable. He climbed faster.

For all its confusion, this island was not a big one. When Vidar turned inside a spiny ridge of rock, he found G'lann resting in the unexpected safety that it offered, and Ar'on beside him. Perhaps ten feet away, across a thankfully flat piece of rock, the last gulf awaited them. The others found this place, one by one, sinking against the rock when they realized G'lann would not leave until his sister and Var'kald had caught up.

Finally, Ullir and Sif appeared, half-carrying Var'kald between them. The elf had taken the arrow in his shoulder. Klin distorted his face, but it was not a crippling wound. What's more, the shaft had gone right through him, leaving no fragments which would have to be removed. Sif had torn a strip from her bundled cloak to stop the flow of blood, but it had already been soaked through.

"Var'kald," said G'lann. "There's one more chasm to leap across."

"I know," said the elf. "It's my arm that hurts, not my eyes."

"Can you do it?" asked Eric.

Var'kald groaned. "Have I a choice?"

G'lann nearly smiled. "Good," he said. He looked up and found Vidar. "You go first. You've got no bow." In fact, Vidar had left Usk'ur's bow somewhere, considering Jt excess baggage.

G'lann turned to Eric next. "After Vidar, you."

Meanwhile, the dwarvin, Sif and H'limif had already positioned themselves around the ridge and were making life difficult for their pursuers. Vidar heard one of Vett'r's elves scream as a shaft found its mark.

"Come on," said Var'kald. "Before we're all wearing feathers."

Vidar turned and looked across the short stretch of plateau. It wasn't the toughest jump he'd been asked to make that day.

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He pelted down his chosen runway and sprang. He landed on all fours—and the gate was right there in front of him, a narrow fissure in the black rock.

Eric came next. Showing no signs of how close he'd come to death so recently, he negotiated the chasm with a small measure of grace. Ar'on came after, then G'lann.

"Get ready," said the elflord, after he'd steadied himself. "Here comes Var'kald."

Var'kald leaped and Var'kald cleared the abyss—if barely. Despite his loss of blood, he was stronger than he looked. The others followed in quick succession. N'arri came last, spending his final arrow before he turned and hurtled across the gap.

A volcano roared. Far below, the sea of lava hissed and spat. Bloodred clouds blossomed in never-ceasing turmoil. Cinders fell into their eyes.

The gate was just large enough for Vidar to fit through. Jam might never have made it, even if he'd survived.

Odin's son slithered down into darkness, the glare of NidaveHir still carved into his vision like a blood-eagle. Once again, he forsook reality and walked the path between worlds. After NidaveHir, it almost felt pleasant to

be deprived of one's senses.

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Vidar selected another boulder. With a great effort, he lifted it off the ground, took two steps toward the gate and heaved it at the opening. As he'd hoped, it bounded down the slope and lodged in the gate.

G'lann and H'limif worked another boulder free from its ages-old berth and sent it crashing after the first one. Then a third one followed, while Sif and M'norr and Eric watched the results of their handiwork appreciatively.

"There." said Vidar. "I don't think we'll have to worry about Vett'r anymore. There's only room for one at a time to come out of there, and he won't be able to budge those stones by himself."

"I wish him a good trip back," said G'lann.

They stood on a long, white, snow-soft slope that the sun had already abandoned. It still shone, however, on the peaks above them with a glorious, pink and pleasant light. Vidar unrolled his cloak and wound it about him. The air was sharp enough here to freeze their breath, yet it felt fine

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to breathe it after the brimstone atmosphere of the place they'd left behind.

Sif took a handful of snow and washed Eric's face with it. When the snow came away, the mask he'd acquired in Nidavellir was gone. He laughed and did the same for her.

They decided to trek up the slope while the light still held. G'lann said that there would be some shelter from the wind at the top of it, and they could make their camp there for the night. The snow was up to their knees in some places, but the incline was not all that steep. By the time dusk fell on the peaks, they found the shelter of which G'lann had spoken—a copse of birch and alder nestled in the lee of a few mammoth stones.

It was only after he sat down that Vidar realized how hungry and thirsty he was. The snow quenched his thirst, but he had to settle for a half-ration of graincakes. The food was running out. Even after Vidar had eaten, his belly rumbled hollowly,

Vidar began the healing process in Var'kald and then let Ullir take over when it was his turn to stand watch. The arrow had not done that much damage after all. Var'kald would heal quickly.

Ar*on was already standing guard with his sword and his harp-sack when Vidar emerged from the trees to join him.

The youth seemed to relax a bit, as if standing watch alone made him nervous.

"We can sit down," said Vidar. "It's going to be a long night." Ar'on nodded, and they each chose a cold, moss-green boulder. After a few moments, the elf leaned his sword against the rock, point down so that his hand could leap to the hilt if necessary. Then he brought his harp out from its leather bag and allowed his fingers to roam softly over the strings.

"Why don't you play?" asked Vidar. "It'll help pass the time."

Ar'on shrugged. "I guess I don't feel like playing."

"No?" said Vidar. "Then give it to me."

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"You?" asked Ar'on-

"Aye, me," said Vidar. "I've played a harp or two in my day."

Tentatively, Ar'on extended the harp. Vidar took it and plucked at a string. The note was off a bit in this cold, but it would do. He didn't want to think about Jam, or the two lyos that had died fighting the dragon on Munarvag- He didn't want to think about all the elves that had died pursuing them. All he wanted to do was lose himself in the music, as he'd done time and again as Sin Skolding. While there was music, he need not think about death.

With the music came words, and soon Vidar found himself singing softly, so as not to wake the others. He spun a tale of his brothers, Baldur and Vali and Hod, and how a maiden in Midgard had made them all love her- then escaped their anger by finding shelter in the arms of Odin himself. Only Baldur would have let her go without punishment- for he was gentle with women, even in his youth- but both Vali and Hod would have quartered her and fed her to swine had it not been for Odin.

When the tale was done, Vidar heard his voice trail off, as it had so many times in feasting halls from Radsey to Algron. Then there was only silence.

"Do you still miss them?" asked Ar'on, green fire burning deep within his eyes.

"Who?" asked Vidar, lost in old, old thoughts. His eyes hardened when he realized Ar'on was still waiting for a response. "My brothers, you mean?" He paused, watching his breath freeze. "Aye," he said. "I miss them all. Heimdall for his certainty, I think. You never had to worry about what was right and wrong- all you had to do was watch him."*

Vidar smiled, though the cold stretched the skin of his

face tight over his bones. "And I miss Bragi, for he was clever in his poetry, and I always admired that. Sort of a pain in the ass at other times—but a hell of a poet. And Baldur. What can I tell you about Baldur? He was our

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touchstone, our sun and our stars. Our luck. We looked at Baldur, our brother, and we knew that we ourselves couldn't be all that bad if he was our kinsman."

Ar'on nodded, entranced.

"What about your brothers?" asked Vidar.

The light in Ar'on's eyes faltered for a moment, then flared again. "Ei'tri was the oldest," he said. "He would have inherited the farm. That would have been best, for he would have made the land bulge with mighty harvests. That was his pleasure, his talent."

Ar'on sighed. "Svip'dag was born second, but he was our best warrior. As long as I can remember, he practiced at swordplay, as if the world were still at war. Who could have know that in the end, war could return—and Svip'dag would find that he was too brave?" The elf paused, his eyes fixed on nothingness. "If he'd been less proud of his swordsmanship, he might have been alive today."

"Why is that?" asked Vidar.

"He challenged Skir'nir himself," said Ar'on. "Wbuld that he'd found someone else to trade blows with." The elf's head dropped a bit. "But he found Skir'nir, and Skir'nir proved too much."

Vidar nodded in silence, watching the wind rustle the snow-laden branches where their friends slept. The sky was blue-black, clear with a crystalline quality.

"Did you have your revenge?" asked Ar'on.

"Revenge?" asked Vidar. "There was no one left to seek revenge upon. Those who slew my brothers died the same day—and some of them by my brothers' hands. Only Baldur's murderer was never found—and only Vali still seeks revenge for that death."

"Why?" asked the elf. "Who killed him?"

Vidar snorted. "Another brother. Hod." The wind whistled, a shrill, hollow sound that was nonetheless soothing, for it beat back the silence.

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"One of your brothers killed the other?" asked Ar'on, his voice rife with disgust. "That's fratricide."

"Aye," said Vidar. And what did he contemplate when he found Odin? Patricide? "We Aesir are a strange bunch, Ar'on."

The elf considered that last remark for a time.

"What will you do," asked Vidar, "when we return? Tend the farm?"

"I suppose I will," said Ar'on. "And you?"

"I think I'd like to tend the farm," said Vidar, "but there's someone tending it already."

"I don't understand," said the elf.

The only sound that alerted Vidar to the possibility of danger was a soft crunching of snow. Then the wolf was upon them, snarling and snapping, a powerful gray fury that was at Ar'on's throat before the elf could even cry out. Vidar grabbed without seeing clearly what it was he grabbed at, but he managed to get his fingers around a foreleg and fling it away.

The wolf landed in a flurry of snow, twisted and was on Vidar in a second. Hot saliva dripped from its maw as it sprang for his throat. This time, he got his fingers in between its fangs, one hand on its snout, the other on its chin. It gathered its legs beneath it and slashed at him with its hindclaws, trying to disembowel him. Vidar twisted to avoid the razor-sharp claws, but he did not let go.

Slowly, against increasing resistance, he strained to force the jaws apart. A whine began in the creature's throat and it grew into a sound like the creaking of an uncoiled hinge. Finally, with a spray of blood, Vidar broke the wolf's jaw.

Crawling out from beneath it, he surveyed his handiwork. The wolf coughed out its life into the snow, a pitiful thing now, just a dying animal. But it could just as easily have been Ar'on lying there, turning the snow crimson, if he'd been alone when the wolf attacked.

The elf had dropped his harp and grabbed his sword. He

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crouched nearby, ready to help if need be. He was trembling slightly, but unhurt. With great caution and more than a little awe, Ar'on approached the bloody carcass.

Vidar touched his fingertips to his belly and they came away smeared with blood. His tunic had been slashed to ribbons, but he'd not been cut too deeply. Mostly, it just smarted like the devil. He bent over and picked up a

handful of snow, then rubbed it against his middle.

At first, he had to wince at the sharp, stinging pain. Then the snow did its job and numbed it a little.

"Are you all right?" asked Ar'on, staring at Vidar's wounds.

Vidar nodded. "No maladjusted wolf is going to do me in. Fve had too much experience with them."

By this time, the others had begun to gather around them, wrapped in their cloaks. H'limif knelt beside the wolf, saw how it had died, then looked up at Vidar and saw the blood on his hands. He smirked and nodded appreciatively.

"What happened?" asked Sif. When she saw Vidar's wound, her eyes widened. "Ullir," she said, "my kinsman is hurt."

Vidar held up a hand. "Don't bother," he told the Aesirman. "It looks a lot worse than it is. Save your strength for Var'kald."

"This," said G'lann, nudging the carcass with his foot, "is why the lyos no longer live in the mountains as our ancestors did. The wolves thrived too well for us to thrive at all."

Vidar looked at the slopes around them, blue-white and majestic in the light of the sickle moon. "Wolves hunt in packs," he said to no one in particular. "This one could have been a loner—but there may be more of them about. Let's be careful,"

"Aye," said Sif.

"You know," said H'limif, "our food is running low." He looked meaningfully at the wolf.

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"Wolf-meat?" said M'norr, his face clenching in disgust.

"Aye," said G'lann. "It's not as bad as you might think."

Vidar had never tasted wolf-meat either, but his initial reaction was the same as M'norr's. Nonetheless, the sounds his stomach was making were likely to cause an avalanche if he didn't get something more to eat than half-rations of graincakes.

They built a fire with some deadwood they found beneath the trees, and G'lann butchered the animal. It did not have much meat on it, but there was enough to go around. Even the dwarvin had some.

G'lann had been wrong. It tasted worse than Vidar had expected. But none of them seemed eager to end their little feast. They wanted to satisfy themselves, perhaps, that there were not more of the wolves nearby, waiting to feast on them.

In the silence that descended afterward, Vidar rolled up in his cloak and tried to get some sleep. First, he sent out a mental call to Hoenir, on the chance that he'd made it farther into the mountains than expected. But there was no response, so Vidar let his fatigue catch up to him.

When morning came, there was again not much to eat. They started off in silence that was like a complaint, and G'tann led them up another long slope. But this one was blinding white in the early morning sunlight, and the wind that hollowed out the sky with its fury blew down on them with a vengeance. It numbed their flesh through their clothing and made their bones brittle. The going was slow, for the snow was deep here, and it sprayed into their faces every time they looked up. Only the sun's reflected warmth, meager as it was, kept them from freezing.

But by the time the sun stood high, they'd found a level area on which to rest. The wind blew here, too, but not as strongly. Vidar looked at the faces of his companions. They were ruddy with the cold and drawn thin. for they

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were not as well-equipped to ignore their hunger as Vidar was. Once again, half-portions of graincakes were passed around.

In time, they resumed their climb, and at the top of the slope they found a belt of forestland. They entered among the towering pine trees gladly, for here the wind would not have a chance to whittle at them. But there was no food to be found in the form of pine nuts. Squirrels or something like them had already gnawed out all the meat. Above the treetops, the sky stood blue and empty, mocking them.

Vidar walked alongside G'lann on the carpet of pine needles mixed with snow. "How much farther, then?" he asked him.

G'lann shrugged. "Another couple of days, perhaps. I've only seen these mountains in summer, and then I've never come this far up. Who would want to?" He paused. "I'm only following the instructions that Skir'nir gave me. Before he turned traitor."

"Let's hope," said Vidar, "that he knew what he was talking about."

G'lann said nothing. It was not-something he wanted to think about.

The day passed and night fell softly in the pine forest. Vidar saw to Var'kald, to make sure that his wound was

healing right, but his concern was unnecessary. The elf had only the same complaints as the rest of them—too much cold and not enough food. Still, he would not be able to use his sword-arm for a time.

There were no wolves seen that night. But when Vidar's turn came to stand watch, he could not shake the feeling that they were being stalked. Perhaps Skir'nir was closer than they thought.

In the morning, they emerged from the forest. The land here was steep and treacherous, the mountainside marred by crevices and faults. In some places, the rock had been stripped bare of snow and ice by the wind; in other places, the snow was soft and deep, or piled high in great drifts.

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Once, H'limif stepped on what looked like solid ground with a shallow blanket of snow over it—the next moment, he found himself waist deep in a fissure. After that, they scaled the side of the mountain a bit more carefully,

"Do you get snow like this in Midgard?" asked Ullir, climbing alongside Vidar. -,

"Of course," said Vidar. "Mostly in the mountains. People travel for miles to find it, too. Hundreds of miles, sometimes, for a slope like the ones behind us."

"You're spinning a tale now," said Ullir.

"No," said Vidar. "I swear it. And when they find such a slope, they bind things to their feet—and they ski,"

"Ski?" asked the Aesirman. "What's that?"

"They stand on long, narrow boards and glide down the slopes."

Ullir pondered that information for a moment. "Why?" he asked.

"Because," said Vidar, "it's fun."

Ullir laughed. "Oh- Because it's fun, eh?"

"Yes," said Vidar. "But don't laugh. Some of your human ancestors may have skied before they were brought to Valhalla—where Odin had all the fun."

Ullir nodded. "I think I'd like to see Midgard some-time," he said. "With your permission, of course."

Vidar shrugged, turning his face out of the wind as it lifted a spray of snow toward them. "You're welcome there, Ullir, But you have to come alone. I don't want Midgard suddenly flooded with Asgardian ski-bums."

Ullir laughed again, and some of the snow that had

crusted in his yellow beard shook loose. "Fair enough," he said.

As they ascended, the wind increased in velocity, hammering at them as if to sweep them off the mountain. They buried their faces in the folds of their cloaks, but it made the going even slower. Despite his heavy boots, Vidar's feet became numb, and his forehead felt as if someone had taken a cheese grater to it.

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"Vidar!" cried Sif suddenly.

He was right behind her. "What is it?" he bellowed, trying to be heard over the howl of the wind.

"Look up," she cried. "That way." She pointed to something dark, well up the mountainside.

"A wolf?" wondered Vidar, unable to see clearly through the wind-stung tears in his eyes and the blinding glare of the snowsheet.

"Don't know," said Sif.

"What is it?" shouted Gilling from just below.

"We're not sure," said Vidar, pointing to the dark spot on the mountain, where—yes—something seemed to crouch. Then, suddenly, it moved and was gone. As if it had never been there in the first place.

Sif looked down at him and Vidar shook his head. She patted her hilt meaningfully, then turned back into the wind and went on.

The sun set early, for they were on the eastern slope of the mountain. But the sky stayed clear and painfully blue, with hardly a wisp of cloud, for a couple of hours afterward. Then it became dark, hinging at indigo, and the cold became more intimate with their bones.

Before nightfall, however, they found a fairly hospitable fissure that seemed deep enough and long enough to shelter all of them. It sat between two tall drifts that might have been wind-hewn snow or piles of boulders covered by 'a thin, icy veneer. It made no difference, as long as they kept the wind off them.

The word of Sif's sighting spread like flames throughout the company. "Could it have been an eagle?" asked G'lann.

"No," said Sif. "It was on all fours. That much I could see.**

Her brother nodded grimly. "Let's keep our weapons close to hand, then— And keep awake when we stand guard."

"If it was only a wolf," said Var'kald, "its feedings must

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be few and far between. Else it would not have dared the daylight."

"They can't be fewer than ours," said H'limif.

But Vidar had a feeling that it was neither wolf nor eagle. He had never seen an elvish wolf appear in sunlight—unlike its cousins on some other worlds. And there was something in the way the thing had vanished that made him wonder.

With twigs and kindling that they'd gathered back in the pine forest, they were able to start a brave yellow fire. It didn't throw off much heat, but it was enough to warm their hands by. They took turns sitting closest to it.

That night,—they all slept with their swords half-drawn.

XX

"Make me a sword,"* said Frey, "that will be invincible in battle."

The dwarvin sat back among his furs and regarded the prince of the Vanir with something like amusement. "You've come to the right place," he said, and his melodious voice echoed throughout the wet, darkly shining cavern. Torchlight cast a monstrous shadow behind Frey. "No magic is greater than mine. But what need have you of such a sword?"

Frey shrugged. "To fight hrimthursar, of course. What else would I do with it, Ivai'di?"

The dwarvin regarded him slyly. His eyes were green and slanted, like a cat's. "You've done enough damage in Jotunheim without such a weapon," he told the Vaniraaan. "The daring of your exploits has become known to us even here in Svartheim."

Frey scowled. "Then perhaps I shall use the sword elsewhere," he admitted grudgingly.

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Ivai'di grinned. "Against the Aesir, perhaps?"

"Perhaps," said Frey.

"Then it is true?" asked Ivai'di. "Enmity grows between the Aesir and the Vanir?"

But Frey would say no more. "Will you make me a

sword," he demanded, "or won't you?"

•*

"Aye," said the dwarvin. "A sword such as Asaheim has never seen. But what will I get in return?"

Frey drew a pouch out of his tunic. He flung it at Ivai'di's feet and it opened, spilling part of its contents onto the stone floor—Gold glittered in the torchlight—"And there's more," said the Vanirman, "when the weapon is finished."

"Fair enough," said the dwarvin. "Come back in three days, and bring the rest of the gold—enough to cover me head to toe."

Frey eyed him. "A steep price," he said.

"There's no one else who can do what you want done," said Ivai'di. "Come back in three days and it will be finished."

Frey finally agreed. He left and Ivai'di set to work.

It was not easy for the Vanirman to contain his eagerness for three days, but he did so. At the end of the allotted time, he returned to behold the fruits of Ivai'di's labor. He did not ask what smoking blood, what terrible runes had gone into its making, for he did not want to know. But as soon as he took the sword in his hand, he knew it was a thing of immense power.

"Its name is Angrum," said Ivai'di, "and there has never been a sword like it—nor will there ever be again. And now," said the dwarvin, his green eyes glittering, "the gold."

Frey shoved the sword into his belt and dropped a sack that he had borne on his shoulder. He emptied it on the floor. Ivai'di stretched out full-length, like a languorous cat, and piece by piece Frey covered his body with

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the yellow metal. But when all the gold was used up, the tip of Ivai'di's finger still protruded from the mound.

"Not enough," said the dwarvin. "And since you have reneged on the price, you must return the blade."

"I fear I cannot do that," said Frey. "For it's Vanaheim's best hope against Odin's armies, and I must take it with me." Drawing the sword, he hacked off the dwarvxn's fingertip. "Now the price has been paid."

Ivai'di cried out in pain, but he was so weighed down by the gold that he could not get up. His cry brought his nine sons rushing from their places by Ivai'di's smithies—and when they saw Frey standing there with his sword drawn, they unleashed their own blades, in the hope of making him pay for his deed.

But with Angrum in his hand, Frey was not easily held to account. The blade flashed, and every time it did so, another of Ivai'di's sons fell dead.

When he'd finished his bloody work, Frey fled the caverns of Svartheim and made his way back to his father's world with his prize- But Ivai'di surveyed the Vanirman's handiwork and his wailing filled the torchlit cavern. Eight of his sons lay dead. Only B'rokk, the youngest, had survived.

The dwarvin mourned his sons for eight days, and at the end of that time, he had fashioned a plan by which he might get even with Frey.

So it happened that a dwarvin appeared at the door to Thrudheim, Thor's hall in Asgard, and asked the Thunderer himself to come down with him into Svartheim. Thor was leery of the invitation, for the motives of the dark elves were never pure. But his curiosity got the better of him and he came nevertheless.

The messenger--none other than Ivai'di's son B'rokk--led him through a maze of twisting tunnels. Finally, they came to the cavern in which Ivai'di sat, waiting. His green eyes glittered with a vengeful light.

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"Greetings, Odin-son," said the dwarvin, leaning forward.

"Aye, greetings," said Thor, never one to mince words. "Why have you brought me here? I don't like close, dark places like this cavern of yours, so be quick with your answer."

"But my lord," said Ivai'di, "I brought you here only to give you a gift."

Thor raised an eyebrow. "A gift?" he echoed.

"Aye," said Ivai'di.

"Since when do the dark elves give gifts--and expect nothing in return?"

"It is a new fashion among us," said the dwarvin, smiling.

"And what kind of gift would you give me?" asked red-bearded Thor.

"Come back in three days and you shall see."

No sooner had the prince of the Aesir left than Ivai'di set to work at his forge, in a great cavern set deep within the earth of Svartheim. B'rokk worked the bellows while his father battered a hunk of common iron into a shape

he desired. The sullen walls grew bright with molten light. Ivai'di strained the limits of this lore to invest this object with even more power than Frey's sword. Sweat broke out on his brow and he struggled to keep his hand steady—for he drew upon sources of mystery that only he could master. For three days, he worked at his chore.

Finally, when he had shaped the object to the desired form, he left the cavern, for he was weary beyond telling. But he said to B'rokk, "Keep pumping the bellows while I am gone. If you stop, all will be ruined. And even I have not the strength to forge another weapon like this one."

Ivai'di left and B'rokk pumped. But a short time after his father had gone, a gnat alighted on B'rokk's hand. It stung him mightily, but he did not stop his bellows-work for a moment.

Then it found his neck, and again it stung him—this

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time more sharply than before. The dwarvin winced, but he did not dare stop pumping.

The gnat buzzed around B'rokk's head, still not satisfied. Finally, it landed between the dark elf's eyes. This time, when it stung him, it drew blood—and the blood blinded him. He cried out. And for a moment—only a moment—he paused in his bellows-pumping to wipe the blood out of his eyes. Then he quickly resumed his work.

When Ivai'di heard his cry, he returned and withdrew the magical object from the forge. His eyes narrowed. "Almost, my boy," he said. "Almost ruined—but as it is, we were lucky. Only a trifle short in the handle."

For it was Thor's mallet that Ivai'di had fashioned—to give Asgard a weapon with which it might stand against Frey's sword. In time, Ivai'di would have his ^ revenge. If it were not for the hammer, the Vanirmen \ might have overrun Asaheim, and not the other way around. Because Thor wielded Mjollnir, the hammer, the Aesir triumphed instead.

That would teach Frey to cheat the dwarvin. And so what if the hammer was a little short in the S handle? It never stopped Thor from smashing skulls with it.

Sin Skolding
Algron, A.D. 360

XXI

The weather changed quickly in these mountains. Morning was gray, bloated with dark, purplish clouds that climbed on top of one another all the way to the roof of the world. Soon it began to snow.

"Wonderful," said H'limif. "If we go any slower, the sword will be dust before we find it."

The wind whipped the falling snow into a frenzy. The company stayed in a closely tied knot, lest anyone become lost in the storm. Their progress was hard-won, torturous. A couple of times, they had to stop while G'lann got his bearings. Vidar found himself longing for the volcanic heat of Nidavellir after a while.

Finally, they took shelter in the lee of a naked rock, worn smooth by the winds of countless winters. They leaned against the rock or just slumped down, exhausted.

"Damn!" said G'lann. "I can't see three feet ahead of me in this stuff."

"You're not lost, are you?" asked Vidar.

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G'lann's elvish eyes flashed. "No," he snapped. Then his blunt angry features relaxed. "But there's no point in trying to make any headway while the storm keeps up." He shook his head in frustration and spat into the snow. "Our only consolation is that Skir'nir must contend with the same storm farther down the mountain."

There was a miserable silence.

"Anyone know any good songs?" asked Vidar. He looked around at the dour faces of his companions. No one seemed to be volunteering. "Oh, well," he said. "I tried."

"You find this humorous?" asked H'limif. "I'm half-frozen, my stomach's forgotten what food might be and my legs don't have the strength to carry me. I don't find that funny. But then," he said, "I'm no Aesirman."

"And if you were," said Ullir, "you'd feel about the same."

H'limif scowled.

The storm did not let up until late afternoon. G'lann led them out from behind the rock and up the snow-clogged mountainside. It was strangely quiet all of a sudden, for the wind was off howling somewhere in the distance. The sounds of their boots scraping on rock and crunching crusts of frozen snow seemed unnaturally loud.

G'lann stopped abruptly. His lips were pressed together in a thin white line of concentration.

"What is it?" asked Sif.

Her brother shook his head. "It does not look familiar.

Where is the cut that Skifnir described?"

NTnorr hissed, and when Vidar turned to see what that was about, he saw the elf point to something. It was a dark figure, silhouetted where the mountain bulked against the sky. Vaguely man-shaped, but sitting low against the ground like a beast. It was strange that Vidar could not see it better at this distance, but he could not seem to define it as it crouched there. Yet it may have wanted to be seen, for it did not run away. Finally, after G'lann and Sif began to approach the thing, it disappeared over a rise.

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G'lann stopped, unsure of whether it would be wise to follow it. Sif, too, paused.

But Vidar strode past them. "Come on," he said. "I think it wants us to follow. And since memory seems to have failed you, G'lann. I suggest we do that."

The elfiord frowned. "Aye," he said. "We'll follow.;"

So they made their way over the rise, and it brought them to a place where the mountain seemed to have split at the seams. It was like the fissure in which they'd spent the night, but it was deeper, and it ran as far up the slope as the eye could see.

"There's your cut," said Var'kald, Unless I'm mistaken,"

A smile slid across G'lann's face. "Then I wasn't too far off, after all," he said. With new vigor, he tramped over the frozen ground and lowered himself into the ravine. The others followed.

But the strange being that had found their way for them was nowhere to be seen. Again he'd vanished—if it was a "he," Vidar mused.

In less than an hour, they lost the light, and had to stop for the night. But they found that this vast crevice was not a bad place to sleep. It was mostly dry and free of snow at its deepest point, and with a small fire they'd made with the last of their kindling wood, they came as close to comfort as they could have hoped.

"Who could that have been?" wondered Eric out loud. He sat huddled in his cloak next to Vidar.

"I don't know," said Odin's son, peering into the dark, cloud-strewn heavens. "But he may be on our side. It's as if he knew we were lost and led us to this cut."

"Then he must know where we're going," said Var*kald. who sat opposite Vidar.

"Aye," said Eric. "At least he's not trying to stop us."

A few minutes later, they heard the howling of a wolf.

"Wonderful." said Var'kald. "Just what we-ni

"Damn them." said Eric. "I'm hungry, too."

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Vidar stared into the flames of their little fire and pulled his cloak closer to him. Where were the others now? Vali and Modi? How had they fared in whatever world they'd entered? What had they found there—one of Odin's armies, waiting to ambush them? And would they be resting any better tonight if they knew that Odin was on this mountain, racing with Vidar and Magni's heirs for the sword of Frey?

Were they even alive?

Vidar's thoughts turned then to Hoenir, and Odin's boast that his brother would become his ally soon. Not a pleasant thought now, with Hoenir somewhere below them in the mountains. Vidar scowled involuntarily. What if Hoenir had swallowed Odin's argument? What if the boast in Utgard had been true, and the Lord of the Ravens had won his brother over?

Then they might win the sword, but they'd not hold it for long. Odin and Skir'nir would find them and there'd be no Hoenir to save their skins. Not even Vidar could unlock the sword's power instantly. It would take days, at the very least. Without their army, they'd be easy pickings, and Odin would get the sword after all.

It would be so easy. All Hoenir would have to do was take his time, and everything else would take care of itself....

Wearily, Vidar put the thought from him. He had remembered how to mistrust too well. Even now, Hoenir was probably cursing him as he pressed his army up the mountain in pursuit of Skir*nir. Perhaps he'd already caught up to him. Perhaps he and his brother, the All-father, had already met in battle.

But that was not a particularly encouraging thought, either. One never counted Odin out. He always had a dagger or two up his sleeve.

In time. Vidar drifted off to sleep, vaguely unsettled by the mournful call of the wolf.

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But his turn to stand watch came in the hours before dawn. Eric woke him as gently as he could.

Var'kald stood guard with him. The elf's eyes were'dim

and lusterless in the predawn darkness.

"If I don't eat something soon, I'm not going to make it much farther," said Var'kald. "I mean that." He rubbed his shoulder where the arrow had pierced it, and worked his arm around in its socket.

Vidar shrugged. They were down to quarter-rations now, but there was no point in complaining about it. "Maybe our luck will change and we'll find a herd of goats today." He sighed. "Maybe."

"Of course," said Var'kald. "They're just waiting for us around the next outcropping." They had not seen a goat yet.

When the sky had turned a crystalline blue, they set off again. At least there was not much snow in the crevice to slow them down. But the path was steep sometimes, and narrow at others, and there were rocks underfoot that had slid into the cut during avalanches.

Sometime around midmorning, they found a carcass lying in their path. It was a goat—with a shaft protruding from the side of its neck. The blood that trickled from its wound seemed not quite dry. Wordless, Vidar laid his hand on its hide. The body was still warm.

"Aha!" cried H'limif. "Our friend has served us well, whoever he is."

"But we have no wood left," said Var'kald.

"Your pardon," said Ar'on, "but what's this?" For a bit farther up the defile, a stack of kindling and a couple of stouter branches awaited their pleasure.

G'lann plucked the arrow from the creature's neck and inspected it, turning it over in his hands. He looked at Sif. "I've never seen these markings before," he said. "Nor this kind of notching."

Sif took it from him and scrutinized it. Shrugging, she gave it back. "Not Skir'nir's arrow, at least.'*

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"Come on," said Eric. "If our benefactor has been good enough to provide, the least we can do is eat."

Sif smiled at him. "Aye," she said. "We can do that."

After they'd skinned, roasted and divided up the beast, however, Vidar wasn't sure that he didn't feel worse than before. The meat had been enough to start his digestive juices flowing, but not enough to satisfy even his shrunken stomach.

They started off again around noon. By the time the afternoon's brilliance had begun to fade, they had emerged from the cut onto a broad, gentle slope. Vidar looked around them and saw the vast bulks of the other mountains in the range. The air was frigid here, and the wind was starting to pick up again. There were no forests up this high, only rock and glacier that sprawled about them like gray-and-white tigers.

"We'll reach the sword sometime tomorrow," said G'lann, gazing at the peaks beside Vidar.

Odin's son looked up the mountainside. "Looks like rough going," he said. "Wouldn't it be better to stay in the cut another night?"

G'lann shook his head, resolute. "We don't know how close Skir'nir may be—and we've still got to go back down the mountain. Lower down, there are other ways home. But if he catches us up here, there's only one path." He paused, eyes narrowing. "A little haste will stand us in good stead later."

It made sense. Vidar nodded. "Okay," he said. "Lead on, Macduff."

G'lann looked at him strangely, but he led. There was only one direction in which they could travel, and that led them on a course around the shoulder of the mountain. Little by little, their path narrowed until it became nothing more than a ledge. Then the ledge itself narrowed, and they had to walk sideways, hugging the stone wall of the mountain to keep from slipping off.

The farther they went, the more tenacious grew the

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wind. Vidar looked over his shoulder into an abyss so deep that the failing light could not find its bottom. Fierce blasts of frozen air threatened to sweep them off their feet, polishing the ice underfoot until it shone up at them like a flawless mirror.

Vidar pressed his face and shoulders into the side of the mountain, cursing, though the wind swept his invectives away before even he could hear them. Beyond G'lann, the elvish sun settled into a glorious miasma of green-gold and fiery red light.

But he could not pause to enjoy it. The wind stabbed him all over, disregarding the garb he wore. The ledge narrowed perilously to just a couple of feet and he held his breath before each sidling step.

Someone called out. Vidar looked back and saw a dark object plummet from the ledge into the chasm. He dreaded to find out who the victim had been.

"It's all right," came Sits voice, strangely loud in a

sudden lull. "It was just a stone." Vidar breathed a sigh of relief-

He took another step—and a section of ledge broke off beneath him. He felt himself falling. He might have cried out. Wildly, he groped for something to hang on to, but his fingers found no purchase in the stone.

Something rushed up to smash against him. He still held on to the tatters of consciousness, staving off horror with little luck. He was falling, the world rising around him in a blur of white—and he was too dazed to try to stop himself. Death was moments away. Somewhere deep within himself, he accepted that. But somewhere else, he refused to believe it—fought it tooth and nail.

Suddenly, there was a bone-shattering impact. His skull seemed to rattle for a long time with the force of it. His lungs were a vacuum, the air gone from them, - and with whatever life he had left, he sucked desperately to fill them again. But it hurt too much.

Darkness took him,

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At first, he didn't know where he was or how he had gotten there. But he wasn't dead. There was enough sense left in his head for him to know that, at least. It was enough. More than enough. But he was hurt—bones broken, maybe, for the pain was excruciating and everywhere. He heard himself whimper. There was a taste of blood in his mouth and he spat it out. but it went no further than his beard.

How long had he lain here?

He was still, unmoving, trying to remember why he should want to move—until the first needlelike tendrils of cold seeped into his flesh. Then—gingerly, for the pain was terrible—lie tried to roll over onto his side. He groaned. He rolled, felt the snow sting his cheek.

For a while he lay there like that. gathering his wits. He told himself that if he did not move, he would die. His body didn't seem to care. It was too battered to make the effort.

In time. the pain grew even worse—but it also became

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more isolated. His legs were damaged, both of them—though how badly, he could not tell. There were no bones protruding—something to be thankful for. One of his arms was broken. The other one was only bruised, more than likely. And he had suffered a concussion—he knew the symptoms well enough from healing others. ,

But his spine was intact. Perhaps the snow had cush-

ioned his fall. Perhaps he'd struck a few other things on the way down—he seemed to remember something like that.

Then it came back to him. The others. The ledge. In his mind's eye, he saw it give way beneath his feet again, felt himself casting around for something to hang on to. So that's how it had happened.

He wondered again—how long had he lain here? A few minutes? Hours?

How far had he dropped? Would the others be able to fish him up as they had in Nidavellir?

He knew the answer even before his mind asked the question. He had fallen too far. No one would turn back from the sword-quest to look for him. It was only luck that had enabled him to survive the fall, luck beyond telling. Even Eric and N'arri would have given him up for dead. And if not—if they clung to the slim chance that he'd survived—how would they find him in this vastness of snow and rock?

There was only one hope for him, and it lay twisted into his Aesir blood, as runes are twisted into the iron of a sword. In each of Odin's kin, there was a vitality—a wellspring of strength and power, the source of their immortality. He could tap that source, heal himself. Slow his blood down to a crawl in his veins.

But still, it would take time... and there was more than the cold to worry about. There were the wolves.

It was his only hope. He took it. He tapped the spring, and the world slowed down. But his mind remained alert, a kernel of now in a field of forever.

Time passed, flowing evenly like a river. A long river.

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Suddenly he heard a sound.

A voice? There—again. It was a voice. Or was he imagining it in his blue-black depths?

No. There was someone there. But who? Slowly, like a great, lazy serpent, he pulled himself forth from the muck of his self-induced hibernation. Who was it? His companions, come to get him after all? He regained normal time. The pain came back in a wave, forcing a cry from his throat. He fought it, tried to prop himself up on an elbow. Did it, though agony shot up his arm.

"Stay where you are," said someone close to him. He opened his eyes and saw the face that hovered over him. It was a narrow face, but fair. An elvish face beneath its pale mane. Then he saw the length of sword that ended beneath

his chin, and he knew the face was not a friendly one.

It took only a moment before he guessed who it might be. His voice was only a harsh whisper. "Skir'nir," he croaked.

"He's hurt, my lord," said another voice.

The elf's eyes searched his own, then considered the rest of his body. "Aye," he said. "You're right." He looked skyward. "He must have fallen—but how? Magni's Aesir friends were days behind us when we went through Lofni Pass."

He looked back to Vidar and withdrew his sword, sheathing it. "I thought you asleep," he said. "But I see that I was wrong." He fell silent for a moment, considering his enemy. "How?" he asked then. "How did you reach the peaks ahead of me?"

Vidar said nothing—not because he thought Skir'nir could use the information— It was too late for that. But he sensed that the elf might allow him to live if his curiosity was left unsatisfied.

Skir'nir stood. "N'orrat," he said, looming against the sky, "we'll take him with us."

"But my lord," said the other lyos, "it's hard enough to drag our own carcasses through these mountains."

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"Aye," said Skir'nir. "I know. But I want him taken along."

The other elf stifled a protest. There were other voices, then hands—careful hands—that lifted him off the ground and placed him on a litter of some sort. He felt a weight on top of him. Something soft. Cloaks? Were they piUng cloaks on top of him? It was a pleasant thought. A warm thought,

An urgent need for sleep came over him, and he yielded to it. Some time later, he woke and saw a flurry of slim, pale figures around him. Vidar raised his head—and clenched his jaw as he paid the price for that exertion—to see if Skir'nir was among them. He was not. He must have been farther ahead.

And where was Odin? Why did he not come to gloat over his son's broken body? Perhaps he had gone ahead of the lyos, to pick out the quickest way for them. Did he know what kind of prize his friend Skir'nir had found?

The cloaks that the elves had laid upon him had melted the cold in his bones, while his body drew upon its blood-magic to heal itself. Bones had begun to knit, flesh to scab and re-form— But he still had a long way to go.

Again, he gave way to sleep. He dreamed of snowfields turned red with blood, though he did not know whose.

When he opened his eyes, shivering despite the cloaks, a shard of azure sky had lodged among the ice-white peaks. He was no longer being borne by the elves, but had been placed on the ground. Instinctively, he tried to sit up, but the pain caught him halfway and brought him down again. He lay there grinding his teeth together as the agony subsided. Then, carefully, he rolled over onto his side and watched the elves make camp.

He felt as if he'd been hit by a subway train. His head throbbed, his neck was stiff and his body ached. But the pain was not as terrible as when he'd first woken up to find himself alive. Tentatively, he moved his broken arm. It hurt, but it was tolerable. He tried his legs. They too

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moved, one at a time—but the shoots of fire that climbed the length of them made him stop.

Be thankful for small favors, he told himself.

A voice called, cold and clear in the mountain air. Then another, as a small fire was built against the coming of dusk. Vidar could see less than a score of the lyos gathering kindling and bringing out provisions from their belts. But where were the rest of them? According to G'lann, Skir'nir had started out with hundreds. Had he sent some of his troops back toward Hargard once he'd gained the pass—or perhaps left them at Lofni, to guard his return? There was another possibility, Vidar mused. But he couldn't believe that the elf had lost so many of his troops in the mountains.

As he watched, two fur-cloaked figures approached him. His heart thudded when it came to him that one of them might be Odin—but no, both were too slim. As they came close, he could see that one of them was Skir'nir, and the other N'orrat, who'd protested bringing Vidar along. N'orrat hung back while the rebel lord sat beside the Aesirman.

This time, Vidar could discern the hardship and deprivation in Skir'nir's hollowed cheeks, the worry that weighed on his brow. The elvish eyes glittered like ice-chips.

"You feel better," said Skir'nir. It was a statement.

"Somewhat," said Vidar. But his voice was still thin, a harsh whisper. It was shocking to hear himself.

The lyos paused for a moment. "Munarvag, wasn't it? You came through Nidavellir."

The jig was up. "Aye," said Vidar.

Skir'nir nodded. "I should have guessed that G'iann would try that. Why didn't I think of it?" He considered Vidar for what seemed like a long time. "Was Sifwith you as well?"

"Aye," said Vidar again.

"And Hargard? Have you taken it back with your

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armies from Asaheim?" Skir'nir's voice was full of bitterness,

"Don't know," said Vidar. "Not yet--when we left."

The lyos smiled a thin smile. His pale hair caught the last light of the sun, reflected off the walls of snow. "You know who I am, I see." ..

"Aye," said Vidar.

Silence.

"Tell me of Sif," said the elf. "Of G'lann. Do they live?"

"They live," Vidar whispered.

"And they hate me?" asked Skir'nir.

Vidar wet his lips with his tongue.

"N'orrat," called the elf. "Some water here."

The other lyos brought over a bladder half-full of water and handed it to Skir'nir. He let the liquid fall on Vidar's lower lip, a few drops at a time, but half of it ran down the side of his face. Suddenly, with a great effort, Vidar raised himself on an elbow.

"More," he wheezed. "If you don't mind."

Skir'nir put the skin to Vidar's lips and let the water spill out slowly. The Aesirman drank. When he was finished, he took a deep breath.

"Aye," he said. "They hate you."

"They would," said the elf. "Especially after the battle at Ar'vid's farm. G'lann was there, wasn't he?"

Vidar nodded.

"But you say he survived," said Skir'nir. "Good. In all the confusion, I could not be sure." His eyes narrowed. "And how many days from the Nidavellir gate when you fell?"

Vidar said nothing. That was information that he could perhaps use to trap G'lann and the others on their way down.

Skir'nir smiled again. "Keep it to yourself, then." He started to get up.

"Wait," said Vidar. It was a sound like wind in a hollow tree.

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The elf sat again.

"Ygg," said Vidar. "Where is he?"

Skir'nir laughed, a short, ugly sound. "Where indeed? Why don't you ask Magni?"

With that, he rose and walked off. "See that he gets something to eat," he told N'orrrat, handing him the water bag. Then he went to help with the cooking preparations.

Ask Magni? How would Magni know where Ygg was? Unless...

N'orrrat left and came back a short time later with the food. First, he lowered the leather water sack from his shoulder and put the opening to Vidar's mouth. The water was ice-cold and it burned his throat, but it felt like life itself as it coursed through his flesh. Vidar drank hungrily, like a babe at his mother's breast.

"All right, that's enough—take a breath, damn you, before you finish the whole thing." N'orrrat finally tugged the water bag out of Vidar's mouth. He eyed the Aesirman with unconcealed hatred. "It's a mystery to me why Skir'nir wants you alive at all—but you'll get what you need. Just be patient.'*

Vidar gulped down the last mouthful of water, took a breath and coughed. The ribs on his right side, where he lay, felt as if someone were driving nails into them.

N'orrrat reached into a pouch and took out a graincake. "Eat it slowly," said the elf. "Or you'll choke on it."

It was only then that Vidar realized how hungry he was. Even a graincake looked good to him. He nibbled at it and chewed carefully, knowing what kind of agony awaited if he began to cough again. More than likely, he'd cracked a couple of ribs, too.

When he'd taken the edge off his hunger, Vidar put his hand up, "Okay," he said. "For now."

"Okay?" echoed N'orrrat. "You Aesirmen speak strangely. That's a word I've never heard even in Asgard." He paused when he saw Vidar react to that. "Aye, I've been in your fabled city. But I'd rather be here in Alfheim. I'd sooner

risk my life here in the mountains and take my chances with the wolves than live a day in Asaheim—wondering when I'll find a dirk in my back."

Vidar started to shrug, then stopped. It hurt too much.

N'orrat glared at him, his eyes filled with an angry green sea. "Aren't there enough worlds to feast on without having to turn toward this one? And Magni, our king—hah! When Asgard wanted to make us its slaves, did he stand in the way? No. He lent his sword to the slave-makers. If there was any doubt as to where his allegiances lay, there's none now, is there?"

Vidar did not answer. He didn't know what to say—out he listened, for the questions were most interesting.

"We knew your plans," said N'orrat. "That's why we were able to take Hargard in time—and to harass you at the gorge, until we had enough time to reach into the mountains for the sword." He spat. "For all the good it did us. G'lann was more clever than I gave him credit for.'*

N'orrat stood. For a moment, Vidar feared the thoughts behind those elvish eyes. If N'orrat had wanted to harm him, there was little he could do to prevent it. But after a moment, the elf just walked away.

He left Vidar much to ponder. He was still pondering when the heavens became a trembling wash of bright stars. Finally, he slept, but his dreams were troubled. He saw himself at the foot of Valaskjaiff, Odin's dark tower in Asgard. He climbed the nine hundred steps, sword drawn, and it seemed to take an eternity. But in time he reached the topmost floor, where it was said that Odin kept his ravens, his pitch-black warbirds, in great cages of yellow gold. Yet when Vidar gained his father's study, there were no ravens and no cages. He heard a scream and he whirled, and there was Odin—but only for a moment. For even as Vidar slashed at him with his blade, his father disappeared. A black flutter at the single wide window caught his eye, and he turned back in time to see a raven dart into the brooding sky.

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Then the tower crumbled. Vidar cried out...

... and found himself ranting at the elvish morning. There was the padding of footsteps and Skir'nir knelt over him suddenly, concern etched into his face.

When he saw Vidar's eyes open, he asked, "What ails you?"

Vidar shook his head. "It's nothing."

The elf started to rise.

"Wait," Vidar said. His voice was a little stronger than the night before and some of his smaller pains had left him. "Take a moment to talk to me, my lord."

"Your lord?" asked Skir'nir. "That's the first time an Aesirman ever hailed me that way."

"There's a first time for everything," said Vidar. "I think I'm beginning to see the truth of this war for the first time."

Skir'nir's brows curled. "What do you mean? You Aesirmen should know this war better than anyone—you planned it."

Vidar shook his head. "No. No matter what you may think, Asgard had no hand in this."

"Indeed," said Skir'nir, his voice tinged with mockery, "And that's why we found you and your allies in the gorge—because you have no designs on Alfheim."

"That was no invasion," Vidar insisted. "We came to stop Ygg. You know him?"

"Aye," said Skir'nir, his lips drawing back like a wolf's. "I know him. I caught him plotting with Magni—overheard their plans, their Aesir intrigue. And when I confronted Magni—my ... my father—with the knowledge, he had me seized for treason. It was only with the help of friends that I escaped Hargard. Otherwise, Alfheim would have been in chains by now. And you," he said, loathing rising in his voice, "have the gall to tell me there was to be no invasion."

Vidar sighed. This would not be easy. "To begin with," he said, "Ygg is my enemy. He's Asaheim's enemy. He's

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your enemy and G'lann's enemy. If he arranged an invasion, neither I nor the forces I led into Alfheim are part of it."

Skir'nir's eyes narrowed. "K»u led?" He regarded Vidar for a long moment. "Then you are not some common soldier, eh? Who are you?" -.

Vidar decided to tell the truth. It might not hurt his credibility to have some credentials right now.

"My name is Vidar. Odin's son, late of Midgard."

"Ahh," said Skir'nir, his eyes dancing. "Then that explains how you lived through that fall—and why ypur strength is returning so quickly. You're Odin's kin, like my

accursed father."

"Listen," said Vidar. "If Magni has thrown in with Ygg, I'll stand in line behind you to curse him- But you must believe that Asaheim had no part in this plot."

The elf scowled. "All right," he said. "I'm listening."

"When we heard that there was a rebellion in Alfheim," said Vidar, "we believed that Ygg was behind it, and that Magni was a victim of it. We brought an army into Alfheim to save this world-not to conquer it."

Skir'nir said nothing, so Vidar went on. "Sif told me that you had overthrown Magni, so I thought that you had become Ygg's ally. It was only when I asked you where Ygg was, and you told me to ask Magni, that I started to have my doubts. I put the pieces together, and now I know why you launched the rebellion. We should be friends, Skir'nir-allies, not enemies."

The elf took a moment to digest that. "But why should I believe you?" he asked. "You're an Aesirman."

"There's no reason you should," said Vidar. "Other than the fact that I'm telling the truth. In your place, I'd be wary, too."

Vidar felt his strength starting to ebb, but he went on. He could sense that Skir'nir's defenses were crumbling.

"Let me tell you something about Ygg," said Vidar. "All he wants is destruction, and he doesn't care what its

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trappings are. He's insane, but he's clever. If he enlisted Magni's aid to enslave the lyos, he had one of two things in mind. Either he wanted Magni to start a war and win-or he wanted him to start a war and lose."

The elf's face changed as he listened. His brow furrowed and his nostrils flared. Behind the green eyes of which Frey had loved to sing, there was realization. Also anger-and a little shame.

"I see what you're saying," said Skir'nir. "That by launching the rebellion. I've been his tool as much as if I had stood by and done nothing."

"Yes," said Vidar. "Exactly."

"But why would this Ygg want destruction for destruction's sake? Surely there's more in this for him?"

"No," said Vidar. "As I said-he's insane."

"Perhaps Magni is insane, too, in his way," said the

lyos. "After my foster mother's death, he became unfit to rule in Alfheim. When it came down to it, I think, he was no elf—and bereft of his elvish wife, he cared nothing for Alfheim's welfare. There were petty cruelties against those he liked least, and injustices against those who opposed him in council."

Skir'nir's eyes flashed. "But I tell you, Aesirman—I would never have raised my sword against him until I saw him whispering with Ygg. I would have found some other way to rouse the lyos against him—but not by the sword."

"Sif said that you had spent a lot of time in the hills—that you acted strangely after your foster mother's death."

"Aye," said Skir'nir. "I was measuring the force of sentiment against the king. It was no secret that I'd spoken ill of Magni in the halls of the hill lords. But it was not war I was stirring—only an alliance that could make him earn his throne or yield it up. That was all."

The elf paused. "When I learned the truth—caught Magni conspiring with the stranger that he called Ygg—I went straight to the hill lords. One called F'orri summoned the others and we decided to move quickly against Har-

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gard. Nor could I have trusted G'tann and Sif with our plan. Their blood-tie would have kept them from seeing the truth. They would have given me away to Magni, then tried to shield me from his wrath."

"And what about Magni? Does he live?"

The elf looked at him strangely— "Of course he lives. How could I have put him to the sword—no matter what he'd done? He was wounded in defense of Hargard, but I gave strict orders not to slay him. He sits in a dungeon, contemplating his mistakes."

"And we," said Vidar, "have mistakes to contemplate, too. I brought an army here after Ygg—fought through Nidavellir to come after you, thinking you were m this together with him—and now I don't even know if he's in Alfheim."

It was a hollow feeling, to have come so far along on this trail, and at such great expense, only to find that Odin had played him for a fool. Vidar thought of Jam and, Hymir, Gunnar and Tyrfingur, E'lig and Usk'ur and the others whose names he had never learned. Dead—and for what? Because Vidar had been deceived by a mask left in the cavern above Asgard, and the news that giants had stolen through the gate to Alfheim.

Anger rose in Vidar like bitter gall. He'd add those names, then, to Stim's, and feed the slow fire of his vengeance. Odin would not escape him forever.

And where was Odin? If not in Atfheim, what other world? With what purpose?

"I am glad I let you live," said Skir'nir. "My first inclination was to kill you where I found you, after what I thought your kind had done to us. And because of the anger I felt when I realized G'lann had beaten me to the sword." He paused thoughtfully. "But then, my struggle was over then, wasn't it? I'd lost. And besides, I was more than a little curious about how G'lann and Sif had overtaken me."

"I wondered about that," said Vidar. "Your letting me

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live, I mean. After what I'd seen near Ar'vid's farm, I wasn't sure what to expect."

Skir'nir's jaw clenched and his temples worked. "Aye," he said finally. "Ar'vid's farm."

"Was it necessary to kill so many?" asked Vidar. "Couldn't you have just scattered them?"

Skir'nir's nostrils flared. "I would not have killed any--if it could have been avoided. I had no idea that there was to have been such a gathering, Aesirman--I swear it."

He paused, "I was on my way to Lofni Pass and the mountains, thinking that all resistance against me would be centered around Hargard. By the time I saw the crowd that had come together near Ar'vid's land, it was too late to go another way. G'lann's archers fired on my riders, and they responded by riding down into the gathering, swords drawn. They were hard-pressed, for it was only a small portion of my troops I'd taken with me. I could not let them fight without me."

The muscles in Skir'nir's jaw rippled. "With every farmer I slew, I told myself that it was the price of finding the sword. Afterward, Aesirman; I had time for regrets, as after the battle for Hargard. But that was afterward."

Vidar nodded. Fatigue was climbing all over him, but he staved it off, "We knew you'd gone after the sword," he said. "G'lann saw you head in that direction, and he guessed your intention."

The elf frowned. "Prey's sword was only to have been used in the direst need--that was the warning that the first Skir'nir gave to his son, when he told him where it was hidden. An invasion of Alfheim--an Aesir invasion--seemed to me to be such a need."

How blind they'd all been, Vidar mused. Even him.

"And now," said Odin's son, "G'lann will find the

sword, and he'll be ready to use it against your armies. If we don't stop him, he'll carry out Ygg's plan as surely as you would have, without knowing it."

"Then we must stop him," said Skir'nir, "After I found

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you, I continued my quest for the sword with only the slimmest hope that G'lann would lose his way—or never reach it. It was a painful hope, believe me. Now I have another reason for pursuing him."

"Aye," said Vidar. "Perhaps between the two of us, we can convince him of the truth—before he takes your head

off."

"That," said the elf, "would be my preference."

XXIII

Skir'nir's lyos bore Vidar through narrow corridors in the frozen rock, tilting him this way and that as the passages turned and twisted. After a time, the terrain began to look familiar. When he saw the jumble of boulders at the foot of a long slope, he knew why. They were passing the place where he'd emerged from Nidavellir.

Skir'nir came up beside him. "This is the gate to Nidavellir, is it not?"

"Aye," said Vidar. "We blocked it to cut off pursuit. Perhaps you can roll some of the rocks away."

Skir'nir shook his head. "They would have turned back by now." He smiled. "They followed you all the way to this gate, eh?"

"Yes," said Vidar. "A brave bunch."

"And how many days did you put between you and the gate before you fell? You can tell me now, can't you?"

Vidar strove to remember. "Between four and five. And

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I recall that G'lann said we had another day to go from there."

Skir'nir surveyed the long slope, blinding white beneath the elvish sun. The sky was a dark blue, filled with tattered banners of cloud. "Then G'lann may bear the sword already," he said. "We may meet him anywhere from—Ahis

point on up."

They climbed the slope, shielding their eyes from its splendor. In time, they passed the copse of birch and alder where Vidar and his companions had slept in the shelter of huge, egg-shaped boulders—and where the wolf had attacked Ar'on. Though the light was starting to fade, Skir'nir pressed them to go on.

The next time Skir'nir chose to walk beside his litter, Vidar mentioned the incident with the wolf. The elves slanted, oval eyes went cold at the warning.

"We have had our own trouble with the wolves," said Skir'nir. "Hardly a night has gone by when one' of the beasts has not found a throat to rip out. That's why there are so few of us now—the wolves, and the avalanche that buried half my company just a few days before we found you."

"How many did you start out with?" asked Vidar.

"After I'd sent most of my elves back toward Hargard? I came through the pass at Lofni with nearly fifty. And these," said Skir'nir, "are all I have left"

Just before the sky went dark, the wind became wild. It drove the loose powder off the mountainside, stinging their faces, blinding them. Vidar dug deeper into his covering of fur cloaks and cursed himself for slowing Skir'nir down. They'd have climbed the slope a lot faster if they hadn't had to bear the litter.

Without the sun to warm them, it became colder and colder, and the wind did not let up. If anything, it became worse. Vidar began to shiver, even beneath all the cloaks. He could only imagine what the others were enduring.

Finally, the slope leveled off and they stopped for a

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moment to rest. But only for a moment—long enough for the litter to change hands. This time, Skir'nir himself was one of those who lifted him. As they resumed their trek, he shouted something to the Aesirman, but the wind stole his words.

"What?" cried Vidar.

The elf leaned closer. "... reach the pine forest?" was all Vidar could hear.

"A couple of hours," he answered, as loudly as he could.

The elf cursed. Vidar couldn't make out the words, but he got the gist of it.

They labored against the fierce, slashing winds, beneath stars that seemed to quiver with the cold. Vidar felt his fingers and toes go numb. He saw the faces of the elves as they turned toward him, and they were nearly scarlet. It was scarcely believable that they still found the strength to carry him.

The pine forest appeared an eternity later, first a vague line of darkness behind the driving veil of snow, then a thick, inviting margin of greenery. The elves collapsed as soon as they were free of the wind. Vidar felt himself lowered gently to the ground. Then he heard the groans of his bearers as they straightened their backs.

In time, the lyos gathered enough small branches to get a fire going, and one of them found a stout bough that had fallen to the ground, Vidar was set down by the flames so that he might benefit from them, and the others took turns warming frozen hands and feet.

Skir'nir sat next to him and took out a couple of grain-cakes. He gave Vidar one and munched on the other, staring at something that he could not yet see.

"Listen," said Vidar, "you can leave me here. Just give me some food and water, and the forest will keep me warm enough until you get back."

.Skir'nir looked at him and frowned. "Aye," he said. "By then the wolves will have picked your bones clean."

Vidar shook his head. "I slow you down too much. It

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doesn't get any easier from here on. Just leave me—I'll be fine. You know how many tricks we Aesirmen have up our

sleeves."

Skir'nir grunted. "For a silver-tongued son of Odin, you're not very convincing. Besides—I need you to vouch for the truth of my story. How will I convince G,'iann

otherwise?"

There was some sense in that, Vidar admitted. But he could not allow himself to be such a burden,

They all slept soundly, glad for the chance to let their bones thaw. But Vidar slept more soundly than the rest, drawing again on the magics in his blood. And if a wolf had come upon them, he could have taken his pick.

XXIV

The sun rose too soon. They woke with the first light that filtered through the trees and ate a hasty breakfast. Then

Skir'nir called for the journey to resume, and four of the elves came over to lift Vidar on his litter.

"Wait a minute," said the Aesirman. With an effort, he rolled over and got a knee underneath himself. Then he wrestled his other leg into position, so that he was able to raise himself on all fours.

He could hear the lyos murmur. He pushed up with his hands until he was resting on his haunches.

N'orrat came to stand next to him. "What do you think you're doing?" he asked. "You can't crawl all the way to the sword."

"Don't intend to," said Vidar, letting himself get a little angry at the elf's taunt. It would help to get his adrenaline flowing. Then, with a loud grunt, he planted his right foot. Pain tore at his knee and twisted up and down his thigh.

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He planted the right foot, and wanted to cry out as his nerves screamed in outrage.

Instead, he smiled. He was standing—not as steady, perhaps, as the pine trees all around him, but at least he was on his feet.

Skir'nir stared at him. "You amaze me, Aesirman. Not three days ago, we found you close to death—shattered. And here you are ready to climb the mountain. Odin must have been powerful indeed to have such sons."

"Hah," said Vidar. "You should have seen Thor. He would have hurt the mountain more than it hurt him"

Skir'nir crossed his arms on his chest, considering Vidar. "It's a good thing for you," he said, "that I'm not so easily deceived. You can't go very far—or very fast—for all your bravado," He turned to one of the other lyos—the biggest of them. "Why not give him some help, V'ili?"

The elf called V'ili walked over and threw Vidar's arm over his neck. Vidar's legs were grateful for the support, although he tried hard not to show it. "We'll move fast enough," V'ili assured Skir'nir. "Even if I have to drag him."

"Good," said Skir'nir, smiling grimly. "Then let's not waste any more time."

Their boots crunched on the frozen carpet of pine needles. At first, Vidar found the going painful, even when the ground was relatively level. Then he became accustomed to moving his legs again, and the pain lessened. It felt as if layer after layer of frost were cracking away from his bones. By the time the afternoon wore thin, he was able to

walk by himself with a staff that V'ili had cut for him.

With sunset came a delicious fatigue. It had felt good to walk again. He'd barely set aside his walking stick and washed down his graincakes with a draught of cold water before he fell asleep.-

Dawn found him even stronger. He felt as if he might even throw away the staff—but he didn't, for he remembered what kind of cruel terrain was still before

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them. Just before the sun reached its zenith, the forest gave way to the cracked and crumbled mountainside that Vidar had climbed once before.

The wind whistled around jagged upheavals of stone, and the going was terribly slow. The ledges of sheer rock were slippery with a thin layer of ice, and when they tried to negotiate the snowdrifts, they sank in up to their armpits. But they pressed ahead and were thankful for what warmth the sun could give them.

When the light flared and died at the edge of the mountain, they went on by starlight. Finally, they found what Vidar knew was waiting for them—the long fissure in which he'd slept only a handful of days ago. It still sheltered the ashes of his companions' fire. When he and his new companions dropped into the cut, they found it crowded, for Vidar had shared it with a smaller group last time. But it held them all, and warmly, and the complaints were few. It seemed that those who had to sleep the farthest up the fissure groused the longest.

They heard wolves howling that night, and they were not far off. Skir'nir posted a couple of sentries, but Vidar didn't sleep well. He kept drifting off and starting awake, teased by the fringe of sleep. He dreamed over and over again of the wolves that Loki had set loose on Vigrid. Every time he shut his eyes, he could sense them, hunting him with lolling tongues and devil's-fire eyes. When he woke the last time, just an hour or so before dawn, his dream had been so real that he looked at his hands—expecting to find the beasts' dried blood there.

They left the fissure as soon as the sky lightened, before they could even see the sun rise over the mountain. The slope was steep, the ground underfoot a confusion of jagged rocks and crevices, but at least there was no storm to slow them up—for this was the place where Vidar's companions had been forced to seek shelter. The sky was kind to them that day, although the wind still etched its secrets into their flesh.

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When they reached the place where the mountain

seemed to have split at the seams, they dropped down inside the seemingly endless ravine and stopped awhile to eat, Skir'nir was the last to sit down, and he'd only accept his portion of graincakes after he was sure everyone else had had enough. It seemed that food was running low in Skir'nir's company as well. Finally, Magni's foster son hunkered down next to Vidar and chewed his meal in silence.

"Seems to me we should have met G'lann by now," said the Aesirman-

"Aye," said the elf, if distantly. "That's what I was thinking." His deep, green eyes narrowed. "There's only one way he could have gone—and this is it. If we have not met him, it's because he has not yet descended with the sword."

Vidar voiced the alternative. "Or never made it up."

Skir'nir nodded absently, intent perhaps on his recollections of G'lann and Sif. "Or that," he conceded, wiping his beardless mouth with the back of his hand.

"And there's something else," said Vidar. "When we got to this spot before, G'lann and Sif were not sure of the way. Someone—or something—showed it to us." Skir'nir looked at him quizzically, his narrow face suddenly alive with interest. Vidar went on. "It looked like you or I, from a distance. But there was a vagueness about it, as if the shadows were drawn to it. We couldn't tell what it was. But later on, it brought us meat when we'd run out of food."

The elf shrugged, plainly at a loss. "Who could endure this weather for very long? We elves moved out of the mountains long ago, and none of us lived this high up anyway. It's hard to believe that there's someone living here now." He paused thoughtfully. "Are you sure that you saw someone? The eyes can play tricks after staring at slopes for a while."

Vidar shook his head. "Hallucinations don't leave their arrows in the goats they've slain." He swallowed the last of

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his graincake. "And I wonder if this mystery man doesn't have something to do with G'lann, and the fact that we've not seen him. Just because this creature appeared benevolent at first..."

"... doesn't mean that his motives were snow-white," Skir'nir finished. "I see what you mean." His brow furrowed. "If there is such a creature, then we've more than wolves to be wary of—don't we?"

"Seems that way," said Vidar.

They went on. At times, the cut narrowed, so that they had to proceed in single file. At other times the snow became so deep that they had to wade through it, or a rockslide humped up in their path. But there was no sign of Vidar's mysterious benefactor—not even a goat slain for their lunch.

Once Vidar slipped on some loose rocks and fell heavily. For all his enmity, N'orrat was at his side in a moment, -/ and V'ili right beside him.

Vidar cursed and brushed the snow off himself. He'd reawakened the pain in his legs—something he'd hoped he could forget. But he stood up nonetheless, shrugging the elves off when they took his arms to help him climb.

"I'm not somebody's grandmother," he said, finding his staff and planting it against the frozen ground. "You can ! stop fussing over me."

But every time he negotiated a rough stretch of the ravine, he found V'ili nearby, keeping a close eye on him. Vidar could not help but smile. With enemies like these, who needed friends?

Finally, they reached the end of the cut—but even Skir'nir was not so headstrong that he would have gone on in darkness. A thick blanket of clouds had moved in to blot out the stars. The slope ahead seemed vague and featureless, dreamlike. They'd be unable to defend against wolves—or anything else—even if they could see them in time.

Vidar insisted that he stand one of the watches, Skir'nir

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began to protest—but he was as tired as the rest of them, and if the Aesirman had a death-wish, was it any of his concern?

Vidar knew that he wouldn't be too much help against a wolf attack, but his senses were still sharper than any elves, and he might be able to detect trouble before it was -too late. Besides, V'ili would stand watch with him, and he could hold off one of the beasts until help came.

The sky was dark, brooding, and the only sound was the rush of the wind. There was something sad about the enormity of these mountains, Vidar mused, something ancient and apart.

He shifted his cloak on his shoulders. Perhaps the mountains might have said the same about him.

He slid his fingers over the hilt of his sword, felt the runes carved into the blade where it met the guard. He'd not lost the sword in his fall. Of course not. There was always a blade ready for him whenever the opportunity to kill arose.

B'rannit had said that swords were not in themselves evil. She'd said that though her people fashioned them, it was other hands that turned them to a purpose. The hand that held them was good or evil.

Vidar had resolved to turn a blade against his father, even his brother, to stop the slaughter that Vali perpetuated. What did that make his hands?

B'rannit—dark elfqueen. Even now, she drew his memories like a lodestone. Balm for his tortured dreams, certainty where he doubted, she was like no one he'd ever known. Not in all the centuries of his youth in Asgard, not in all the long years of his life on Earth. Even Alissa's fire seemed small and sordid next to B'rannit's laughing eyes. Vidar felt himself smiling.

He put the memory from him. B'rannit was a world away and his business in Alfheim was far from finished. There was still the matter of Frey's sword to resolve, and the war that ravaged the elfworld. But long after he'd

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turned his thoughts outward to scan the slope for stalking shadows, he found that he was smiling still.

Then he sensed it—the sudden presence of wolf. Like a scent on the wind, the brush of soft fur. Not one wolf, but many. The hairs on Vidar's neck stirred. He strained to see movement on the slope, but there was none.

Yet they were somewhere down there—so many of them that their bloodred thoughts had been like a sudden electric shock to his wide-ranging Aesir consciousness. But even then, he would not have noticed them if his senses had not been extended, and the mountains so tranquil otherwise. Even the powers of the Aesir had their limits.

He must have flinched or something, because V'ili gripped his arm. "What is it?" asked the elf.

"Wolves," said Vidar. "Somewhere about."

V'ili scanned the mountainside. "I don't see them," he said.

"No," said Vidar, offering no further explanation. The lyos would chalk it up to Aesir witchcraft. "But it might not be a bad idea to wake the others." He listened. Yes—he could hear them now. A pack of them padding their way up the slope.

V'ili roused the others. As Vidar heard the sounds of Skir'nir's lyos reaching for their weapons, they seemed distant, unreal. The more immediate, more tangible sound was the soft crunching of the wolves' approach over the brittle crust of the snowfields. They were still far off, but headed this way— Their approach grew noisier with each

passing moment.

Heimdall would have heard them long before this, but Heimdall had been better than radar. It used to be said in Midgard that he could hear the grass growing before it pricked the surface of the ground.

Skir'nir crawled up the wall of the ravine next to Vidar. "What is it?*" he asked.

"Wolves," said Vidar. "You can't see them yet, but they're coming. Trust me."

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Skir'nir muttered something. Then, as they watched, a scattering of tiny ruby-red fires appeared downslope. Like hell's fireflies. Or the night-bright, knife-sharp eyes of mountain wolves. The lyos fitted arrows to their bow-strings—was there an elf alive that did not carry his bow with him like another limb?—and waited for the creatures to come within their range. The wolves moved slowly, cautiously—as if they knew the elves had teeth and claws of their own. But they did not stop. They spread out into individual shadows, the red hunger in their eyes blinking fiercely like beacons in a storm wind.

"N'orrat, K'alif, Im'u—shoot a single arrow at them," said Skir'nir. "Perhaps we can scare them off."

The lyos drew back their shafts and let them fly. One struck a wolf full in the face, killing it instantly. It slumped without a sound. But the others did not scatter. They only froze for a moment—waiting to see if the barrage would continue, it seemed. Then, just as slowly as before, they advanced, their bellies grazing the hard surface of the snow.

They were near enough now for Vidar to count them. About a dozen—even odds. Again, a few of the elves took aim and fired—this time, with no success. The wolves crouched for a moment, lying low, then slunk closer. Bestial thoughts of maddening hunger and imminent flesh-rendering beat at the fringe of Vidar's consciousness. And something else—something he could not define, as if there were another mind guiding these beast-minds. But who? The shadow-being that had brought food when Vidar's companions were hungry? If he'd helped G'lann, why would he stand in Skir'nir's way?

Then there was no more time for speculation. Without warning, the wolves attacked. They swarmed up the slope and slithered into the ravine, silent but for their panting. Their claws scraped against rocks and snow as they sprang.

Vidar caught one with his staff while it hung in midair.

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The staff broke, but the creature dropped like a bag of stones. An elf cried out and the sound became a thick, gurgling noise as his throat was ripped open. His blood turned the snow crimson as he died,

Swords struck flesh and bone, but in close quarters the lyos had to be careful not to carve each other. Vidar saw V'ili bury his blade in a gray hunter's shoulder. The animal thrashed about for a moment, then fell still, adding his life's blood to the palette of destruction.

Skir'nir fought beside Vidar, slashing at the beasts each time they darted in. It took Odin's son a few moments to realize that the elf was protecting him, and at the risk of his own life. If there was anything Vidar hated, it was someone risking their life to preserve his. He drew his sword and tried to stand beside Skir'nir, but his legs were still too weak to bear him well in battle.

Then he saw it—an attacker from behind. But the wolf had sunk its fangs into Skir'nir's shoulder and borne him down before Vidar could shout a warning—

Frantically, he dropped the sword and flung himself at the wolf. His fingers probed iron-hard muscle. With an effort that plumbed the depths of his strength, he wrenched the beast off Skir'nir. The animal writhed and turned its head to snap at him. He flung it from him—but not far enough. He stumbled. In a moment, it was at his throat. He inserted his fingers in between its slavering jaws and tried to thrust it away.

But he had no strength left. He should have been able to pry those jaws apart and snap the wolf's mandibles at the joint, but too much of his energy had gone into healing himself. Bit by bit, the wolf forced its head down toward Vidar's neck. He cursed himself for his feebleness, teeth grinding. The beast's saliva dripped on his face, hot and thick. Its growl became a roar as it gradually broke free of his restraining fingers.

As he felt his arms go numb with exertion, Vidar saw the irony—the great wolf-slayer of Ragnarok, slain by a

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wolf. He could feel the pulse in his jugular where the beast would sink its fangs....

But it seemed that it was not his day to die— There was a sudden thud that made the wolf jerk away, its growl become a whimper. Vidar looked up and saw Skir'nir, his shoulder wet with gore, and his sword-edge no less bloody. The wolf lay lifeless, slumped over Vidar's legs. He slithered out from beneath the carcass as the elf, satisfied with his handiwork, went looking for another beast to slay.

Then, as quickly as they'd attacked, they were gone— low-lying shadows slinking away up the slope. But there were fewer of them, for half the wolves had been cut down

by Skir'nir's band.

Nor had the lyos bought their lives cheaply. Four of their companions lay stretched out against the walls of the ravine, blood still running from the awful ruin of their throats. And Skir'nir's left arm hung limp and useless where the wolf had clamped its jaws onto his shoulder. He sat down heavily, leaning back against a boulder, and laid his sword upon the ground.

N'orrat shredded a cloak that one of the slain had worn and bound Skir'nir's wound with it. Vidar got to his feet and staggered over to make sure that N'orrat knew what he was doing. As it turned out, he did.

Skir'nir looked up at Vidar, flinching at N'orrat's ministrations. "Now we're both cripples," he said.

Vidar shook his head. "When N'orrafs got the bleeding under control, I'll tend to you. Not all our Aesir tricks are destructive."

"No," said Skir'nir. "I know of your healing—Magni told me about it. But he also said that it saps your strength, and you have little enough of that to begin with." He winced. "Heal yourself if you can."

Vidar frowned. The elf was right, of course, but that didn't ease the sting of his frustration. Healers healed—they couldn't walk away from pain. It had been that way since he'd developed the talent as a child.

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"When I get stronger," said Vidar, "you will, too."

"Aye," said Skir'nir, considering the carnage without expression. "I'm counting on it—Ow! Must you be so clumsy, N'orrat?"

"Quiet," said the elf, "or I'll sink my own teeth into you."

In stone silence, they dragged the bodies of their comrades—as well as the carcasses of the wolves—out of the ravine. But before Skir'nir left the dead to the mercy of the elements^ he said something under his breath. It was not quite a prayer—the lyos had no gods. But the effect was the same.

With the morning came a light, windless snow that muffled all sounds but that of their own breathing. They trekked up a broad flank of the mountain, up to their knees sometimes in snow. After a while, the stuff had caked so thickly on Vidar's beard that he had to use the warmth of his hand to melt it. He made his way without the staff now and he missed it. But this part of the journey was not all that difficult, as he remembered—and soon a staff would

not be of much use. The ledge from which he'd fallen was not too far ahead.

Soon they came to the place where the slope narrowed and began to wind around the side of the mountain. The wind was more insistent here, but not as bad as the last time. Bit by bit, the path became a ledge, and the ledge diminished until the only way to go on was sideways.

This time, Vidar did not look down. He remembered the abyss well enough without having to refresh his memory. It didn't take long before his legs grew cramped and cold, impatient at this slow, torturous progress. After what seemed like a very long time, Vidar came to a break in the ledge—a hiatus of not more than a couple of feet. He considered it. It was the place where he'd fallen. Pressing his face and shoulders into the icy rock, he stretched his right foot out across the gap. Carefully, he planted it,

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shifted his weight and stepped across. He went on without looking back.

But there was still a long stretch of ledge before him—at least fifty feet that he could see, and more around the curve of the mountain. Vidar slid one foot after the other, sometimes finding purchase in the rock with his fingers, sometimes stopping when the elf ahead of him stopped. The snow began to fall more heavily, disguising the cracks and bulges in the rock, so that each step had to be felt rather than seen.

Then the ledge widened and they were able to move ahead with more certainty. It broadened into a steep escarpment full of great boulders—which looked as if they might tear loose from their moorings at any time and come bounding down to crush them. They threaded their way among these monsters, careful not to lean on any of them. Vidar wondered how they had come to be here, frozen into place.

It was at the top of this escarpment that Skir'nir called a halt. The sun had not gone down yet, for the world was still light. But he'd seen how tired his companions were.

"Tomorrow," said Skir'nir, when someone asked him how far they were now from their goal.

Vidar hunkered down and surveyed the peaks that rose all about them like the foundations of heaven. The air was thinner here and colder. He watched his breath freeze in a cloud of white vapor, rubbed his hands together to work the numbness out of his joints.

Why was it that he could bend iron with his hands, heal the infirm and shape men's volition like a puppeteer—but when it came to heat and cold, he was as vulnerable as any other creature? He spat.

Looking up, he saw Skir'nir coming over to sit by him. The elf settled himself and was silent for a little while, staring off into the rose-tinted sky in the west.

Finally, he spoke. "Still no sign of G'lann or Sif.

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Aesirman. Something must have happened to them. Wolves, perhaps."

Nor had there been any survivors.

With some surprise, Vidar realized that he had accepted that conclusion long ago.

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Skir'nir spoke no more that day, nor the next morning, when they found a path that twisted up through the heights. They'd left the boulders behind them and only the very peak of the mountain loomed ahead.

The elf mourned the loss of his sister and brother—it was plain in the dull cast of his eyes, the pallor in his face. But at the same time, he must have felt a relief that there was no longer a G'lann to carry out Odin's destruction

unawares.

What about the others—Eric, N'arri, UlHr? How had they died? All together or separately? Had they even made it past the ledge, or fallen as Vidar had? A lump began to grow in his throat and he cursed softly.

More nightmares, more ghosts. After a while, what was the difference?

But there was always a difference,

They trudged through snow, now deep, now shallow, but a constant obstacle. The morning passed with eerie slow-

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ness and stretched out beyond noon, under a pale sun that barely showed through the overcast. Without warning, Skir'nir stopped.

He turned to the rest of them. "Here it is," he said-

Vidar looked over the elf's shoulder. The mountain bulged up against the sky, featureless, blinding white even in this weak sunlight. Was Skir'nir kidding? Then Vidar saw it—a narrow cleft that might allow them through one at a time—And beyond that—the sword.

There was no rush of joy, no cries of triumph. Just a sodden silence, punctuated by the skirl of the wind. The price they'd paid to reach this place had been too steep for them to shout much.

Then there was a shout after all—but it could hardly be described as triumphant. Skir'nir yelled again, his eyes wide with apprehension. He pointed downslope.

Vidar turned. He saw what had made Skir'nir cry out.

The mountain had grown a shrugging, writhing skin of gray fur—A river of wolves, running upstream—A sea. A tidal wave.

They made for the notch in the mountain as if the beasts were much closer than they were. Vidar scrambled as fast as he could, but V'ili helped him along from behind with frantic haste. When Vidar looked back, he saw that the wolves were gaining on them.

If they could reach the cleft, they could defend it. The wolves would have to come through one at a time, and they could handle them that way. At least until their sword-arms gave out. But they had to get there first.

Somewhere amid the adrenaline-rush of fear—for even the Aesir feared, contrary to imperial propaganda—it occurred to Vidar that wolves did not gather in such large numbers. Nor did they hunt by day. There was someone behind this—and Vidar hoped to survive long enough to find out who it was.

Odin? Could he have pursued the sword alone? Vidar slipped on some loose snow, righted himself and launched

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his body up the slope. Then there was no more time for speculation—the snarls were getting a little too loud behind him.

The cleft stood above them, filled with a dark gray sky. The wind roared down the mountainside, a force that threatened to pick them up and fling them down to the beasts below. Storm—Vidar sensed it as he had sensed the wolf pack the night before last. He sniffed ozone on the air, and in the east, he saw the first dark coils of a sky serpent begin to sneak around the side of the mountain—irrefutable proof that this was no natural storm.

Odin. More and more, the evidence pointed toward him.

Clinging to the slope, Vidar waited a moment until the wind died down, then chugged toward the cleft. Off to the east, where the sky was darkening steadily, there was a brief, threadlike flash of lightning. The thunder that followed was more echo than anything else—but it was getting closer.

Vidar drove himself. He climbed with hands and feet, ignoring the pain such exertions brought. Wolves barked behind him, closer than before, and he looked over his shoulder to see just how close they were. He turned and strove against the rising storm.

Then Skir'nir, the foremost of them, slipped through the notch. A second elf disappeared through the narrow opening. A third.

Vidar could feel V'ili pressing him from behind. He could hear the wolves' panting now, like a southing of branches in a sudden wind, and he lurched ahead.

Not much farther. A few yards. The furred tide of beast-flesh behind him snarled and snapped, churning the snow up. Vidar could almost feel their hot breath.

But he wasn't about to give up now—not with the prospect of finding Odin so near at hand. With a last spurt, Vidar flung himself headlong through the cleft like a fullback diving between blockers. He made it through—

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sprawled in the snow, V'ili came through right behind him, tripped over him and sprawled, too.

Then Skir'nir and the others closed up the passage with their bodies, swords drawn, ready for the rush of wild gray beasts.

None came—

There was no need. The small, bowl-like valley into which they'd emerged was full of wolves already.

Vidar stood and drew his own weapon. For a brief space, the beasts did not move. Then they began to slide along the perimeter of the bowl, en masse, their teeth exposed as if they were grinning. In the corner of his eye, Vidar saw the flare of lightning. A few moments later, he heard the thunder. But the wind did not seem to be able to penetrate this place.

"What are they doing?" asked N'orrat.

"Herding us." said Vidar.

"What do we do?" asked another elf.

"We move as they wish us to," answered Vidar.

The wolves advanced on them and they moved back, keeping their points between those gray hunters and themselves. The wolves ignored the blades and kept on coming. The elves gave way, step by step, until it became obvious that the beasts were guiding them toward the far end of the valley.

Vidar glanced that way and saw a cave. Caves made good hiding places for things you didn't want found. It didn't take long for him to put two and two together.

"Skir'nir," he said, "I think we've found the sword-cave."

The elf turned to look about, saw it, then returned his attention to the wolves. "So it would seem," he said.

If it was true—if the original Skir'nir had entrusted Frey's sword to this cave long ago—then it would take only a couple of weeks to attune to it, and they'd have a way out.

That is, if their food didn't give out. And if the wolves

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didn't attack them first. And if Odin hadn't grabbed the sword for himself already—a distinct possibility, or why would he have his wolves corral them in the very place that might free them?

The beasts advanced and the company retreated. They came to the cave. The wolves flared out, forming a wall of gray fur around the cave-mouth. They came forward again, snarling, until the lyos backed up into the darkness of the cave—

Skir'nir turned toward Vidar. His face was almost occluded by the gloom. Only one side of it and a single-eye still caught the light.

"Now what?" asked the elf.

Suddenly, something moved—something deeper in the cave. The elves whirled, straining to see into the blackness. Instinctively, they backed off, despite the rising cacophony of fury as the wolves outside saw them coming.

More movement in the cave. More sounds, the scrape of stone against—leather? A whispering. Then the thing emerged into the light, other things on either side of it.

It was G'lann. He seemed transfixed, or confused, it was hard to tell which. But his gaze was for Skir'nir alone.

Eric and Sif came out into the light beside him, and - H'fimif. They shaded their eyes, striving to see into the blinding reflections off the snow—for them as impenetra-

ble as darkness.

Then G'lann's eyes narrowed, their Aesir-born acuity allowing him to adjust before the others could. His mouth twisted savagely.

"It is you," he whispered, glaring at his foster brother. With a quickness no other lyos could match, he leaped forward and drove his fist into Skir'nir's face.

The elf's head snapped back and he sprawled backward into the cave wall. He struck the wall hard, slumped and rolled away in agony, clutching at his wounded shoulder.

G'lann bent over him, dug his fingers into the fabric of

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Skir'nir's tunic. He lifted him up with one hand, the other seeking the sword that hung from his belt.

Iron rustled out of nearly a dozen sheaths, as V'ili and N'orrat and the others moved to stop G'lann. At the same time, G'lann's companions interposed themselves, still blinking at the light, but waving their swords to show their intentions.

"Hold!" cried Vidar. They all seemed to freeze—even G'lann. Skir'nir gasped in his grip. Vidar took a step toward Magni's son. "Put him down, G'lann. He's not the enemy, damn it!"

"Vidar!" shouted Eric, his point dropping.

"Kinsman," muttered Sif, plainly astonished. "But where..."

Yet G'lann did not release his foster brother. His eyes became slits and his teeth showed as he answered. "He's killed my friends. He's slain my kin—my father. And now I'll kill him with the sword he would have used to rule Alfheim."

He drew Prey's blade. It glittered along its length in the bright light that streamed in from the cave-mouth. The runes that had been carved into it in Svartheim seemed to writhe in anticipation.

"No!" cried Vidar, taking another step forward. "You're a fool, G'lann. Both you and Skir'nir—dupes. And so am I."

"What do you mean?" asked Sif. Her mouth was hard, her eyes cold. She'd made no move to stop G'lann.

"Skir'nir is not the traitor," said Vidar. "It's Magni."

"What?" G'lann spat. "My father?"

"Yes," said Vidar. "In league with Ygg. And we're all playing into the destroyer's hands—slaying one another while Ygg sits somewhere and laughs. He'll be here soon, G'lann—who do you think sent the wolves, the sky-serpent? And when he gets here, he'll think it a fine joke that you slew your brother for him—saving him the trouble."

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G'lann hesitated, caught between anger and disbelief. He looked up into his brother's face, seeking the truth there. Then, slowly, he let Skir'nir down. The elf sank to his knees, a trickle of blood starting at the corner of his mouth. Sif sheathed her sword and came over to where Skir'nir knelt.

For a moment, she regarded him, perhaps weighing the possibility of her father's guilt. Then she knelt beside Skir'nir and put her arms around his shoulders. Suddenly, she sobbed, and her head came to rest against his neck.

Eric moved near to her, but sensed that this was none of his business. His hand brushed away a loose wisp of auburn hair from her cheek, and then he took a step back.

G'lann let the sword fall from his fingers. It clattered noisily against the cave floor. The anger left him and he peered at Skir'nir, who now looked up at him, half-smiling.

"What have I done?" asked G'lann. His face was blank, desolate. He shook his head. "I don't understand."

"It's nothing now," said Skir'nir. "It's over." He took G'lann by the wrist and drew him down. Magni's son resisted for a moment. Then he too was kneeling, his arms encircling Sif and Skir'nir, moving his big hands over their backs.

H'limif and Var'kald looked at one another. Var'kald shrugged. Then they put their weapons away. Skir'nir's lyos did the same, and the cavern hissed with the sound of iron again.

Sif looked up. Her green elvish eyes were wet and shiny. She regarded those who had come up the mountain with Skir'nir and smiled.

"It's been a long time, N'orrrat," she said.

N'orrrat nodded. "Too long, my lady."

Vidar saw that there was still the distance of bloodshed between them—but that would heal. It might take a long time, but the wounds would close.

Ullir moved to Vidar's side, placing his hand on Vidar's

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shoulder. "Care to tell us what's going on here? We thought we'd lost you."

Vidar shrugged. "I guess I'm not that easy to lose. Vali can tell you that." Even as he spoke, N'arri and M'norr came over to greet him.

Then the wolves, who'd leaped and snarled outside the cave during the confrontation, began to quiet down. Vidar watched them. They seemed to be listening for something. Behind them, lightning turned the valley splendid. Thunder came, louder than before. The sky grew old and leathery, so that the darkness outside began to approximate that inside the cave.

Sif rose and gently drew her brothers up alongside her. She looked for Vidar, came over and took his hands. "I'm glad to see you, too, kinsman. You brought me a gift I could not have hoped for." She wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand.

"But I took away, too, didn't I?" asked Vidar.

Sif's face lost some of its color. "Aye. But if it's the truth, I cannot fault you for it."

Vidar nodded. "It's the truth."

"And how did you find Skir'nir?" she asked.

"He came upon me," said Vidar, and explained how they had worked out Ygg's scheme between them. "But how long have you been penned up like this?"

"Days," said Eric. "Four, I think." He looked out toward the wolves, strangely silent in their multitude. "The storm is getting worse. Ygg must be close."

"Aye," said Vidar.

Gilling clapped him on the shoulder. "Good to see you," said the Aesirman. "Although I've seen you look better."

But someone was missing. Vidar looked around. Ar'on? Where was Ar'on?

When he asked, everyone fell silent. Finally, Ullir spoke. "When we got here, there were no wolves. But it took us some time to find the sword—this cave is deeper than it looks—and by the time we were ready to come out, we

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found what you see now. We knew that our only chance was to fight our way out, no matter how bad the odds. Ar'on fell in the second attempt."

G'lann spat. "He would be alive today if not for the damned harp," he said. "He dropped it--and as the rest of us were retreating toward the cave, he went back to get U." He shook his head. "You want to see it? I tried to save him, but it was too late-- All I could rescue was ... that."

G'lann pointed into a shadowy corner of the cave. There sat the leather bag with the harp in it-- Outside, the storm was growing worse. The wolves' eyes flashed every time the lightning did, and they did not bark at the drone of thunder that followed each flare. They waited patiently for their master, their tongues hanging loose in their mouths--

"But how did Ygg know where the sword was?" asked Ullir.

Vidar thought for a moment, "By latching onto our minds," he said. "G'lann's, Sifs, Skir'nir's...." "I thought that was an Aesir talent," said N'orrat. Vidar shrugged. "We don't know much about Ygg," he lied. "Could be that he's Aesir after all."

"My lord!" They all turned. It was M'norr, who stood at the cave-mouth with N'arri. "Come see what the storm brought!" cried the dark elf.

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The dark, cloaked figure came straight toward the cave. It seemed as if a black cloud hovered over its head. Then Vidar was able to discern it for what it was--a flock of hovering ravens. A chill went down his spine as he remembered his dream of Valaskjalff.

Lord of the wolves. Lord of the Ravens,

Ygg's face was concealed by a cowl. Just as well, thought Vidar, recalling what Loki's fire had done to that face. The wolves rose and parted before his passage, fawning over him like dogs at their master's knee.

Somewhere outside this bowl of a valley, the wind howled like a madman and the thunder crashed. Lightning split the sky, more thunder. The sky-serpent reared, huge and dark and terrible, as high as the roof of the gray, tortured world.

Ygg approached. They watched him. When he stood less than a spear-cast from the cave, he halted. Then he whipped his head back and the cowl fell from his face.

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Eric gasped. "That's not Ygg," he whispered.

After the first shock of recognition, the surprise drained from Vidar. All the pieces fell into place. In a corner of his

mind, perhaps, this had not been unexpected.

"Greetings, uncle," he called out.

Hoenir smiled. The wolves all around him glared at Vidar, less polite than Odin's brother,

"I see the journey wasn't too hard on you, nephew."

"No," said Vidar. "Except for a few broken bones, I'm fit as a fiddle. I take it that you brought the wolves, the ravens, the sky-serpent...?"

"Aye," said Hoenir. "Insurance—to make certain that my trip wasn't for nothing. Now, the sword, if you don't mind."

Vidar laughed, trying to conceal from Hoenir how weak he was still. "We mind, uncle. We mind a whole lot."

Hoenir shrugged—the family gesture. "I don't see that you have much of a choice. Jawbreaker. You seem to be outmatched."

The wolves snarled as if on cue. Lightning etched a jagged white line in the blackboard sky and the air bel-lowed its outrage—just for emphasis.

Suddenly, N'orrat drew back on his bowstring and let an arrow fly. In the fraction of a second in which it hung in the air, it appeared to be headed straight for Hoenir's breast.

But in the same fraction of a second, the ravens that had hovered about Hoenir's head converged into a shield of sleek black feathers. One of the birds squawked and fell to earth, impaled on the shaft. The others darted about, screeching, ready to defend their master from a second arrow.

"That was not smart," said Hoenir.

The valley flashed with white-hot intensity for a moment and the mountain seemed to crumble all around them. Rocks fell from above the cave-mouth and smashed at their feet. The thunder was instantaneous. It reverberated

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in their skulls as if it would turn their brains to putty, and the ground shook.

When they regained their feet, they saw that a few of the wolves had been seared to death by the blast. The smell of their burnt fur was stifling.

But Hoenir had not even flinched. He was still standing there calmly, his hair blowing in the soft breeze.

"There's more where that came from," he said. "Do you think that I spent the last thousand years in idleness, Jawbreaker? I mastered the elements as no stromrad ever mastered them- Not even Odin can control the storm as I do. Not now." He smiled indulgently. "After all, if Odin had not returned, I might have taken a shot at Vali's throne. That required preparation."

"Then Odin's boast was no lie-you are in league with him," said Vidar.

"Aye," said his uncle. "Have been since Utgard."

"And what will you do," asked Vidar, "when the universe is dead and the nine worlds are destroyed? What's in it for you, Hoenir?"

Hoenir laughed softly. "My brother must have left out a few details when he talked to you. Of course, there will be destruction. It's a cleansing. But when it's all over, we'll start again-he and I-to build a universe like the one we built long ago. A new empire. A new Asgard-not like the mockery Vali has built, a shadow. But a braver place, peopled with a race that will know no cowardice, no fear. It will be like the old days, before Ragnarok." Hoenir paused. "It's only a pity you won't be around to see it, Vidar. There was a time when you would have liked such a place."

"And you will rule at Odin's side?"

"Aye," said Hoenir. "As I did once before-before you'd taken your first breath. Then there were three of us-Odin and Lodur and myself. The world was different then. Jawbreaker."

Vidar shook his head slowly from side to side. "No. He

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lied to you. There'll be no new world-only destruction. And you're no more than a tool to him, to be discarded on the last day, when his victory is complete."

Hoenir spat. "You think you know Odin, Jawbreaker? I'm his brother. He could never lie to me."

"He's insane now," said Vidar.

Hoenir laughed. "That's what you think/* he said. "Now-give me the sword, and I'll let you all live. For the time being, anyway."

They were silent for a moment, while the wind blew and the thunder muttered to itself. Vidar groped for a way to forestall the inevitable.

"Then you knew all along that Odin was not in Alfheim," he called, feigning bitterness. "You knew it was a ruse from the start."

"Of course," said Hoenir, allowing a wolf to lick at his hand. "A few thursar priests were to leave the mask in the cave. All I had to do was find it, and the evidence would lead you to believe that he'd gone into Asgard. Then the same priests made sure to leave a casualty when they won through into Alfheim, so the incident wouldn't go unnoticed, and again you took the bait."

"Silly me," said Vidar. "But how did you know where the sword was?"

"I didn't," said Hoenir, "until I got your message. Then I abandoned that patchwork army of yours and made my way into the mountains. In a week or so I'd found Skir'nir and latched onto his mind. Then I let him lead me to the sword." He chuckled. "Of course, I didn't want to have to face too many of you up here, so I thinned the troops out a bit with my wolves and a well-timed avalanche."

Skir'nir said nothing, but his lips formed a taut white line.

"Then where is Odin?" asked Vidar. His mind raced, searching for a way out of this. If Hoenir left this place with the sword, Odin would wield it soon enough. Hoenir

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would not dare to try to keep it for himself. And with Frey's blade in his hand, who would be a match for Odin?

"He's busy crushing Vaii," said Hoenir.

"And where's Vali?" asked Vidar.

Hoenir laughed. "You'd like to know, wouldn't you?" Odin's brother shook his head, and his hair whipped in the wind. "Be glad I won't tell you that, Vidar. I couldn't let you live then. Asgard might attempt a rescue, and that would slow matters down considerably—wouldn't it?"

"I suppose," Vidar muttered to himself.

The clouds moved ponderously overhead. The wolves prowled just outside the cave-mouth and the ravens wheeled, screeching.

"Enough," said Hoenir. He must have been aware of Vidar's delay tactic, but seemed to enjoy the boasting it afforded him. Now his patience had come to an end.

G'lann took a step forward suddenly. "You want the sword?" he yelled. The wolves growled at him, baring their fangs. He lifted it, point up. Vidar hadn't seen him pick it

up again, but it seemed that G'lann had recovered it in the confusion.

Hoenir smiled, his eyes narrowing. "Aye," he said.

"Then fight me for it," said the elf, the slightest stain of mockery in his voice. "And if you win, the sword is yours,"

"No," said Vidar in a whisper. "You haven't got a chance, G'lann. Let me. At least I can--"

Skir'nir stopped him, gripping his arm. "Once again," he said, "your courage exceeds your strength, Aesirman. G'lann is our best hope now."

Vidar looked at Skir'nir and scowled. The lyos was right.

But Hoenir just shook his head and chuckled. "It's not my style, boy, to take up pointless challenges. Nor would it be much of a battle." He turned toward Vidar. "Drum some sense into the whelp. Jawbreaker. And quickly. I don't have as much patience as I used to."

"It wouldn't be as easy as you think," shouted G'lann,

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advancing another step. The wolves coiled to spring, but Hoenir must have held them back for some reason of his own. "Odin's blood is in me, too," G'lann went on. His green eyes were trained on the gaut, the creator, who had pushed up mountains and carved riverbeds in his youth—long before G'lann's grandfather had been born. But G'lann pressed his case much as his grandfather would have done. "I repeat the challenge," he said, "unless you fear to face me."

Vidar whistled softly.

"And I repeat my refusal," said Hoenir, anger showing through the slightest cracks in his facade of reason. Then, more gently, in measured tones, "Come now. Do you think I look forward to killing you all? All I require is the sword."

No one moved, no one spoke. Not even G'lann.

"Surely," said Hoenir, "you must know there's no way out. Must I make an example of someone?"

A handful of wolves turned toward them suddenly and moved in. They backed off, tightening into a knot of resistance, swords drawn and ready. Eric darted forward and took a swipe at one of the beasts, but he had to give way as two others leaped for his throat. G'lann battered one aside and Vidar the other.

But they were not quick enough to ward off the ravens. There was a streak of black in the air and suddenly V'ili

was doubled over, clutching at his face. Another attack and Ullir staggered, the side of his face scored with blood. Vidar stepped in front to protect him—and inspiration struck.

"Odin," he shouted, so that Hoenir could hear him even above the wind and the thunder and the growling of the wolves, "Odin would have accepted the challenge."

The wolves froze as suddenly as they had erupted, as stiff as stone now. The ravens retreated. There was a terrible stalk of light that struck the far side of the mountain, shattering its bones and searing their vision.

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Hoenir's face had become a fiery red. Vidar's taunt had found his uncle's most vulnerable spot—his inferiority complex. Since Vidar could remember, and long before that, Hoenir had been forced to stand in Odin's shadow. He was standing there still. But while he'd made the choice to play alongside Odin, something in him must have rankled at having to play second fiddle again.

"Very well, then," said Hoenir, his voice low and clipped and dangerous. He drew his sword. Thunder boomed above them. "But I want your arrows—every one of them. And your bows. I don't want to find you taking target practice while my attention is elsewhere."

G'lann looked to Vidar. It seemed that this was the very plan he'd had in mind.

"Well?" asked Hoenir.

G'lann's jaw set. He looked at his sister and gently removed her bow from her back, passing it over her head and arm. She moved her arm to make it easier—Then the others followed suit, taking off bows and the straps that held their quivers in place. Many of them had already been emptied anyway.

Sif, Eric and Skir'nir carried the weapons out to the brink of the wolf-tide. The beasts parted, allowing them a corridor through which they might pass.

"All right," said Hoenir. "Far enough." He was smiling again. "Now drop them and go back."

They did that. The path among the wolves closed behind them, engulfing the pile of bows and quivers like quicksand.

"Now then," said Hoenir—He shrugged off his cloak, "Or have you lost your heart, elf-boy?"

G'lann spat and came forward, Frey's blade in his hand. For all the power locked inside it, imprisoned there by the

dark elves at their forges in Svartheim, it was only a common weapon in G'tann's grasp. He'd shown that he had the talent to be a healer, a lifting, and could therefore have attuned to the blade in the course of time. But not

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even Vidar could have unlocked the sword's secrets in a matter of a few days.

"Come, lad," said Hoenir, as G'lann strode toward him and the wolves gave him a narrow path through which to:

approach. "I'll be quick—for Thor's sake. I promise." The gray hunters around him backed off reluctantly, so that there was space for fighting.

G'lann closed the gap between Hoenir and himself, but it seemed to Vidar that the closer he came to his adversary, the slower he walked. There was caution there. Good, thought Vidar. The worst mistake G'lann could make would be to underestimate Hoenir's power. Even without his wolves and his ravens and his storm-making, he'd always been a hell of a swordsman.

"Where's your courage now, boy—in your throat?" asked Hoenir. "Let's get this over with."

G'lann did not answer him. Perhaps fear had made his tongue swollen. What was going on in the elflord's mind now? Vidar wondered, watching—and wishing it were him facing Hoenir instead. Was G'lann thinking of how he'd left the field near Ar'vid's farm, while his comrades bought his escape with their lives? Or was he remembering how Magni had warned him about Hoenir?

When G'lann came within a couple of sword's lengths of his enemy, he stopped. The air seemed to grow taut between them, though neither moved. The ravens flew, screeching.

Suddenly, G'lann lunged. He was quick, but Hoenir was quicker. He batted the sword aside and slashed at G'lann's head.

The elf barely spun out of the way before Hoenir's brand buried itself in the densely packed snow. Hoenir dragged it free and advanced on G'lann, stalking him. But the elf was the one who attacked, rushing at him with Prey's sword held high in both his hands. This time, Hoenir caught the blade on his own. For a moment, he seemed hard-pressed to keep the edge from his clavicle—

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perhaps surprised at the amount of strength G'lann had inherited from his father. Then Hoenir gritted his teeth and—with a flourish—tore the sword from G'lann's grasp.

It flew end over end in a high arc and landed point first in the snow.

Sif gasped. Skir'nir cursed.

Hoenir cut at the elf's legs. G'lann leaped high enough to avoid the blade but stumbled when he came to earth. He tried to right himself, but that only made it worse. He sprawled backward.

Hoenir was on him in a moment. He smiled as his point came to rest just beneath G'lann's jaw. The wolves howled and the ravens screamed, as if they could taste blood already. In fact, a thin line of gore ran down the elf's neck.

"Why, that must be the blood you boasted of," said Hoenir, loud enough for all of them to hear. "Odin's blood, wasn't it? Where are your boasts now, elf?" G'lann did not move, but met Hoenir's glare evenly, unflinching at the nearness of death.

Vidar had no arrows and no bow with which to launch them. He had his sword, but it was useless at this distance, even if he'd had the strength to fling it with some accuracy. All that was left him was the power of his Aesir mind, and he used it with all the violence and the raw, pulsing force of which it was capable.

But even that was not enough. Hoenir too was Aesir, and a gaut. He staggered, but his defenses did not fall. G'lann looked at him, puzzled, and tried to squirm away. But Hoenir took a step forward and pinned him again.

He turned toward Vidar, his face still twisted with the effort of fending off his nephew's attack. "Nice try," was the message that Hoenir sent him. "But you're a bit rusty, it seems."

Then Hoenir retaliated with a blast of his own. Vidar felt as if his brain were on fire. Instinctively, he clutched at his head.

Hoenir turned back toward Magni's son. "Say good-bye,

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sweet prince," he told him. Sif tried to charge out of the cave, but the wolves leaped up in her way. Eric fought beside her, and then Skir'nir and H'limif, but no one could break through. Vidar found himself slashing at the wolves, too, though he knew that it was all over for G'lann.

There was a scream—but it was not G'lann's. Vi4ar took a step back and looked up.

Hoenir stood there above the outstretched elf, his sword fallen, cradling his right hand with his left—for a black-feathered arrow had pierced it, and now it stuck out of both sides of the hand, having passed only halfway through. The Aesirman looked for the bowman who'd

maimed him—and saw him as they all did, a vague figure among the snow-covered rocks to one side of the cave.

Lightning sprang from the sky. There was a blinding flash in the place where the archer had been—and now there was nothing there, only a shattered boulder.

But in that small space of time, G'lann had picked up the sword that Hoenir had dropped. Odin's brother turned in time to see the blade bury itself in his chest.

G'lann staggered back, half-expecting to be blasted on the spot. But Hoenir only stood there, looking more confused than anything else. He stared at the blade, his hands encircling the hilt as he tried to draw it out. When he found that he could not, his eyes sought Vidar.

Thunder moaned. Hoenir fell to his knees, still clutching the swordhilt. There was no anger in his face—only a strange, gentle sorrow. Vidar felt something stir in his mind. It was only a word—"M'thrund." Then Hoenir fell forward and lay still.

Lightning flashed and the sky roared in agony. Outside the bowl of the valley, the wind shrieked like a banshee. The wolves withdrew, making fearful sounds deep in their throats, and the ravens took off as one—gone like smoke in a storm.

Some of them rushed forward—Sif. Skir'nir. H'limif

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and Var'kald. They ran to embrace G'lann. Vidar came afterward.

But it wasn't Magni's son he came for. It was Hoenir. He knelt beside him, turning him over so that his face was thrust up toward the sky. It was too late for healing. His uncle's handsome visage had gone slack, his clever gray eyes gone as dull as slate.

So Odin's first victim among his kinsmen was the one who had become his ally. Vidar appreciated the irony.

Vidar drew the blade from Hoenir's body and flung it away. He found himself saddened. Why? He cursed himself. Hoenir had never done anything to deserve a mourner. Just now, he'd been an enemy—ready to kill any and all of them if he had to.

Vidar looked at his uncle's face. It was not so unlike Odin's—or his own. That was the core of his sadness, of course. Hoenir had been family—and it hurt to lose a kinsman when there were so few of them left now.

All around them, the wolves snarled and withdrew. They knew that they had no business here anymore. The will

that had called them was gone, so they slunk off like gray shadows. Vidar watched them file out of the valley through the cleft.

Even the storm abated somewhat, but that would take longer to leave them. The sky would boil with Hoenir's sky-serpent until the savage winds could disperse it.

Then Eric was waving at him from the spot where the archer had appeared—their mysterious savior. "Vidar!" he called. "Come quickly!"

Vidar reached for Hoenir's cloak and dragged it across his face. Then he rose and went to Eric.

When he climbed over the rock to where the boy was, he found that Eric was not alone. He was folding his cloak so that he could put it under the head of what appeared to be a thursar.

A thursar only half-destroyed by Hoenir's blast, though he was fading fast. A thursar who had saved their lives

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more than once, it seemed. Vidar saw him clearly for the first time now,

Ice trickled down his spine. It was Jam.

Eric looked up at Vidar, horrified. "Vidar," he whispered, "how can it be?"

Then the giant shook his head, a slight movement from side to side, for even that caused him great agony. "No," he rumbled, spitting out blood. "I am not... your companion. It is only an appearance you ... seem to cherish. That is why I have ... taken it."

"Who are you?" asked Vidar, pulling off his own cloak to lay it over the giant form.

The immobile thursar features seemed to struggle for expression. "My name ... is Kir. I am ... mokkurkalfi."

Vidar's memory reeled. He remembered such creatures—had even seen one once, before they seemed to vanish from Alfheim.

Then, as if the mokkurkalfi could read his mind, it said, "I am ... the last. The last."

"You need not keep up the guise," said Vidar. "It must cost you strength. You have nothing to fear from us,"

"Long ago ... lyos feared us," said the creature. "They found us... ugly."

"That was long ago," said Eric. "You saved our lives—and we are not lyos."

The creature—the thursar—said nothing. But little by little, Jam's form diminished. His flesh melted away from him, layer by layer, until only a blockish gray body remained. Vidar regarded the mokkurkalfi's face—hairless, misshapen and soft, the eyes only slits beneath a spongy brow. The creature was squat, clumsy-looking, and it had no neck. Vidar had forgotten how monstrous its race had been.

But it was impolite to cringe before someone who had just saved your life.

"Why?" asked Vidar. "Why did you help us?"

The creature's face clenched, its body a bloody ruin, and

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wracked by spasms. "I sensed the good, and ... the evil. Even if I had to ... help lyos."

Eric searched Vidar's eyes. "Can you heat it?" he asked.

Vidar placed a splay-fingered hand on the mokkurkalfi's temple. He gave it a few more moments of life. But when he looked up at Eric again, he shook his head from side to side.

Kir peered up at Vidar through eyes set deep within the soft folds of its flesh. "Aesir," it said.

"Aye," said Vidar.

Then the mokkurkalfi shuddered and died. Just like that.

"What is it?"

Vidar turned and saw that it was G'lann who'd asked. G'lann stared at the creature's inert form, disgust written plainly in his face.

"Mokkurkalfi," said Eric. "And the last of its kind."

G'lann turned his head and spat. "Just as well. It's even uglier than the tales tell."

"It just saved your life," said Vidar.

G'lann met his gaze evenly, then glanced back at the mokkurkalfi. "You know," he said, "perhaps it doesn't look so bad after all." Then his nostrils flared. "But it smells like a field full of manure."

Vidar winced. "You're a sensitive guy, G'lann—a real sensitive guy."

XXVII

Truly, my lord, I am a skald. But I cannot sing for your hall tonight. I've lost someone close to me and I do not feel much like singing.

A friend, my lord? That is a good question. Perhaps not a friend exactly. Once I thought so, but now I think differently.

Lars did not like me very much. He was a bard like myself, and therefore a competitor. Nor was he the type to be satisfied with next best, or second choice at table. If we sang in the same hall and I was given the better reward, he'd slander me the rest of the night out of Jealousy.

But still I was sorry to see him go. Why? Because there are few enough skalds these days, and the world will be emptier without him. Even someone like Lars was better than nothing.

Ah, you are too kind. Indeed, I have neither eaten nor

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drunk for longer than I care to remember. Not every chieftain would give a poor skald food without a song.

Perhaps, my lord, my voice will be fuller tomorrow if I have some of your mead tonight. I drink to you. May I forget everything but my songs.

Sin Skolding
Radsey, A.D. 482

XXVIII

They built two pyres—one for Hoenir and one for Kir. They used dry wood that G'lann had found deep in the sword-cave—wood that the first Skir'nir might have left there centuries ago, when he'd hidden the sword away. The lyos had thought to leave both bodies in the cave, according to their custom, but neither the Aesirmen nor the Utgarders could abide by that.

Vidar stood beside his uncle's pyre and watched the first flames lick at the dark, half-starred sky. Hoenir's face looked as if it had been carved from the ice and then dusted with gold. His sword—the one that G'lann had used to slay him—lay on his breast, his arms crossed over it.

"You bastard," Vidar whispered. "You lived so long and you never learned a thing."

Then the flames leaped up all around the body, casting wild shadows over the snowscape. Vidar tried not to think of the pyres on Vigrid, the flames that had consumed

Heimdall's remains, and Bragi's, and Hermod's. He tried

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to stave off the memory of Frey's pyre and Thor's. But he couldn't.

Off to one side, the mokkurkalfi too was devoured by the fire, a grotesque insect engulfed in a flower with long golden petals. Vidar could not imagine how it had survived so long here in the mountains. It had been said that the mokkurkalfi were long-lived, like the Aesir and the Vanir. But the loneliness... the incredible loneliness. How had Kir borne that?

But the mokkurkalfi's last gift to them had not been their lives. Just behind him, they'd found the sling full of food that he must have carried for his own nourishment. It was not much, but it had kept them from starving this night.

The rest of the company clustered around a smaller fire inside the cave, where there was shelter from the wind. Vidar stood alone and watched the funeral flames blossom. But when they shot up and sent a spray of sparks into the sky, Eric came out to stand at Vidar's side. Then Ullir came, and N'arri.

"You know," said Ullir, "I don't think I'll ever be able to look at a funeral pyre again without feeling my heart leap into my throat." But little else was said until the blaze died, leaving only charred bones and ashes that the wind would steal away.

Then they returned to the cave and the others, and sat in the fire-shot darkness. Var'kald was strumming a harp—the one that Ar'on had given his life for. It turned out that Var'kald had some talent—His voice was clear and melodic, like all the voices of his kind, and his fingers were deft.

He sang of the mokkurkalfi. Long and long ago, they had lived in the lowlands and by the sea, powerful magicians who reaped a rich harvest from the water as well as from the land. The lyos had dwelled in the mountains then, where their race had been weaned on hoarfrost and what little the hard hills would yield them.

The lyos learned to hate the mokkurkalfi. First, for their

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ugliness. Second, out of envy. And third, because the mokkurkalfi would not share what they had. Early on, the elves had tried to come down out of their wolf-infested mountains and live on the fringes of the mokkurkalfi land—but the mokkurkalfi drove them away with their

magic. Later, the lyos tried to take the land by force—but again the mokkurkalfi drove them back.

Still, there came a time when the lyos had grown so numerous in their mountain fastnesses that no-magic could contain them. They swept down upon their monstrous enemies like a pestilence, depending on the strength of their arms and the swiftness of their arrows to preserve them against witchery.

The elves found that the mokkurkalfi were not nearly as many as they had been in the past, nor as strong. They pushed half the lowlanders into the sea, and the other half into the mountains. The mokkurkalfi took their toll, however, for the one magic that was still rife among them was that of illusion—and where a lyos should have seen a brother, he saw instead a grotesque, fleshy foe. It was only after the monster fell, an arrow growing from his belly, that the lyos saw his victim for who he was.

Many of the elves fell that way at first, struck down by their own friends and kinsmen. Then the lyos learned to signal one another during the battle, in ways the mokkurkalfi could not predict. The enemy fell or was driven away from his home, to endure the same cold and ice that the elves had endured before.

When the war was done, the lyos swept away the dwellings of the mokkurkalfi. They built their own villages on the sites, for they were pleasant places, nestled in the bends of wide rivers or in the lee of hills that rose near the sea.

The lyos warned their young to be wary of the mokkurkalfi in those days—for sometimes one or two would be found lurking in the forests, peering out at the places that once were theirs. Nor did elf trust elf when mokkurkalfi

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had been seen in the vicinity, for who knew which of them might be a monster in disguise?

But the sightings dwindled, even in the highlands. The mokkurkalfi were thought to have died out, unable to live in the cold, narrow places as the elves had. Finally even the tales faded.

On that note, Var'kald's song trailed off. He put the harp back inside its leather bag and placed it on the stone floor next to him.

Outside, the wind howled and the fire seemed to cower. Vidar wrapped his cloak about himself and closed his eyes. But sleep did not come easily. Something was bothering him—what? That the mokkurkalfi had kept himself alive all these years as if waiting for the day he might intercede and save them? Or the willingness with which Kir had sacrificed himself?

Yes, those things. But also something else,...

Then it came to him—the message that Hoenir had sent him before he died. "M'thrund," he'd said. What was it? A warning? A curse?

He opened his eyes and saw Ullir sitting cross-legged on the other side of the dying fire, his yellow beard tinted by the low golden light. His eyes were shut—after all, he'd imparted a portion of his strength to V*ili, whose face had been badly torn by the ravens, and to Skir'nir for his shoulder wound.

Nor was he himself unscathed. He bore four parallel scars on his cheek where the birds had raked him. Healing took a lot more out of Ullir than it did Vidar, for his Aesir blood was mixed with human. But when Vidar had offered to share the burden of healing, Ullir had said he'd have no part of it. He'd insisted that Odin's son save his strength for his own hurts—

Vidar decided to let him sleep. He could ask him about M'thrund later.

In the morning, they began their trek down the mountainside. The first day and night, they went hungry.

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Despair walked beside them, for it was a long way down, and they knew that they would not make it without food.

But on the second day, N'arri spotted some goats, and they brought down two of them with their bows. On the second night, they roasted them, and it was like a feast.

After that, game became almost plentiful. Without, so many wolves about, the other wild creatures dared to move around on the slopes. With their bellies fed, the company did not even seem to mind the treacherous terrain and the ice-cold edge of the wind. Food cured a multitude of evils, and what it did not cure—the memories of comrades lost—Var'kald's playing helped to soothe.

Once they got past the ledge where Vidar had fallen, the atmosphere became near-f\ i'ghthearted.

G*lann and Skir'nir spent much time together, and they were not always laughing. Perhaps there were matters upon which they would never agree—but they came to walk beside one another as brothers again. Sif had accepted Skir'nir much more readily, and often she would glance at the two of them with a slight, knowing smile.

Just after they reached the pine forest, a wild and sudden storm descended on them— Snow piled deep in the spaces between the trees and weighed the branches down, slowing their progress. But they made their way down the mountain as quickly as they could, for somewhere below elf was fighting elf, and there was blood being shed that

might have been prevented.

The storm finally broke and they emerged from the forest. By then, a large measure of Vidar's strength had returned. He not only kept pace with the rest of them, but sometimes he took the lead—when he felt that they might take a slope a little faster. He still suffered small pains in his legs and ribs now and then, but that had a lot to do with the cold.

Skir'nir marveled at his powers of recuperation. "You come back faster than a weed," he told him.

•Thanks," said Vidar. "I think."

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Whenever they rested, Vidar would help G'lann attune to the sword. They had never spoken about who would claim the sword once they reached it. But Vidar had decided a long time ago that he would let G'lann have it without a fight. Frey had left it to Alfheim's keeping—it seemed only right that G'lann should be the one to wield it.

Magni's son caught on quickly. Just as he'd shown an untutored aptitude for healing, he showed a natural talent for attunement. Thor, his grandfather, had been the same way, though Midgard had made more of his ability with Mjollnir than his ability to heal.

Some six days after they'd left Hoenir's ashes to the vagaries of the wind, Vidar spotted a few dark specks on the slope below them. The longer he looked, the more specks he saw. They moved like the advance scouts of an army.

He called down the mountain until the air rang with his cries. No matter who it was, they had no enemies now in Alfheim. The scouts called back, though Vidar couldn't make out the words.

They turned out to be dwarvin^ their green eyes dancing beneath their black cowls. They hugged N'arri and M'norr and knelt before Vidar, even in the snow.

"Get up," said Vidar. "A simple hello will do." But he smiled as he said it, for he was glad to see them.

The main body of the army was not far away now. With Hoenir gone, it seemed, one of the Aesirmen had taken over as chieftain—a big man that Vidar believed he recognized, even at this distance.

Thakrad.

Eventually, he stood face to face with the warrior he'd bested in the cavern outside Asgard. Vidar half-expected to have to fight him again. Thakrad's mouth was a thin, tight line beneath his dark mustache, and he looked none too pleased to have discovered Vidar again. He might have

hoped that Odin's son had perished in the sword-quest.

But if he was disappointed, he did not allow it to color

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his sense of duty. Vidar had spared his life—and he owed that life to him now, like it or not. Slowly, he withdrew his sword from its place at his hip and held it out to Vidar with both hands. ;

"My lord," he said, and there was only the slightest tinge of mockery in his voice. '«.

Vidar decided to ignore it. "Nice to see you again, Thakrad." Then, perhaps, he surprised the Aesirman. **I salute you," he said. "It took some courage to follow us into the mountains as you did,"

Thakrad's brows met above his nose. "It was your command," he said.

"Aye," said Vidar. "But still, it took courage."

The gesture was not lost on Thakrad. Odin's son—traitor or not—had complimented him before the entire army. He inclined his head at a slight angle. Vidar nodded. It would take the sting out of losing command—and perhaps remove an enemy from his back.

"And the sword?" asked Thakrad, glancing at Vidar's sheath and the hilt that protruded from it.

"We've got it," said Vidar. "But G'lann bears it—Magni's son." He indicated the elflord, who stood between Sif and Skir'nir and watched as Eric, Ullir and Gilling found friends back in the ranks.

Thakrad regarded G'lann. Vidar could imagine what he was thinking—a coward for a leader and elves wielding weapons of power. His disgust was evident on his face.

"Come," said Odin's son. "We have much to tell."

Thakrad looked at him, scowling. He grunted his assent.

Vidar looked across the small fire at Ullir. "By now, the word of how Hoenir died will have spread throughout the army," he said, stirring the coals with a stick. "But I left out the part about Odin. I just said that when he learned of the sword's whereabouts, he made a bid for it himself." The blondbeard nodded. The fire glinted in his eyes. "They'll understand that in Asgard," said Vidar.

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"Treachery, on the other hand ... well, what's the point of villifying him? He was a loyal defender of Asgard—once."

"Aye," said Ullir. "Then that's the story I'll tell, too."

"And I," said Gilling.

"Thanks," said Vidar.

"Have the elves gone out yet?" asked Gitling.

"Yes," said Vidar. "Just now, in pairs. Between Skir'nir's warriors, H'limif and Var'kald, the word ought to spread soon enough. With any luck, the war in Alfheim will be over well before we reach Hargard."

"It had better be," said Gilling. "I don't mind dying when it means something, but...,"

When it means something. Vidar spat.

"But there was something else you wanted to ask us, wasn't there?" Ullir's face was a question.

"Yes," said Vidar. "Hoenir contacted me before he died. It was some kind of warning, I think. Just one word—M'thrund."

Ullir frowned, his brow knitting over his pale blue eyes. Gilling whistled.

"You know what it means?" asked Vidar.

"Aye," said Ullir. "It's one of the worlds where Vali did not fare so well. He tried to invade M'thrund as he had Muspelheim and some of the others—but he couldn't. The thrund—the inhabitants—were too strong. But that was many years ago. Before my grandfather was born. Nor does the name come up very often—no one wishes to remind Vali of his only failure."

M'thrund. Vidar recalled the look on Hoenir's face as he'd sent the message—one of apology. Perhaps a way of making amends.

By giving him the information he'd asked for.

"Vidar—what is it?" asked Ullir.

Odin's son gazed into the flames. "I think I know where to find Vali," he said.

But Odin would be waiting for him.

Along with the thrund.