

BOOK ONE

TJASSE

Under a sky of twilight gray, the mountains of Jotunheim arched their jagged peaks against the storm. Throngs of icy gales blasted like a trumpet fanfare heralding the advent of winter's brutal rule. Some in hovels, some in longhouses, jotun clans huddled together wrapped in furs around their firepits. Numbed by the cold, they gritted their chattering teeth as best they could and breathed a frosty prayer to Ymir.

At the heart of the storm a solitary figure moved.

Skade braved her way across the snow-swept face of the mountainside. The foothold was narrow and treacherously icy. Inches from where she stepped, a dark precipice fell sharply into foggy oblivion. Her lungs burned with hoarfrost. Each pace was lanced with pain. Her nose and cheeks were black with frostbite, her swollen lips thick with scabs of blood and rime. Pausing a moment to fight back her tears, Skade gathered in her bearskin cloak, lowered a shoulder, and fought on with fierce determination.

As she gingerly rounded a gnarled-toothed rock, the ledge widened unexpectedly and the winds abruptly stopped. Pitching forward onto her hands and knees, Skade looked up and saw her way blocked by a horse and rider. The horse stood ringed in mist, head lowered, peering off into the gloom. The rider sat sunken in his saddle. The reins hung loosely in his big hands. He wore a fine helmet and a corselet of mail over a leather tunic. A thick, gray beard framed his lonely profile. His eyes bore a tremendous burden and his expression was battle-worn and as dreary as drizzle. Removing his

helmet, he gazed at the girl with a deep foreboding, as if she were some frightful dream he could not chase from his skull.

Seventeen summers old, Skade was as wild and beautiful as the mountains themselves. Even so, the gray man knew better than to be deceived by the apparent innocence of her youth. Beneath her bearskin cloak was the figure of a powerful warrior, equally schooled in battle and sorrow, victory and loss. Her brow was closely knit and there was true venom in her eyes.

She was dressed as a man, in a woollen shirt, linen trousers, and kneehigh leather boots stuffed with grass to guard against the cold. A fine-crafted sword in a wooden scabbard hung from her belt, along with a sack of meager provisions. The bearskin cloak offered scant protection from the ravages of the storm.

The rider turned and raised his face to the wind.

"Winter has come early, but not alone. Still, I wonder: was it the storm that brought you here, or you the storm? I know who you are, Skade. I know where you are going and why."

"Who are you?" Skade demanded, hauling herself to her feet. She drew her sword and glowered threateningly at the rider.

The gray man's eyes rested uneasily on the blade. Its keen double edge had been forged in a storm greater than this, and its cold iron would bring about a winter unequalled by any other.

"How do you know my name?" Skade snarled. "Are you one of Durin's scouts?"

"Am I a jotun?" thundered the rider as the flint-gray sky lit up behind him. "We are not so different, you and I. Like you, I follow a narrow pathway. Like you, I anger. Like you, I soon must kill. So why not trust one another? Here. Take this. It will ease both our tasks, and spare the innocent from the fate of the guilty."

He held out a small leather pouch to the girl. Skade stepped forward warily, keeping her sword between them. As quick as a cat, she snatched the pouch from his hand and retreated a step or two. She sheathed her sword in the snow and emptied the contents of the pouch into her mitt. It was a thin bar of soapstone inlaid with runes.

"It is a powerful spell," he explained. "Bury it at the foot of Durin's fortress. Then wait a short while. The runes will not fail you as others have."

Skade eyed the gray man suspiciously, suddenly conscious that she was in the presence of a great and aged power.

"Who are you?"

"Vegtam am I hight. A wanderer." He reached beneath his cloak and produced a small clay jar. "This is a simple mixture of fat and water from the Well of Urd. It has miraculous healing properties. It will soothe your blackened flesh and strengthen you for the task at hand."

Skade hesitated a moment. The gray man's eyes beckoned to her with a trust she thought long dead. The warmth of his gaze confused her even as it drew her to him. The world was cold and dark. Skade knew that now. Life was fleeting. Why then was the light in the gray man's eyes so deep and abiding?

Setting aside her misgivings, she stepped up to the enormous horse and offered her face to the man as one offers trust to a god. She fully expected his hands to be

rough and callused and so was surprised to find them soft and uncommonly gentle. Her face tingled with warmth as he smeared the balm over her scabs. The frostbite vanished and a rosy hue returned to her cheeks.

Skade caught his hands and held them a moment longer. "Your hands are too soft for a wanderer."

"And the world is too hard for the innocent. Calm your bloodlust, Skade. The path you follow leads to ruin. Ride with me."

Skade looked up fiercely. The light in his eyes no longer seemed as warm, and the chill of winter crept back into her bones. Dropping his hand, Skade shuddered and recoiled.

"I must do as destiny decides."

The gray man nodded in resignation. "Then brace yourself as I turn my steed aside."

Skade returned her sword to its scabbard, then gripped the rock face and dug her heels into the snow. The gray man tugged once on the reins. The horse raised its magnificent head, and as it leapt into the air, Skade instantly felt the full brunt of the storm. An icy gale nearly toppled her from her perch, but she held fast. Raising a mitt to protect her eyes from the needles of freezing rain, she scanned the mountain for a trace of the stranger, but horse and rider both had vanished. The ledge was narrow and treacherous once more beneath her feet.

Skade checked her belt. The pouch with its soapstone charm was fastened to the buckle. She touched her cheeks. They were soft and warm. Puzzled, she frowned and forged on.

Descending through a pass in the massif, Skade crossed the moraine and continued south into the valley, following the glacial streams. As the land flattened, the streams converged into a river. Large ice floes jostled against each other like sleeping giants in a bed.

Skade was trudging down a snowy embankment when she was jolted by the snort of a bear. Looking upriver, she spied the animal foraging along the bank. Skade closed her eyes and chased away a bloody memory. Then she took a few deep breaths, and eased her sword back into its scabbard. When she opened her eyes again, she was staring into the face of a jotun. She instantly leapt backwards and found herself surrounded by four warriors.

"Durin welcomes you," a leather-faced jotun saluted, "and bids you die."

"Bah! She's just a child," scoffed a second warrior, posturing with his halberd.

"Then kill her," the third jotun bellowed, clapping his companion on the back. "Durin will reward us all the more when we bring him her head."

"Since when do wolves feed on empty boasts?" Skade challenged hotly. "I thought jotuns fought with iron, not words. Are you all so keen to shun my sword and its wound-cutting edge?"

“We have borne blood-reddened sword and bitter ax,” the leather-faced jotun snapped back. “We have fought in the border wars against Midgard and butchered children half your age. Durin will quaff his ale for your skull this night.”

“Then fight me, jotuns! Linger not on words but battle!”

Unfastening a brooch, Skade shrugged the cloak from her shoulders and drew her sword. She wheeled around and charged the warrior with the halberd. The jotun roared and raised his weapon to meet her attack. Skade struck the spear a sideways blow and leapt unexpectedly to her right. Taken by surprise, the third jotun gave a sharp yelp as Skade fell on him with the full weight of her sword. She sank the blade in his chest, killing him instantly.

Skade's agility in the snow disarmed the jotuns. Looking at each other in halting confusion, they hesitated in their attack. Skade withdrew her sword from the corpse and snatched up the fallen jotun's shield.

“Kill her! Kill her!” cried the leather-faced jotun, pushing the second jotun forward.

He lunged at Skade with his halberd. The pike shattered her shield, but she was no longer behind it. Skade sprang to his left and sheared off his leg above the knee. The jotun shrieked and fell dead in the snow.

Skade whirled about violently as the fourth jotun struck. He dashed his sword at her head, hoping to end the skirmish with a single blow. Skade dodged the blade, but the edge caught the pommel of her sword, knocking it from her grasp. She sprang back over the body of the second jotun and winched the halberd from the shield. The fourth jotun flew at her in a frenzy of arms and teeth. Skade plunged the halberd into

his stomach and lifted him into the air. The shaft splintered and snapped under the strain and the jotun's bloody corpse tumbled down the embankment and sprawled over the ice in a pool of steaming blood.

Skade drew her long knife in anticipation of the remaining jotun's assault.

The leather-faced jotun cowered before her, hands raised in supplication. He averted his eyes and dared not look at her. Skade presented a terrifying vision of destruction. Her eyes burned with the primal fury of Ginungagap. Her face was streaked with the blood and tears of his fallen comrades. Her lips were distorted in a hideous snarl.

"Spare me. By Ymir's fecund toes and armpits, I beg of you." The jotun quaked.

"Coward!" spat Skade. "Return to Fyrkat and tell Durin that tonight the prophecy will be fulfilled. Do you hear me?"

"Yes. Yes."

"Then go!"

The jotun scrambled to his feet and skidded across the ice, disappearing over the opposite embankment.

Alone again, Skade paused to catch her breath and retrieve her fallen cloak and sword.

"Tonight," she repeated resolutely to herself. "Tonight."

Fyrkat, the fortress of Durin Bloodaxe, was typical of strongholds in Jotunheim. Its earthen ramparts were reinforced with timber and a high palisade, encircling the bow-sided barracks within. Four gateways, like the points of a compass, stood closely guarded.

Durin had won great renown in the border wars with Midgard. Jotuns returning home, hot with the glow of cruelest warfare, often told of dire portents preceding his attacks, such as immense whirlwinds, flashes of lightning, or fiery dragons in the air. True or not, no one dared deny that Durin and his ax, 'Skull-splitter,' had carved themselves a gruesome reputation. There was no one in the Five Worlds of Creation Durin feared, neither god nor man, save Skade. Even as she crouched at the foot of the rampart she could feel Durin's fear resonating around her, in the wood and rock and snow.

"Can you feel me too, murderer?" she wondered. "I am here."

Undoing the leather pouch from her belt, Skade removed the bar of soapstone and buried it in the snow. There was nothing to do now but wait. The journey had been long and arduous, and Skade welcomed the opportunity to rest and husband her strength. She sat with her back propped up against the rampart and pulled the bearskin over her head.

"How quickly things change," she thought bitterly, as she nestled into her cloak. "One day it is summer, the next day it's winter. One day we live, one day we die. All in one day, all in the same day ... what does it matter? All men are equally helpless before fate, and none escape their destiny."

As Skade continued to brood, it was hard to imagine that she had ever known sunnier days in Jotunheim. Yes, there was the valley where she grew up, and yes, there was Tjasse. But happiness is a dream best forgotten when the adult awakens in the child.

Jotunheim was a mountainous, bleak country of many deep glacial lakes, valleys, and fjords. Although jotuns inhabited the vast majority of the land, there remained a few secret havens known only through legends, lays sung by astonished skalds who, wandering without seeking, stumbled upon the abodes of the gods. One such adventurer was Durin, and in one such abiding place lived Tjasse.

Tjasse lived alone with his daughter, Skade, in a fertile valley called Thrymheim. A rune-carved cairn high in the mountain pass protected the valley from detection by drawing a misty veil over the senses of any traveler who happened by.

Tjasse managed the farm and cultivated the land. In the fields he grew barley, oats, and a little corn. In the garden he grew peas and cabbages, leeks and onions. The valley itself abounded with heavy-headed apple and walnut trees. He kept a modest herd of livestock for dairy and meats: cows, sheep, and a few swine. In the mountains he hunted red deer, elk, and the occasional wild boar. Sometimes he ventured out of the valley to net trout or salmon in the larger outlying rivers.

Tjasse's greatest joy in life was Skade. Raising a child while tending the farm often proved a challenge, so he entrusted Skade's care to Audumbla, a long-haired

fairy goat who nursed the infant with ambrosia and nectar from her horns. Between the two of them, they managed to raise Skade into a strong and healthy young girl. What there was to know about the farm, she knew. Tjasse taught her how to milk the cows, skim the fat, and churn the fat into butter. She watched as Tjasse sheared the sheep, spun the wool, and wove it on the loom. She sowed the land with him in springtime and harvested the crops in autumn. She ground the barley in her quern and baked it into bread. She mapped the stars and knew the seasons.

But best of all, Skade loved to hunt.

When Skade was five, Tjasse made her a small bow and some blunt-tipped arrows and she would dance, and imagine herself a great huntress slaying elk and deer and the long-tusked boar. But the only animals Tjasse permitted her to hunt were the squirrels and rabbits that pestered the gardens and orchards around the farm. This frustrated Skade no end, and her impatience often showed.

One late-summer morning, Skade was practicing her archery in the orchard. Audumbla was with her, although she was more interested in the carrot Skade kept tucked in her belt like a knife, than she was in the girl's fledgling talent.

"Stop it," Skade snapped, as she swatted the goat's nose away from her belt for the third time. "You're spoiling my aim."

Skade looked around and spied a rabbit pilfering cabbage from the garden. Biting her lower lip and holding her breath, she took careful aim. Just as her fingers were about to loose the string, Audumbla butted her from behind and Skade fell chin first in the grass.

Tjasse poked his head out of the byre to see what the commotion was all about. Bleating proudly, Audumbla trotted by, sporting a carrot in her mouth like a trophy.

"I don't think Audumbla shares your love for hunting, Skade," he chuckled warmly, helping his daughter to her feet.

"She's impossible, Father," the girl fumed vaingloriously. "It's like hunting with a child."

"Is it now?" Tjasse smiled with amusement.

"She ate my knife!"

"Did she? Well, perhaps she has a taste for hunting after all."

"It's not funny, Father." Skade stamped her feet in exasperation. "I'm tired of chasing rabbits and squirrels. I want to go hunting in the mountains with you."

Tjasse pursed his lips and tenderly wiped a wisp of grass from Skade's chin.

"We've talked about this before. You're too young to go hunting with me. It's too dangerous. Deer and elk aren't the only creatures that inhabit these hills."

"But I'm not afraid, Father," huffed Skade, drawing herself up. "I won't go after any boars, and if I see a jotun I promise to hide."

Tjasse sighed distantly. "It's not wild boars I'm worried about."

"What then?"

"Skade, please. Enough. I don't want to hear any more about it. You have all of Thrymheim in which to frolic. Why can't you be content with that?"

Skade hung her head in silence. She choked up and started to cry. Tjasse took her into his arms.

"Skade, Skade," he whispered. "You are my life. If any harm befell you I would die. Be patient. Was it not only yesterday that you were too young for a bow? You'll go hunting with me soon enough, I promise."

Tjasse was true to his word. When Skade was ten, she accompanied him into the mountains for the first time. They did not venture far on those initial forays, hunting only what presented itself to them in plain sight, mostly deer. Skade flourished on these outings. She was an accomplished archer, and her exuberance for the hunt was contagious. Bit by bit they traveled farther and farther from Thrymheim, stealthily stalking their prey. It wasn't long before Skade stood by the riverside where Tjasse introduced her to fishing with a baited line, a net, and spear. On those days the world seemed bountiful, and Skade's love for Tjasse ran as deep as the fjords.

"Was the world always so beautiful?" Skade asked one summer afternoon as they dozed on the slope of the foothills looking out across the bloom of the valley.

A cloud passed over the sun as Tjasse sat up and looked away in silence. His eyes were cast in shadow and the valley seemed to grow dark around them. The air chilled, and Skade sensed that the clouds hid more than the warmth of the sun. Life in Thrymheim seemed suddenly a very fragile thing, as though the surrounding mountains offered only illusionary protection from the outside world.

"Father? What was there before the world began?" Skade asked softly.

“There was another world, Skade,” he answered flatly. “Do not dwell on the sorrows of the past. Enjoy the splendor of this moment. Life will answer all your questions soon enough.”

“But who created the world?” Skade asked.

“The gods of the aesir,” Tjasse said with a bitter sigh. “Three brothers formed the Five Worlds out of frost and fire. It was a joyless time, Skade. There was much war and murder, and worse.”

“It was the jotuns, wasn’t it, Father? They tried to destroy Creation as they destroy everything. Didn’t they?”

“No, Skade, that’s not true. Jotuns are savage and shiftless, but they have hearts that can be broken, as do we all. The world was once theirs. You must understand that. They lived in peace with their father-god, Ymir, until the gods of the aesir arrived. The brothers murdered Ymir and fashioned the world from his corpse. Do not judge them for their anger until you have lost what they have lost.”

“But the world is safe now, isn’t it?” Skade said with trembling voice. “Our valley is so beautiful, it has to last forever, doesn’t it, Father? We will always be together, won’t we? Yes. Yes, we will.”

Skade hugged his arm and nestled a cheek against his shoulder. The clouds passed away from the sun and the valley brightened and warmed. Tjasse’s brow no longer looked so dark, or the world so grim.

A year or so later, Skade and Tjasse were on the hunt again. It was autumn, and the chill of winter was in the air. Already the leaves around Thrymheim were tinted with red and gold and the mountains were bright with berries. Spotting the spoor of a deer, Skade ran on ahead, and it was all Tjasse could do just to keep up with her.

"Not too far, Skade. Keep in sight."

"Hurry up, Father, I found something. Look, look!"

"Lower your voice. We don't want every animal on the mountain to know we're here. Now show me what you found."

"Here, on the path. It's a fresh stool. A deer must be nearby. Father? Are you listening to me?"

Tjasse grabbed Skade without answering and quickly withdrew behind a boulder.

"What is it, Father?" asked the girl, trembling. "You're frightening me."

Tjasse motioned to her to be quiet. Keeping a strong arm around her shoulder, he held her tightly to his side.

"Shush, Skade. Not a word. Not a breath."

Cautiously, he peered around the boulder. Skade's sharp ears picked up the sound of heavy padding feet. Shivering, she wrapped her arms around Tjasse's waist and held him close.

"Listen carefully to me," Tjasse explained, shrinking back behind the boulder. "As silently as you can, I want you to look around the rock. There is someone there I want you to see."

Under Tjasse's guidance, Skade peered around the boulder. Looming over the place where a hart had been grazing earlier was a monstrous bear. His wet snout sniffed the turf and snorted. Then, turning suddenly, he stood as still as a glacier. He sniffed the air, his nostrils flaring, as if he'd caught a familiar scent. Deciding he was mistaken, he lumbered off down the slope.

Tjasse breathed a deep sigh of relief. Satisfied the bear was gone, he relaxed his grip on Skade.

"Who was that, Father?" Skade asked, still trembling from the sight of the ferocious animal.

"His name is Bothvar Biarki," answered Tjasse, his eyes fixed on the spot where the bear had been. "We are old enemies, Skade. Never go near him. Never challenge him. Never allow yourself to be seen by him." A sudden cloud descended over Tjasse's brow and he grabbed his daughter roughly by the shoulders and shook her in his powerful grip. His fingers dug into her skin like the talons of a bird. Skade gasped in pain.

"Promise me, Skade. Promise me!"

"I promise, Father." She cringed. "You're hurting me."

Tjasse jerked his hands away and brusquely turned his back on her. Unnerved, Skade backed away, rubbing her shoulders and wiping her tears. She had never seen her father like this before. His eyes were dark and threatening, and his countenance had the sharp appearance of an animal's.

"Forgive me, Skade," he asked humbly. "Please don't be frightened of me. I meant you no harm. The sight of Bothvar brought back many painful memories."

"If you fear him so much, why don't you kill him?"

Tjasse smiled reticently and shook his head. "Death does not always settle matters of evil. And evil deeds have evil consequences. Remember that, Skade. Enough. It's time we returned home."

"What if Bothvar follows us, Father?" Skade asked, nervously glancing back up the slope.

Tjasse placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Let him try. We can easily lose him on the trails. And if by chance he found our valley's entrance, the runes would confound his senses. He'd see nothing but a wall of rock. Bothvar has no knowledge of runes or their magic. The only way for him to find us is for someone to lead him there by the paw."

"Then let us hasten home where we'll be safe," Skade urged.

She plucked Tjasse by the arm and led him hurriedly down the path.

After a short but speedy hike, they arrived at an impasse. The trail ended abruptly against a sheet of rock that seemed to grow from the ground up to the clouds. Tjasse reached out a hand and brushed the rock with his fingertips. As he did, he uttered a single word: "Ing."

All at once the rock evaporated like water in a pot, and a splendorous valley appeared before them. Skade smiled proudly at her father and skipped on down the hillside towards the farm, eager to tell Audumbla about the day's adventures. Tjasse followed, stepping past the cairn on which was carved the mystic rune whose name had just been invoked. As Tjasse passed safely into Thrymheim, the wall of rock reappeared behind him, sealing off the valley once again.

The year passed quickly, and Skade's encounter with Bothvar Biarki had fostered a new restlessness in her heart. Her dreams of hunting boar were replaced with heroic fantasies of Bothvar's death in which Skade saw herself in mortal combat with the bear as a wounded Tjasse looked on. Audumbla was less impressed by these distractions. She cautioned against such childish whimsies. The bear was not one to be trifled with, even in daydreams.

One day, the restlessness returned as Skade sat in the fields minding the sheep that were grazing on the last of autumn's grass.

"This is boring, Audumbla," she complained. "The sheep can look after themselves. Let's slip into the mountains and go hunting. I spotted some deer up on the slopes earlier. I know I can track them."

Audumbla bleated in warning.

"I know what Father said," replied Skade curtly. "I'm not a child. I'm almost thirteen. Besides, he's working in the smithy. He won't even know we're gone. Come on."

Shouldering her bow, Skade dashed up the mountainside and stole away from the valley. She had gone less than a mile outside of Thrymheim when she came across the spoor of a deer. As she paused to examine the tracks, Audumbla trotted up behind her.

"There. See? What did I tell you?" Skade boasted.

Skade followed the spoor and soon spied a young buck grazing on a grassy plateau. Notching an arrow, she raised her bow and took aim.

"Won't father be surprised when I return home with ..."

Skade had not finished her thought when something startled the buck and it bounded away. She quickly scanned the area and let out a gasp when she saw Bothvar Biarki amble onto the mountainside.

"It's the bear, Audumbla! What would father say if I slew his mortal enemy?"

Audumbla bleated in terror as Skade strode up the trail. The goat caught the hem of Skade's tunic in her teeth in an effort to hold her back. Unable to pull away, Skade cracked the goat angrily across the snout with an arrow. Audumbla bleated in pain and stumbled backwards.

"Go on, shoo!" Skade sniggered. "Run away if you're so scared. I'm not afraid of a dusty old bear."

Skade turned boldly and stepped out into plain view.

Bothvar stared curiously at the piffling little thing shaking her defiant fist at him, and he laughed.

"Bothvar Biarki," Skade shouted haughtily. "Winter is coming and I'll need your pelt to keep me warm."

"What is your name, great huntress?" he replied, inclining his head in mock respect. "Tell me, so when I enter Valhalla I can boast to the Einherjar that it was you who killed me."

"I am Skade, Huntress of Thrymheim. Daughter of Tjasse."

Bothvar's eyes turned the color of blood and his mind was seized by a paroxysm of rage. Skade could feel the scorch of his hatred even from a distance.

"Tjasse?" spat the bear. "You are Tjasse's whelp?"

Bothvar charged the girl with a roar. The earth thundered beneath his tread as he devoured the stretch of land between them.

Skade never imagined that an animal so big could move so fast. She fumbled with her bow, desperately trying to notch an arrow. Panic-stricken, she slipped on the scree and fell backwards, twisting an ankle and smacking her head on the stone. She dizzily reached for her knife, but the shadow of the bear was fast upon her. Bursting into tears, she threw up her hands in desperation when over top of her leapt Audumbla.

The goat met the bear head on. Bothvar did not even break stride as he brushed her aside with one swipe of his forepaw. Her gored body smacked against a rock with a sickening crunch and fell to the ground in a bloody heap of hair. Skade screamed in horror as Bothvar reared up on his hind legs, towering above her.

"I'll strew your bones across the mountain for the wolves to gnaw," the bear sneered. "Tjasse will greet over your corpse."

Skade tensed and screwed her eyes shut as a crimson forepaw swept towards her head. But the blow never fell.

An eagle swooped out of the clouds towards them. Its long curved talons sank into the back of Bothvar's neck, halting the bear in his tracks. Bothvar flexed his muscles, snarling in pain, and shook himself free. Spinning on his haunches, he lunged and swiped at the bird. The eagle stabbed at the bear's eyes with its beak, luring it away from the girl. Enraged, Bothvar snapped his jaws and flailed madly at the air with his

forepaws. The eagle struck again, drawing blood. Hurting and outdone, Bothvar retreated, shielding his eyes. As he stepped backwards the ground loosened beneath his feet, and with a startled roar, he tumbled down a narrow crevice amidst a shower of turf and scree.

The eagle caught Skade in its claws and whisked her back to Thrymheim. As they circled above the crevice, Skade looked back and thought she glimpsed a wight lying naked and unconscious at the bottom of the fissure. She strained her neck to get a better look, but the eagles' pinions passed before her eyes and darkness overtook her.

Back home in the longhouse, Skade lay weeping on her bed. Tjasse sat next to her, tenderly stroking her hair.

"Father, what have I done?" she blubbered into her pillow. "What have I done? Poor Audumbla. She tried to stop me, Father, but I wouldn't listen. Now she's ... Oh, Father, forgive me."

"Hush, Skade. Rest. Audumbla died nobly against a mighty adversary. She's with Odin in Valaskjalf, gladdened by the news that you are safely home, and in my care again."

"I was saved by an eagle, Father. He fought the bear and carried me home. I swooned in his claws."

"The eagle is a good and trusted friend, Skade. He is my eyes, watching over you when I cannot."

"Will you always watch over me, Father? Promise me you will."

Tjasse kissed Skade on the brow.

"Of course, my daughter. My eyes will be like two stars looking down at you from the welkin, keeping you safe from harm. Now sleep, Skade," he instructed.

"Sleep."

Skade awoke with a start. Throwing off her bearskin cloak, she found herself half buried in a drift of snow back at the foot of Durin's fortress. She looked up through the blistering winds, but could see no sign of activity on the wall walk. Unable to contain her curiosity, she dug about in the snow for the rune stone. Skade sat back, mystified. In place of the soapstone, a tiny sleeping figure lay cradled in the snow.

"What kind of magic is this?" Skade wondered to herself.

She quickly covered up the enchanted sleeper and got to her feet. She felt her way around the rampart until she reached one of the four gates, forced ajar by the gathering drifts of snow. Squeezing her way inside, Skade stopped and stared at the curious scene before her. The grounds were dotted with jotun bodies, as still as death. Bending over one of the fallen warriors, Skade peeled back his eyelids.

"Asleep," she exclaimed in a hushed cry and nodded knowingly. "So, wanderer, I see your plan. *Let the innocent sleep and destiny decide the rest.*"

Skade's attention immediately fell on a fiery glow in one of the barracks. She carefully stepped over the sleeping sentry and took up a clandestine position outside the doorway.

Illuminated by the flames of the hearth, Durin leaned on his ax in the centre of the room, girded by a hundred warriors. At his feet lay the butchered carcass of the leather-faced jotun Skade had spared.

"I will brook no cowardice," Durin shouted fiercely. "Our weapons won't fail us unless our courage does. The girl is near. I sense it. Ready yourselves."

No one moved.

"Have you all gone daft?" charged Durin. "I said, to your posts."

A jotun wavered on his feet and fell prostrate on the floor. A second followed, and then a third. Durin watched in stunned silence as one by one his troops yawned and slumped forward in slumber.

"What madness is this?" he demanded. "Seer."

A seer of Mimir stepped forward from the shadows.

"The girl is not alone, my lord. She is accompanied by powerful runes."

"It is the wrath of Odin," cried a jotun, losing his nerve.

Durin whirled on him in a rage and cut the hapless creature down with his ax.

"By Ymir's breath, we will stand and fight. We are jotuns. Jotuns!"

"Foolish man," the seer scolded. "Will you make us share your fate? You kill us for our cowardice, yet you stay your hand from killing yourself. No man can trust his own strength on his dying day. His courage and life will ebb out together."

Durin struck the seer a thundering blow. He fell across the hearth and was pulled from the fire by a pair of quick acting guards.

“I’ll bathe my ax in your blood-pool if you say again that I flinch from a fight.” Durin seethed. “My ax has never failed the test of battle.”

He hustled the seer to his knees and commanded him to pray. The seer cast his runes and chanted in an ancient etin tongue.

Outside the doorway, Skade's eyes narrowed on Durin. Evil deeds have evil consequences, Tjasse had cautioned her. But as she watched Durin, she knew there was evil far greater than bloodlust, and consequences more dire than death.

After her encounter with Bothvar Biarki, Skade refused to stir from the valley. She declined all of Tjasse’s invitations to hunt, and would not touch her bow. Tjasse persevered, however, and was eventually rewarded for his attention and love. After much encouragement and reassurance, he finally convinced Skade to venture into the mountains once more.

Once outside the valley, Skade's ardor for the hunt reawakened. Soon she was stronger and swifter than ever. Tjasse gave her a knife and forged her a sword in the smithy. Swordplay firmed her muscles, quickened her reflexes, and sharpened her wits. Skade prided herself on her strength and agility. She lifted boulders daily, toning and defining the muscles of her upper body and arms. Her legs were as steady and as strong as the boles of an oak. Tjasse taught her to wrestle and found in her a formidable opponent.

By the time she was fifteen, Skade was hunting on her own. In summer she hunted on foot. In winter she glided after her prey on skis. Tjasse's heart swelled with pride as he watched his daughter mature into a brave and able young woman.

The sun was sitting lazily in the summer sky when Skade lay cradled in the tall mountain grass a mile outside of Thrymheim. She often came to this thoughtful place to rest in seclusion away from the responsibilities of the farmstead. Close by was the rock where Audumbla died, defending her charge. The stain of her sacrifice had not washed away from Skade's memory, and the dark shadow of her blood was still visible on the stone. The base of the rock bloomed with cinnamon roses and white tassels of cotton thrush that Skade tended faithfully every spring. Feeling drowsy and contemplative, she decided to close her eyes and bask awhile in the sun.

She was reminiscing fondly with Audumbla's fetch, when the sun disappeared behind a cloud. The spirit-goat nipped at her ear in alarm and Skade opened her eyes. It was not a cloud at all that had cast its cold shadow across her form like an unwelcome suitor, but an awestruck jotun. Skade jumped warily to her feet, her sword at the ready.

She had never actually seen a jotun before and the experience unnerved her. Although Tjasse had told her many stories of these rankled wights, she somehow never imagined them to be as real as the creature that confronted her. He stood a full seven feet tall and weighed as much as a boulder. His shoulders and chest seemed to span the horizon, and his arms boasted of ferocious strength. His craggy face was harder than Tjasse's, with hair as coarse as straw, and a thick, forked beard. His brow and cheekbones formed a cave out of which two eyes peered, as black as basalt. He was far

older than Skade, perhaps even Tjasse. It was hard to judge. His strength was youthful enough, that was certain. He was dight in a woollen tunic and stockinged breeches. A wooden shield was slung over his back, and he shouldered an ax. If Skade was certain of nothing else, she was certain of this: the jotun was a warrior of great repute.

"Who are you, girl?" implored the besotted warrior. "You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. Are you a goddess?"

"Stay where you are," Skade advised, as the jotun made a move to approach her. "Come closer and tonight you'll sleep in the warmth of Ymir's armpit."

"Wait, stay," cried the jotun, his beady eyes roving lecherously over the girl's youthful figure. "I want you for my wife."

Skade gawked at the shameless creature in disbelief. The sight of his scabrous expression made her flesh crawl.

"Marry you?" Skade burst into laughter. "I'd rather wed a boar."

"By Ymir's ears," stormed the jotun, "I wasn't offering you a choice."

Livid with anger, the jotun sprang at Skade. Pinning her arms to her side, he speedily overpowered her.

"You've the fire of the southern rims in your veins, girl, but I'll tame you."

Holding her squarely, he kissed Skade full on the mouth. Unable to jerk her head away, Skade bit down on his lip as hard as she could. The jotun yelped in pain and loosed his grip. Skade tore an arm free and knock him back a pace. The blow both surprised and impressed the jotun, but angered him natheless. He spat blood and curses at the girl, but Skade just snatched up her sword and cuffed him on the ear with the flat of

the blade. The jotun dropped to his knees with a howl. Putting the heel of her boot to his chest, Skade sent him somersaulting down the hill.

"Filth of Ymir!" she called out scornfully. "If I ever see you again I'll kill you where you stand."

Skade marched off.

The jotun lay in an ignoble heap at the bottom of the slope nursing his warrior's pride as well as a bloody lip. Righting himself, he made to pursue the young girl when a burly hand spun him around by the shoulder and threw him roughly to the ground. A second stout hand clamped itself around his throat, choking the breath from his lungs. A malevolent, bestial face glowered at him.

At first Durin thought he had been attacked by a bear, but the face quickly changed from animal to man, and Durin realized he was in the grasp of a being far more dangerous than that of any wild beast.

The wight was naked and frenzy-eyed. The cords of his throat were as taut as the rigging of a sail at sea, and the blood in his veins pulsed like the magma that coursed through the veins of the world below.

"Who are you?" demanded Bothvar Biarki. "What is your business with that girl?"

"I am Durin Bloodax," the purple-faced jotun squeaked, his eyes bulging comically out of his head. "And if it's any business of yours, I plan to marry that girl, whatever her name. As soon as I discover where she lives - -"

"Can you do this?" interrupted Bothvar, tightening the vice of his grip on the jotun's throat. "Answer me. Can you find out where she lives?"

Durin nodded desperately. Unable to draw a breath, his eyes blurred with tears and his head spun. Bothvar sensed the jotun was about to lose consciousness and he slackened his grip. Durin rolled over and retched.

"Go then," Bothvar said with a wave of his hand. "Find out where she lives. When you do, tell me. She has a father: Tjasse. Do what you like with the girl, but leave the father to me. Refuse me, and I'll kill you. Betray me, and I'll kill you."

"I believe you," rasped the jotun, delicately rubbing his red and swollen neck.

Durin seldom saw Skade after the first snowfall. During the winter months, she and Tjasse lived on meat they had either salted or pickled in the fall. It was not until the following spring that Durin was able to renew his hunt in earnest. But chasing Skade was like trying to net a fetch, and Durin's efforts were continually frustrated.

Another year passed, and nothing noteworthy took place. Durin returned to the border wars while Skade continued to grow in stature and skill. Then one summer day he caught sight of her returning home from the river with a net full of salmon. Concealing himself along the trail, he followed her for a mile or so until she stopped in front of the impasse. Durin watched as Skade lightly touched the rock wall with her fingertips. Her lips parted and the breath swirled over her tongue and formed the ancient rune.

“Ing.”

The rock vanished. Skade stepped in past the cairn and the entrance resealed itself behind her.

On the opposite side of the impasse, Durin pressed his hands against the rock in amazement. He stepped back a pace, and, wiping the saliva from his anxious lips, he repeated the word he had heard Skade utter moments earlier:

“Ing.”

Durin nearly fell over in astonishment as the rock became vapor, and revealed a resplendent valley below. Barking his thanks to Ymir, he brought the news to Bothvar.

Tjasse was gathering apples in the orchard a few days later when he heard himself brusquely addressed.

“Far from home is far from joy, is it not, Tjasse?”

Tjasse turned, ashen faced, to see Bothvar Biarki standing naked several yards away.

“I’ve sought after you for twenty years,” Bothvar growled. “Twenty years in this Odin-forsaken land. How I’ve longed to abandon our feud and return to Vanaheim. But the heart cannot set sail until the hand has upheld its honor.”

“I don’t know how you found this place, Bothvar Biarki,” Tjasse answered, regaining his composure, “but by Odin’s wrath you’d best leave before - -”

"Before what?" Bothvar bellowed contemptuously. His laughter echoed around the valley to where Skade was shepherding the sheep. "You'll do nothing, Tjasse," he sneered. "Look at what you've become. You're a beardless old woman. I will set sail for Vanaheim tonight on a sea of your blood. Killing you won't be a challenge, but it will be a pleasure natheless."

The sky above Thrymheim turned a dark red as Bothvar assumed the shape of a bear. Tjasse reached for the knife in his belt, but the weapon leapt at him unexpectedly, wounding him in the arm. Tjasse gaped at the gash as Bothvar roared with wicked delight.

"Betrayed by your own weapon. The gods are with me, Tjasse. I will eat your heart and quaff your blood."

Seizing the moment, Bothvar charged his startled enemy and crushed him against a tree. Tjasse's ribs and breastplate cracked under the weight of the bear. Using the breath left to him, Tjasse shrieked an incantation in a desperate attempt at his own transformation, but Bothvar snared him in his jaws. The bear sank his teeth deep into Tjasse's collar, splintering the bone and rending the muscle. He shook him like a doll and tossed him thirty feet in the air.

Tjasse landed in a crumpled heap of flesh and feathers. He rolled painfully to his knees in time to catch the full force of Bothvar's blow. The bear's paw struck him in the beak like a cudgel and all but ripped his head from his shoulders. As Bothvar's jaws closed around him a second time, Tjasse was helpless to resist. Bothvar hoisted him to his feet and batted him backwards through the air. Tjasse hit the ground and, this time, did

not move. Bothvar reared up to his full height and was poised to deliver the final blow when, with a leap, Skade was between them.

Her sword sang in a high and terrible arc as she dealt the bear a staggering blow. The blade shattered across his skull and sent him reeling. Blood sluiced from a grievous gash across the bear's heated brow as the white of his skull glinted in the sunlight. Bothvar bellowed and lunged sluggishly at the girl. She easily sidestepped his ponderous attack and notched an arrow on her bowstring. Bothvar skidded to a halt, turned, and looked around, confounded by hatred and blinded by blood. Skade drew back the string and took aim.

"Over here, Bothvar Biarki," she announced coldly. "Winter is coming and I'll need your pelt to keep me warm."

The bear roared and sprang in the direction of Skade's voice.

The arrow struck him in the eye. Delirious with pain, Bothvar lashed out with his claws, but Skade was not there.

"Over here," she called.

The bear lunged, his jaws snapping at the empty air.

"Over here," the voice called out again.

Bothvar wheeled around and sprang at nothing.

Skade notched another arrow and drew back the string as far as it would go.

"When you enter Valhalla, Bothvar, be sure and tell the Einherjar that it was Skade who killed you."

Bothvar let out a frenzied yowl. He rose up on his hind legs and opened his forepaws to crush her. Skade's arrow passed cleanly through his heart, out his back, and imbedded itself in the bole of an apple tree. Bothvar's momentum carried him forward and he crashed in a cloud of dust, dead, at Skade's feet.

Skade knelt beside Tjasse. Caught in mid transformation, he was neither man nor bird but a grotesque mixture of both. He clung to life by the end of his thread.

"Skade," he rasped in a gurgling whisper, his lungs drowning in his own blood. He reached up a hand, but it was a feathered wing that touched the girl's cheek.

"I am safe, Father. I saved you."

"No, Daughter. Bothvar has killed me. But before I die, I must tell you the truth."

"You are the eagle that saved me," said Skade lovingly, her eyes moist with tears. "I see that, Father."

"Please, Skade, don't interrupt. My time is short, and there is much I have to say.

"Nineteen years ago a young jotun crossed the Iving and led a savage raid into Midgard. Bright fires lit the night as he toppled many farms in flames. Hel did not withhold the lives of the families, who defended their farmsteads against him. On one farm, however, he slew all save one: a girl your own age. Smitten by her beauty, the jotun fell madly in love. He returned with her to Jotunheim, where they were wed. The jotuns treated her cruelly because she was aesir, but she put her trust in Odin and persevered.

"In time, she bore her lord a child, a daughter. When they presented the fledgling to the seer of Mimir for his blessing, he foretold that the girl would grow to best

the father in battle. Terrified, the jotun immediately planned to kill her. Natheless, the mother, warned of this in a dream, fled with the infant into the mountains. It was not long before the jotun discovered their flight, and took up his ax to follow.

"She fled as far as she could before resting by a waterfall. Behind her echoed the foul whoops and war cries of the jotun as he crashed through the bush. Close by was a hollow stump. She stripped the baby naked and laid her carefully inside the tree. Then, taking a stone from the ground, she dressed it in the baby's wrap. She knelt by the edge of the waterfall, cradling the bundle in her arms. Her eyes swollen with tears, she kissed the stone once and bade her daughter goodbye.

"In that pose she died.

"The jotun's deft, war-seasoned hand was mercifully swift. He crushed her skull with a single blow from his ax. He kicked her corpse into the churning waters, scooped up the bundle in his hairy hands and swallowed it in a single gulp. Believing the child now dead, he then rinsed his ax and returned to his camp.

"Later that day, Odin led me to find the baby hidden in the hollow of the tree. Bothvar and I are from Vanaheim. We are berserkers -- warriors whose depraved fighting spirits transform them into animals. Bothvar pursued me here to settle a blood feud between our families. I do not begrudge him my death. My hands are washed in his kinsmen's blood. Evil deeds have evil consequences, and the hand is soon sorry it struck.

"I left Vanaheim wishing to make amends for the crimes and murders on my conscience. I got that chance by caring for the child given to me by a merciful god. I named her Skade. She alone delivered me from a life of endless battle. She alone taught

me to love. And now, at the end of my life, she alone gives me the courage and confidence to die."

Skade was shaking uncontrollably. The knuckles on her clenched fists were as white as chalk. Her eyes and lips were tight with rage.

"Why are you telling me this?" she demanded vehemently, her heart broken and betrayed. "What do you expect me to do or say?"

"I don't expect you to do or say anything, Skade," Tjasse replied weakly. "I thought you would be happy for me. I thought it would ease your grief knowing I am saved."

"You thought?" shouted Skade indignantly. "I am jotun? Jotun! If you are not my father, who is? Tell me his name. You must know it. Who was the jotun that murdered my mother? Answer me!"

Tjasse made no reply. He was dead.

"Odin have mercy," Skade wailed. "It's not fair. Oh, Tjasse. Father! Why didn't you curse me with your dying breath? A curse I could bear. But this?"

Doubling over, Skade unleashed a flood of tears.

"Oh, Tjasse," she sobbed. "You once told me jotuns had hearts that could be broken. Oh, Tjasse, oh, Father. Mine is broken. Mine is broken."

"I see Bothvar's years of persistence have finally paid off."

Durin swaggered across the yard, eating an apple. He pursed his lips and surveyed the carnage dispassionately.

"As have my own. I'm not sorry to see the old bear dead, but I kept my end of the bargain. I tarried long enough for him to have his revenge. His blood-fine has been paid. It's time to collect that which is my due."

The jotun's lustful eyes settled on Skade.

"By Ymir's loins you're beautiful, even soaked in gore. Only once have I beheld such beauty in a woman. A girl your own age."

Skade straightened herself slowly, drawn to her feet by the jotun's words.

"A girl my own age?" she repeated, as a fog suddenly lifted from her eyes. Her glare bore deep into the jotun's soul and held him fast, discerning everything.

"It was you."

"Yes, it was me," bragged the jotun smugly. "I was the one who discovered this valley and brought Bothvar here."

"*You* are my father."

"I promised to tame you, and by Ymir's hoary beard, I ... I am what?"

"You are my father."

Durin stood, stunned, in horrid recognition. A thunderclap shook his memory. He stared into Skade's eyes and saw his own reflection.

"It's not possible," he stammered. "You're dead. I killed you myself. I devoured you! But the face, hers; the eyes, mine. I see it now! Your mother! You! Ymir, save your good and faithful servant."

Durin turned on his heel and bolted from the valley. Skade let him go. She would follow him in due course and kill him then. Only a slave avenges himself at once and only a coward never. First she had to bury Tjasse.

Carrying his body back to the longhouse, Skade washed his wounds and dressed him in clean clothes. She adorned him with jewelry and surrounded him with food and drink for his journey to the next world. She laid his weapons beside him. She bent the blade of his sword, slashed his shield, and broke the shafts of his arrows and spears. Lastly, she drove the livestock into the longhouse and slaughtered them. When all this was accomplished, she set the longhouse on fire.

Skade stood at a distance and watched the fire burn.

As the flames consumed the longhouse and byre, she felt all she was and all she knew die in the blaze. When there was nothing left of the longhouse but ashes, Skade stood, a hollow and burnt-out shell.

In the days that followed, Skade kept the company of dark forces. She spent all her time in the smithy, neither eating nor sleeping. At night the starry sky above Thrymheim glowed an eerie red. The sound of her hammer clinking on the stone anvil echoed across the mountains, sending jotun children scurrying beneath their covers in fear. In the fires of the forge, Skade resembled a demon of Niflheim.

Eventually the fires died down and Skade emerged, black-faced, from the forge. In her hand she carried a new sword, pattern-welded from case-hardened iron and tempered violently in Bothvar Biarki's blood. She named it "Eagle-claw" and inscribed it with the kenning "Bear-slayer."

Skade bathed and washed her clothes in the stream. Staked to the ground, Bothvar's hide tanned in the sun. As she dressed, she shivered from an early chill in the air. It was only midsummer and the green of the valley was already fading. That suited her fine. She felt more accustomed to the cold and preferred the company of ice and snow.

Taking a sack from the storehouse, she filled it with corn and dried meats. Then she threw the bearskin cloak around her shoulders and climbed the valley slopes for the last time. After passing the cairn, she dashed it with a rock. Thrymheim sealed itself off forever, as if it had never existed at all.

Inside the barracks of Fyrkat, the seer's runes ignited and vanished in a sulphurous billow. He shrieked in agony as blood streamed from his eyes and ears. "The girl is protected by a god!" He shuddered and stiffened, as his heart burst within his chest-hall and he crashed, dead, to the floor.

A murmur of horror rumbled through the barracks. Durin stood by helplessly as the remainder of his troops collapsed in unison to the floor.

Skade stood in the doorway. She said:

"My sword growls

Like the she-wolf in her den.

She has caught the scent of blood.

The kill is near."

Durin scowled and grunted defiantly.

"Enough games. A seer of Mimir said you would best me in battle. You have your sword to prove him right and I my ax to prove him wrong. Daughter, fight me if you dare. My ax has trodden this field before. My enemies lie vanquished, their corpses strewn and left as carrion for the wound-birds to gorge their greed upon gobbets of flesh. Come. Embrace me a final time."

Skull-splitter's tooth was hungry and sharp, but Eagle-claw cut with equal strength. The sword was set on vengeance and proved its worth in battle. It thirsted after Durin's blood and struck with a mind of its own. Together, girl and sword were indistinguishable. Each time Durin felt the icy chill of Skade's cold breath, it was followed by the ripping edge of Eagle-claw's talon. Each time Eagle-claw drew blood, Skade's eyes cut him even deeper.

The shadows in the great hall began to shorten with the rising sun, but the jotun horde showed no sign of stirring. Oblivious to the duel in their midst, they slept peacefully, and for once their dreams were not of struggle. Ymir, their god, was alive. He cradled them in his armpits and reminisced fondly of a time when the Aesir did not exist, and murder had not changed the universe forever.

Back in the waking world, Durin flailed his ax wildly at Skade. Strength and courage abandoned him. He was stiff with exhaustion and cold. His eyes were clouded with blood, and the shrieks that deafened his ears were his own.

Slumping against a post, Durin clutched his heaving chest. Blood pooled at his feet as the earth drank up his life. Skull-splitter weighed like an anvil in his hands. He tried to lift it but his fingers were no more than bloody stumps, hacked away in the

course of the combat. The ax slipped through his palms and thumped to the floor. Skade stood a mere arm's length from him, steaming with his blood.

“You're mine, all right,” he hissed. “There's no mistaking that. Your icy hatred and cold fury are mine as well. Let that be your dowry. Let snow and darkness, doom and loveless death, be a father's legacy to his daughter. I lay my curse on you. May you always see my eyes before you. They will make your solitude unbearable and drag you to your death. Live as I have lived, and die as I have died.”

Screaming, Durin flung himself out the door.

The sky was clear, and the air was cold and crisp. A fresh blanket of snow covered the courtyard. Durin stumbled over the bodies of his sleeping comrades as he made his way toward the horse and rider awaiting him at the northern gate. His resources spent, Durin collapsed at the horse's feet. Then, with a last howl of defiance, he grabbed the bridle with the fingers left to him and hoisted himself up.

"This is your doing," he spat at the rider. "You and your kin brought murder and lawlessness into creation. Befouler of families. Is there a Law Rock in the Five Worlds where I can give notice of your crimes? What blood-fine will you pay for my death? Can my sword-stroke take vengeance upon you? It is you I should grapple with, not my daughter. By Ymir's thrice-blessed beard may your acts bring you ill luck and misfortune. May outlawry and slaughter dog you to your doom. May you find neither help nor harbor." Durin's head drooped as his bitter tirade exhausted itself. He raised his eyes to the gray man who gazed grimly down at him from his saddle. "Slay me. I am eager to join my god in the under-kingdom. My blood is already on your sword. I will not have them say, 'A child killed him.'"

The gray man drew his sword and drove it hiltdeep into Durin's breast.

The breath rushed from his lungs and he rattled and died.

Skade stood a few feet away. She eyed the gray man and the eight legs of his horse.

"You are Odin, are you not?"

The gray man nodded.

"Where will you go now, Skade?"

"North, I think," the girl replied, looking beyond the god to the open gate behind him. "I've never seen the sea, and I've heard the hunting there is good."

"And when you have seen all there is to see, and hunted all there is to hunt, what then? Ride with me on Sleipnir, Skade."

"No," Skade responded, stroking the horse's nose. "I will visit the coast. After that, who knows? I will do as destiny decides."

"We will meet again, Skade."

The girl smiled faintly and shrugged. She crossed the yard and vanished through the gateway.

Odin patted Sleipnir on the neck. The horse whinnied and stamped its eight hooves on the ground. An eddy of snow swirled around them. When it settled, they too were gone.