



# the NORTHLANDS SAGA COMPLETE

## Player's Guide



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# The Northlands Saga Complete Player's Guide

The **Northlands Saga** isn't just an epic and adventure path and campaign for a GM to throw viking-inspired monsters and challenges at his players, it's full a campaign setting providing a homeland and base of operations from which players can launch the careers and life paths of their characters. As such, there is valuable information in *The Northlands Saga Complete* that is valuable to players and GMs alike, but not every player needs to (or should) purchase the entire campaign guide, adventure path, and all that are contained with the massive tome. Instead we have provided a small, soft cover player's guide to provide those details most pertinent to a player who is creating his Northlands character, as well as, setting information that doesn't reveal all the secrets of the setting but does provide the players with an excellent feel for what the Northlands is all about.

Included in *The Northlands Saga Complete Player's Guide* are new PC races, class options, and equipment (presented in *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game* rules with *Swords & Wizardry Complete* conversion commentary where needed), optional rules for players on how to handle things like fate and death speeches, eight pre-generated characters making use of some of these new characters rules and options that players can use or simply look at as examples of Northlander character creation, and six new **Tales of the Lost Lands** stories set in the Northlands that give examples of the kinds of adventures and attitudes that the players are likely to find in the **Northlands Saga** setting.

Wording found in braces {} indicates the use of *Swords & Wizardry Complete* terminology where it specifically differs from that the *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game*.



# Player Character Races

There is not as great a diversity of races and peoples in the Northlands as one sees in the Southlands or especially the distant Caliphate. Only humans and elves have any large representation, but even this is overshadowed by the fact that the Northlands are nearly entirely dominated by the human Northlanders. Elves, of a sort that many Southlanders would find alien and foreign, are represented by the Nûklanders, but these reindeer herders live to the north of the Northlands proper. There has been some limited interbreeding between the Northlanders and Nûklanders, creating a small number of half-elves. Most of these half-breeds can be found in the wilds of Estenfirð where Northlander civilization abuts the southern range of the Nûklanders. Of dwarves, there are only the few enclaves in Halfstead and Trotheim, plus the occasional dwarf who has found his way into the household of a jarl. Of halflings and gnomes, none are native to the region, and it is rare that members of either of these races wander into the frozen and dangerous north.

Of the other common humanoid races found in other lands, these are nearly or entirely absent in the Northlands. No orcs, goblins, bugbears, gnolls, or other of the “monstrous” humanoids are present, save for the rare individual who has made the journey north. Likewise, half-orcs are rare to the point of being nonexistent, and would be considered either some form of troll-touched abomination or a bizarre specimen, depending on where one goes.

What one does find in the area of non-humans are giants, and lots of them. Nearly every type of giant, and several varieties of troll and other giant-related species, can be found in the Northlands. These large and dangerous creatures lurk on the edges of Northlands’ settlements and are a popular target for heroes and would-be heroes. Invariably, the giants of the Northlands are evil {Chaotic}, even if their more southerly kin would be benign. The presence of these monsters has led to the birth of humans with giant or troll blood, unfortunates wanted by neither group and unwelcome in all but the most tolerant of halls. Still, a few of these giant- or troll-blooded unfortunates have managed to keep their innate evil in check and rise from the humblest of beginnings to become heroic companions in another — more proper — hero’s saga.

## Northlanders

The most populous cultural and racial group in the Northlands are, unsurprisingly, the Northlanders themselves. Famed for their size, cleanliness, independence, and ferocity, the Northlanders stand out among the smaller, darker people of the Southlands. Most Northlanders are of above-average height and weight for a human, though they do not exceed human norms for size. In skin, eye, and hair color they tend toward the lighter shades, though dark brown hair and eyes, as well as black, are not uncommon. Northlanders are also well known for being clean and for regularly bathing. These hardy folk see no problem with diving into a winter-chilled stream, providing they can quickly exit and get back into the warmth of a hall.

Men and women wear their hair long and in braids, though women’s hair tends to be longer. Men, and women engaged in more-active pursuits, wear trousers, a long tunic, and shoes of wood or leather. Women’s clothing tends toward dresses, aprons, and smocks, and both genders wear several layers, especially in winter, as well as cloaks and hats. Although women occasionally wear men’s clothing, men rarely are seen in women’s clothing.

The Northlanders have two social classes, thralls and freemen, though the latter has some gradations from simple freemen to the jarls. Thralls are in effect slaves and are owned property of a freeman. They are generally captives taken in raids of Seagestreland, the Southlands, or places beyond, though they are occasionally purchased from Caliphate traders. A thrall may own property and may purchase its freedom, or it may gain its freedom through heroic deeds, the decision of its owner, or rarely by vote of a Thing (though like other decisions passed by these bodies, the

Thing does not enforce the freeing of a thrall). Thralls may also bring suit before a Thing, though they may not vote and have no right to speak unless so granted by the assembly. The child of a thrall is also a thrall, but traditionally owners free their thralls upon death. A rare few thralls are Northlanders who have been captured in a raid or who have fallen on hard times and have sold themselves into slavery to pay debts or simply to find food and shelter.

All other Northlanders are freemen, and by tradition considered equal in rights and responsibilities. Freemen can own property, make oaths, and vote or speak in the Thing. Most freemen are simple farmers, called bondi; even craftsmen usually pursue their professions as a side job when not farming. The common farmer barely makes enough to put something away for the next year, and can arm himself only with a light wooden shield, a spear, a long knife or axe, and maybe a chain shirt if he is lucky, but more often leather. Wealthier farmers are known as hirdmen and make up roughly a third of Northlander society. A hirdman has a large enough excess income to afford to arm and armor himself at a higher level, namely with a suit of chainmail, a heavy wooden shield, several spears, an axe, a sword, and possibly a riding horse as well. These are not to be confused with hirthmenn who are the citizen militia of Northlands realms and were once principally comprised of hirdmen for which they were originally named.

First among equals, jarls have enough wealth to support themselves and their families, but also a large household of specialist craftsmen, thralls, and skilled warriors. The most valued members of a jarl’s household are his huscarls — men and women sworn into his service whose support is entirely dependant on the jarl. In effect, to be a jarl a person needs not just wealth, but the ability to convince others to pledge their lives in your service and also be able to provide for their feeding, shelter, clothes, weapons, armor, and all other things they may need. A jarl rides to war (though he fights on foot), and bears the best weapons and armor such as a heavy wooden shield, a sword or axe, and a suit of finely linked chain. Many jarls also own a longship or two — sometimes more — and regularly outfit expeditions for trading or raiding.

## Religion

Much like the rest of their society, the Northlanders do not follow an organized or hierarchical religion. They have their gods and heroes, and the worship of them is up to the individual. There are priests, but these are part-time positions that do not produce wealth in any appreciable amount. Instead, priests, called godi, are afforded a great deal of respect, but are also expected to see to their own affairs as any other freeman. Because of this, all godi have a regular occupation, often farmer, which provides a more profitable means of support. Also, godi tends to be an inherited position that passes from father to son or mother to daughter depending on the family. Godi are required to maintain their temples, called godshouses, that are normally simple affairs of wood and thatch. Those that avail themselves of a godi’s services are expected to gift the godi a reward of some sort. However, aside from funerals, births, and deaths, most people are content to worship in their own ways and in private, thus limiting the need for the godi’s skills.

Godi do not dedicate themselves to one deity, except for a few rare individuals who have felt a specific calling. These specialized godi are normally the only ones who gain access to spells; other godi may be of the cleric or druid class, but would consider the granting of a spell from their deity to be a momentous event. Likewise, only those dedicated to one deity ever gain supernatural powers from their god. More on religion of the Northlanders can be found below.

## Northlander Characters

By far, Northlander heroes are of the martial-oriented classes, and even then, fighters are the most numerous. After fighters, rangers are the most





popular, though these are usually of the non-magic-using archetypes. One would think that their fame as savage warriors would mean a fair number of barbarians would be found in the Northlands, but this is not the case. Those capable of flying into a battle rage are often looked on with fear by their fellows, even if that person is part of the Bearsarker or Ulfhander cults. Cavaliers are unheard of except among the Hrolf who have adopted Southlander ways; the way of war for the Northlanders does not generally include the horse. Firearms are entirely unknown in the Northlands, and thus the gunslinger class is not native and would be seen as a strange, possibly magical, profession. Likewise, the amazing abilities of those Outlanders who have perfected their bodies and minds in such a manner to become members of the monk class are seen as somehow supernatural, and possibly not to be trusted.

Rogues and their ilk are almost unheard of in the Northlands. Theft is a major crime and often results in a person being declared an outlaw. Also, locks and mechanical traps, aside from those traps used for hunting, are unheard of. True, some Andøvan ruins or tombs are locked and trapped, but these are scattered widely across the land. No thieves' guilds or other organized crime syndicates are in the Northlands; the lack of authority and harshness of punishment, not to mention the tightknit nature of Northlander communities, makes these impossible. What rogues that can be found are often combat or wilderness scout orientated, and not the more traditional thief or thug of the Southlands.

Arcane spellcasters are extremely rare in the Northlands, to the point of being largely unheard of save in story and myth. Those who exhibit mastery of arcane magic are often shunned, if not brought to suit at a local Thing for being dangerous witches (no matter the actual class of the character). Wizards are at times given some respect for the amount of training required to gain their powers, but even then all consider it best to keep wizards far away from good, normal folk. Sorcerers and witches are greatly feared, and are often declared outlaws and hunted down. Alchemy, being a science of more civilized lands, is unheard of in the Northlands. {The Northlanders would not ordinarily perceive the art of alchemy or its products as magical, so potions and other such items are not considered

## Banned Classes

You may notice that many classes are either unknown among the Northlanders or heavily persecuted when they appear. This does not mean they are banned from your **Northlands Saga** campaign. All this means is that the Northlanders themselves do not normally produce gunslingers, alchemists, samurai, ninja, monks, inquisitors, and others. However, the PCs are heroes of an epic saga, and they should be able to break the mold, if the player can provide a suitable background. Another option, and perhaps a better one, is that someone really wanting to play a gunslinger, for example, should play an Outlander, and thus open up an opportunity for excellent "fish out of water" stories that allow the GM and players to throw a mirror up to the Northlanders.

evidence of witchcraft.} The magus class is also unknown and appears only among outlanders. Of all the arcane classes, the summoner is the most hated and feared, for members of this class can bring strange beasts — most likely corrupted creatures of the Ginnungagap, demon-gods, or giants of the ancient world (at least in the eyes of the Northlanders) — into the Northlander's reality. The only exceptions to this general distrust of arcane spellcasters are the cunning woman lineages who are treated as honored and valuable members of the community.

Bards, called skalds in the Northlands, are a different matter. Bards are respected for their ability to inspire men in battle, as well as the skill needed to learn the many tales and legends of the North. Although they can cast arcane spells, most Northlander bards have learned to mask this spellcasting by mixing it into their song, oratory, or through the use of folk cures and curses.

The divinely inspired classes are rare and poorly represented in the Northlands. Few godi actually have any sort of spellcasting ability, and

those that do are clerics or druids who have dedicated themselves to a specific deity instead of the Northlander pantheons as a whole. Paladins are even rarer, as only one deity of the Northlanders has the requisite temperament to attract and empower these paragons of virtue. Adding to their troubles, paladins in the Northlands must constantly contend with the scourge of slavery in the form of thralldom. Lacking a formal church structure, as well as the temperament, inquisitors are unknown among the Northlanders themselves. Oracles are well known, and many of those who dedicate themselves to a single deity do so without the normal guidance and training afforded a member of one of the godi lineages.

## Nûk, Nûklanders

Beginning at Neiuiburg in Estenfird and reaching north to the Endless Glacier that marks the edge of the world lays Nûkland, the land of the Nûk. Invariably, the Northlanders know the Nûk as Nûklanders despite their claims that this name is a mistranslation (a more correct translation would be “People of the Reindeer”). The Nûklanders are a different race than the human Northlanders, a race that foreigners would describe as elven. The average Nûklander is short, slender of build, and dark of skin and hair. They have long faces with small, broad noses, pointed ears, and eyes possessing slightly folded lids. Nûklanders have a second, inner eyelid that is transparent and seems to serve to protect the eye from the sun and cold, but also gives them the look of perpetually staring (Nûklanders rarely blink). Despite their slight build, Nûklanders do not suffer from the great cold of their icy homeland; indeed, they tend not to feel the cold at all due to their innate resistance derived from their inherently magical nature.

While the Northlanders consider the Nûklanders to be natives of the area, they were in their present range when the first Northlanders wandered beyond the Wyrn Fang Mountains; the Nûklanders are in fact rather recent settlers. Nearly three thousand years ago, a new god appeared among the elven peoples of a distant land to the south. This god proclaimed he would lead his followers to a place of eternal sunshine, vast fields, and endless game. Many scoffed at this boast and called this new deity a demon, devil, or scam. A few chose to pay homage to the new god, and soon a cult formed around him. As the cult grew in power, it came into conflict with the more established elven religions. In time, this conflict transformed from simple arguments to repression of the new cult.

The Forgotten One, whose name the Nûklanders and other elves have stricken from all record, encouraged his followers to strike out against those who would oppress them, and the nation was rent in civil strife. The traditional elves won out, and the cult fled north, traveling thousands of miles and slowly working its way to the “promised land.” In the frozen reaches of the North, they entered a land that has endless daylight for half the year, but night for the other half. Vast fields of heather and flowers filled the land, at least when it was not covered by fields of snow and ice. Game was abundant, at least part of the year, but became scarce when the winter winds blew in. In their rage at this betrayal, the less-enthusiastic members of the cult turned on their leaders and in a night of slaughter ended the worship of the Forgotten One.

Trapped in the frigid north and facing their death, the small group of former cultists found themselves cast out by the elven gods. Seeking some aid in this new and barren land, they called out to the night. Not to be seduced by evil as they had before, the Nûklanders pleaded with those their people once worshipped, the spirits of the land, of the sky, of the water, and of the beasts that dwelled in that frozen waste. These spirits answered their call. To this day, the Nûklanders have adhered strictly to the worship of the spirits of nature, fearing any reference to a single god may again lead them into evil and corruption.

## Religion

It is to the spirits of the land that the Nûklanders turn for divine aid and spiritual comfort. To a Nûk, the gods have turned their backs on them, but the simple spirits of the natural world will never forsake them. Animism is very strong in this faith, and every type of animal or plant, as well as natural features and events, have their guardian spirits. These spirits generally keep to their own spheres; a wolf spirit is concerned with wolf things, not bird things. The tribes’ shamans are tasked with interceding

## Nûklander Racial Traits

Nûklanders are in all senses elves as described in the Pathfinder Roleplaying Game with the following changes:

Nûklanders replace the Elven Magic racial trait with the Silent Hunter racial trait and the Elven Immunities racial trait with the Elemental Resistance (cold) racial trait as described in the *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game: Advanced Race Guide*.

with these spirits in order to placate them or request their aid, though every Nûklander knows some simple prayers (these are not spells, just minor forms of worship).

## Nûklander Characters

Nûklanders are rarely seen outside of Estenfird, and even then only in the winter months as they feed their livestock along the Ice River. A handful has drifted south seeking adventure or just exploring the world around them, and these usually evoke a fair amount of surprise and excitement among the Northlanders. While they are obviously non-human, enough contact occurs between the two peoples that tales and legends of the Nûklanders are generally positive. No Nûklander thralls exist in the Northlands, as they tend to perform poorly in this role, giving up the will to live when made captives, and they stop eating, slowly dying from hunger and thirst.

Nûklanders are most commonly rangers, druids, or oracles. They lack the organized religious views that encourage classes such as clerics, inquisitors, and paladins. A rare few Nûklanders have devoted themselves solely to the combat arts, but these Nûklander fighters are renowned as deadly mounted combatants, riding their fearsome war reindeer into the heart of battle. Rogues are as rare among the Nûklanders as they are among the Northlanders, more so when one considers that the Nûklanders have little of value to steal. Of the arcane classes, these are almost entirely unheard of, save for the occasional sorcerer, and even then such a Nûk must keep his abilities secret lest the tribe banish or kill him.

## Seagestrelanders

To the southwest of the Northlands proper lies the Seagestreland, a forested band that stretches between the shores of the North Sea and the vast plains of the Sea of Grass. This forest, and the plains beyond, is home to hundreds of warring tribes known collectively as the Seagestrelanders. These tribes are human, but of a different origin than the Northlanders, speaking several different languages, and possessing a very different culture (in fact, several different cultures). Despite the variations, the Seagestrelanders are all one people to the Northlanders, just as the Southlanders are considered one nation despite the plethora of kingdoms that make up the Southlands.

It is difficult to describe the average Seagestrelander, as there is truly no such thing. The vast majority are smaller in frame and stature than the towering Northlanders, tend toward equally pale complexions, but have darker hair and eyes. They are human, and number few mixed-races among themselves, having no half-elves or half-orcs, and rarely producing a giant- or troll-blooded child.

In times past, the Seagestrelanders wandered north out of the southern expanses of the Sea of Grass, likely pushed out by the then-expanding horsemen of the Hundaei tribes. In their northward migration, some groups settled along the Dniper River, while others took to life in the forests and along the coast of the North Sea. Others stayed on the plains and took to a mounted nomadic lifestyle similar to that of the Hundaei that drove them from their ancestral homes.

With the coming of the Northlanders, the Seagestrelanders found any further expansion north, east, or west blocked, and soon saw their coastal villages raided and plundered. Yet other Northlanders came and offered to trade for amber, gold, and slaves. It is this last trade commodity that started the constant warring among the tribes, as neighbors raided each



other in order to sell their prisoners to the Northlander traders and hopefully stave off raids against themselves by wild vikings. This did not help, as the various groups of Northlanders had no central authority to stop the raiding. Thus, today the Seagestrelanders treat every approaching vessel with fear, for until they see if the dragonhead is set they do not know if this will be a fight or an exchange of goods.

The Seagestrelanders desperately need this exchange of goods, for their land is poor in mineral wealth and their metalworking skills are less than those of the Northlanders. Strange beasts and fell monsters abound in Seagestreland and on the Sea of Grass beyond. Warfare is constant between the tribes, and the advantage that well-forged weapons and armor gives can mean the life or death (or often enslavement) of a tribe — not to mention aiding in defense against vikings coming in from the sea. Furthermore, trade goods can be exchanged to Northlanders in return for aid in some battle or conquest, a practice that has often led to Northlanders fighting each other on behalf of different Seagestrelander tribes. As the Northlanders have begun to move up the Dnipir River, this need for better armament has become all the more important.

## Religion

The gods of the Seagestrelanders live in each village inside a god-tree, a single massive tree trunk carved or painted to represent the gods of that tribe and village, or with a hollow in the trunk in which the tribe's tibaz idols are placed. It is here that communal worship takes place, and the local priest usually lives adjacent to it. The dead are cremated, and their ashes scattered on and about the god-tree. This empowers the area immediately around the tree with the souls of the people (when casting spells within 30 feet of a god-tree, a Seagestrelander priest's spells are subject to the Maximize Spell metamagic feat with no cost in increased spell slots or requirements to prepare the spell ahead of time). {Having inherent magical power, the god-trees have variable areas within which their magical influence reaches. Some have powers that reach no more than 30 or 40 feet (often quite powerful in this limited area), and others may have an influence of a mile or more (but are able to exert only small influences and cryptic guidance in this wider region).}

## Seagestrelander Characters

Seagestrelander characters face an uphill battle in the Northlands, for it is generally assumed that any Seagestrelander found outside his home region is a thrall. The other option is to play a thrall, though this would be quite the role-playing challenge and should be attempted only by experienced and mature players. Most Seagestrelanders should be warriors, barbarians, fighters, or rangers. Clerics and adepts are not uncommon nor are other spellcasters, though any such should be played as priests of the Seagestrelander gods no matter what type of spellcaster they are.

## New Races

The *Northlands Saga* introduces two new races and one racial variant. Nûklanders present an elven sub-race whose nature denies the arcane magic of their southern relatives and relies more on adaptation to their frigid arctic home. The giant- and troll-blooded are offered as playable PC races, though each has features that set them well above (at least the giant-blooded) those more commonly associated with PC races. Also, the giant- and troll-blooded face a great deal of bigotry in the Northlands and are assumed to be evil, malicious monsters by most Northlanders. {The Nûklanders represent a new variety of elves to go along with the new giant-bloods and troll-bloods races below. These three new races are not proposed for use as PCs, but if the Referee chooses to add house rules adding these as possible races in character generation, feel free to do so.}

## Giant-Blooded

The Northlanders hate giants, especially in regions plagued by hordes of these monsters, such as Estenfird or Vastavikland. Yet sometimes a union between a giant and a Northlander occurs (usually a giantess and

a human male), and the result is the giant-blooded. Occasionally these abominations are born to two Northlanders, for it is said that the taint of giant blood corrupts for a dozen generations. However the unfortunate thing is conceived, it is usually killed at birth, for most Northlanders will not accept the shame of such an abomination. Still, some are allowed to live and find a place in Northlander society, though always at the fringes and never with full acceptance.

**Physical Description:** Giant-blooded are huge, often well over 8 feet tall, hairy, brutish in body and mind, and prone to tempers and passions beyond that of other men. Their hair is coarse, as are their features, and birth defects such as cleft lips, missing or extra digits, enlarged foreheads, and other unsightly things are common. They are also not terribly bright as the giant blood seems to dim the intelligence of the human, producing individuals who have trouble with even the most mundane of tasks. Furthermore, the giant-blooded are not patient, giving into impulses and desires, often of a fell nature.

**Society:** The giant-blooded do not form their own societies, instead living in either human or giant communities.

**Relations:** Despite all this, having a giant-blooded warrior in your household, although seen as shameful, can be a great boon. These warriors are inhumanly strong and hardy, capable of breaking a shieldwall on their own. Having someone about who can lift oxen is more than merely useful; it can also serve to intimidate rivals. Some jarls keep giant-blooded in their household as a sort of freak show, bringing them out in order to impress guests, and allowing friends to insult or pester a caged or bound giant.

In more kind and merciful communities, great care is taken to integrate the giant-blooded into society. This often takes the form of assigning a person, usually a close relative, to look after the giant-blooded and keep it out of trouble. Riding herd on a rage-prone, not-terribly-bright relative, especially one who can break most men like dry wood, is a thankless job whose only real reward is helping another to simply live. In these situations, it is not unusual for the giant-blooded and his uncorrupted relatives to take to the whale road in search of adventure and the possibility to make a name for themselves.

**Alignment and Religion:** The giant-blooded tend strongly toward chaos and evil, though like any creature with free will, they can be of any alignment. Even those who have learned to live in Northlander society are still wild and reckless, and thus chaotic in their nature. Few godi, save for those dedicated to Loptr, will include a giant-blooded in their congregation unless so ordered by their deity or jarl, or driven by feelings of kindness or pity.

**Adventurers:** Giant-blooded adventurers do so for a variety of reasons. It is in their nature to wander and seek conflict, and the life of an aspiring hero permits just that. Those who have been mistreated often seek the means to escape, and taking to a wandering life with a band of like-minded fellows provides just that. The tempers and poor judgment that marks giant-blooded psychology often leads to accidents, something that forces even the most open-minded communities to point to the road out of town. Finally, the bigotry that all giant-blooded experience on a daily basis tends to keep them on the move, constantly in search of a place they truly belong.

## Giant-Blooded Racial Traits

**+4 Strength, +2 Constitution, –2 Dexterity, –2 Charisma:** Giant-blooded are strong and hardy, but ugly and prone to violent mood swings.

**Giant Blood:** Giant-blooded count as giants and humans for any effect related to race.

**Large:** Giant-blooded are Large creatures and suffer a –1 size penalty to AC and attack rolls and a –4 size penalty to Stealth checks but gain a +1 size bonus to CMB and CMD. Large creatures occupy a 10-foot space and have a 5-foot reach.

**Long Legs:** Due to the long strides giant-blooded can take, their base speed is 40 feet.

**Low-Light Vision:** Giant-blooded can see twice as far as humans in conditions of dim light.

**Tough Skin:** Giant-blooded have skin more akin to the hide of oxen, granting them a +1 natural armor bonus.

**Long Arms:** Giant-blooded have a disproportionate arm-to-body length, and it is not unusual for one to be able to touch its calves while standing fully erect. Giant-blooded have a reach of 10 feet.



**Languages:** Giant-blooded speak Nørsk and Giant. Should a giant-blooded have an exceptional Intelligence score, it can choose any language it wants (except secret languages, such as Druidic).

## Troll-Blooded

As rare as giant-blooded are, the troll-blooded are even more so. Few interactions between humans and trolls are of any nature other than killing and eating, and thus almost never produce troll-blooded offspring. Still, it does happen, and like giant-blooded, troll blood corrupts for generations, meaning that two humans can produce a troll-blooded child. The fruits of these unions are even more cursed than the giant-blooded, for if there is anything the Northlanders hate more than giants, it's trolls.

Through mercy or their own evil, some parents allow their troll-blooded offspring to live, though it can be argued that the prejudice and hatred troll-blooded endure in life makes death a greater mercy. Those allowed to survive must face the hatred of their neighbors and an all-consuming drive to eat. Troll-blooded are always hungry, and due to their nature and digestive systems, they need to consume far more meat than anything else. This makes keeping a troll-blooded fed throughout the long winters a daunting task, for he will eat something, and a troll-blooded driven into the depths of hunger will be hard pressed to eat meat that is socially acceptable. True, they can consume carrion, but fresh meat is what a troll-blooded desires the most. Settlements that host troll-blooded over the winter often find that by spring they have a dearth of rats, cats, and dogs, assuming that the livestock hasn't already been pillaged.

**Physical Description:** Troll-blooded are feral, savage, creatures, at least in appearance if not in behavior. They are tall, but not much taller than most men, and have a hunched posture. Their skin is greasy and tends toward a greenish tint, their hair is straight and black, and their eyes range from red to blue. Like their troll relatives, the troll-blooded have long limbs and short torsos; in fact, their hands easily reach to their knees when standing. These hands grow long talon-like nails that can rend steel. It is the face that is the most troll-like, having a long, narrow nose, high cheekbones, and a mouth filled with sharp teeth. Despite these inhuman features, most troll-blooded retain some signs of their human heritage, usually in their facial expressions or as a glint of intelligence in their eyes.

**Society:** Troll-blooded are so rare that they do not form their own societies.

**Relations:** Everyone hates the troll-blooded: Northlanders, Nùklanders, Seagestrelanders, everyone. Even the giant-blooded do not feel a kinship for these abominations. If not killed at birth, a troll-blooded is often hidden away in order to keep it safe and to keep a family's shame a secret. When they are discovered and make their way into the larger world, they are often the targets of would-be heroes, local hirths, or a jarl's huscarls. Those kept by a jarl in his household are often enslaved and treated as

thralls whose only use is to be thrown into battle and expended against one's foes.

**Alignment and Religion:** Most troll-blooded tend toward chaotic and evil, though individuals may be of any alignment. Even those that are not evil are rarely neutral, much less lawful in outlook. Troll-blooded heroes in the legends of the Northlanders (and there are only two) were chaotic good in alignment.

One of the greatest prejudices suffered by the troll-blooded is that no godi will willingly take one into his congregation. Occasionally a troll-blooded who has proven himself might receive the blessings of the gods from a godi, but such a troll-blooded and such a godi are extremely rare. Not even Loptr looks with favor on a troll-blooded, much less the more popular gods such as Donar and Wotan.

**Adventurers:** Troll-blooded become adventurers largely in order to find an outlet for their drives to violence and eating. Heroes eat well, no matter what race they are, and are afforded at least a modicum of respect (in the case of troll-blooded that means they do not get attacked on sight). Some troll-blooded are taken into the halls of jarls to serve as disposable shield-wall breakers, and when they survive the fury of the spear din are elevated to leaders of bands of desperate men sent against enemy shieldwalls, palisades, and ramparts. Often times, troll-blooded find themselves driven out of their homes by prejudice and take to the wilds, where they either live a lonely existence or fall in with other outcasts, outlaws, or wanderers.

## Troll-Blooded Racial Traits

**+2 Strength, +4 Constitution, –4 Charisma:** Troll-blooded are strong and amazingly hardy, but their origin and their tendency to eat nearly anything makes them unwelcome company (especially at dinner).

**Medium:** Troll-blooded are Medium creatures and have no bonuses or penalties due to their size.

**Darkvision:** Troll-blooded can see in the dark up to 60 feet.

**Ferocity:** When a troll-blooded's hit points fall below 0 and it is not yet dead, it can continue to fight. If it does, it is staggered and loses 1 hit point per round until it is dead (troll-blooded still die when their negative hit points equal their Constitution score).

**Claws:** Troll-blooded have sharp claws on their hands that allow a natural attack inflicting 1d4 points of damage.

**Eat Anything:** Troll-blooded can consume any organic substance and are immune to ingested organic poisons.

**Fire Sensitivity:** Troll-blooded, like their troll relatives, avoid fire. Troll-blooded take an extra point of damage per die of fire damage they suffer.

**Languages:** Troll-blooded begin play speaking Nørsk and Giant. Troll-blooded with exceptional Intelligence may learn any language (except those that are secret, such as Druidic).

# Character Options

Below are some options for characters native to the Northlands or adventuring there. It is up to the GM's discretion if any of these are eligible for use in her campaign. However, these character options, especially the class archetypes and character traits, are tightly tied to the *Northlands Saga* setting and go a long way toward emulating the feel of the real-world sagas it is based on.

## Bearsarker (Barbarian Archetype)

While the gods do not normally interfere in the lives of mortals, save for the most heroic, there are those who have been touched by the gods and granted power through them. Most commonly, these are the godi, represented in the Pathfinder Roleplaying Game by the cleric, druid, and oracle classes. However, some are not merely granted powers, but are transformed by the contact with the gods. Some of these mortals so altered are the Bearsarkers, a cult dedicated to the worship of Wotan and the glory of the spear-din.

The Bearsarker Cult is a sacred order of men and women who have dedicated their lives to Wotan. There are many reasons they choose to do so, but the most common is that they feel an intense desire to enter a savage fury and commit rampant acts of slaughter. This urge to rage is even greater during battle, and so in order to control this drive and have a place in society, the Bearsarker Cult of Wotan has formed.

Through esoteric arts, ritual drunkenness, and great personal sacrifice, the Bearsarker not only tames his inner fire, but learns to become a whirling spirit of death and destruction, when the time for such action is called for. Most do not live long, especially when one considers that their rituals are fairly violent and often result in severe injury and maiming. It is not unusual to find a Bearsarker who has plucked out one of his own eyes to gain wisdom, or who has spent time meditating while hung on a tree of woe.

Members of the cult undergo extensive training in order to learn to control their rage, as well as training in religion and the esoteric arts. Although inwardly highly meditative and thoughtful people, the outward appearance of the Bearsarkers gives others pause, considering the reputation of the cult for great savagery barely contained, as well as incredible feats of stamina and strength. As per their religious dictates, Bearsarkers do not bathe except for rare ritual purification purposes, clad themselves only in a loincloth and bear robe, and never cut their hair or beards. This shaggy, unkempt and wild appearance is the means by which the cult is known, and seeing a Bearsarker on the other side of a battlefield has been known to turn the morale of even the most-hardy of warriors. Also despite, or because of, their sacred status, Bearsarkers are afforded a great deal of leeway in their actions and behavior.

**Note:** Bearsarkers must be good- or neutral-aligned, must maintain the unkempt appearance of their faith, worship Wotan above all other gods, remain honorable, forsake marriage, children and wealth, and live to serve the Northlander people as a whole. Breaking any of these tenets results in a loss of class abilities until the character can undergo purification through an *atonement* spell. Members of this archetype automatically suffer a  $-4$  penalty to their Charisma score.

**Fury of the Gods (Ex):** This works the same as a barbarian's normal rage class feature; however, the number of rounds per day a Bearsarker can rage is equal to  $4 +$  his Wisdom modifier rather than Constitution. He gains additional rounds at the normal rate. Also, Bearsarkers gain Knowledge (religion) as a class skill. This replaces rage.

**Berserk Fury (Ex):** At 2nd level, a Bearsarker that enters his fury of the gods inspires fear in enemies who witness it. Any enemy who sees this display of savagery must make a Will save (DC  $10 + 1/2$  the Bearsarker's level + the Bearsarker's Wisdom modifier) or become shaken for the duration of the Bearsarker's fury. Each additional Bearsarker in a fury at the same time adds  $+1$  to the Will save DC to a maximum of  $+5$ , but one Bearsarker must be chosen who leads the fury to determine its duration

and whose Wisdom modifier is used to determine the save DC. This ability replaces uncanny dodge.

**Naked Fury (Ex):** At 3rd level a Bearsarker who is not wearing armor and is lightly encumbered gains a  $+2$  dodge bonus to AC. This bonus increases by  $+2$  every three barbarian levels thereafter. This replaces trap sense.

**Unarmed Fury (Su):** At 5th level, a Bearsarker's hands actually transform into bear claws while in a fury. The Bearsarker cannot wield any weapons but gains 2 claw attacks that deal  $1d6$  points of damage + both the Bearsarker's Strength and Wisdom modifiers. The Bearsarker can suppress this transformation if he chooses to do so, but each round he does so reduces the number of rounds he can use his fury of the gods that day by 1 round. This replaces improved uncanny dodge.

**Fanged Fury (Su):** At 7th level, whenever a Bearsarker uses his unarmed fury ability, he gains the benefits of a *greater magic fang* spell (cannot be dispelled) granting him a  $+1$  enhancement bonus to his claw attacks and any other natural attacks he may have (through the animal fury rage power, for example). This bonus increases by  $+1$  every three barbarian levels thereafter. This replaces damage reduction.

**Rage Powers:** The following rage powers complement the Bearsarker archetype: come and get me\*, flesh wound\*, good for what ails you\*, inspire ferocity\*, knockback, liquid courage\*, roaring drunk\*, smasher\*, and terrifying howl.

\*See *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game Advanced Player's Guide*

## Ulfhander (Barbarian Archetype)

The feared Bearsarkers are not the only blood-mad battleragers in the Northlands. Several smaller cults dedicated to Wotan seek to harness their inner fires. Of these, the most well known are the Ulfhanders, those whom iron will not bite. Like their Bearsarker cousins, the Ulfhanders have dedicated themselves to Wotan but not just as the leader of battles. Rather, they have also embraced him as the master of beasts. In addition to their amazing fighting prowess, the Ulfhanders also have the ability to physically transform into wolves in order to carry their battle madness into enemy shieldwalls.

The key to the Ulfhanders power, other than their faith and worship of Wotan, is their divinely blessed cloaks. These cloaks, made from the whole skins of wolves that a prospective Ulfhander has killed in unarmed combat, grant them their powers. With his cloak on, the Ulfhander can ignore injury, fight with a ferocious rage, and even assume the form of a wolf. Without it, he is just a normal man, albeit one who has spent the better part of his life alternating between contemplation of the divine and training for war.

Much like their Bearsarker cousins, the Ulfhanders practice esoteric rituals and spend a great deal of time outside of combat in prayer and mediation. Whereas the Bearsarkers tend toward mediation, scarification, and personal sacrifice as routes to the divine, the Ulfhanders are more active in their approach and seek to understand the boundaries between men and beasts and men and gods by regularly blurring those lines. Vision quests, time spent living as a wolf, and other odd behaviors are common. It is not unheard of for an Ulfhander to become entranced by the beauty of the All-Father's creation and stand still, marveling at the mysteries in new-fallen snow, sunrises, or still ponds.

**Fury of the Gods (Ex):** This works the same as a barbarian's normal rage class feature; however, the number of rounds per day an Ulfhander can rage is equal to  $4 +$  his Wisdom modifier rather than Constitution. He gains additional rounds at the normal rate. Also, Bearsarkers gain Knowledge (religion) as a class skill. This replaces rage.

**Sacred Wolfskin (Su):** Each Ulfhander obtains a sacred wolfskin at 1st level that he has hunted barehanded. When worn, this wolfskin grants the Ulfhander DR  $1/-$ , which increases by  $+1$  at 3rd level and every three levels after that (at 6th, 9th, 12th, 15th, and 18th). If the Ulfhander is not



wearing his sacred wolfskin, he does not have access to the fury of the gods, brother of the wolf, skin of the wolf, or rage powers class features. Ulfhander are not proficient in any armor and may not wear armor and also wear their sacred wolfskin. This replaces the normal barbarian armor proficiencies as well as damage reduction. If the wolfskin is lost or destroyed, the Ulfhander must spend 3 months in uninterrupted contemplation while hunting a new wolf to replace it.

**Brother of the Wolf (Ex):** At 4th level, the Ulfhander may form a bond with a wolf. This functions as a druid's nature bond class feature, save that the effective druid level of the character is his levels in Ulfhander archetype –3. At 8th level and every four levels after that (12th, 16th, and 20th), the Ulfhander may add an additional wolf companion to his pack, up to a maximum of his Charisma modifier.

**Skin of the Wolf (Su):** At 6th level, the Ulfhander may transform into a wolf as a druid's wild shape class feature, but the Ulfhander becomes a specific individual wolf. The effect lasts a number of hours equal to the character's levels in Ulfhander –3. The Ulfhander may use this ability once per day at 6th level, and an additional number of times per day every two levels after to a maximum of eight times a day at 18th level. This replaces trap sense, uncanny dodge, and improved uncanny dodge.

**Rage Powers:** The following rage powers complement the Ulfhander: animal fury, beast totem\*, greater beast totem\*, lesser beast totem\*, night vision, raging leaper, scent, and terrifying howl.

\*See *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game Advanced Player's Guide*

## Skald (Bard Archetype)

Skalds have a well-respected place in Northlander society, for they are the lore keepers, the tellers of tales, and the men who inspire others to great deeds through word and example. It is not enough to tell tales of heroes both ancient and modern, to be respected amongst the huscarls and other professional fighting men; one must be able to stand with them in the shieldwall. The skald is more than capable of this, and often finds the living of the life of glory more fulfilling than the tales told later.

Most Northlander bards take great pains to keep their arcane abilities secret, even going so far as to let this talent atrophy from disuse. Instead, they focus on their role as warriors, singing their brethren into battle. Because of this, skalds lack spellcasting ability, but are far more fearsome warriors than the dandified bards of other lands.

**Weapons and Armor Proficiencies:** Skalds are proficient with all the simple weapons, the battleaxe, longsword, handaxe, and short sword. They are also proficient with light and medium armor, as well as shields.

**Form the Line (Su):** At 4th level, the skald may use his performance to grant all allies within 30 feet the use of the following feats: Shield Wall\*, Great Fortitude, and Swap Places\*. This effect lasts as long as the skald is performing plus his Charisma modifier in rounds. This replaces Inspire Competence.

**Man of War (Ex):** At 1st, 4th, 7th, 10th, 13th, and 16th levels, the skald gains a bonus combat feat. This replaces spells and cantrips.

\*See *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game Advanced Player's Guide*

## Huscarl (Fighter Archetype)

Jarls keep many skilled men and women in their households, from the lowliest of stable boys to the elite warriors that are the huscarls. A huscarl has sworn to serve, to obey his jarl, and to protect his jarl with his life. More than just bodyguards, huscarls are the most trusted men and women in a jarl's household, the only ones that a jarl can turn to when in dire straits. Because of this, all huscarls must be honorable and just, as well as dutiful and obedient, and thus of lawful alignment.

The primary task of a huscarl is to protect his jarl. This is more than simply standing by during feasts or in battle; huscarls are expected to be proactive in their defense of the jarl and his family. Because of this, huscarls are not permitted to marry, and one that brings a child into the world and acknowledges it loses much honor and often his position. In return for this sacrifice and service, huscarls are the first to receive rings from their jarl, are fed, armored, and armed at the jarl's expense, and can expect to live a comfortable life. A huscarl who has grown too old to serve is often

allowed to leave his oath and is set up with some form of support for the remainder of his days. Even retired, there are many tales of aged huscarls coming forth for one last fight, to stop some hidden plot, or simply to die beside their jarl in glorious combat.

Feats marked with an asterisk (\*) are presented later in this chapter.

**Center of the Wall (Ex):** At 1st level, a huscarl may make full use of the Shield Wall\*\*, Shielded Caster\*\*, Shieldwall Breaker\*, Swine's Head\*, and Swap Places\*\* teamwork feats even if his ally does not have these feats. He gains one of those feats as a bonus feat provided he meets the prerequisites for it in addition to his regular fighter bonus feats.

**Loyal unto Death (Ex):** At 3rd level, whenever a huscarl's jarl, his jarl's family, or other sworn companions are threatened, he gains the Bodyguard\*\* and In Harm's Way\*\* feats, even if he does not meet the prerequisites, for the duration of the combat.

**Delayed Armor Training (Ex):** A huscarl does not gain armor training at 3rd level. Instead, at 7th level you gain armor training 1. Every four levels thereafter (11th, and 15th), armor training increases by 1.

**Delayed Weapon Training (Ex):** A huscarl does not gain weapon training at 5th level. Instead, at 9th level you gain weapon training 1, and this increases every four levels thereafter (12th and 16th). You may only choose the following weapon groups for weapon training: axes, heavy blades, close, and spears.

\*\*See *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game Advanced Player's Guide*

## Spear Maiden (Paladin Archetype)

Warrior-women are not unknown in the Northlands, and certain regions such as Gatland, Estenfir, and Vastavikland produce a large number of them. Most of these warrior-women spend only part of their youth as full-time warriors, for it is greatly frowned upon for a woman to continue her fighting and adventuring ways after she has wed and borne children. Still, the skills picked up during their warrior days never leave them, and many an Outlander is surprised to find that Halla, mother of five, is a demon with a sword.

Then there are the spear maidens, women who have given up any hope of a normal life, of husband and family, and have instead dedicated themselves to the warrior's life. Spear maidens have taken a sacred vow to never wed, to never lie with a man, and to never surrender in battle. They are living weapons that spend their days and nights honing themselves for battle, and woe be to any who face them across a shieldwall. To follow the road of a spear maiden is a hard choice to make, but once made, few ever go back on their oaths. Those that do suffer great ridicule and loss of honor, though many tales in the Northlands tell of a spear maiden who lost all she had gained in a tragic love.

While spear maiden is a paladin archetype, they are not traditional paladins of the Southlands. A spear maiden must be devoted to Baldr, Donar, or Wotan (most wear the hammer amulet of Donar) but is not seen as a holy warrior of that deity so much as a sacred defender of her home and clan. Her supernatural abilities are seen as a mark of her wyrd blessing her for the profession she has chosen.

Feats marked with an asterisk (\*) are presented later in this chapter.

**Master of the Spear 1 (Ex):** At 1st level, the spear maiden gains the Weapon Focus (Spear) feat and treats a spear as a trip weapon.

**Master of the Spear 2 (Ex):** At 2nd level, a spear maiden gains a +1 bonus to CMD to make trip attacks made with a spear, and a +1 to CMD to defend against attacks that would sunder, disarm, or otherwise target her spear. Furthermore, this bonus applies to saving throws to resist spells that target her spear. This bonus increases by +1 every four levels. Also, a spear maiden may take the Weapon Specialization feat when she reaches 4th level. This replaces heavy armor proficiency and lay on hands.

**Battle Maiden (Ex):** At 3rd level, and every three levels thereafter, the spear maiden gains a combat feat. This replaces mercy.

**Master of the Shieldwall (Ex):** At 4th level, the spear maiden gains the Shield Wall\*\* feat whether or not she has the prerequisites for it. She can use it even if her ally does not have this feat. When she uses this feat, she gains a +1 bonus to her attack and damage rolls. This bonus increases by +1 every 3 levels. This replaces spells.

**Head of the Swine (Ex):** At 5th level, the spear maiden gains the Swine's Head\* feat whether she has the prerequisites for it or not. She can

use it even if her ally does not have this feat. Whenever she uses the feat in combat, she gains a +2 bonus to attack rolls in addition to any bonus from charging. Furthermore, the critical threat range of her melee weapon is doubled. If she is wielding a spear, the threat range is increased to 18–20. If charging, she does not take the –2 penalty to AC. This replaces divine bond

**\*\*See *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game Advanced Player's Guide***

## Cunning Woman (Sorcerer Bloodline)

Sorcerers are not well regarded in the Northlands, nor indeed are any practitioners of arcane magic. Sorcerers get singled out for special persecution because their powers seem to erupt spontaneously and can appear in any person, anywhere. Furthermore, as there is not an established means of training young sorcerers, they often cause havoc and death with their newfound and barely controlled abilities.

One type of sorcerer common and popular among the Northlanders is the cunning woman. This bloodline is strong, and families that have one cunning woman in their midst often have several. Indeed, it is not unheard of for every woman in a lineage to express sorcerous powers. What makes cunning woman so well thought of is that their powers are generally not of the destructive kind, but instead provide a source of healing magic that is very rare in the Northlands. Young cunning woman receive training, and an honored and respected place in society, something that other sorcerers in the Northlands can only dream of.

Cunning women — and they are always women — are skilled healers with mundane and magical skills. They often live on the edge of a settlement, not because they have been banished, but due to the fact that their herbal remedies require extensive gardens and access to uncultivated lands. Those in need of the services of a cunning woman are welcome as long as they are polite, and payment is most often based on the means of their patients as opposed to the cost of the medicine or spells. Being a cunning woman has a marked downside, and it is that traditionally they do not marry. To perpetuate their bloodline, they still must build some form of sexual relationship with men, often in a long-term partnership that outwardly has all the hallmarks of marriage. This taboo is largely because folk wisdom says that cunning women are poison to their mates and cause them to die early.

Many godi have a somewhat adversarial relationship with the local cunning woman. As most godi are only part-time priests, they do not always receive spells from the gods, and thus may or may not be able to help when called (assuming they aren't busy doing something else as their full-time job). This means that most people go to the cunning women for their routine medical needs, and especially in emergencies, thus cutting out the godi (who would otherwise expect some form of donation or offering for their help). As a result, the godi have a financial incentive to not recognize the services provided by cunning women.

**Class Skill:** Heal

**Bonus Spells:** *cure light wounds* (3rd), *cure moderate wounds* (5th), *remove disease* (7th), *neutralize poison* (9th), *breath of life* (11th), *heal* (13th), *greater restoration* (15th), *mass cure serious wounds* (17th), *regenerate* (19th)

**Bonus Feats:** Animal Affinity, Brew Potion, Craft Wand, Magical Aptitude, Reach Spell, Self-Sufficient, Shielded Caster, Skill Focus (Heal)

**Bloodline Arcana:** Whenever you cast a cure spell, you may apply the Maximize spell metamagic feat to it for free a number of times per day equal to your sorcerer level +3.

**Bloodline Powers:**

**Evil Eye (Sp):** At 1st level, you can lock someone within 30 feet with a gaze that foretells their doom (ranged touch attack), causing 1d6 damage +1 per every two sorcerer levels you possess. You can use this a number of times equal to your Charisma modifier +3.

**Natural Healer (Ex):** At 3rd level, you may take 10 on Heal checks without increasing the time taken to perform the skill. Also, as long as you are in a natural environment, you do not need to make use of a healer's kit to perform the Heal skill.

**Creature of the Woodlands (Ex):** You spend a great deal of time in the

wilds, either traveling to see patients or gathering herbs and other ingredients for your cures. At 7th level, the wilds respond, gifting you with woodland stride and trackless step as the druid class features.

**Blessed by Fate (Su):** At 15th level, you may reroll one attack roll, ability check, skill check, saving throw, or caster level check. You must do so before the GM reveals the result of the roll, and must keep the second result, even if it is lower than the first. You may use this ability once per day.

**Fey Rebirth (Su):** Upon reaching 20th level, you no longer age, and become immune to poisons and diseases. When you die, you are reincarnated as a fey creature or a blood relative in your own family if one is due to be born soon. This is not as the *reincarnate* spell, but a total rebirth from childhood on, though in this new life you do not have the cunning woman sorcerer bloodline and are permitted to live a normal life as a just reward for a lifetime of service to your community.

## New Character Traits

### Basic Traits

**Hnefatafl Player:** You have whiled away many long winters playing hnefatafl board games. Furthermore, you have developed some skill with them. This earns you some respect among your peers, for the Northlanders appreciate a quick mind and good game play. You gain a +1 trait bonus to Initiative due to your experience outwitting opponents.

**Horseman:** You are one of the few who has bothered to learn to ride a horse and ride it well. You gain a +1 trait bonus to Ride and may take it as a class skill. Also, you may learn mounted combat feats.

**Merchant:** While the screaming vikings are by far the most well-known of the Northlanders who take to the sea, the vast majority of seamen are merchants. You have spent a part of your life plying the trade lanes from port to port, perhaps even journeying as far as the Southlands in search of profit. You gain a +1 trait bonus to Knowledge (geography) and Linguistics, and one of these becomes a class skill.

**Spearman:** Warfare is not just a part of Northlands life, it is a central part of the culture and heritage. You were raised to fight in the shieldwall, leap off a longship into the fray, or defend your village against raiders. You gain a +1 trait bonus to combat maneuvers made with a spear.

### Magic Traits

**Dwarf Blood:** It is rare that the Dvergar have any relations outside their own kind, but one of your ancestors managed just that. As a result, you have unnatural blood in your veins, something that others would find disturbing if they knew. You are shorter and uglier than average, and likely have an unusual hair or eye color. You gain a +1 trait bonus to Craft, and after reaching 5th level you may take the Craft Magic Arms and Armor feat, though if you are not a spellcaster you may only craft or repair weapons and armor that do not have special abilities.

**Elf Blood:** One of your ancestors is of the Alfar, a Nûklandler or more rarely a Southlander elf. It is even possible that your ancestor was stolen as an infant and a fey changeling left in his place. Either way, you have non-human blood in your veins, something that taints you in the eyes of other Northlanders. You are thinner and taller than average, and likely have a strange look to your facial features, hair color, or eye color. As a result, you gain a +1 trait bonus to Stealth and Perception, and one of these becomes a class skill.

**Focused Devotee:** Although not a priest, you have dedicated a part of your life to the study of the gods. As a devotee of a single deity, you place his or her worship above all others (while not ignoring the other gods lest you offend). Your alignment must be within one step of your favored deity's. Also, you must uphold that deity's ambitions and virtues. You gain a +1 trait bonus to Knowledge (religion) and it becomes a class skill for you. Additionally, you gain a +1 trait bonus to damage rolls with that deity's favored weapon.

**Giant Blood:** Somewhere in your family's history, someone lay with a giant. The taint of the evil, demonic Jötnar is in your blood, which poses



several disadvantages. You are driven to commit crimes against the natural order of the Northlands. Those who know of your taint will likely shun you, and even the gods may turn their backs on you if you prove unworthy. As compensation, you are unusually tall and hardy, gaining a +1 trait bonus on Fortitude saves. Due to your unnatural ancestry, you also gain a +1 to either Knowledge (arcana) or Spellcraft. Note: This is not the same as the giant-blooded race, which represents a heritage closer to half-giant.

**Rune Reader:** You know how to read the runes and write them, including carving them into stone. You thus gain the Runic language and a +1 trait bonus to Craft (sculpture).

**Tale Spinner:** While you may not be a skald, you are skilled at telling stories and have a broad repertoire to choose from. You are considered an educated person in a society that places great stock in oral communication. Your skills at public speaking also gain you an advantage when speaking before a Thing. You gain a +1 trait bonus to two of the following skills, and one becomes a class skill for you: Diplomacy, Perform (oratory), or Knowledge (history).

**Troll Blood:** Somewhere in your ancestry is a troll, likely a well-kept secret, though if open knowledge, good luck finding a family that will let you marry into it. You have one or more features of the Jötnar, such as coarse hair or skin, reddish eyes at night, long ears or nose, or even a feral cast to your features that can be dismissed away but is also a telltale sign to those familiar with troll heritage. As a result of this taint in our bloodline, you may make a DC 15 Fortitude save to gain fast healing 1 for a number of rounds per day equal to your Constitution modifier.

## Social Traits

**Bondi:** You are a small landholder, entitled to vote in the local Thing and bring cases before it. Although the vast majority of Northlanders are freemen, you are in a class above the others. You have a small farm that yields 40 gp a year in profit, though this assumes you or someone else spends a great deal of time working on it. You have a +1 trait bonus on Profession (farmer).

**Child of Heroes:** One or both of your parents are widely recognized heroes, paragons of the warrior virtues, maybe even figures who have appeared in epic sagas themselves. Due to your heroic heritage, you gain one of the following: a +1 bonus to one ability score, +2 skill points per level, or +1 hit point per level. You are expected to live up to your parent or parents' reputation.

**Famous Family:** You are from one of the famous families of the Northlands, such as the Gats or Hrolfs. Your family connections can help you get into higher circles of power, gives you a bonus of +3 votes when appearing before a Thing, and gives you an extra 100 gp to begin your adventuring career. Unfortunately, you are expected to uphold your family's honor and ambitions and participate in its feuds. You gain a +1 trait bonus to Knowledge (nobility) and it becomes a class skill for you.

**Heir:** You are the child of a jarl, and thus stand to inherit some degree of wealth. As a result you are expected to live up to the expectations of your position, and have a bonus of +10 votes when appearing before a Thing. You begin your adventuring career with an extra 300 gp, a chain shirt, a heavy wooden shield, a hand weapon, and clothing befitting your station.

**Hirdman:** You are an independent landowner of some wealth and status, above the bondi yet below the Jarls. You possess a fair bit of land and have a bonus of +5 votes when speaking at the local Thing due to your position. Your land yields enough to feed you and your family, plus produce 100 gp a year in profit, though this assumes you or someone else spends a good deal of time at work planting, reaping, etc. Also, you begin play with an extra 150 gp, a riding horse, a suit of light armor, heavy wooden shield, and a simple or martial melee weapon.

**Huscarl:** You are a household warrior in service to a jarl or higher-ranked personage. As such, you do not need to worry about your daily needs and upkeep as long as you are in the service of your jarl and in his domain. You begin your adventuring career with a riding horse, a heavy wooden shield, a chain shirt, and a simple or martial weapon of your choice. In return, you must perform services to your jarl as determined by the GM.

**Outlaw:** A Thing has declared you an outlaw, and all hands may be turned against you. Any who slay you are not subject to wergild or any

other legal action, and may be rewarded for their actions. Due to the fragmented political landscape of the Northlands, a sentence of outlawry may or may not apply if you flee to another jurisdiction. You gain a +1 trait bonus to Bluff and Disguise, and one becomes a class skill.

**Thrall:** You are a thrall, one of the few non-freeman in the Northlands. Your life is one of a slave, and you likely were not born into that condition. You may not own property, and may only carry arms if your master allows it. Most likely you are from another land, possibly the Southlands or another even more distant place. You gain a +1 trait bonus to Craft (any) and Profession (servant) and choose one to become a class skill.

## Regional Traits

**Estenfirder:** A harsh life in the wilds of Estenfird has hardened you and taught you how to get by on your own. Choose either a +1 trait bonus to Fortitude saves or +1 trait bonus to Survival, and make that skill a class skill.

**Gatlander:** As the paragons of the viking ideal, the Gatlanders are sailors without peer. You gain a +1 trait bonus to Profession (sailor) and Swim, and choose one as a class skill.

**Halfsteader:** Halfstead is the largest city in the Northlands, and acts as a central point for the entire region. Peoples, goods, and ideas from throughout the North, as well as from farther abroad, flow through, generating wealth. You gain a +1 bonus to Knowledge (geography) and Linguistics, and choose one as a class skill.

**Hordalander:** Your kingdom is in turmoil, which means that you must be well aware of which jarls are aligned with which factions. Being constantly on your toes has given you a +1 trait bonus to Sense Motive.

**Hrolflander:** The Hrolf in their ongoing bid to unify and dominate the Northlands have adopted new ideas from the Southlands. Among these foreign ideas are the use of alien and bizarre weaponry such as crossbows. You gain a bonus proficiency in one martial or exotic weapon not normally found in the Northlands.

**Storstrom Valer:** As the heart of Northlands culture, the old ways are the most respected, and the minor jarldoms and small steadings of the Vale are as fiercely traditionalist as they are independent. You gain a +1 trait bonus to Knowledge (religion) and Knowledge (history) and choose one as a class skill.

**Vastaviklander:** Vastaviklanders have a reputation for being ferocious and easily angered. They also are known as some of the hardest and best sailors in the Northlands. You gain a +1 trait bonus to Intimidate and gain it as a class skill. Also, you gain a +1 trait bonus to two of the following skills: Perception, Profession (sailor), or Survival.

## New Feats

### Axe Bouncer (Combat)

You are particularly skilled with the use of the throwing axe. You can throw an axe in such a manner that it bounces off the ground and up at your target.

**Prerequisites:** Base Attack Bonus +1, Weapon Focus (throwing axe)

**Benefit:** Make a ranged attack made with a –2 penalty, if successful ignore the target's shield bonus to AC, and ignore any bonus to AC received from teamwork feats such as Shieldwall or Swine's Head.

### Northlander Spear Fighting (Combat)

You have trained in the standard fighting style of the Northlanders, a heavy spear in one hand and a shield in the other. This allows you to use a spear in one hand.

**Prerequisites:** Weapon Focus (spear)

**Benefit:** You may use a longspear one-handed, provided you are also wielding a shield in the other hand. When you do so, you gain a +1 bonus to your shield bonus to AC.

## Shieldwall Breaker (Combat)

You are skilled at breaking the shieldwall formations of others.

**Prerequisites:** Shield Wall\*, Base Attack Bonus +5

**Benefit:** Make a bull rush or charge action against one member of a shieldwall. If you succeed in your attack, that person and the shieldwall members to the immediate left and right of him lose any bonus from the Shield Wall feat until the end of your next turn. However, if part of a shieldwall, you also lose your bonus from that feat until the end of the next turn.

## Skilled Kenninger

You are a master of the art of kenning, of subtly creating oral allusions to common objects.

**Prerequisites:** Perform (oratory) 2 ranks, bardic music class feature

**Benefit:** You may add half your ranks in Profession (oratory) to the DC to resist your bardic music.

## Swine's Head (Teamwork, Combat)

You are skilled in the rare but deadly Swine's Head formation, a flying wedge of heavily armed Northlands warriors.

**Prerequisites:** Shield Wall\*, Shieldwall Breaker

**Benefit:** You may run or charge and still enjoy the benefits of the Shield Wall feat.

## Throwing Charge (Combat)

You are skilled at flinging a missile at your foes as you charge into melee combat.

**Prerequisites:** Base Attack Bonus +1, Combat Reflexes

**Benefit:** As part of a charge action, you may make an attack with one thrown weapon at the target you are charging. This attack is at –4, and may take place from any point in your charge.

## Whale Road Rider

You are an experienced sailor, used to the rigors and joys of life on the sea.

**Prerequisites:** Profession (sailor) 2 ranks

**Benefit:** You may ignore up to your level from the armor penalty to Swim.

\*See *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game Advanced Player's Guide*

## New Equipment

There are several types of non-magical gear used in the Northlands that are largely unique to the region.

### Greathammer (Exotic Two-handed Melee Weapon)

A greathammer is a two-handed warhammer with a double head. It has an iron haft or an extremely thick wooden one to support the extra weight of its head.

**Greathammer:** Cost 24 gp; Damage 1d8 (S), 1d10 (M); Crit x3; Weight 20 lb.; Type bludgeoning.

### Sunstone

The current technology level of the Northlands does not allow for the common availability of compasses such as those used by Southlander ship's masters. Likewise, though Northlander helmsmen often use sundials to chart their course against the path of the sun, in the northern climes days are frequently overcast or shrouded in fog, completely hiding the sun and preventing the use of those instruments. Yet despite these limitations, Northlanders remain some of the greatest seafarers in the world. This is largely due to the use of sunstones, calcite crystals unique to the lands bordering the North Sea that allow the user to pinpoint the direction of the sun and chart his course accordingly even in the gloomiest of weather.

#### SUNSTONE

**Price** 20 gp; **Weight** —

A blocky, transparent crystal no bigger than the palm of the hand, this lozenge-shaped stone cut from Northlands spar has the unusual property of birefringence. Used primarily by Northlander sailors, even on a completely overcast or fog-shrouded day, when held aloft and shifted until the double shadows of refraction within its interior are equal the sunstone pinpoints the direction of the sun. This gives you a +2 circumstance bonus on Survival checks to avoid becoming lost or Profession sailor checks to navigate a ship. It does not work at night.

**Create** Craft (jeweler) DC 15







## Trondheim Pony

Trondheim ponies are a special breed of horse that has been raised for generations in the Vale, particularly in and around the city of Trotheim. It is believed they are named for an earlier pronunciation of that city's name from the earliest days of Northlander settlement. Though not large enough to serve as warhorses (the Northlands have little use for true cavalry) and not the most aesthetically pleasing, Trondheim ponies are nevertheless a staple of the Northlands and perfectly suited to their environment.

Trondheim ponies have short legs and long backs. They stand no more than 13 hands high with a wide barrel, broad forehead, and thicker, shaggier coat. They typically have a bay coloration, though some may be piebald with white spots marking their darker coats. Mains and tails are universally black. Though they are Medium creatures, Trondheim ponies have extremely hardy and stable leg musculature and have the carrying capacity of a light horse. They are also able to carry Medium riders, though a particularly long-legged rider may find his knees awkwardly bent to avoid having his feet drag too low to the ground, especially on a shorter pony.

Trondheim ponies are favored by Northlanders not only because of their extreme ruggedness and strength but because they are also able to negotiate the perilous terrain of the North's mountainous regions much better than a typical horse. Trondheim ponies gain a +2 racial bonus to Acrobatics and Climb checks that involve balancing, jumping, are otherwise negotiating rugged terrain. In addition, Trondheim ponies with their thick coats are especially adapted to the harsh Northlands winters. They are treated as having cold weather gear for purposes of determining exposure to cold dangers and gain a +4 racial bonus to any Fortitude saves necessary from exposure to the cold. Finally, Trondheim ponies require only three-quarters as much food as a typical pony and are able to sustain themselves on the sparse grasses and lichens of the mountains for up to a week before beginning to show the effects of starvation that other breeds of horses would experience.

Trondheim ponies are not well disposed towards combat, so riders normally must dismount before entering battle. But Northlanders generally consider them to be too valuable to risk in combat anyway. A Trondheim pony can usually be purchased in Trotheim or Storström Vale for 50 hs. Elsewhere in the Northlands the going price is 100–150 hs.

### TRONDHEIM PONY XP 200

Advanced pony (*Pathfinder Roleplaying Game Bestiary* "Horse, Pony")

N Medium animal

**Init** +1; **Senses** low-light vision, scent; **Perception** +7

**AC** 15, touch 13, flat-footed 12 (+3 Dex, +2 natural)  
**hp** 17 (2d8+8)

CR 1/2

**Fort** +7 (+11 vs. cold); **Ref** +6; **Will** +2  
**Defensive Abilities** cold adaptation

**Speed** 40 ft.

**Melee** 2 hooves –1 (1d3+1)

**Str** 17, **Dex** 17, **Con** 18, **Int** 2, **Wis** 15, **Cha** 8

**Base Atk** +1; **CMB** +4; **CMD** 17 (21 vs. trip)

**Feats** Endurance, Run<sup>B</sup>

**Skills** Acrobatics +3 (+5 balancing and jumping), Climb +3 (+5 rugged terrain), Perception +7; **Racial Modifiers** +2 Acrobatics for balancing and jumping in rugged terrain, +2 Climb in rugged terrain

**SQ** greater carrying capacity, docile

**Greater Carrying Capacity (Ex)** A Trondheim pony is able to carry Medium riders. A light load for a Trondheim pony is up to 228 pounds, a medium load is 229–459 pounds, and a heavy load is 460–690 pounds. A Trondheim pony can drag 3,450 pounds.

## Death and Dying

With so many ways to die in the Northlands, it would seem that death would be simple and uncomplicated. But not so. In the Northlands, the only bad death is the unlaundered death and, as such, death speeches and fate can play a huge part in a PC's end-of-life decisions.

## Death Speech

Heroes in the sagas do not merely die; they die with courage, gusto, and eloquence. If a PC or important NPC dies, they may as a free action regain consciousness to do one of the following things: First, they may take one standard or move action in order to complete a task interrupted by their demise or make an attack, after which they slip the mortal coil and go to meet their ultimate fate. Second, they may make a death speech, a long and usually poetic summation of their lives. If the dead man is a PC, the GM should award a bonus to that player's next character based on the quality of the speech, usually an XP award or a story-appropriate magic item. Alternately, instead of the death speech or final action, the dying hero may choose one of the following: he may lay a curse upon his foes, as the spell *bestow curse*, {–1 to hit for 1d3 entire months or some similar disadvantage} or lay a *geas* on a willing ally, as the spell *lesser geas* at a caster level equal to the dying character's level. {In both cases, a saving throw applies, but at –2 to the roll. The curse of a death speech can



be negated by the spell *remove curse*. There is a huge downside to making a death speech, however. By doing so, the dying individual is choosing to take a permanent place in the afterlife, and the character's soul can no longer be "retrieved" by the use of a *raise dead* or *resurrection* spell.}

## Fate

To the Northlanders, fate (sometimes called *wyrd*) is an all-consuming force. The Norns measure and cut the thread of a man's life, and destiny often plays games with heroes. Once per campaign, the player may decide that his character has reached the point where he is fated to die. It is recommended that the player consult with the GM before proceeding, but if the GM agrees that this is a good time for a heroic end, the player declares his character a victim of fate.

First, the player must give a death speech in character (this does not permit the laying of a curse, as in death speech above). After this, the character gains a +20 fate bonus to attack rolls and skills used in the scene and automatically inflicts double damage with every hit or spell (treat like

a critical hit for purposes of determining stacking). However, the character also suffers –10 penalty to AC, saving throws, and may not be the beneficiary of magical healing. When the battle is over, if the character still stands, he may utter one short sentence before dying. Nothing can prevent the character from dying at this point; the Norns have measured and cut his thread and his life is over at the fated time. Just to clarify, not even *resurrection* or the actions of the gods can save the PC, for even the gods must obey fate.

The following player characters represent 1st-level heroes just beginning their careers as they set out on the road for adventure in the Northlands. They are designed specifically for use with *The Northlands Saga Adventure Path*, though you can use them for any other campaign or simply as sample Northlands NPCs. Each includes a relevant character background that you can use or ignore as you see fit. These characters were created using a 15-point build to exemplify the low-fantasy style of play to be found in a gritty Northlands setting where magic is relatively scarce and true danger abounds on all sides, though you can increase them to a 20-point build to fit a more high-fantasy style of play.

# Northlands Saga

## Pre-Generated Player Characters

### Balázs, Seagestrelander Thrall

BALÁZS

XP 200

CR 1/2

Male human (Seagestrelander) barbarian (Bearsarker) 1  
(*The Northlands Saga Campaign Guide*, Chapter 4)

CG Medium humanoid (human)

Init +1; Perception +2

AC 14, touch 11, flat-footed 13 (+3 armor, +1 Dex)

hp 15 (1d12+2 plus 1)

Fort +4; Ref +1; Will +2

Speed 40 ft.

Melee greatsword +4 (2d6+4/19–20)

Ranged javelin +2 (1d6+3)

Special Attacks fury of the gods 6 rounds/day

Str 17, Dex 12, Con 14, Int 8, Wis 14, Cha 8

Base Atk +1; CMB +4; CMD 15

Feats Combat Reflexes<sup>P</sup>, Throwing Charging\*

Skills Craft (weapons) +7, Handle Animal +2, Profession (servant) +3, Survival +6

Languages Nørsk, Seagestrelander

SQ fast movement, thrall\*

Gear studded leather armor, greatsword, 5 javelins, backpack, bedroll, flint and steel, 8 days trail rations, waterskin, sack, 5 torches, peasant's outfit, belt pouch with 15 hs, 6 sp, and 5 cp.

\*See *The Northlands Saga Campaign Guide*, Chapter 4

**Fury of the Gods (Ex)** This works the same as a barbarian's normal rage class feature, however the number of rounds per day a Bearsarker can rage is equal to 4 + his Wisdom modifier rather than Constitution. He gains additional rounds at the normal rate. Also, Bearsarkers gain Knowledge (religion) as a class skill. This replaces rage.

A thrall raised in the house of Jarl Olaf, Balázs was taken from his homeland to the west at a very young age. The slave traders sold him in Osløn, and he was purchased for the household of the Jarl of Halfstead. Balázs has only vague recollections of his years among the forests of Seagestreland and feels little kinship for those distant peoples. Life as a thrall in Jarl Olaf's household is easier than in that of many of the Northlander lords, and Balázs was allowed to practice arms among the other children, though his frenzy for the spear-din was unmatched among the others his age. Balázs took Wotan as his god and exhibited a fierce loyalty in his service to the All-Father until finally, over the winter, being allowed into the sacred Bearsarker Cult. An unusual honor for one of Outlander blood, Jarl Olaf has told Balázs that it is unseemly to hold a Bearsarker as thrall and that if he proves his mind's-worth in service to Wotan he will free the youth from his obligation to the Jarl's house.

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### Swords & Wizardry Complete Version

**Balázs (Ftr1):** HP 8; AC 7[12]; Atk two-handed sword (1d10) or javelin (1d6); Move 12; Save 14; S 15, D 12, C 14, I 8, W 14, Ch 8; AL N; CL/XP 1/15; Special: +1 to hit strength bonus.

**Equipment:** leather armor, two-handed sword, 5 javelins, backpack, bedroll, flint and steel, 8 days trail rations, waterskin, sack, 5 torches, belt pouch, 15 hs, 6sp, 5cp.

thrall in Jarl Olaf's household is easier than in that of many of the Northlander lords, and Balázs was allowed to practice arms among the other children, though his frenzy for the spear-din was unmatched among the others his age. Balázs took Wotan as his god and exhibited a fierce loyalty in his service to the All-Father until finally, over the winter, being allowed into the sacred Bearsarker Cult. An unusual honor for one of Outlander blood, Jarl Olaf has told Balázs that it is unseemly to hold a Bearsarker as thrall and that if he proves his mind's-worth in service to Wotan he will free the youth from his obligation to the Jarl's house.





# Breaks-the-Sky, Nûk Wanderer

## BREAKS-THE-SKY

CR 1/2

XP 200

Male elf (Nûk) druid 1

N Medium humanoid (elf)

**Init** +2; **Senses** low-light vision; **Perception** +11

**AC** 15, touch 12, flat-footed 13 (+2 armor, +2 Dex, +1 shield)  
**hp** 8 (1d8)

**Fort** +2; **Ref** +2; **Will** +5

**Defensive Abilities** elemental resistance\*; **Resist** cold 5

**Speed** 30 ft.

**Melee** shortspear +1 (1d6+1) or dagger +1 (1d4+1/19–20)

**Ranged** shortbow +2 (1d6/x3) or shortspear +2 (1d6+1)

**Spells Prepared** (CL 1st):

1st—*magic stone*, *speak with animals*

0 (at will)—*create water*, *flare* (DC 13), *know direction*, *stabilize*

**Str** 12, **Dex** 15, **Con** 10, **Int** 10, **Wis** 16, **Cha** 10

**Base Atk** +0; **CMB** +1; **CMD** 13

**Feats** Alertness

**Skills** Handle Animal +4, Heal +7, Knowledge (nature) +6, Perception +11, Sense Motive +5, Survival +9

**Languages** Druidic, Nørsk, Nûklanders

**SQ** link to animal companion, nature bond (animal companion), share spells with animal companion, silent hunter\*, wild empathy +1

**Gear** leather armor, light wooden shield, 4 shortspears, dagger, shortbow, 20 arrows, backpack, bedroll, flint and steel, 8 days trail rations, waterskin, hide outfit, belt pouch with 10 hs and 9 sp.

\*See *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game Advanced Race Guide*

**Elemental Resistance** Cold resistance 5 (included in stat block).

**Silent Hunter** You reduce the penalty for using Stealth while moving by 5 and can make Stealth checks while running at a –20 penalty (this includes the penalty reduction from this racial trait).

The Nûklanders name is unpronounceable to the Northlanders of Jarl Olaf's hold, but he enjoys hearing the word-song of his name said in their language as well and so does not correct them. Breaks-the-Sky is a member of the Nûk tribes of the frozen tundra in far Nûkland. A rarity among the Northlands, he made his way south across the peaks of Vastavikland and the forests of Seagestreland on a spirit journey before finally arriving at the Jarl's hall in the midst of a blizzard. It has been a great honor for Jarl Olaf to host the exotic Nûkländer in his hall for the winter, and Breaks-the-Sky has enjoyed the status of a favored, if curious, guest. Now, however, since Breaks-the-Sky has shared the Jarl's hearth-meat he owes service in return and seeks a way to repay the Jarl as he continues his spirit journey.

**STÁJ**

**XP** —

Male wolf animal companion (*Pathfinder Roleplaying Game Bestiary* "Wolf")

N Medium animal

CR —

## Swords & Wizardry Complete Version

**Breaks-the-Sky (Drd1): HP** 6; **AC** 5[14]; **Atk** spear (1d6) or dagger (1d4) or sling (1d4); **Move** 12; **Save** 15; **S** 12, **D** 12, **C** 10, **I** 10, **W** 16, **Ch** 10; **AL** N; **CL/XP** 1/15; **Special:** +2 on saving throws against fire, spells (1).

**Spells:** 1st—*faerie fire*.

**Equipment:** leather armor, wooden shield, spear, dagger, sling, 20 sling stones, backpack, bedroll, flint and steel, 8 days trail rations, waterskin, hide outfit, belt pouch, 1hs, 9sp.

**Stáj, trained wolf: HD** 2+2; **HP** 11; **AC** 7[12]; **Atk** bite (1d4+1); **Move** 18; **Save** 16; **AL** N; **CL/XP** 2/30.

**Init** +2; **Senses** low-light vision, scent; **Perception** +5

**AC** 14, touch 12, flat-footed 12 (+2 Dex, +2 natural)  
**hp** 11 (2d8+2)

**Fort** +5; **Ref** +5; **Will** +1

**Speed** 50 ft.

**Melee** bite +2 (1d8+1 plus trip)

**Str** 13, **Dex** 15, **Con** 15, **Int** 2, **Wis** 12, **Cha** 6

**Base Atk** +1; **CMB** +2; **CMD** 14 (18 vs. trip)

**Feats** Improved Natural Attack (bite)

**Skills** Perception +5, Stealth +6, Survival +1 (+5 tracking by scent)

**SQ** link to master, share spells, tricks (attack, come, down, heel, seek, stay, track)



# Jón the Tree

## JÓN THE TREE

XP 200

CR 1/2

Male giant-blooded fighter 1 (*The Northlands Saga Campaign Guide, Chapter 1*)

N Large humanoid (giant, human)

**Init** +0; **Senses** low-light vision; **Perception** –1

**AC** 15, touch 9, flat-footed 15 (+5 armor, +1 natural, –1 size)

**hp** 18 (1d10+4 plus 4)

**Fort** +6; **Ref** +0; **Will** –1

**Speed** 40 ft.

**Melee** greataxe +5 (3d6+7/x3) or spear +5 (2d6+7/x3) or

dagger +5 (1d6+5/19–20)

**Ranged** spear +0 (2d6+5/x3)

**Space** 10 ft.; **Reach** 10 ft.

**Str** 20, **Dex** 11, **Con** 18, **Int** 8, **Wis** 8, **Cha** 5

**Base Atk** +1; **CMB** +7; **CMD** 17

**Feats** Power Attack<sup>B</sup>, Toughness

**Skills** Intimidate +1, Stealth –8

**Languages** Giant, Nørsk

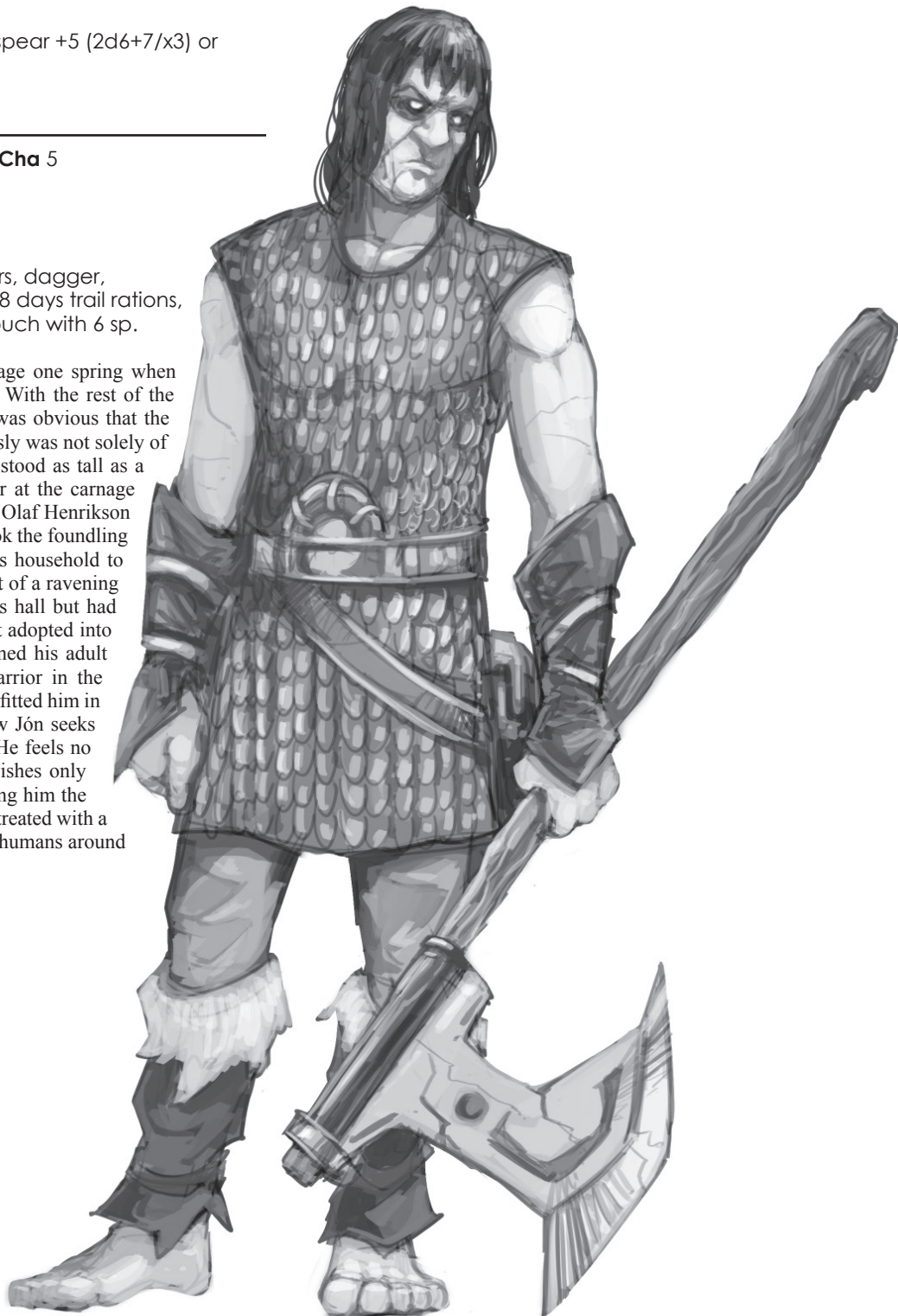
**Gear** scale mail, greataxe, 3 spears, dagger, backpack, bedroll, flint and steel, 8 days trail rations, waterskin, peasant's outfit, belt pouch with 6 sp.

Jón was found in a coastal giant village one spring when Jarl Olaf was raiding into Vastavikland. With the rest of the giants slaughtered by Olaf's reavers, it was obvious that the youngling eyeing the strangers suspiciously was not solely of giant stock. Only a toddler, Jón already stood as tall as a teenage Northlander and showed no fear at the carnage around him. Though a renowned Viking, Olaf Henrikson was also a man of compassion, and he took the foundling aboard his ship and brought him into his household to give him a chance at a life other than that of a ravaging giant. Jón grew up as a servant in Olaf's hall but had such a cheerful nature that he was all but adopted into the family. Called "The Tree" as he gained his adult height, Jón has vowed to become a warrior in the Jarl's service, and to that end Olaf has outfitted him in large-sized arms to befit his stature. Now Jón seeks to prove himself to his adopted people. He feels no call of kinship to his giant blood and wishes only to prove himself as a Northlander, granting him the rare opportunity as a giant-blooded to be treated with a measure of honor and respect among the humans around him.

## Swords & Wizardry Complete Version

**Jón (Ftr1):** **HP** 8; **AC** 5[14]; **Atk** battleaxe (1d8+2) or spear (1d6+2) or dagger (1d4+2); **Move** 12; **Save** 14; **S** 17, **D** 11, **C** 18, **I** 8, **W** 8, **Ch** 5; **AL** N; **CL/XP** 1/15; **Special:** +2 to hit and damage strength bonus.

**Equipment:** chainmail, battleaxe, 3 spears, dagger, backpack, bedroll, flint and steel, 8 days trail rations, waterskin, peasant's outfit, belt pouch, 6sp.





# Knörr Goatsblood, Dwarven Scout

**KNÖRR GOATSBLOOD**  
**XP 200**

CR 1/2

Male dwarf ranger 1  
CG Medium humanoid (dwarf)  
**Init** +7; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft.; **Perception** +5

**AC** 17, touch 13, flat-footed 14 (+4 armor, +3 Dex)  
**hp** 12 (1d10+2)  
**Fort** +4; **Ref** +5; **Will** +1; +2 vs. poison, spells, and spell-like abilities  
**Defensive Abilities** +4 dodge vs. giants

**Speed** 20 ft.  
**Melee** dwarven waraxe +3 (1d10+2/x3) or handaxe +3 (1d6+2/x3)  
**Ranged** shortbow +4 (1d6/x3)  
**Special Attacks** +1 attacks vs. goblinoids and orcs, favored enemy (humanoid [giant] +2)

**Str** 14, **Dex** 16, **Con** 14, **Int** 8, **Wis** 12, **Cha** 8  
**Base Atk** +1; **CMB** +3; **CMD** 16 (20 vs. bull or trip)  
**Feats** Improved Initiative  
**Skills** Appraise -1 (+1 precious metals or gems), Climb +4, Heal +5, Knowledge (geography) +3, Perception +5 (+7 stonework), Stealth +5, Survival +5 (+6 tracking)  
**Languages** Dwarven, Nørsk  
**SQ** track, wild empathy +0  
**Gear** chain shirt, dwarven waraxe, handaxe, shortbow, 20 arrows, backpack, bedroll, 4 days trail rations, waterskin, traveler's outfit, belt pouch with 9 sp.

A scout for the dwarven clans of northern Hordaland, Knörr was traveling through the area of Silvermeade when the first winter snows came. Though dwarves are fairly common in Hordaland compared to the rest of the Northlands, his arrival was still a cause for much curiosity among the folk of the hall, and Jarl Olaf graciously offered for him to winter at Silvermeade. With no specific duties to his folk at the moment, Knörr gladly accepted the offer and has spent the winter in the warmth of the hall eating the Jarl's meat (plentiful) and drinking his ale (weak). However, he has enjoyed his time among the tall folk, having never before had much of a chance for more than cursory interactions with humans. As a result, he has decided to take his time in getting back to his own people in order to see what these short-lived, long-legged enigmas do for fun in the warmer months.

## Swords & Wizardry Complete Version

**Knörr Goatsblood (Thf1):** **HP** 4; **AC** 6[13]; **Atk** battleaxe (1d8) or handaxe (1d6) or shortbow x2 (1d6); **Move** 12; **Save** 15; **S** 12, **D** 15, **C** 12, **I** 8, **W** 12, **Ch** 8; **AL** N; **CL/XP** 1/15; **Special:** +1 to hit with ranged weapons dexterity bonus, -1[+1] AC bonus, +2 on saving throws vs. devices, +4 on saving throws vs. magic, backstab (x2), darkvision 60ft, dwarf abilities, thieving skills.

**Thieving Skills:** Climb 85%, Tasks/Traps 25%, Hear 3 in 6, Hide 15%, Silent 25%, Locks 15%.

**Equipment:** leather, battleaxe, handaxe, shortbow, 20 arrows, backpack, bedroll, 4 days trail rations, waterskin, traveler's outfit, belt pouch, 9sp.





# Kolr Hákonson, Young Huscarl

**KOLR HÁKONSON**

CR 1/2

**XP 200**

Male human fighter (huscarl) 1 (*The Northlands Saga Campaign Guide, Chapter 4*)

LN Medium humanoid (human)

**Init** +1; **Perception** -1

**AC** 19, touch 11, flat-footed 18 (+6 armor, +1 Dex, +2 shield)

**hp** 13 (1d10+2 plus 1

**Fort** +4; **Ref** +1; **Will** -1

**Speed** 20 ft.

**Melee** longsword +5 (1d8+3/19-20) or dagger +4 (1d4+3/19-20)

**Ranged** shortbow +2 (1d6/x3) or dagger +2 (1d4+3/19-20)

**Str** 16, **Dex** 12, **Con** 15, **Int** 10, **Wis** 8, **Cha** 13

**Base Atk** +1; **CMB** +4; **CMD** 15

**Feats** Shield Wall<sup>B\*\*</sup>, Skill Focus (Profession [sailor])<sup>B</sup>, Step Up, Weapon Focus (longsword)<sup>B</sup>

**Skills** Intimidate +5, Profession (sailor) +6, Survival +3

**Languages** Nørsk

**SQ** center of the wall

**Gear** chainmail, heavy wooden shield, longsword, dagger, shortbow, 20 arrows, backpack, bedroll, flint and steel, 8 days trail rations, waterskin, sack, traveler's outfit, belt pouch with 9 hs and 8 sp.

**Center of the Wall (Ex)** At 1st level a huscarl may make full use of the Shield Wall<sup>\*\*</sup>, Shielded Caster<sup>\*\*</sup>, Shieldwall Breaker<sup>\*</sup>, Swine's Head<sup>\*</sup>, and Swap Places<sup>\*\*</sup> teamwork feats even if his ally does not have these feats. He gains one of those feats as a bonus feat provided he meets the prerequisites for it in addition to his regular fighter bonus feats.

<sup>\*</sup>See *The Northlands Saga Campaign Guide, Chapter 4*

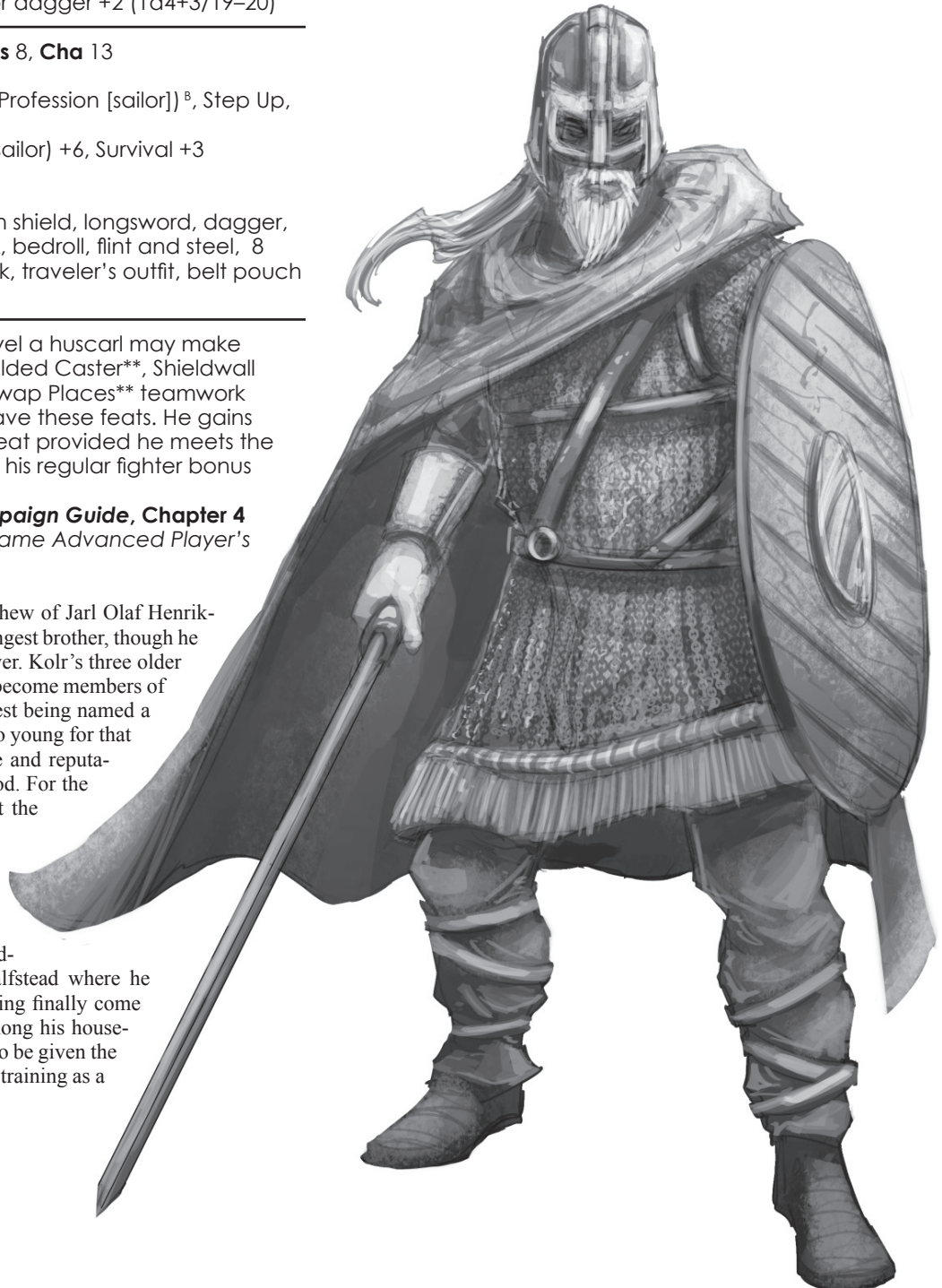
<sup>\*\*</sup>See *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game Advanced Player's Guide*

Kolr (pronounced "Cole") is a nephew of Jarl Olaf Henrikson. His father Hákon was Olaf's youngest brother, though he died 12 winters ago from the slow fever. Kolr's three older brothers and one older sister have all become members of Olaf's household guard, with the oldest being named a huscarl. Kolr, only nineteen, is still too young for that honor but seeks to advance his name and reputation since reaching the age of manhood. For the last couple of years he has chafed at the slow pace of life at Silvermeade, and with the sudden death of the Koenig last year, he thought sure the turmoil to follow would bring excitement, but Jarl Olaf kept a firm hand on his household and prevented the hot-blooded young man from traveling to Halfstead where he might get into trouble. Now with spring finally come and the Jarl set to give out favors among his household for the new year, Kolr is hoping to be given the opportunity for glory and to begin his training as a huscarl to the Jarl.

## Swords & Wizardry Complete Version

**Kolr Hákonson (Ftr1):** **HP** 8; **AC** 4[15]; **Atk** longsword (1d8) or dagger (1d4) or shortbow x2 (1d6); **Move** 12; **Save** 14; **S** 15, **D** 12, **C** 15, **I** 10, **W** 8, **Ch** 13; **AL** N; **CL/XP** 1/15; **Special:** +1 to hit strength bonus.

**Equipment:** chainmail, wooden shield, longsword, dagger, shortbow, 20 arrows, backpack, bedroll, flint and steel, 8 days trail rations, waterskin, sack, traveler's outfit, belt pouch, 9hs, 8sp.



# Signy Stone-Eye, Witch-Woman

**SIGNY STONE-EYE**

**CR 1/2**

**XP 200**

Female human sorcerer 1  
N Medium humanoid (human)  
**Init** +1; **Perception** +0

**AC** 11, touch 11, flat-footed 10 (+1 Dex)  
**hp** 6 (1d6)  
**Fort** +0; **Ref** +1; **Will** +4

**Speed** 30 ft.

**Melee** sickle +0 (1d6) or dagger +0 (1d4/19–20)

**Ranged** sling +1 (1d4) or dagger +1 (1d4/19–20)

**Bloodline Spell-like Abilities** (CL 1st):

7/day—evil eye\* (ranged touch +1, 1d6)

**Spells Known** (CL 1st):

1st (4/day)—*icicle dagger*\*\*\*, *mage armor*

0 (at will)—*acid splash* (ranged touch +1), *disrupt undead*

(ranged touch +1), *message*, *spark*\*\* (DC 14)

**Bloodline** cunning woman\*

**Str** 10, **Dex** 12, **Con** 10, **Int** 13, **Wis** 10, **Cha** 18

**Base Atk** +0; **CMB** +0; **CMD** 11

**Feats** Eschew Materials<sup>a</sup>, Iron Will<sup>b</sup>, Skill Focus (Heal)

**Skills** Bluff +7, Heal +7, Intimidate +8, Knowledge (arcana) +5, Linguistics +2, Spellcraft +5

**Languages** Andøvan, Nørsk, Runic

**SQ** bloodline arcana (Maximize cure spells 4 times/day)

**Combat Gear** *potion of cure light wounds*; **Other Gear** sickle, dagger, sling, 10 sling bullets, backpack, bedroll, 5 candles, 8 days trail rations, waterskin, sack, traveler's outfit, belt pouch with 2 hs, 6 sp, and 5 cp.

\*See *The Northlands Saga Campaign Guide*, Chapter 4

\*\*See *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game Advanced Player's Guide*

\*\*\*See *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game Ultimate Magic*

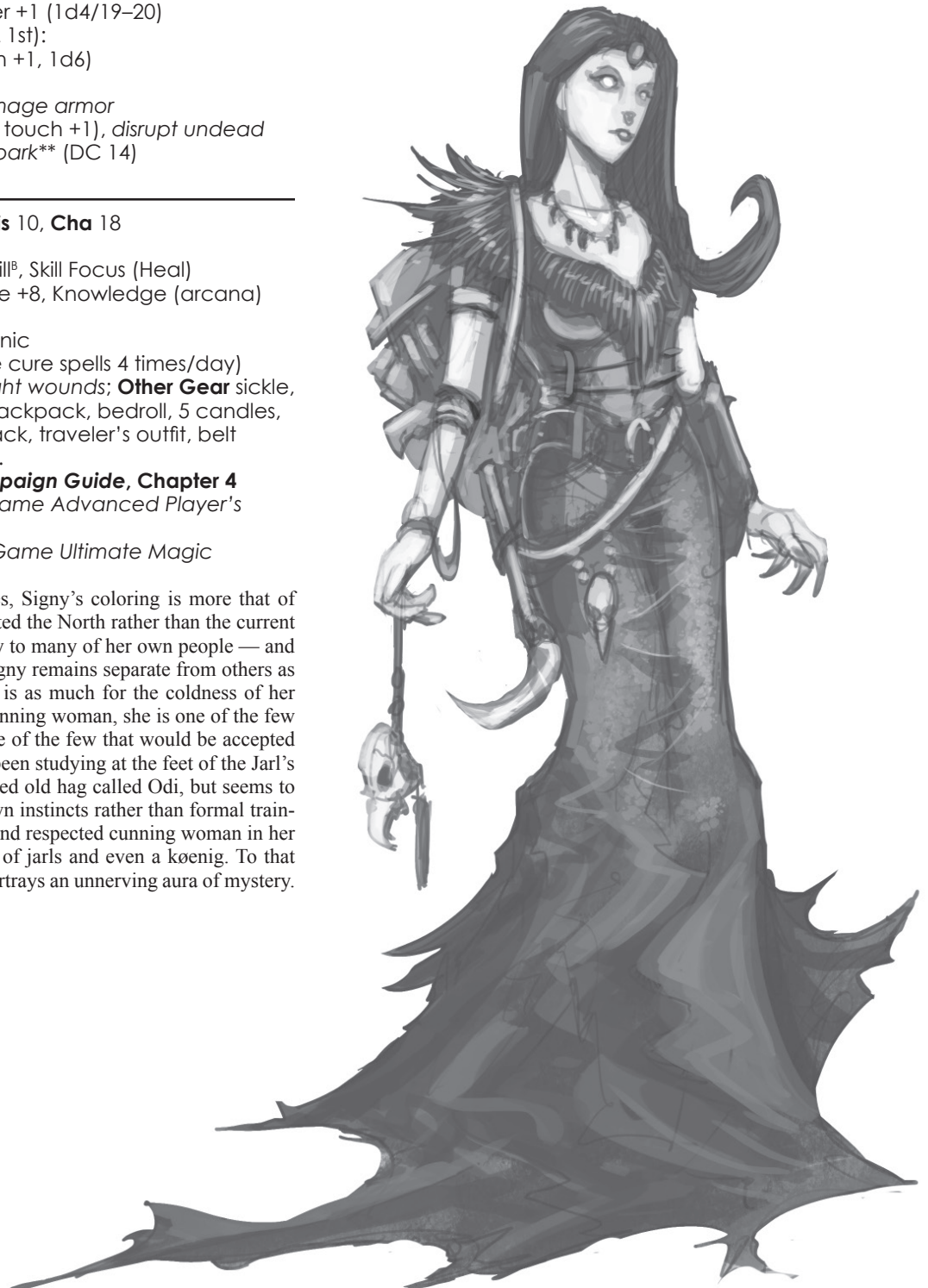
With coal-black hair and gray eyes, Signy's coloring is more that of the ancient Andøvan that once inhabited the North rather than the current Northlander peoples. She is a mystery to many of her own people — and that is the way she prefers it to be. Signy remains separate from others as much as possible, and her nickname is as much for the coldness of her glare as the color of her eyes. As a cunning woman, she is one of the few spellcasters at Jarl Olaf's hall and one of the few that would be accepted among Northlander society. She has been studying at the feet of the Jarl's personal cunning woman, a gray-haired old hag called Odi, but seems to gain much of her skill through her own instincts rather than formal training. Signy seeks to become a feared and respected cunning woman in her own right, one that can bend the ear of jarls and even a kœnig. To that end she keeps her own council and portrays an unnerving aura of mystery.

## Swords & Wizardry Complete Version

**Signy Stone-Eye (MU1):** **HP** 4; **AC** 9[10]; **Atk** dagger (1d4) or dart x3 (1d3); **Move** 12; **Save** 15; **S** 10, **D** 12, **C** 10, **I** 13, **W** 10, **Ch** 18; **AL** N; **CL/XP** 1/15; **Special:** +2 on saving throws against spells, spells (1).

**Spells:** 1st—*charm person*.

**Equipment:** dagger, 9 darts, *potion of cure light wounds*, backpack, bedroll, 5 candles, 8 days trail rations, waterskin, sack, traveler's outfit, belt pouch, 2hs, 6sp, 5cp.





# Skagi the Trader, Outlander Peddler

## SKAGI THE TRADER

XP 200

Male human rogue 1

N Medium humanoid (human)

Init +3; Perception +3

**AC** 16, touch 13, flat-footed 13 (+2 armor, +3 Dex, +1 shield)  
**hp** 8 (1d8)

**Fort** +0; **Ref** +5; **Will** -1

**Speed** 30 ft.

**Melee** shortspear +1 (1d6+1) or short sword +1 (1d6+1/19-20) or dagger +1 (1d4+1/19-20)

**Ranged** sling +3 (1d4+1) or shortspear +3 (1d6+1) or dagger +3 (1d4+1/19-20)

**Special Attacks** sneak attack +1d6

**Str** 12, **Dex** 16, **Con** 10, **Int** 14, **Wis** 8, **Cha** 14

**Base Atk** +0; **CMB** +1; **CMD** 14

**Feats** Shield Proficiency, Stealthy<sup>8</sup>

**Skills** Appraise +6, Bluff +6, Diplomacy +6, Disable Device +7, Escape Artist +8, Intimidate +6, Knowledge (local) +6, Perception +3 (+4 locate traps), Profession (merchant) +3, Sense Motive +3, Sleight of Hand +6, Stealth +8

**Languages** Common, Nørsk, Seagestrelander

**SQ** trapfinding

**Combat Gear** vial of antitoxin, 3 tindertwigs; **Other**

**Gear** leather armor, buckler, shortspear, short sword, 2 daggers, sling, 20 sling bullets, backpack, thieves' tools, bedroll, flint and steel, 5 torches, 8 days trail rations, waterskin, sack, traveler's outfit, belt pouch with 6 hs, 5 sp, and 5 cp.

Hailing from southern lands beyond the North Sea, the dusken-skinned, hatchet-nosed, beady-eyed Outlander called Skagi the Trader arrived in Halfstead aboard a merchantman out of Bliski. The apprentice tradesman experienced a falling out with his ship's master and found himself left behind on the Northlander shores of Hordaland as his vessel sailed away to beat the winter weather through the Mulstabhin Passage. Fortunately for Skagi he was able to strike up an acquaintance with Jarl Olaf Hendrikson by securing him an excellent deal on a trade for several casks of imported Southlander wine. Seeing the sharp wit and naked ambition in the young Outlander, Jarl Olaf took him into his household to winter. Skagi hopes that by learning the ways of the Northlanders he can amass a vast fortune in this barbaric land and return home to Bliski with more gold than his old master ever dreamed of. Until then he intends to keep his wits sharp and his blade sharper as he navigates the paths and perils of this strange northern land.

## Swords & Wizardry Complete Version

**Skagi (Thf1):** **HP** 4; **AC** 7[12]; **Atk** spear (1d6) or short sword (1d6) or dagger (1d4); **Move** 12; **Save** 15; **S** 12, **D** 12, **C** 10, **I** 14, **W** 8, **Ch** 14; **AL** N; **CL/XP** 1/15; **Special:** +2 on saving throws vs. devices, backstab (x2), thieving skills.

**Thieving Skills:** Climb 85%, Tasks/Traps 25%, Hear 3 in 6, Hide 15%, Silent 25%, Locks 15%.

**Equipment:** leather armor, spear, short sword, 2 daggers, backpack, thieves' tools, bedroll, flint and steel, 5 torches, 8 days trail rations, waterskin, sack, traveler's outfit, belt pouch, 6hs, 5sp, and 5cp.





# Thórunn Glædirsdottir, Valkyrie-Spirited Maiden

THÓRUNN GLÆDIRSDOTTIR

XP 200

Female human cleric of Donar 1

CG Medium humanoid (human)

Init +0; Perception +3

Aura chaos, good

AC 15, touch 10, flat-footed 15 (+4 armor, +1 shield)

hp 10 (1d8+1 plus 1)

Fort +3; Ref +0; Will +5

Speed 30 ft.

Melee warhammer +2 (1d8+2/x3) or dagger +2 (1d4+2/19–20)

Ranged dagger +0 (1d4+2/19–20)

Special Attacks channel energy 4/day (DC 11, 1d6), spontaneous casting (cure spells)

Domain Spell-like Abilities (CL 1st):

6/day—battle rage (+1), storm burst (1d6 nonlethal)

Spells Prepared (CL 1st):

1st—cure light wounds (DC 14), divine favor, magic weapon<sup>D</sup>

0 (at will)—guidance, light, stabilize

D domain spell; Domains War, Weather

Str 14, Dex 10, Con 13, Int 8, Wis 17, Cha 12

Base Atk +0; CMB +2; CMD 12

Feats Channel Smite, Martial Weapon Proficiency (warhammer)<sup>D</sup>

Skills Knowledge (religion) +3, Linguistics +0, Spellcraft +2

Languages Nørsk, Runic

Gear chain shirt, light wooden shield, warhammer, 4 daggers, wooden hammer amulet of Donar, backpack, bedroll, flint and steel, 5 torches, 8 days trail rations, waterskin, sack, traveler's outfit, belt pouch with 5 hs, 7 sp, and 5 cp.

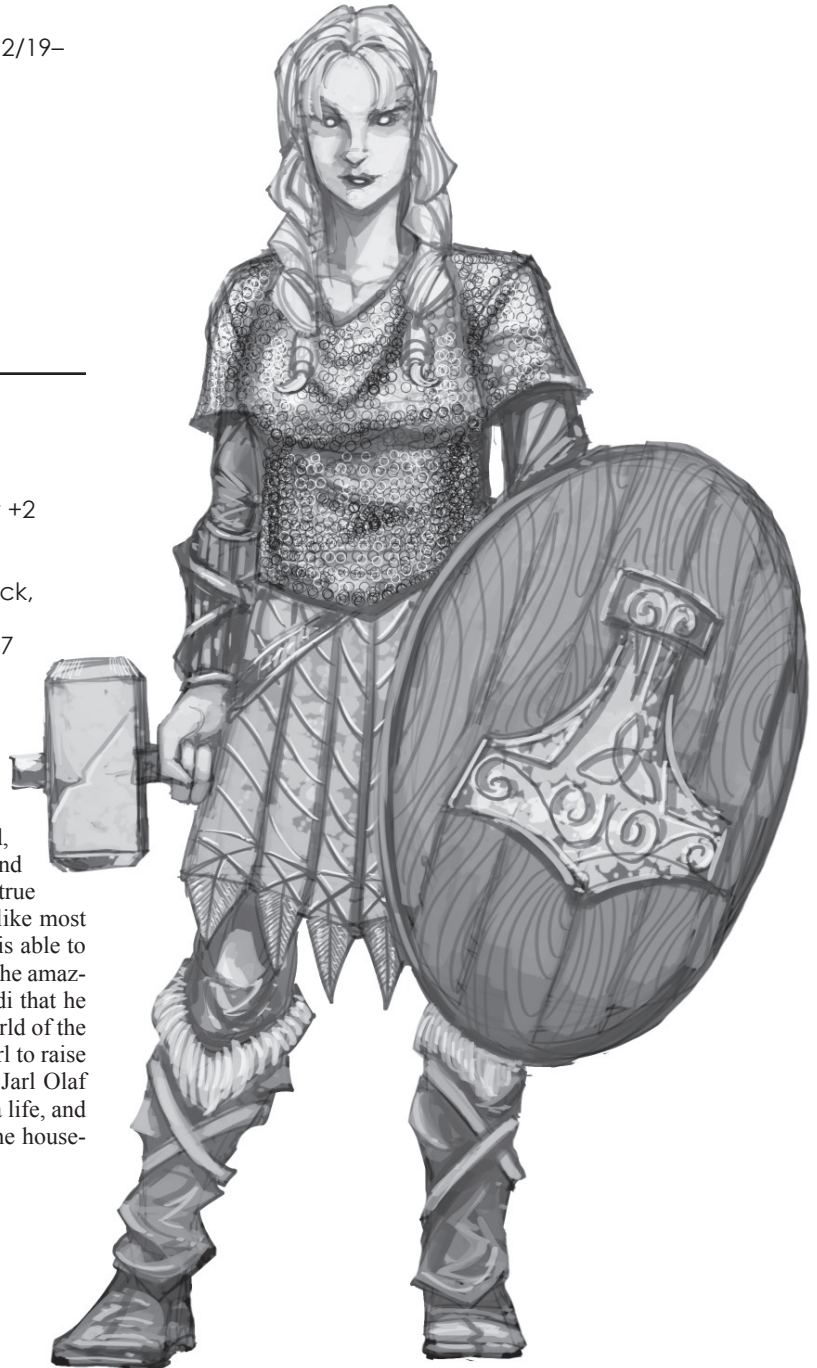
Daughter of the godi of Jarl Olaf's household, Thórunn grew up knowing the call of Donar in her heart. Unlike her father, Glædir, who tends to his devotions to the Thunderer when not tending to the forge-fire of his smithy, Thórunn has grown to be one of those rare godi whose devotion is wholly given to her god, such that she carries on with no other trade. Her life's wyrd and means of living are all tied up in her worship of Donar, and as a true godi she has received the rare gift of magic from her deity. Unlike most godi of the godshouses, when she calls on Donar in prayer she is able to command powers beyond that of the natural world. Recognizing her amazing potential in Glædir's daughter, Jarl Olaf has advised the godi that he should encourage his daughter to travel some and explore the world of the gods and men before she settles down as the wife of some huscarl to raise his family and tend to the will of the gods in only small ways. Jarl Olaf believes that young Thórunn is meant for much more than such a life, and with her father's blessing she looks forward to accompanying the householders as they go abroad in the Jarl's name this spring.

## Swords & Wizardry Complete Version

Thórunn Glædirsdottir (Clr1): HP 6; AC 4[15]; Atk warhammer (1d4+1); Move 15; Save 14; S 14, D 10, C 13, I 8, W 17, Ch 10; AL N; CL/XP 1/15; Special: +1 to hit strength bonus, +2 on saving throws vs. poison and paralyzation, spells (1).

Spells: 1st—*protection from evil*.

Equipment: chainmail, wooden shield, warhammer, wooden hammer amulet of Donar, backpack, bedroll, flint and steel, 5 torches, 8 days trail rations, waterskin, sack, traveler's outfit, belt pouch, 5hs, 7sp, 5cp.



# Tales of the Lost Lands: Tales Pack 3

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# Harsh Wyrds

By Jeff Provine

## GM Note

### Spoiler Warning: Light

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



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

“But why?” he asked.

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

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

Kol shook his head. The black shadows of hair flicked before his vision. “No. This doesn’t seem right.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kol winced and turned his head.

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

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

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

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



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

The jarl turned back to the hall's doorway.

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

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

"But my father's house... my inheritance!"

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

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

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

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

The door slammed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kol took in a shaking breath. The frost in the air clawed his lungs, and he blew it back out in a cloud of steam. He watched the fog he made float

up and fade into nothing in the face of great Jurderheim.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kol smiled and dug his fingers into the cracks on Jurderheim's frozen face. He climbed under the starlight. Gradually the waning moon appeared and cast brilliant silver rays, soon joined by the smaller moon, waxing in its nightly course. Beneath the dual illumination of lights — bright silver and dull gray — strange shadows formed amid the crevices and cracks. The juxtaposed interplay of bright and dark gave the shadows new depth and dimension. Under the weird play of light, paths revealed themselves, standing out with a glow amid the shadows where he could not trek.

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

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

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

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

## PLAYER'S GUIDE

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

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

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

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

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

The wind suddenly picked up as if making a shriek.

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

The wind faltered. The night was still.

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

The stars stared down at him.

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

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

Thunder began to rumble in the cloudless, moonlit sky. It started as a distant echo, and it grew louder and closer. Pebbles began to dance, and then then the mountaintop quaked under Kol's feet. Kol had to undo his fists and clamp his hands over his ears to keep out the pulsing noise of Hrym the Boatman beating his oars upon the waters of the sky.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kol stammered again.

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

Donar leaned close.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The elders speak of wyrd," Kol mumbled.

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

Kol scratched his head and finally nodded.

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

"I what?" Kol blurted.

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

"I...I," Kol stammered once more.

Donar leaned forward again. "You are a boy of mind's-worth, aren't you?"

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

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

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

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

Donar cocked his eyebrow and stood, waiting.

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

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

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

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

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

## THE NORTHLANDS SAGA COMPLETE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Do what?"

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

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

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

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

"Quit squirming!" Kol yelled.

"I have to!" Donar said with a chortle. "I want to live! Don't you?"

Wouldn't the man in the well?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kol just stared at him.

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

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

He turned away. "No."

"Why not? Turned coward are you?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*How could I have been so stupid?*

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

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

The blows fell hard and fast now. Donar jabbed with the flat head of



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

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

"What's that?"

"I," Kol began, taking in deeper breaths to give strength to his arms. "I would climb that well wall... I would face that beast!"

"Surely it'd slay you, boy!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Donar reached out a hand toward him.

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

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

Kol took the god's grip.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# The Brothers of Jarl Skur Skulisdottir

By Kenneth Spencer

## GM Note

### Spoiler Warning: Light

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



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

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

the good name and hospitality of the jarl.

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

“Once I had an uncle who—”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Boë’s rages grew worse as his body reached terrible proportions and his strength matched that of an entire shieldwall. Only through the intervention of his brother was murder narrowly averted, but even then the jarl had to pay the wergild to those the giant had injured and terrified. The presence of this monster threatened to drive the oath-sworn men and women from

Through some witchery or perhaps a union between man and Jöttnar in

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Skuli's hall and ruin him in the process, for Boë consumed three cattle a week and by himself drank as much mead as a hall of feasting warriors.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The entire band laughed. They laughed at a young man first setting out to seek his fortune and a name for himself. They laughed at Diarf Skuli-

son. They, of course, had not seen Boë still in his concealed position.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Much could be said of their adventures after this, of the foes they vanquished together, and of their shared glories. Word filtered back to their father's hall — no longer ruled by Jarl Skuli Valison's but rather now by Jarl Skur Skulisdottir. The twins were seen in the shieldwall at Hrolfdale when the Gatlanders raided the Hrolf coast in the summer of the Falling Sky. Skalds told of their slaying the nachjtjagers that haunted the grasslands beyond Dnipirstead. It was Diarf and Boë who sailed with Sven Tokison and drove the sea raider Sven Oakenfist from the shores of Hordaland in the autumn of the Year of Leaping Fish. When the great whale Nalithrov harried the ships from the seas, the great heroes Lini the Proud and Raghild Tufisdottir — named Donar's Hammer by some — called upon the brothers to accompany them into the beast's maw. They came out again with a wealth of ambergris the



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likes of which the world had not seen before and may never again.

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

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

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

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

Enraged by their long chase and their mind's-worth ablaze with the fury of the gods at such travesty against Man and Æsir, the twins charged in, slaying and hacking through the throng. Bodies heaped upon bodies as the crazed cultists ran with eagerness to die upon the brothers' blades. As at birth, and for the last time, Diarf was beset by a pack of beasts assaulting him only to have Boë stand tall over his brother's body and defend him with his own life.

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

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

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

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

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

The two brothers met only once more after that, for by then both had taken leadership of the opposing armies. When the shieldwalls met, the spear-din rose to reach the heavens and the gods themselves watched as

the Last Hirth stood firm against the horde of beasts and beastmen, of savage Jöttnar and foul witches. The battle-dew formed its own river, and the bodies clogged the Ice River for thirteen miles.

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

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

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

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

With their champion dead—

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Fadr

By Kevin Wright

## GM Note

### Spoiler Warning: None

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



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

The warriors and huscarls of the village, strong men and women forged in the frosty fire of the Northlands, fell before the zealots as wheat before the scythe. Axe, spear, and blade availed

them naught in the face of the overwhelming horde. In the end, their jarl, Geir Bloodyhaft — a seasoned and fearsome swordsman past his prime but still tall and hale — bent the knee before the Wyrms’ vile godi. With battered and bloodied hands, the jarl lifted up to his conqueror his own broken blade in token of surrender. Tears, fierce and bright, fell from his cheeks, yet none of his people looked askance at this show of weakness; they knew that with his surrender, he had bought their very lives.

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

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

With that, he turned and left, his servants and his war band following behind. Trailing behind came a train of women, scores of them, the most beautiful maidens from the villages of the North. They were bound together with thick shackles, all wailing at their lamentable fate. In the

tumult and confusion no one noticed that, of all the women now enslaved by the Wyrms, only the fiery-haired woman taken from Byrgisvik did not weep. Though her eyes were downcast, the glimmer they held was not one of grief or terror, but of anger.

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

They rode straightaway to the mead hall where their leader dismounted. This was Magnus, son of Jarl Geir, a warrior just come into the fullness of manhood. Hair glossy as polished gold flowed from beneath his graven helm and covered his jutting chin in a newly grown beard. He stood a head taller than his tall companions, a group of Helhounds if ever there was one. Magnus’ band had recently come from the Waldron Mountains, where they had hunted the onyx deer and fell-boar. With his own hand, Magnus had slain an enormous troll that had come upon them in the night, killing dogs and men alike with mighty sweeps of its sinewy arms. The fire-blackened skull of the monster now lay bound to his leathern saddle.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Blood drained from that young warrior’s face as he heard the news, and his shoulders shook with anger. His huge fists clenched and his eyes narrowed with his rage. Unnoticed, his mother stepped back from him in dismay. His sisters Ingun and Thorhild were the damsels fair-haired and

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dark, but she of the fiery mane was Bera, long loved by Magnus, the one whom he thought one day to take as his bride.

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

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

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

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

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

Ærinmund's face grew dark.

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

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

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

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

"Yes, *drengr*," the lad replied.

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

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

The young men were distraught at the idea of never seeing their revered

mentor again, but they knew how deeply he loved his daughter and touched their foreheads in acquiescence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The jarl spoke and anger bloodied each syllable.

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

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

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



## PLAYER'S GUIDE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The woman sitting on the far side of the table was a slender brunette,

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

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

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

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

"Hælg! What's wrong with you, lad? You look as if you'd seen a ghost?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Enough of that," said Thorballa. Her voice was a pleasing contralto. "That was decided long ago by the four of us and a good decision it was. Knowing the *wyrd* that lay upon her, she had to be raised in obscurity,

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hidden from those malevolent eyes that yet seek her. Kory was the only one able and — let us say it — willing to give her the anonymity and shelter she needed. Also,” she said, looking at Kory, “I’ve never seen man love daughter as I saw you love that little girl.”

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

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

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

“Yes, Kory?”

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

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

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

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

Kory just gave a frosty smile and nodded his head.

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

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

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

“Who did you say sent you?”

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

The priest’s breath sucked inward at this proclamation.

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

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

The godi stared for long moments at the young warrior.

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

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

For days they traveled, ever southward, down from the cold of the secret ancient ways of the Andøvan highlands and onto a wide grassy plain. Hoarfrost glittered on the expanse as far as they eye could see, a dazzling silver ocean under a cold sun. Hælg recognized it: the Plain of Storms, and he

rejoiced that the end of his journey was drawing nigh. He’d had more luck than Magnus in finding Bera, and he managed to keep an eye on her, far ahead of him, as they walked out of the mountains. For the entire journey, he mentally repeated Kory’s plan to himself as he walked.

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

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

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

“I’d say at least three thousand spears,” Thorballa said.

“Yes.”

“I do not think we could’ve slain them all,” she said.

“No.”

“I’m glad you had another plan.”

“Yes.”

“Although, as far as plans go, this one’s a bit...suicidal.”

“Yes.”

“If we come out of this alive, I’m going to marry you.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Keep your mutt away from me,” she said, “or I’ll swat it.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Speak not of your betters, Meat-for-Ravens! Snækol soon arises and you will learn humility at his coming. His hatred burns deeply for the one who slew his mate. An unchecked force of malignance now seeks you out. You were a fool to reveal yourself.”

“Fool I may be, but I have a proposal for you, Slave of Worms. I will meet with Snækol on this very plateau. If he slays me, my friend here will ensure that you know where to find Freyja’s Pomegranate, the most coveted jewel taken from Vigdis’ hoard. If I slay him, you and your minions,” he said, waving vaguely toward the army of worshipers and their captives, “shall

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become my slaves to do with as I choose. What say you?"

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

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

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

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

"So... what was that about...?" he began timidly.

"Leave it 'til after," she said, smiling at nothing in particular.

"Alright," he said, a little abashed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kory sighed and looked back to the rushing engine of destruction. It was no more than a half-mile away. "Each linnorm bears within it the seed of a foul curse, released upon its slayer at the moment of its death. I alone must bear the venom of this malediction. I claim it as my own."

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

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

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

As the first head now snatched up the terrorized and screaming horse

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

"Hello, old lizard," the warrior said calmly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Below in the Wyrn's camp, there was turmoil and confusion. What was happening? Where was their priest? The oblong box once carried by Hælgi and given to the godi burst asunder where it sat in the godi's tent. A shining spike, gleaming with silver and crimson light, flew from that place to the waiting hand of Kory on the plateau high above. This was *Hurguð*, the Piercer of Scales, a magnificent spear forged of mithral and covered in ruby-encrusted runes. Those runes sang of courage in the face of any danger and of piercing the heart of all dragons. With her, Kory had slain the dread serpent Vigdis, ending her reign of terror in the Northlands. But his victory came at great price, for with her death came the Curse of Boiling Blood. From that day on, his body had been wracked with great pain as his blood scorched him from within, and he had never again been the warrior he once was.

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

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



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heads ripping at her creation; it, being made of mere shadow-stuff like the simulacra before, blinked silently out of existence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Home?" she said, absently.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sæunn sighed. "Are you sure about this?"

Thorballa never took her eyes off him. "Yes. Without reservation."

"When will we tell Bera?"

"I'll tell her when the time is right. For now a little grief will temper her spirit."

Hel's priestess shook her head. "I'll never understand what you all see in him."

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

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

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

# Tales of the Lost Lands: Tales Pack 4

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# Ten Cowards

By John Bennett

## GM Note

### Spoiler Warning: Heavy

“Ten Cowards” reveals the adventure background for *NS8: The Hallburning*. It reveals the actions and identities of the culprits led by Cnut Anglison, as well as something of their motives. Players should not be allowed to read this story if you are intending to run that adventure for them if you wish for the details of this background to remain hidden from them. However, the culprits in this crime are identified at the very beginning of the adventure, so the players will know the general information provided here very quickly in the adventure, so it shouldn't affect game play to any significant degree. If you are comfortable with the players having that knowledge, then allowing your players to read this story before playing through the adventure could actually enhance their gameplay experience as they may become more invested in the story and its protagonists, perhaps even holding a more personal grudge against Cnut Anglison and his ilk. One possibility would be to allow the players to read the story only after they have started the adventure and met Runa Gundrikswif. Then the contents of the story could be considered to largely be information gleaned from talking to the widow Runa about the events that transpired therein.



en figures strode through the snow, their outlines carved in silhouette against a dark background by the faint moonlight. Each man held an unlit torch tightly in fur gloved hand. Weapons hung from their belts along with a hollow ox horn holding live coals buried in ash to preserve their heat. The men strode forward with unwavering tread of booted feet, their faces grim with the singular focus of future violence. No one spoke or sang

songs to accompany their march through the stark, night wilderness. All thoughts were on the expectation of what was to come and what they must

do. The night air hung tense around them, silent except for the sound of crunching snow. These were men on a mission of deadly purpose.

The ten marched at first through a stretch of silent woodlands. Around them stood, tall pines, as straight as spears. Cnut Anglison took the lead, guiding the men along a well-trod footpath through the trees. A thin cloak covered his armored shirt of caliginous metal rings, as if suffused with shadows. A simple, wooden shield sat strapped to his broad back while his battleaxe hung in a strap at his belt. Cnut never looked back to see if any of the men lagged behind, or worse, stopped following him and let the night swallow them in anonymity. He knew they were not cowards, lacking the fortitude to complete the task before them. Cnut knew the nine others would do what needed to be done, knew it as well as he knew the handle of his axe and the honeyed taste of mead drunk in victory.

Cnut led the line men out of the woodlands and into frost covered



fields. He steered them on a direct course towards their goal, no pretense of stealth in their route. A faint breeze brought him the rank odor of *Lame Otti*. The hobbled man stumbled at the end of the line, his twisted, spasmodic leg plowing through the snow like a shovel. As ugly and stupid as a winter night is long, his skin was covered in rashes and atop his shoulders stood a too-small head. These unfortunate traits were matched by an even more unfortunate odor of rank, musty sweat. That was that reason *Lame Otti* was ordered to stay in the back of the line, that and the fact that he worked twice as hard to make his way through the snow as the other men with two good legs. *Cnut* could not afford any delays by *Otti* to slow him in this task. He questioned why he had even brought the man at all but quickly remembered the reason the man was included in all his darkest tasks: *Lame Otti* was completely and utterly loyal. He would not question his orders and, as long as they were not too complex, he would carry them out swiftly and well. The fact that *Cnut's* orders often involved the swinging of an axe with no questions asked, made *Otti* particularly suitable for the job at hand in *Cnut's* mind.

While *Lame Otti* brought up the rear, *Starkathr Bloodhair* and *Skorrbín Dankbeard* moved along just behind *Cnut*. *Starkathr*, a blond, wild-eyed, berserker, hefted his axe over one shoulder. His crusted beard, bathed in the blood of his past enemies, a personal ritual of his, stank horribly. The always man seemed to contain the coiled energy of a wolf about to spring on its prey. *Starkathr* was easy for *Cnut* to influence — an unsheathed blade constantly thirsting for blood. In fact, it was more difficult keeping a leash on the man than off, which is why most of *Starkathr's* payment would go towards buying enough mead to knock him into a drunken stupor afterwards.

*Skorrbín* was altogether a different man than the mindlessly violent *Starkathr*. *Cnut* knew he could trust *Skorrbín* to do the job and do it well. The two had a long history together, participating in many a raid in the past. A smart man, *Skorrbín* possessed a keen sense for sailing and exploring unmapped coastlines, the kind of man you wanted on a long, seaborne raid. *Cnut* knew *Skorrbín* had ambitions of his own — a longship with a reaving crew that he could sail where he wanted, instead of following the orders of whatever jarl was currently paying him.

A little further back, *Júrgan Hrothspyke* marched, a spear in one hand and a short sword on a belt tightened around a mail coat. *Júrgan* was a traveler, never staying in one place long and usually leaving quickly with a bounty placed on his head. He had a habit of attacking at the slightest provocation, usually while the person's back was turned rather than in fair combat. The label of outlaw was no stranger to *Júrgan*. Many times he had stood before a jarl or Thing while a death sentence was pronounced, but each time through luck and guile *Júrgan* somehow managed to escape, often leaving one or two more bodies behind. These violent tendencies and lack of discomfort in doing the ruthless if necessary were what attracted *Cnut* to recruit him. Also, as a bonus, *Cnut* knew that many of the bounties on the man's head did not specify that he be returned alive. *Cnut* knew that if it became advantageous to do so he could always collect the reward on the man himself.

*Anwulf the Black*, who stalked behind *Júrgan*, was named for his mood, a grim, dark, brooding man. Like *Skorrbín*, *Anwulf* had fought alongside *Cnut* many times in battles as reavers upon the North Sea and beyond. The man never seemed to raise his voice, not even in challenge to an enemy. When the shieldwalls formed and the champions hurled insults towards the enemy, *Anwulf* never failed to maintain his stony silence. Instead, a grimace would crawl across his face until his dark eyes hardened like two bits of iron shot. An expert spearman, *Anwulf* would step forward, able to drive the point of his weapon into soft flesh no matter the strength of the shieldwall before him. Like the *seadugenga* and a harbinger of death, *Anwulf* moved through his enemies with ease, and where he moved, they died. *Anwulf* liked his moniker and the fear he brought to his opponents more than glory, silver, or arm-rings. Fear he surely would bring tonight.

Behind *Anwulf* stalked the two *Skeggi* brothers, *Otr* and *Ölvir*, there blond hair long, shaggy, and unwashed, their first beards little more than a soft yellow down on their chins and cheeks. Unlike the others, they wore equipment and armor in poor repair that did not fit well. One even wore thick rags wrapped around his feet rather than proper boots. The two gripped their spears and tried to scowl at everyone around them at once. They were untried in battle but desperate to prove themselves, and they lusted after the prosperity and power that they saw represented in

*Cnut*. The fact that he held their mother as thrall for a debt their father owed before his death only further sealed their loyalty to him. Like many men their age — little more than boys play-acting at being men — they despised the weakness they saw in their mother's sacrifice for them and scoffed at her words of admonishment to not follow the path of *Cnut Anglison*. *Cnut* allowed himself a small smile; he could not have bound them more securely to his cause had he clapped them in irons. It was a grim irony he recognized in them; the passion and violence of youth with none of the wisdom of man. They made useful tools, and like tools were easily disposed of.

Watching the *Skeggi* brothers suspiciously was *Uverd*, a strange Outlander with fallow, pock-marked skin and a thin moustache of deepest black that drooped at the corners of his mouth and ended in dangling copper beads. His armor and clothing were a mismatched mixture of that of the horse riders of the plains south of *Storström Vale* and the Southlander soldiers of the free cities of the *Buntesveldt*. His mouthful of cracked and broken teeth — apparently the work of a professional torturer some years earlier — and the perpetual glare in his angry eyes that constantly shifted about as if seeking some unseen foe named him a fugitive. *Cnut* had no doubt that *Unverd* was not his true name and that the man was running from some crime or crimes in the South. He spoke little through his mangled mouth, which was just fine with *Cnut* who despised his Outlander accent, but he was good in a fight with his stolen *Mongat* saber and had no problem putting a knife into the kidney of a sleeping man, so *Cnut* found him useful.

*Hegi Einnarrson* was *Cnut's* last recruit, a barrel shaped man with a thick beard. *Hegi* could drink heavily and laugh lustily in the mead halls, seemingly not possessing the dark, natures of the other men *Cnut* had gathered. However, *Cnut* knew that to put *Hegi* in a shieldwall with that massive sword of his, and he took to fighting with the same huge appetite he had for drinking and whoring. For *Hegi*, it was about the story and relating his heroics to a wide-eyed crowd with all the gusto of a half-drunk skald. Often, these tales were spun and embellished, both to cover his dark deeds on the battlefield and to make *Hegi's* prowess seemingly match that of the gods themselves. And if the warrior's eyes sometimes looked like bleak, yawning pits of despair as he drank into the small hours of the night and ruminated on things best left unsaid, *Cnut* cared not. He was a sure sword on the field of battle, and had enough sense to know what to tell and what not to tell, even when drunk. That was enough for *Cnut Anglison*.

*Cnut* considered himself successful in gathering such a troupe, a group of men to do a task few would be able to stomach. The job of the night required people of a certain, low moral character. While many men could be violent, these particular men specialized in it, were particularly suited for the night's work. Bucking the traditions and beliefs of the North, they would not balk at doing what needed done and would see it through to the end. He had needed men who could offer the hospitality of their hall and then smother a child in its sleep. He had needed men of courage who did not fear risking the label of outlaw and the danger of being hunted in every jarldom and town across the North. He needed these brave men.

Besides, if they did the job right, no one would be the wiser.

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*Skorrbín* noticed it first with keen eyes trained in scanning the horizon during the shipboard watches of the night. Ahead the moonlight faintly caught the trail of lazily, curling smoke. A simple grunt from him was all that needed pass between them, and *Cnut* quickened the men's pace. *Hegi* adjusted the harness carrying his naked greatsword on his back, the tip of the heavily notched blade almost touching the ground. Behind him, *Lame Otti* hurried to keep up, one hand on his unlit torch, the other hand holding a large, poorly balanced axe over his shoulder, the man's legs moving haphazardly as he shuffled onward.

The smell of a wood fire soon drifted over them, followed faintly by voices raised in laughter, toasting, and song. The tension of the still night air that had dogged their very steps seemed to collapse under that release, filled with a feeling of home and inviting the ten men to rest, raise horns of mead, and share tales of past raids and plunder. More than one ragged figure paused a heartbeat as the portent of what their dark errand claimed them. But the spell was soon broken, *Cnut* raised his hand in signal. Shaking off the moment's hesitation, *Skorrbín* turned with the soft clinking of

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mail and let out a short, low whistle down the line. The men stopped their frantic pace, and began a slower, deliberate creep forward. All was lost if the alarm was raised.

A few small huts and animal pens stood like sentries around the hall, their darkened windows and doorways watching as the men slipped past. Skorrbin took point and was joined by Anwulf and Júrġan, who crept quietly among the huts, inspecting them for signs of life while Cnut held the others back. Behind him, he could hear the creak of Starkathr's crude, animal hide armor, frozen near solid by the cold night air, as the man shifted restlessly, barely controlling the blood frenzy welling up within him. In the back, Lame Ottí short-hopped forward to regain his precarious balance, his legs working awkwardly as he fumbled with his ox horn to ensure its coal hadn't been lost in the journey and almost spilling it in his inspection.

Satisfied that the huts were empty of watchers who might raise a cry, Skorrbin nodded to Cnut who motioned the men again moved slowly forward, the sounds of merry feasting ringing in their ears with its song of hot, roasted meat and plentiful drink. They ducked around the remaining huts, keeping low in case any sentries stood guard outside the hall. As they advanced Uverd paused to peel back an animal hide window cover and look inside one of the huts for any possible valuable that might be easily lifted. Hegi's thump on his shoulder with a callous-hardened palm encouraged the man forward again. Cnut winced and the hollow clap that the blow made, fearful that unseen eyes or perhaps even the spirits of the guardian landvaettir might have heard or given warning to the household within, though from the noise coming from ahead, it seemed unlikely. Uverd gave Hegi a short, murderous glare before moving on.

Cold torches gripped even more firmly, the men strode forward, their footsteps now padding over well-trod ground, brushed free of the snow-fall by the daily activities of the busy village. On the hard-frozen ground, their footfalls hardly made a sound. Starkathr lightly spun his battleaxe between his palms in anticipation as he moved with the group.

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Their destination loomed ahead; the large mead hall built of stout timbers and a freshly thatched roof, the home of Jarl Gundrik Arison of Vestfemarken, the jarldom in which they currently traveled. Thick double doors, expertly carved with fantastical creatures and the gods, barred entry. Smoke from the fires inside poured out of a central smoke hole in the roof. Stray glimpses of firelight shone out on the cold ground from between a few narrow gaps in some of the timbers. Inside, Cnut knew, dozens of people gathered around cooking fires or sat drinking mead on long benches, the sound of their revelry carrying outside to the ten men approaching like silent shadows slipping through the night.

Cnut approached the hall, stopping just short of the door, cocking his head to listen. After a few moments, satisfied that no sound of alarm came from within, he raised his fist in the air, in the prepared signal to the others. Quickly, the men begin sifting the ash out of the horns they carried to retrieve the glowing coals within, and within moments, each one held a burning brand in his hand. Ottí sucked burned fingers where he had managed to spill his coal out on the ground and then quickly picked it up without thinking. But his torch was now lit along with the others, even if his abused fingers throbbed with the flicker of the burning brand he held.

The men spread out on either side of their leader, taking up position as they spaced themselves around the front half of the mead hall. Cnut nodded to his left and then to his right. By old habit he slid his waraxe from its strap and into his left hand and felt the familiar smooth wood and rough wrapping of its handle. He strode up to the door, Lame Ottí and Starkathr flanking him, and there he paused.

Cnut leaned his head back, taking in the view of the flawless sky of the winter night and the brilliant stars it displayed. Were the gods watching? Could they even now see the courage that it took to do what he now did? Any common criminal could steal from a man or slay him. But only those with a heart bold as thunderous Donar would dare do so in a way that risked the ire of all people everywhere. He shrugged. He was satisfied; let Wotan judge him for his deeds, for he surely would. On whatever day Cnut fell, he knew it was his wyrd to do so with axe in hand so that the valkyries would bring him to Valhalla to stand before the All-Father. Let lesser men quail before the laws of Things and jarls, when the One-Eyed

God peered into Cnut's heart, he would see the heart of an aurochs, unbroken and unafraid before even the gods themselves. Wotan needed such men for Ragnarök; Cnut knew he would be welcomed well.

He briefly closed his eyes, taking in the smell of the cold night air mixed with the smoke from the mead hall, laughter and singing washing over him. It felt...invigorating. Skorrbin noticed a small secret smile play briefly across his lips and wondered at its portent.

Cnut Anglison, master of his own wyrd and thrall to no man or god, took a deep breath and opened his eyes in time to see the first torches arc through the sky in a trail of red light and land, FTHOOM, FTHOOM, FTHOOM, almost gently, on the thatched roof.

FTHOOM. The torches spat and hissed, as if channeling the spite of the men below. FTHOOM, flames crawled out from the torches, spreading as they ate through the damp outer layer of thatch and bit hungrily at the old, dry layers of thatch below. FTHOOM, FTHOOM, more torches joined their brethren on the roof, mingling as if dancing. FTHOOM. Cnut tossed his own torch, targeting a section of the roof directly over the doors. Flames came to life in the night air, crawling outward and upwards as they gorged themselves on a feast of tinder. Their light washed over the men waiting inside, casting them in a lurid pallor and reflecting redly over the metal of their armor and weapons. The hall alight, the men rejoined Cnut by the door.

The mead hall, as was customary in the North, had only one way in or out, the solid double door. The better to defend against attacks by raiders, cattle thieves, or trolls. This arrangement had long provided the Northlanders with a more defensible arrangement for protecting their homes and hearths, but just as it created a bottleneck for attackers trying to gain entry so too it did for defenders trying to get out. For this reason — the mutual survival of all — the unwritten code of the North forbade the burning of a hall with the same condemnation and revile as one who would break the laws of hospitality. There was no respite of forgiveness for a hall-burner. Such a one was to be hunted by all to the very end of his days until dragged before a jarl or Thing to receive the just punishment for such a deed. Though many a war could have been won over the years with a hallburning, normal men of the Northlands feared the consequences too much to even entertain the notion — normal men, not the nine courageous men that Cnut had brought with him. He and these men were not normal men; in his mind they were exceptional men. Men with the courage to break from the old ways as a means to the ends. Let Valhalla and Niflheim both tremble before men such as these.

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The roof fully ablaze, smoke would quickly be filling the mead hall, more than could escape through the hole in the roof which was designed for cooking fires, not major conflagrations. Anwulf, Hegi, Júrġan, and Lame Ottí flanked the doors on either side while Cnut stood in front, shield strapped to his arm and battleaxe at the ready. Skorrbin and Starkathr stood just behind him with the remaining men. They all could hear the shouts of dismay inside: fear, confusion, and outrage replaced the sounds of celebration from before. Those inside would see the smoke and hear the flames crackling in the thatch. They would immediately know what was happening and all that it meant. The ten men outside likewise knew what was coming and patiently waited for it.

The doors swung suddenly outward, and smoke washed over the men arrayed around it, stinging their eyes and briefly setting them to coughing as it filled the air around them. They recovered quickly, as the first shape loomed in the doorway, a shadow within the gray, choking cloud of smoke. This would be one of the jarl's mightiest huscarls, his elite warriors. The man's job was simple: break a hole in the enemies ranks so the people trapped in the hall could escape. This was the only way out and the only option available to those inside.

The warrior stumbled forward, his eyes trying to adjust in the smoke and sudden of the night darkness and focus on the foes he knew would be lying in wait. He had had no time to don armor but carried a round wooden shield with iron boss and a short sword for close quarter fighting. The huscarl squinted, eyes running from the sharp smoke, and took a step forward, shield and sword held defensively. He played for time, waiting for the enemy to strike and show his position, so he could make his counterattack. The other huscarls were assembling behind him, but he would

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be first and bring glory to his name. The skalds would sing of his heroics around warm hearth fires.

A pain blossomed in the warrior's side before he could even step out of the doorway, as a spear slid easily into his flank, just below his ribs. Before he could roar in pain, from his other flank a greatsword, thrust and tore into his upper calf, hitting bone. Smoke clogged his throat as he gagged and stumbled. The sounds of chaos behind him seemed to ring louder in his ears than even his suddenly pounding pulse, spurring him on despite the pain. He must, he knew, clear the doorway and take the battle to the enemy to give his people a fighting chance. With a sudden surge, he lunged forward. His vision cleared just in time to see Cnut's advance. A battleaxe seemed to hang in the air, edge-on, electricity curling around its blade, and then it descended with a whistling cut. Before the injured warrior could raise his shield, the axe carved downward into his throat and through, into his breastbone. The arcs of electricity humming on the blade's edge leapt off, coursing through his body setting his nerves alight in the spasmodic twitching of his entire body.

The huscarl died before he even hit the ground, falling backwards into the doorway. His lifeless, still-twitching, body landed at the feet of his comrades behind him. Motes of electricity still crackled around the blackened edges of his horrific wound. A moment of stillness froze the terrible scene, the cries of the jarl's family and guests momentarily silenced in their frantic for escape from the burning death trap. The sudden ending of the jarl's most valiant warrior gave even their own struggle for life pause...but only for a single breath.

The remaining huscarls readied themselves to burst out through the doorway, and the ten outside waited, their weapons steaming with the first blood. The huscarls knew failure meant the death of not just themselves and their jarl, but for everyone in the mead hall — their wives, their children, their servants. The entire village of Vestfellmarken was present in the hall this night for the jarl's name-day feast. Whoever these foul hall-burners were, they knew the jarl and his ways. They knew this attack had to be personal and that the men outside were not here to take thralls or plunder. They knew that their only goal was murder and that unless they fought a path free, that goal would be fully realized.

Stumbling through the smoke, another huscarl hurled himself forward, leaping over the body of his slain brother-in-arms, swinging his greataxe in rage, his fury lending him strength. He cleared the doorway, coming down with an overhead chop deflected by Cnut's shield with a splintering of wood. Cnut's shield arm momentarily paralyzed by the ferocious blow, he hopped back, and the deflected swing struck the shoulder of Otr Skeggi who cried out at the sudden pain. Lame Otti stepped in, nimbly for one so graceless, wielding a greataxe the size of a small man. Otti batted away the huscarl's next blow as if the other man were a petulant child swinging a stick. His own axe head found purchase across the haft of the huscarl's axe, and the warrior cried out as three of his fingers flew free and his grip slipped on the wooden handle. With a guttural noise, Otti pressed the advantage, striking again and again in a mindless fury until the huscarl slumped forward, dead, with his remaining numbed fingers still wrapped around his shattered weapon — the hope of all Northlander warriors in death. At least he would have the chance to see Valhalla.

The next huscarl quickly took his fallen comrade's place, catching the shaft of Anwulf's spear with a free hand while his own broad sword parried Hegi's greatsword. Júrgan leaned in hard, the point of his short spear stabbing the desperate man through the shoulder. Taking the opportunity with the huscarl off balance, Uverd maneuvered around beside the warrior. His short saber flashed like in a blur as he struck fast, targeting vital spots in a quick succession of pinpointed strikes. The huscarl quickly joined his fellows, though this time, sword fell from lifeless fingers. No valkyries would greet him.

The ten attackers fought in tandem, creating a choke point. None could deny the bravery of the huscarls as they fought to escape, but what choice did they have? Only a pair of the doomed warriors could fit through the doorway at a time and each of those times, they were met with a wall of steel, striking from all directions. It did not matter what strategy the huscarls employed; every time one of them stepped through into the doorway, he faced certain death. Yet still they tried and the men outside cut them down like wheat before the scythe, their bodies stacking in the doorway like fallen sheaves until they had to be pulled away by those inside to allow the next pair of huscarls to emerge. Each dead man dragged within seemed to stare

up at his fellows in hopeless appraisal of their struggle. Even the gods had turned away from Jarl Gundrik in his most desperate hour.

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The heat inside the mead hall felt like the furnaces of the Dvergar where the forged weapons of legend from the very fires of the earth. Smoke filled the entirety of the central hall causing those inside to resemble ghosts, perhaps an omen of the wyrd that the Norns had laid for them. The fire, started on the roof, was now eating its way downward, slithering along the rafters and climbing down walls. The crackle and hiss of the flames and the ear-splitting pop of splintering wood, promised death as surely as the monsters waiting outside in the darkness. Rich tapestries hung on the walls to ward against cold drafts burst into fire, shriveling to ash as they fell on those trapped within the hall.

While the huscarls fought and died to try and allow the others to escape, others ran about consumed by a madness brought on by panic, smoke inhalation, and rapidly spreading flames. Some clawed and scratched at the wooden walls as if the stout timbers would give way, charring their hands on the intense heat radiating off of them. As burning thatch rained down around them, others sought shelter by hiding under the long feasting tables as if the flames working their way down the walls would not be able to find them. The screaming of the doomed within and the dying cries of the huscarls without echoed inside while the fire roared louder as if in competition with the noise of the helpless folk.

One older man crawled along the floor, trying to stay under the smoke, searching for a way out, maybe in the back, though it was pointless — one way in, one way out — the way Northlander halls had been built for centuries. Coughing, vision blurring, he moved past bodies of those who had already succumbed to the heat and smoke, easily as deadly as the murderers' steel blades. He searched frantically for someone...who? It was too hard to think with the screaming all around him. Or was it he who was screaming? His mind muddled by smoke and fear, he could only move forward, his clothes stained with ash and falling embers. He clambered over a woman's fallen body, her lifeless eyes locking briefly with his. Was this who he was looking for? She seemed familiar... Grasping her hand, he half-dragged, half-pulled her along behind him as he pushed slowly forward.

His grip began to loosen on the woman's hand and he looked back at her, again into those cold, staring eyes as if remembrance could bring salvation from this nightmare. With a thud, he pushed up against a wall, though what wall he could not tell. By now, there was too much smoke to see anything in front of him. He could have gone in circles for all he knew. He pushed up against the wall again, trying to will it give way beneath his strength as the heat smothered him. But Northlander halls are built to withstand the blows of giants, their timbers carefully chosen for strength and thickness. There was no escape here. Weak, dizzy, and nauseated he leaned back against the unyielding wall, scanning the fiery gloom once more for the woman...one more time, trying to remember her. Was she his wife? His daughter? His air-starved mind struggled to remember. One more time he looked...before the darkness claimed him.

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The huscarls all lay dead in and around the doorway, and the last few householders still capable of bearing arms continued the fight, though the slaughter had slowed. Enough bodies clogged the doorway to make it difficult for both the men outside as well as in to get at each other. Bodies were pulled away on both sides of the doorway as they fell, making room for more but it was getting difficult to find places to put them out of the way.

Despite their skill at arms, the huscarls had been unable to penetrate the half-ring men that awaited them. The last remaining householders fared no better. The heat made them swoon, made their legs sluggish, and their sword and axe swings clumsy. These householders — hirthmenn all who had faced raids by giants and worse things from the mountains over the years — these men now flailed like feeble old men rather than experienced warriors, only the strongest amongst them able to hold onto their weapons as they died. As each one fell someone, whether friend or foe, would drag the body aside so the killing could continue.

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A few people hiding under a feasting table heard the rafters of the mead hall rattle, the timbers groaning as the flames ate away at them. The



death throes of splintering wood sounded as a section of the roof crashed through a table as if it were a clay pot, crushing the lucky ones beneath it and burning the others alive. A woman, her dress torn and hair smoldering from bits of thatch, gazed at the scene of destruction around her, her mind and senses addled. Next to her, she could dimly see her husband through the smoke. The fallen rafter lay across his shattered legs, while burning thatch made his tunic smolder. He repeatedly spasmed weakly, as if trying to get up, not fully realizing that he was trapped. The woman, in her grief and madness, turned away from him. Fighting her way to her feet, she stood up.

The woman pushed her way forward, knocking down others in a blind, desperate bid to escape. The burning roof fell all around her. Unable to see, she clawed and punched at anything appearing out of the smoke. Another rafter collapsed in front of her, barely missing her. She stumbled over it, half falling and half crawling, tearing her skin and burning her flesh. She couldn't even scream for all the smoke searing her lungs. Her vision swam before her in the shimmering waves of heat. The woman collapsed to her knees and slowly sank to the floor. Just ahead of her, she saw three figures: Jarl Gundrik, his son Egill, and his wife Runa. Booted feet stampeded over her and her final thoughts fled with the last of her life. It was a scene repeated throughout the mead hall; the smoke and heat did the murderers' work for them and the people died, cursing the men outside for the sin they were committing and themselves for turning even from loved ones in a desperate bid for escape. It was one thing to die in battle but like this, in a burning hall, this was an act against the gods themselves.

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Another householder fell, this time at the feet of Jarl Gundrik. He, with wife and son clinging to him, had carefully made their way through the inferno towards the hall's entrance. With them was his last huscarl, the elderly Végestr who had served Gundrik's father before him. Once the strongest and most skilled of the huscarls, Végestr now spent his days dozing before the hearth and telling tales of old to the children. Now he stood with his jarl, naked blade in a hand trembling with age and eyes rheumy with age.

Gundrik, face and beard stained with soot and ash, fiery thatch burning holes in a once rich cloak, let out a roar despite the smoke threatening to suffocate him. His battle cry rejuvenated the old Végestr, who raised his sword in feeble arms strengthened with renewed purpose. They moved forward along with Egill who clutched a fine sword of his own, masterfully crafted by a dwarven smith in Trotheim. The three men — one bent with age, one at the end of his prime, and one still in full flush of youth — pushed forward, silver arm-rings clicking together softly as they pushed through the bodies of friends and family. Runa remained a few paces back at the word of her husband. He would see them free he had promised, even if his shade had to hold the center of the shieldwall. She hated that he talked like that; she loved that he talked like that.

Gundrik met the assault at the door with his own steel, a heavy sword which had tasted battle many times before. He hacked and slashed at the weapons greeting him: spears, axes, and swords. Ancient Végestr stood to one side, expertly parrying the blades aimed at him with a skill not seen since his own prime, while Egill squeezed through the doors to his other side, using his smaller stature and dwarf-forged blade to protect his father's flank. Blade strokes fell all around the three warriors. Roaring again and again, Gundrik fought with the desperation of a cornered boar. His sword spat sparks again and again as it met those of his foes, staving off certain death.

The ten men smelled victory and pressed their attack. Cnut shoved Skorbín back as Gundrik's sword shattered the man's shield into pieces. Egill's sword came perilously close to Cnut himself, who delivered a back hand swing in answer. The blow sank deep into young Egill's side but only delivered wound, not a killing stroke. Cnut then attempted to engage Gundrik, but the taller man had reach and desperation on his side, slowly forcing the men back with his wild and reckless swings.

The mead hall's roof shuddered suddenly and loudly as if to accompany the noise of the battle below. From inside, Runa could see it sagging over the doorway, the burning hell of flames that awaited above, separated from those below by only the thinnest remaining layer of thatch. She desperately pushed against the backs of her son and her husband, trying to

force them farther out with what little strength remained to her.

Blood-spattered Starkathr bounded forward, cleaving into the old huscarl's neck and hooking the man with his axe. In a berserker rage of near inhuman strength, Starkathr yanked hard on his axe, pulling the now-dead man towards him. Howling with evil glee, Starkathr lifted the corpse of old Végestr, dented blade still clutched in hand, over his head and with a mighty heave threw it at Gundrik and Egill. The body did no hurt but rocked the both of them on their feet, knocking them off balance and causing them to falter in their attacks. The ten hand-picked men, sporting no more than minor nicks and cuts themselves, closed on the pair like wolves on a wounded hind.

Exhausted and broken in spirit, Runa stepped back from the doorway and gazed at the floor. She summoned all that was left of her strength and courage for one final push. As she looked up again, her eyes widened in horror as she saw blade after blade strike home on her husband and son. Their shields and their own blades were insufficient to parry them all, and both were soon frozen in place where they stood in the doorway, pierced many times by the steel of their foe. As the blades were withdrawn, the paralysis that had seemed to hold them aloft was suddenly gone, and for a second that seemed to stretch into eternity, Gundrik and Egill stood upright and motionless. If she squinted just right, Runa thought to herself, she couldn't even tell that they were injured — perhaps just standing in the doorway as they returned in triumph from a day's hunt. But the illusion — of her mind as much as of her eyes — could not last. The pair's limbs contorted at angles speaking of intense pain, and knees sagged, as suddenly all strength fled from them. Then, ever so slowly, together they crumpled forward onto the ground. Jarl and heir. Father and son. Brothers in arms, they lay together on the blood-slick earth. Runa saw it all, and she screamed a crying paean of horror and loss that threatened to burst her lungs.

The mead hall shuddered like a dying thing, its death rattle echoing through the skeleton of its charred timbers. Runa, enraged, clawed her way into the doorway, ripping away an obstructing body with a strength not her own. She stood tall, the daughter of Erik of Roskilde, breathing labored, body heaving with anger and exhaustion. She locked gazes with the ten men, her senses fully focused by her hatred for them. She drank in the sight of them, reveled in the clarity of ever nick and hurt they carried, gagged on the foul miasma of their fetid murderers' breath. She affixed their appearance in her memory, for all time, to spread before the seat of Wotan himself. She stared unflinchingly as they advanced on her. They would show her no mercy, she knew, but at least she would join her husband and son in the afterlife. Her wits were quick enough to pick up a dropped sword from the ground. Gundrik and Egill had died with sword in hand as men of courage, men of mind's worth. To join them she too must feast in Valhalla, she knew.

Cnut reached her first, blocking her untrained and clumsy attack and then callously giving her a slap that sent her spinning but not down. Smiling grimly at his own unexpected cruelty, he moved in for the kill. With a final shriek like its own anguished cry of defeat, the front of the Jarl Gundrik's hall collapsed. Cnut and his men were forced to scramble backward as timbers fell to avoid them. More timbers joined the cascade, and then the rest of the roof gave way, falling into the smoking hollow that was less than an hour earlier a joyous mead hall. The walls soon joined the collapse, completely the destruction.

Coughing from the effluvia of debris and dust thrown up by the hall, the ten men looked around and at each other in stunned silence. Where Runa Gundrikswif had stood a moment before was now nothing more than a heap of burning rubble. Even they had not expected such a gruesome finale for the jarl's wife.

Flames still raged but their work was done. The destruction was complete; nothing but a pile of burning timbers remained of Jarl Gundrik's mead hall. In the flickering light of the fires, the men scanned for signs of movement or other telltale signs of any survivors. Nothing but the roar of fire answered them. No one could survive in that crushing inferno. Of Runa there remained no sign. A pile of burning timbers lay where she had stood over the corpses of her husband and son, a fitting barrow for the dead buried beneath.

The day was theirs. Now was the time for strong drink and soft women. The courageous few who had dared challenge the laws of men and even the gods had prevailed. Not a witness remained alive, so no wergild would

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be forthcoming, no pronouncement of outlaw would be laid against them. Theirs was a complete and total victory. Ten brave men stood in mute witness to their handiwork. Suddenly the night didn't seem quite so empty, the cold air of winter not quite so refreshing. The shadow walkers — *sce-adugenga* — were known to wander the night. A darkened forest could hide a thousand eyes; the chill of air could be the deadly gaze of the dead lingering on the living. The oldest races of mankind had forbidden hall-burning as an affront before the gods...they must have had good reason.

The smoke-stained, blood-spattered men gazed at each other and at the carnage they had wrought — the *wyrd* they had crafted for themselves. One by one they quietly backed away before turning and going the way from which they had come, until only Cnut stood beside the burning pyre. His mind snapped from dark contemplation with a start. He looked around and realized that he stood completely alone. A timber in the fire popped in a sudden shower of sparks. The night wind moaned through the boughs of a nearby tree. A sudden chill traced its way down his spine. Cnut Anglison quickly turned and retraced his steps as fast as his cold-numbed feet could carry him.

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Ten brave men fled into the night.

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As dawn neared, a fresh snowfall blanketed the massacre in a merciful burial shroud. The thickly falling flakes caused the lingering fires to hiss and spark until only steaming, smoldering pockets remained among the pile of charred timbers. From the pile near the former front of the hall a few of the timbers shifted slightly to reveal a pocket in the rubble below, a pocket formed by the side-by-side corpses of an older warrior and a young warrior, both still clutching hilt of sword in death. A narrow sheltered space, liberally covered in smoldering ash but clear of crushing debris, remained between them. From this sheltered hollow a trembling hand extended upward and pushed away another small piece of debris to enlarge the opening it had made. It was a hand horribly burned and bloodied. A hand hanging with ragged, charred strips of its own flesh. It was a woman's hand.

# The Endless Ice

By Nathan Shank

## GM Note

### Spoiler Warning: Light

“The Endless Ice” tells the tale of one of the Nûk, the tribes of elves that inhabit the frozen wastes beyond the North and her journey to save her son from the wendigo. It gives some details on the ways and customs of the Nûk. It does not tie in with any of the adventures in the *Northlands Saga Adventure Path* and is safe to read for players who will be playing through those adventures. For a player who intends to play one of the Nûk elves, it could even prove useful in providing some insight into the character.



he spirits would guide her.

A movement at the edge of sight caught her attention, and her legs instinctively locked. Her dogged facial expression sank into a camouflage of lifelessness. She resembled a tree or a fallen log. In her thoughts she faded from herself and slipped into the practiced immobile state of invisibility.

The movement flickered again. She resisted the urge to run. She remained frozen.

*Don't move! Is it a wolf? A bear? A snow raptor?*

The possibilities were many, all promising death. She willed herself to not turn her head to glance. Slowly the glimpsed blur came into focus before her as it crossed into her line of sight, and it resolved into the harmless piebald tern. It limped and fluttered across the ageless tundra sky with a lamed right wing. Relief flooded through her.

Eyes-of-Fire left her statue, returned to herself. The bird's omen meant Ragnarök, the Truth That Comes at Twilight. And yet, as it was injured, its presage was uncertain. She knew the lone tern was not lost but only delayed a few hours behind its flock. Still, it would lose its power of flight in a day, would hobble for an hour afterward, and would die or be eaten before the next hour closed. The tern opened its mouth as it passed above her, but its cry was carried away by the tundra's immensity. Eyes-of-Fire knelt, pressed her lips to the icy earth, prayed without words.

The tern was the only sign of life she had seen that day. The frigid tundra hid some and deterred most.

The changing light through the blowing clouds revealed the tern's right wing was nearly frozen stiff. Its delicate feathers could not extend on the downstroke nor fold on the upstroke. It had become a seal's flipper with its injury. The creature's tiny feet pushed and the left wing fluttered unhelpfully. If it knew how slow it was crawling by land instead of its peerless sky route, it did not show it.

Eyes-of-Fire was hungry. She doubted the bird would survive. It could her give the strength needed to go just a bit farther, maybe even just far enough. It might stretch her own life a day. If that day meant meeting a spirit or crossing over the edge into a pocket of hope, then—

*Embersæge.*

*Mission.*

*Death.*

She passed on without looking at the tern.

Eyes-of-Fire had been traveling long enough to forget the glow of a hearth fire, but cold was no longer a problem for her. Cold was habit, a part of her routine: Breakfast. Cold. Check bundle. Cold. Push the ice for ten hours. Cold. Break for dinner smaller than the night before. Cold. Bow low in thanks for the food. Cold. Seek a safetree. Cold. Sleep. Cold.

This was her new life, for however many days it took. Eyes-of-Fire no

longer shivered. Each portion of life was its own time. Eyes-of-Fire no longer counted the days. Now was a time of need, and so it would also be of Cold.

But Cold was not an oppressor. Cold was detailed into the skin of Eyes-of-Fire and her tundra elf kin of frozen Nûkland. It slowed the body, made it stiff, like armor on the smallest scale. It gave its own sensation when holding a block of ice or patting out the fire with bare palms. It was a perpetual thaw. And somewhere, back in lineage and time, it still bore an ache; but otherwise, it was sight. To the Nûk, Cold was the only companion, the dull solace in times of need. Even the spirits could not be so loyal.

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Weeks before the great beast had risen cackling from the fire. She had been out on the hunt. Longer and later than usual, the hunters had stayed poised in the trees until the elk trusted that their scent was part of the sunless groves. When they returned in joyous spirits carrying the fat carcass and with fresh wine frothing in their horn casks, the fire-circle held sober faces. All of them — Embersæge, his brothers and sisters, the Old One and other elders, and winking Önnok — had seen the spirit take form. It grew, they said, from the fire before them: great antlers, unlike any won from a hunt, clawed outward unnaturally. An equine snout followed, leading to a long, emaciated and torso with taloned forelimbs and ending in charred, birdlike stumps of legs. But if it was the spirit of their long-stalked dinner that had just been brought into camp, it had emerged in retribution rather than sacred remembrance as had sometimes occurred in the past.

Önnok cracked his crab-like arms and smacked his flapping lips. “Not a kind spirit,” he rasped, “willing to give when it takes. No, all of the mouth it was. Teeth tore at us. Fire and lashes. I blessed the sand in my hand and thrashed it with whips of the sacred grains. It reared in fear and slipped away into the blaze.” Whether in fear or disgust, the spirit beast had left the Nûk fire-circle in body, but its chilling image had sunk deep into their stomachs, the seat of their thought and being. It would not soon be forgotten.

The planned celebration feast interrupted by the strange visitation, they buried the fresh elk carcass far from camp and ate the winter's frost-burnt meal instead. Önnok said they had reached their arm out too far, taken more than their fair share. Too many hunts. Too much waste. The clan was not safe. Penance would be their master until fear consequences had been fulfilled. Önnok drew in his piles of sand and pounded the ground in front of Danut, Eyes-of-Fire, and the other Nûk hunters. They had behaved like those our fathers had left so many years ago, he had said. Like those who still remained in their endless pursuit revelry and meaninglessness. The Nuk were lucky yet to not all be buried in the snows of their iniquities. The spirits had been quite clear, Önnok decided. Prayer would heal.

But the spirits do not trust mortal promises. Neither do they mind mortal wishes. No one was safe. Embersæge was not safe.

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This land was unlike any other clime known to the Nûk. It went on. Sometimes it declined, other times inclined. No safe hills of trees protected. The expanse was vulnerability. Occasional clumps of stunted, wind-battered trees were the only distinguishing relief from the endless open drifts.

Everywhere the land reflected the cold and the icy, mirroring clouds. Even the smallest life became immense in the space that was otherwise void.

She heard a scramble. Hooves shook the permafrost. Antlers cut through the cold mist from the nearby dusky trees. A massive elk, its fur coat covered in ice, strode into Eyes-of-Fire's presence. His proud breast rose and fell, steam challenging the frosty air cooling his skin. He looked at Eyes-of-Fire as if to speak, and a hushed intelligence articulated his face into an expression she recognized somewhere in the back of her memory.

Eyes-of-Fire held her breath for a moment, cleared her throat, and started to speak—

The elk cut her off by smashing his teeth into the crippled tern. All she could see was the churning of horns as it bent to its task. The elk snorted and huffed and bustled as the tern's bones snapped like sticks and her feathers shredded.

For the first time, Eyes-of-Fire was afraid. And she ran.

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Eyes-of-Fire approached a frozen pool surrounded only by more miles of endless tundra. Her wind-burned and bleeding likeness gazed up at her. Wrists and brow showed the skin peeling apart in dry curls. Worst of all her trials — more than the cold and hunger, cuts and blisters, fear, and even the ultimate uncertainty of her journey — was the isolation. Eyes-of-Fire had never been alone before. Elk-Soul had been her hunting companion since they were children who threw spears at seals that surfaced in the Three Rivers, stealing those young kills on the weeks filling their clan's yearly route to the coast. Sæt, her great-grandmother, had raised her in the family tent amid brothers and sisters now long lost to disease and disaster. Always, her family was her spear. The Nûk did not abandon each other, and seeing this, the spirits had always guided them. In spite of their retribution, they would now accompany her in the absence of mortal shoulders.

In a moment of indulgence, Eyes-of-Fire let herself see her family brace her wrists and ankles where her thick leather jerkin met her mitts and where her boots tugged close with each step that made the skin more raw, swollen, and split. Her grandmother would fire an elixir from sacred blood and mix it with wine and dark spices to poultice the wounds. They would harden stronger than before. And the same was true if one of them died. The others would bind tighter or birth a new link that would solidify their strength. Perhaps, with no Nûk to save her from exposure, she would be that passing bond. But none were here to even know this thought.

The pain was getting worse. Eyes-of-Fire needed help. She could not hunt alone.

*To be alone is to die.*

Yet in this chafing silence, the sky spoke. It told of the next day and sometimes the next stretch of land. And the land replied. It told of the day before and sometimes the years before. It told Eyes-of-Fire that some of her people had once passed this way. She was not alone in her march north. Though none knew what lay beyond the taiga and tundra, a syllable dip in the flat plain spoke of a huddled trudge through the listless land, movement that had disrupted the uniformity of the basic landforms that rose and fell before Eyes-of-Fire. There was a speech there that she knew and could interpret into life.

Eyes-of-Fire continued to gaze at her sullen likeness. She saw the Nûk in the rosy ice.

*The Nûk always care for themselves.*

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She was so tired that the land danced before her. No comfort, though, could be spared. Spots in her eyes became blinking clouds in a distance of vague white and blue rocklike wisps. The day had fallen in on itself without her realizing. Nameless movements flushed her vision from the sides inward.

*Death is a long ways off. A mother's errand always triumphs. Fire is stronger than ice... isn't it?*

Eyes-of-Fire paused and collected herself. The unshifting distance had left her soulless and alone. The shapeless vertigo in her eyes now migrated to her thoughts. Her short shanks tightened. Her neck begged to rest against something solid.

*But how far is it? Where is it? A blurry distance is no sign of reaching the end. Survival is certain, but the destination may not be.*

His curse must be cured. That's all that matters. Crossing these barren ice fields draws near the promise of hope.

*Or is it hope of promise?*

The distance dipped, as though following the world to its end did not arrive in a hill or a wall or a misty barrier like all the stories foretold, but instead in a downward, gentle incline, forever. The frozen ground listed like a lone windswept tree.

*Embersæge depends completely on Eyes-of-Fire.*

Eyes-of-Fire is Nûk. The Nûk are strong and have overcome much worse, have made journeys to make this tundra trek seem a hike. Some have called the Nûk the steadiest of the Alfär.

*Yes, north, north. Go north. North or nothing. No more than north. No less than anything. That is the journey. Giving up is unsayable, unthinkable.*

Her thoughts had become jumbled. The ice glared at her and made her forget what was what. And it all stemmed from being upset about the tern. Or from unimagining her son back to who he was. He was not that creature with the aloof eyes and nubby legs. He strode like the breeze, could notch an arrow as easily as a mother brings a babe to breast.

*Three things always triumph: the returning wind, the diurnal sun, the layering of snow.*

Motion seemed to take focus and then still. The day sun was unmoving, but the earth tilted.

*But death slips upon the unwary... And the wary as well?*

Every part of her ached. Eyes-of-Fire scoffed at her weakness and continued on.

*Or then again, maybe the destination is known. Where does that leave survival?*

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Embersæge had heard the howl. He told it all to her in a blubbing fit when he returned, before his body began to change. It was the middle of the night. Eyes-of-Fire had no idea he had even left the tent. Even Önnok on his pallet in the center of the sleeping band did not catch the fateful bay that roused her son.

Embersæge went out to it. The world to him became a snow tunnel, and he could no more imagine running another course than leaving the safety of the snow-packed passages amidst a blizzard. He approached it. The mournful cry was muffled. Its wapiti net of horns was all that could be seen as its flat enamel teeth chomped through the skull and sinews of some small unidentifiable beast. Incapable of a human smile, the creature's spattered mouth stretched at the ends and, as Embersæge panted with fear in its presence, its eyes grew into a terrible, omniscient knowing.

Shriveled legs touching lightly as a dancer's pivoted the fulsome nightmare of an elk with three quick swivels until it towered over Embersæge. He could feel its hot breath from the fresh blood and smell the cold sweat on its wooly coat. *It was one of our spirits*, Embersæge swore to Eyes-of-Fire, his fever burning badly. It was an Elk-god.

The Nûk have no gods but the souls of the trees, the beasts, the land. The Nûk have no god above all. All spirits are holy, none most holy.

But Embersæge was in earnest. He spoke in feverish bursts, and his eyes became distracted, not quite Nûk. It was most likely from the long run to confront the beast, leaving him flustered. Over days his arms swelled and grew brawny and coarse. Eyes-of-Fire had not noticed how the hair manhood had taken upon him. No, Eyes-of-Fire had been so sure he was still a child only days before. Then, hideously, his legs had started to shrivel. After that, the transformation came quickly.

She had stared in horrors at his mouth now spouting gibberish, at his teeth that were no longer his teeth. They widened and smelt of a blood not his own. It was horrible. It was her flesh, her face that grew the ragged bumps and had the tawny horns protruding through black curls. Her legs stretched and shrank, her organs changed. She felt it as her own body. Seeing and feeling and being became one.

Eyes-of-Fire gazed lastly into her son's eyes and told him, "My final breath with you, my son, lest my final breath save you."

# THE NORTHLANDS SAGA COMPLETE

And she had run.

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Its jaws clamped around her arm before she could react. Faster than any gray wolf she had ever seen, it cut the distance between horizon and presence. The white land erupted in noise, and her body erupted in pain. Her hide coat seemed thinner than skin in trying to block yellow fangs.

*Kill it!*

She screamed inside, she pushed fear away, she stilled her soul — all in an instant. Throwing her weight toward her head, Eyes-of-Fire flipped her small, squat frame and sent the wolf scrabbling over the bumpy ice, taking her flesh with it.

She regained her feet, the wolf already charging at her with teeth bared.

*Run! Run, you fool!*

Eyes-of-Fire jumped headlong into the timberwolf. Their bodies collided in a stiffly-frozen mash of fur and nail and skin. Eyes-of-Fire might have had some wolfblood in her, to see the ferocity and aim of her blows, the complete trust when she used her teeth as weapon, the yellow fire in her own eyes.

For a moment, the rough-and-tumble battle was an equal match. Two similar foes tore at one another.

*Its throat! Bite its throat!*

And then the deed was done. Blood-soaked, Eyes-of-Fire loomed like a sorceress over the carcass in front of her, and she raised an ear-splitting cry into the heavy skies.

An echo — or a voice — answered.

While her rage still held, she threw together a fire. She heaved the wolf on top. She ate its scorching meat. The only trace of sentience left in her was the gracing of her mind with the image of a poor, deformed son.

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Night passed over the tundra. There was no safetree. There were no more trees at all. Eyes-of-Fire had been marching for a long, long time. Her stomach felt like that of a wakened bear in spring. Her feet were worn bare as ice. She feared the next season like a tree in autumn's prime. She was falling.

Gradually but perceptibly, the ground beneath her ceaseless feet began to slicken. What spirit knew the kind of land she now tread? No stars lit the sky. Land, sky, and Eyes-of-Fire were one night. Wind bore with flat line force around her. Eyes-of-Fire pressed forward against it.

She heard a prolonged, low, ratchetting crack. She froze. Though she could see nothing in the pitch black, in her mind's eye the path was vivid. Her solid ground had become ice. The ice had become thin. The thin ice had begun to break.

*Good comes to those who pass a test of pain and courage. Danger and fear must befriend those whose eyes gain the creases of wisdom. But death severs some. Not all gain aged truths.*

Yes, nothing was certain. The separated ice branched out in her imagination, set her in a slow, sink to a lightless grave. But this was worth resisting.

*But Eyes-of-Fire is nearing death.*

*But Embersæge.*

*But her feet.*

*But his face made a horrid mask.*

*But her strength-less limbs.*

*But the cries in the wild nothing.*

*But the certainty of danger made flesh.*

*But she was Nûk.*

*Is the risk of your life worth the chance of changing his? Is your death equal to a baseless hope?*

Not all baseless. Önnok had prophesied that the spirits dwelled beyond the tundra. That in times of desperation, they were a salve, waiting to be balm to the wounded hand in need.

*There is no cure for the curse of the wendigo.*

What? Eyes-of-Fire did not know “wendigo,” but as soon as it sounded in her head, she did know it. The hind skin, the branching antlers, the terrible and lifeless legs. Wendigo.

A brush of light signaled the return of day. She could see little more

than a formless landscape under the moonless sky. The cold rushed around her. Her legs burned. Her eyes begged sleep. But another part of her soul awakened, quickened by fear and new knowledge.

She was not alone.

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She was seven. Lost in the Wyrms Fang Peaks. She hadn't eaten for three sunrises and two sunsets. Her attempts to spark a fire with flint had winked out fruitlessly. Her knife had broken when sawing at a stony tree trying to make a shelter. She was called the “soft girl” and even thought of herself as soft, like gypsum.

Night was cutting in over the peaks quickly and, having waited with all her will for as long as she could in a shallow shelf along a mountain rise, she had felt the first terror of true despair. Then broke into the gray light the proud silhouette of a bull elk. It hadn't spied her, but she knew her scent was a giveaway. Besides that, her knife broken, she was weaponless, and her perch was no safe haven. She was a soft, hungry, weaponless, vulnerable girl. She even felt the cold that her people had learned to ignore.

The bull gave a heave and collapsed.

Eyes-of-Fire felt a thrill of energy and a fear of the unknown. She poised herself on the edge of the shelf, scanning for the source of danger.

But whatever enemy had injured the elk had gone. Its legs too weak to rise from the ground, the bull lifted its eyes toward her perch. It asked.

No, no, no. This was not her role. She was to come to the mountains and kill and win her victory and so gain her name among her people, or else salt the peaks with her fleshless bones. She was to be the hunter. Hers was the kill.

But the soft girl went down to him. There she saw the four slashes across the bull's breast. A residue from the talons that tore those gashes webbed dark purple and green.

She knelt and dipped her head, releasing her guard. “Dear spirits,” she prayed, “here lies a noble beast. I have not seen what thing would kill and not eat, or attack without blessing, but I submit this soul to be safe among yours.” She ripped a strip from her essential cloak and bound the garish wounds, knowing the dressing would not heal. She dribbled water out of her thin waterskin into its parched mouth. A silence passed between them.

“Now forgive me, father.”

Then the soft girl broke her softness as with rock for mallet and broken branch for chisel she wrenched the noble beast's towering antlers off his head. Ribboning her cloak, she bound the antlers to her wrists. She took off through the trees. She hunted as the bull. She let out a howl.

The seer who had been silently watching her woman journey from hiding, bored and worried a moment before, could now barely keep pace with the soft girl who was starving to death. New life filled her veins and reshaped her face. When he finally caught up to her, he found her straddling the wolf carcass, bearing the bloodied antlers before her, eyes blazing.

The seer approached her confidently, then cautiously. “You are no longer the soft girl. You are the hunter. You are Eyes-of-Fire.”

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“I am Eyes-of-Fire. Who are you?” She bore no doubt, only daring. The thin ice around her could shatter at any moment. The wind pushed from behind.

*Your weary thoughts. Or what happens when you are truly alone. Or your imagination unhinged.*

“But you said a name. The name of the creature that transformed Embersæge. Wendigo. The claws and the stumps. I saw it true in my mind. How could I know that?”

*Since you saved me that day, I have been part of you. But so has the fearsome beast that tore me down. Wendigo.*

“No — it can't be. No — I freed you that day.”

*You tried to save my mortal body. And I have sought to save yours in return.*

“For these years, since I hunted for the family, since I birthed my son, I have always known that you, in my memory, were the true Ragnarök, the truth that comes at twilight. How can you not be this when you were the truth that came to me and became me at twilight? How can you be the Angrök, the troubled dusk?”

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*I am not truth but loyalty. And I am both. In that, I am like you. And if you trust loyalty, I can take you beyond this cracking ice.*

“But how can I trust a being both good and evil?”

*All beings are both good and evil.*

A tension-filled silence huddled over the black tundra as Eyes-of-Fire considered her fate. She still could not make out the sunrise. Perhaps she had stolen so far north the sun no longer rose. Perhaps she would span the tentative ice and with this spirit's aid meet a being that none had ever seen. Perhaps he would give her the knowledge to save her son. Then again, perhaps his home, like hers, would be among the icy depths.

“You have seen the being that my son is becoming?”

*I have known it worse than you have.*

“And you have lived as both an elk in the Wyrn Fang Peaks and the wendigo beast who haunts the Nûkland?”

*I am the bloodshed of both. The land from this tundra to the North Sea has been my tent.*

“But have you loved Embersæge?”

A faint light filtered over a distant incline onto the frozen pier on which Eyes-of-Fire stood. A water smell lingered in the air. The tundra rumbled with a vibration deeper than thunder.

Eyes-of-Fire stepped forward, and the brittle ice gave way some, the water pooling around her feet. Hope so recently blossomed now withered. She stepped forward again, and the ice verged on cracking, but held yet another moment. She closed her eyes and looked ahead. Eyes-of-Fire took a deep breath, thought of Embersæge when he was a newborn babe, and took another, resolute step forward toward a frozen glade that held her salvation.



# The Sword of Kings

By Kevin Wright

## GM Note

### Spoiler Warning: Light

“The Sword of Kings” is a fable familiar to all children of the Northlands. It tells the story of the how the first and only High Kœnig of the Northlands, Kraki Haraldson came into possession of the legendary Sword of Kings, *Kroenarck*, and was launched on his path to destiny. While several of the adventures in the *Northlands Saga Adventure Path* relate to the long-dead High Kœnig and his fabled sword, allowing your players to read this story will not spoil any of the encounters in those adventures and will, in fact, serve to represent the knowledge that their characters would likely have already from their childhood if they were raised in the Northlands.



In the darkness before dawn, Kraki Thrallson slipped out of his father’s hovel and stalked silently past several other hovels every bit as ramshackle as his own ‘til he found the edge of town. From there he then strode bravely and foolishly into the long-accursed wood of Garmrdress.

Word had come to his small village that a battle had been waged in the forest the previous day: a troop of Jarlsmen had finally caught up with a band of wild

berserkers who had been terrorizing the countryside. The battle hadn’t been large by any standard — no more than thirty combatants on either side — but it had been bloody. Only a handful of survivors had escaped the carnage to find sanctuary in the village and bind their wounds.

“Why has no one gone to despoil the fallen?” young Kraki asked when he heard the news. “Surely there lay on the battlefield many fine axes and shields, torcs and arm-rings and other bright treasures. Will no one brave the woods and claim them for his own?”

The elders of the village shook their graying heads wisely and breathed deeply from their long clay pipes.

“No, young one,” they said, “None shall enter the darkened eaves of the Garmrdress and loot the dead. For the battlefield is claimed by the Lord of Crows and none shall draw from that dread one’s talons what he calls his own. The valkyries claim the souls of the brave, lifting them to Valhalla on wings of finest gold, but the rest belong to the Crow-lord and his feathery horde. That blood-soaked field is his domain.

Nay, lad,” they said, chuckling at his ignorance. “None that love life shall set foot on that battle ground, lest the Lord of Crows claim him as well.”

Kraki pondered this wisdom in silence for a good, long while. Eventually, he decided that it was dross and that he was going to ignore it completely. He wanted weapons and armor, to take his place in the shieldwall and to hear the maidens sing a paean in his name. But he was young yet...and the son of a thrall. None was there to gift him blade nor byrnie as a father would, much less arm-ring and honor. For too long Kraki had waited. He would wait no longer. Somewhere on that blighted battlefield lay a sharp spear or a burnished greataxe and they were going to be his no matter what some crow-thing might think of it. Like as not, the old men were full of wind about the whole thing anyway.

Now he found himself picking his way through the leaves of that darkened wood with only the flickering of a pitch-soaked brand and a wan moon to light his path.

Despite his earlier confidence, the ever-deepening gloom and the forest’s dire reputation gnawed at him. Misgivings grew in his heart. Perhaps there were no Crow-lord, but what if he should encounter a wolf? He knew that he would fight it with torch and fist, but he had once seen the remains

of a family that had been caught and eaten by a wolf pack. Their eyeless sockets haunted his dreams. He would fight, but he had no illusions that, weaponless, he could prevail against even one of those gaunt, gray-furred beasts. What if he reached the field of battle and one of the berserkers, revived from some stunning blow, caught him there? Could he escape one of those blood-mad warriors? What if he found a field full of bodies... bodies that were not alive, but also not dead? The lore of his people teemed with tales of wights who rose to slake their inhuman appetites on warm human flesh, of unliving draugr who roamed the desolate places, hungering for cold vengeance on those who would dare to keep breathing when they could not. Before long, Kraki couldn’t tell whether he shook more from cold or from the fear blossoming within him.

Fortunately, he reached his destination before his courage failed him utterly. He came upon an open meadow, awash in a somber pool of moonlight. Corpses of men were strewn across it like scattered leaves fallen after a storm. Among the slaughter lay an abundance of Sundered weapons, shattered standard, and broken bodies. Nothing moved except for a solitary black bird that glided from the shadows of the forest to land and peck at an eye in a heedless face.

A shuddering chill entered Kraki’s body as he surveyed the carnage. In that moment, all the boyish fancies he had about war and battle glory seeped from him only to be replaced by a curious certainty that he would see more scenes like this in his lifetime. That he would stand on battlefield after battlefield and that, each time, he would emerge the victor. Unbeknownst to him, Kraki’s wyrd had roosted full upon him.

The youth walked across the meadow, picking his way cautiously through the dead, keen to find weapons and armor that were whole and still serviceable. But his search seemed to be in vain. Everything he found was useless: here was a shield with no handle, there a sword with the blade snapped off. The best he’d found was a dented helmet and a spear with its shaft splintered off a foot beneath the spearhead. Muttering darkly, his fears forgotten, he roamed among the dead, continuing his quest.

Without warning, a violently fluttering, inky black mass seemed to congeal from the very air itself and overwhelm him; it was a sharp-beaked, harshly cawing murder of crows flown from the nearby forest eaves. Kraki squatted low, buffeted by a whirlwind of shadowy wings and slashing talons. He covered his eyes and lashed out wildly with his broken spear. The tumult created by the crows was deafening. The boy screamed a hoarse, panicky war-cry as he fought, fearing that he might lose his hearing as well as his eyes, but the dark swarm dispersed almost as quickly as it appeared.

Kraki huddled low, panting deeply. A score of tiny scratches covered his hands, neck, and face, stinging souvenirs of the murder’s swift attack. For a hundred racing heartbeats, nothing stirred on the lonely battlefield. Kraki stood, his hands shaking, and wondered what had just happened.

From the night air above, three dark figures swooped down and lit on the fallen bodies that lay before him. The two nearest him were monstrous

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crows, large as mastiffs and stinking of offal. They hopped from corpse to corpse, their black beaks tearing through armor, skulls, and rib cages to glut themselves on the soft viscera they found beneath. But ever their strange heads cocked in Kraki's direction. Ever they moved closer and closer to him, unearthly malevolence darkly radiating from every move they made.

The third figure had landed behind them and stood utterly still. It took a moment for Kraki to give it heed while faced with the avian monsters that drew ever nearer him. It was man-shaped, seemingly cloaked and hooded in a mantle of glossy black pinions. A beak extended from the front of its head, but Kraki caught sight of a pale, human face within its maw, its eyes black as midnight and its expression devoid of any human emotion. The words fell numbly from his freezing lips, "*The Lord of Crows.*"

As if his words were a signal, the monstrous birds leaped toward him with piercing cries and outstretched wings. Reacting more from fright than from courage, he struck out with his spear-shard at the first crow that came within reach. His aim couldn't have been more perfect, the spearhead shearing through the monstrosity's eye socket and into its brain. Kraki was knocked backward by the death-throes of the crow, losing his grip on the spear and his balance in at the same time. He fell over something in the dark; whether the body of a Jarlsman or berserker he could not say.

He struggled to rise, but the other fiendish crow flew up and upon him, stabbing its deadly beak into his brain-pan. That dented helmet saved him, turning the blow from his skull but directing it down his neck and into his shoulder. Kraki collapsed with a pain-filled shriek. With a strength he didn't know he had, he shoved the creature off of him. It beat its wings and rose, gathering power for its next lethal strike.

Kraki felt around on the ground for something — anything — to ward off the blow he knew would kill him. As the crow descended upon him, he grasped the handle of he-knew-not-what and slashed upward as he rolled to the side. That time, the bird shrieked, its feet hacked off by the axe in Kraki's hand. The beast rolled awkwardly on the ground and Kraki leapt to his feet and swung the axe again and again and again into the twitching body of the monstrous crow.

When, finally, it lay in an unmoving, ruined mass of bloody feathers, the boy rose shakily to his feet. His head swum uncertainly and his quivering legs felt as if they couldn't hold him up. The white moon seemed brighter, the details of the gory battlefield appeared sharper to his widened eyes. He breathed in deeply. Frigid air revived his burning lungs, and the pounding in his head ceased. Looking down, he saw that his torch lay practically at his feet, its flame nearly smothered by feathers. Kraki picked it up and with a breath, gently coaxed its embers back to life. He sighed and looked around him.

From across the corpse-filled field approached the Lord of Crows.

With quirky, bird-like motions it hopped and fluttered toward him. He couldn't rightly tell whether it seemed more a man in a crow-suit or bird with a beak-enclosed face. Either way, it horrified him.

The boy stood paralyzed as the thing approached. When it came within two spear-lengths, it stopped, cocked its queer head and peered intently at him.

"Hast slain my servants, booooooy?" it croaked.

"Art a doughty warrior, hmmm-mm?" Its voice held overtones of mellifluous Asgard and undertones of guttural Niflheim.

The Lord of Crows hopped to the side, circling Kraki. The boy turned, facing the crow-thing, his ax held at the ready.

"Knowest who I am, do yooooooooo?" Knowest who standeth before thee?" It stopped its movement to stoop over a cadaver, rip off an arm with its beak and hurl it into a nearby tree.

"Y-y-y-yes. I know who you are. You are the Lord of Crows," Kraki said. In horror, he watched the severed limb dangle from a branch.

The creature seemed pleased. "Awwwwk! So. My fame precedeth me. My name is still heavy on the tongues of men. That is well." It leapt onto a stump and preened itself, glimpses of its inhuman face peeking every once in a while from the depths of its razor beak. It spoke again.

"If thou knowest who I am, then thou shouldst know that thou standeth within my rightful domain. The valkyrie have claimed their own. The rest belong to meeeeeee. Why," it croaked, fluffing out its wings, "wouldst thou endanger thy body and soul by intruding here? Art thou mad with grief or head-wound? Seekest thou the long sleep?"

Kraki calmed himself as best he could. "No, Lord. I am neither mad nor do I desire death. I have come that I may find a weapon with which to do battle." He gestured with the axe in his hand. "No one will grant me

weapons. My father was disgraced in battle and lost his rightful name. He is now a thrall in the jarldom of Snorri Fairbeard. I would become a man of mind's-worth and so restore unto my father his name and his honor." His face burned at this confession for he was telling the dearest desire of his young, fiery heart.

"Awwwwk! Honor. Mind's-worth. The priiiiiide of men. These things hath served to fill my gullet these many centuries. But as often as I feast, the burning hunger always returneth. Always, always. And there are always boys just like you — foolish and brave — to rise up and feeeeee it.

Tell me, boy," it croaked, stepping from its perch and hopping uncomfortably nearer. "Thinkest thou that that rude bit of iron in your hand wilt bring thou unto glory?"

Kraki retreated a step. "I...I don't know," he said, looking down at the axe. "I only know that if I do nothing, then I will be nothing." His jaw set as he glared at the crow-thing. "And I will *not* be nothing."

The Crow-lord peered down at him, only two steps away. Through its blood-slimed beak Kraki could see that the eyes in the stark white human-like face were deepest black from pupil to sclera. That blackness sucked in the meager light from stars, moon, and torch and utterly devoured it. Kraki felt as if those eyes devoured him as well.

"Noooooooooooo," the Lord of Crows said quietly. "No. Now that I seeest thee I know that thou wilt not be nothing."

Kraki stood stock-still, feeling like a mouse frozen by the gaze of a hawk. The Lord ruffled his feathers and stepped back.

"But thou wilt not achieve the fame thou desirest with so crude an instrument. I knoooooweth where lies a blade beyond compare, wrought of divine metal and forged in dragon-fire. *Kroenarck* she is called, Icemelter, and strong as Garmr's bonds are the runes that lieth upon her. But hidden she is, yes, yes, hidden away from mortal eyes, and I alone know her resting place. 'Tis a shame for her to lie so lonely, lost from world of men and useless, buried in the damp clay."

Kraki said nothing as the Lord of Crows hopped back onto the stump and resumed his preening.

"Thinkest thee that thou art worthy of such a blade, boy? Wouldst thou claim Icemelter as thine own?"

Kraki tried to speak, but could not. At the word '*Kroenarck*', he felt as if a bell had been rung deep within him and that every member of his body resounded with its deep and thunderous call. When he gained control of himself, he said, "Lord of Crows, I say not that I am worthy, but I would give my life and fortune to claim such a sword. Tell me where it lies and I will claim it though I must climb Yggdrasil and plunder the Nine Worlds to call it my own."

"Awwkkhaaaaww! Such fire! I like thine heart. One day, I'll likely eat it. If truly thou pinest for *Kroenarck*, then I shall tell theeeeeeee how to gain her. Yet why shouldst I gift such a treasure and gain naught for myself? Wouldst this seem just in the eyes of god or man? Nay, boy. Nay. 'Twould be foolish of me. And the Lord of Crows is no fool."

Still reeling from the madness of his recent battle with the monstrous crows and heart aflame with desire for the sword, Kraki spoke without thinking.

"Please, Crow-lord! I would give my soul for such a blade! Tell me where I may find it!"

And for the first time, the youth saw an expression steal over the slackened face of the carrion-lord, one of exultation quickly tempered. It left behind the filthy residue of an oily smirk. Bodies and blood the fey creature had aplenty. Yes, fresh meat and muscle, mushy brain and unctuous entrails were his in abundance. But the souls of mortal men were a precious delicacy that rarely he feasted upon and ever strove to gain. Moreover, the crow-thing sensed that this soul might be the tastiest treat of them all.

"As thou hast spoken, so shall it be. Thus are the stakes: if thou canst answer my riddles three, I shall gift unto thee the blade *Kroenarck*, called Icemelter in the Northman tongue. With it, thou shalt become a warrior without peer and a leader of men unlike any other that have come before. Power, glory, and fame shall all be thine.

However," he said, stepping down from his perch and stalking toward the boy, his feathered head weaving back and forth predatorily. "However. If thou failest to answer any of my riddles, then thine soul shall I claim for mine own, the loot of this, our own personal battlefield. Have we an accoord?"

## THE NORTHLANDS SAGA COMPLETE

Kraki knew that he should refuse this contest. Young as he was, he still sensed that the crow-lord would not enter into a competition that he thought he could lose. But beneath that fear and trepidation, like a strong, warm river beneath a sheet of ice, he felt a certainty unlike anything he had ever known. Everything in him shouted *yes!* to this game, even though the stakes were higher than his young mind could fathom.

"Yes, Lord of Crows. We have an accord."

No triumphant *squawk* did the being make, but its black eyes gleamed exultantly.

"*Awwwk!* That is well, boooy. Let us begin." And it squatted on a nearby corpse. Kraki made a seat of the stump it had vacated and settled his mind to think.

Without preamble, the carrion-thing said, "Who is the great one that glideth o'er the earth, and swalloweth both waters and woods? The wind he feareth, but wights nowise, and seeketh to harm the sun. Aright guess now this riddle, mortal man!"

Long hours had Kraki sat at the hearthfire, listening to his elders play at words and conundrums, yet never had heard this one. Fortunately for him, the cold air frosted his breath as he pondered the enigma, and his quick mind struck upon the answer.

"Good is your riddle, Oh Master of Carrion and guessed it is: that is the fog. One cannot see the sun because of him, but he disappears when the wind blows, and men can do nothing against him. He kills the light of the sun."

The fey creature only shuffled its taloned feet in the earth and posed his next question. "On the way of a miracle: water becometh bone. What is't? Aright guess now this riddle, mortal man!"

Kraki hardly had to think about this one. The words tumbled hurriedly from his mouth.

"Ice! Good is your riddle, crow-lord, but the answer can only be 'ice'. Winter grips water in her frigid fingers and hardens him to bone, as you say."

For long, breathless moments, the Lord of Crows was silent. For a moment, Kraki dared hope that his quick response had befuddled the creature. But soon, in that field fertile with the unplanted dead, the fey being spoke again, its voice low and menacing in the gloom.

"*Awwwk.* What marvel is't which without I saw before Delling's door? It lights for men, and swallows up lights and wolves seeketh ever to win it. Aright guess now *this* riddle, Food for Worms."

Young Kraki was at a complete loss. He'd no clue what Delling's door could be. Wasn't there a man named Delling in the village down the valley? Or was Delling the name of a dwarf from childhood nursery rhyme? He thought that a torch could be what 'lights for men', but what wolves ever sought to win a torch? The only wolves he knew of were the ones who came down from the mountains in the harshest winters, consuming sheep and shepherd before them. Those wolves he knew. Well, them and Skalli and Hatti, those wolves whom the tales said lived in the sky and...he had it!

With a trembling sigh of relief, Kraki said, "Good is your riddle, Eater of the Dead, and guessed it is: that is the Sun. He lights all the world and shines on all men; but there are two wolves, Skalli and Hatti they are hight, one of whom goes before and the other follows the sun."

The crow-thing *cawed* and *awwked* so loudly that Kraki had to press his fists against his ears to drown out that hideous cacophony. With its beak, the carrion eater shredded bodies and hurled the pieces into the new-dawning sky. Kraki was caught in a rain of blood and severed extremities. The thing stopped its gory tantrum and turned on the youth.

"Wouldst best me, boooy?" it cried. "Thinkest thou to be my master?" And hopping eerily from one sharp-taloned foot to the next, it advanced murderously upon him.

His fear melting away to rage, Kraki stood and shouted, "Fog, ice, and sun your answers be, dread Lord of Crows, and to fog, ice, and sun you shall answer. Fog shroud you, ice freeze you, and sun scorch you should you break faith with me and shatter our accord! By the most ancient laws, you know that my curse rings true. Now. Tell me where lies the sword that is mine by right of conquest?"

The crow-thing halted its fell charge, trembling from beak-tip to tail-feather.

"Thou hast the right of it, boooy. Thou hast fairly won our riddling. Bend thine head close and lend an attentive ear to my words."

Casting aside his fears, Kraki listened to the crow-lord, and his eyes grew wide in wonder at what he heard.

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A year of long nights later, Kraki stood atop a long, stone barrow somewhere deep in the Waldron Mountains. He was no longer the boy who snuck out of his father's house and into the woods. Bristles of whiskers shadowed his long-jawed face and a welcome growth-spurt added inches to his height. Kraki was now broad-shouldered and rangy, not yet come into his full strength, but nonetheless one to be reckoned with. Moreover, the trials of the past year had hardened him. It had been no easy task to come to the resting place of Icemelter. His path from battlefield to mountain barrow had been by no-ways straight. Time and again in his quest to claim his prize, he had faced hardship and danger and bone-chilling terror, but now that he had arrived, he had no desire for delay.

He looked down upon the stone slab. Its surface was covered in deep-struck runes, hoary beyond reckoning. He could feel the power lying restless in the barrow, a power that he felt in himself as he spoke the words given him by the Lord of Crows.

*By water, stone, and open sky*

*By Garmr's howl and Serpent's lie*

*By Ymir's death and Ragnarök's field*

*I command that Icemelter stand revealed!*

With a resounding *crack!* the lid of the barrow burst asunder along its length. The sun caught on something bright within the fracture, and Kraki plunged his hand into the gap and grasped the hilt of the most beautiful object he'd ever seen. It was a longsword, shining bright as new-minted silver. Its quillons were thick with interlocking runes, and its pommel was formed in the image of a wolf-head gnawing on a chain. He swung the sword through the thin mountain air. It felt alive in his hands and he laughed as the blade caught sunlight and shone it back to the sky. He gazed out over the vast, untamed land below him and brought *Kroenarck* up to his eyes in a solemn salute.

"Now," he said, an immovable certainty settling into his words. "Now shall they know the name of Kraki Haraldson." And he started the long trek back to his father's home.



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