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## The Saga of Aslaug Sigurdsdottir or The Saga of the Volsungs Retold

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The Saga of Aslaug Sigurdsdottir  
Or  
The Saga of the Volsungs Retold

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
Benicio Taggart

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
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## **Dedication**

*For Aslaug*

## Acknowledgements

To Melina Martinez Engel,

You got me over the line. You would say it was me who did it, and you'd be partly right. You taught me that my education wasn't for me. When I came to Bard, I joined a tradition of learning, and it was my obligation to contribute. I didn't understand that until our conversation on the driveway.

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You planted the idea for this project during a phone conversation last year. I was ranting to you about Signy, and how shocked I was that the text covered her story in only seven pages. You replied, "Well, it sounds like the footnotes to a great story, which would make sense in a tradition of retelling." From that moment forward I knew what I would do. If you choose to read it, I hope you enjoy. Either way, I thank you for your part.

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Prologue: The Man in Gray

*The snows fell and piled high above the knees as the old man approached a small farmstead called Spangarheid in the land of the northmen, where he knew lived a young girl with piercing eyes which unnerved even grown men. Few travelers ever came there. It was a small cone-shaped building with a thatched roof caked in snow. The house was near a haven between the fjords, and the north sea crashed against the stony shore. Drops of water from the ocean froze on the wind and smacked against his gray hood which hung over his eyes. His huge beard was frozen and crinkled with each wading step through the high snows.*

*He knocked on the door three times. A heavy-set woman with a wide face and stringy brown hair swung the door inward. "Who you?" she asked in a thick countryside accent.*

*"I am a wanderer in need of shelter."*

*"And one who speak like 'a ruler! Welcomin if you have need."*

*He came in and sat beside the fire at the center of the homestead and felt his beard moisten as it unfroze. In an enclosure at the far end of the room, a small herd of five sheep huddled together chewing hay. The smell of their dung was palpable.*

*"What is your name?"*

*"Grima."*

*"Thank you my lady, you honor me."*

*"So much respect given to one like I!"*

*"In your own hall, you are owed such respect."*

*"It isn't a hól, it's a farm," she replied matter of factly.*



*The old man shrugged his shoulders and didn't argue with the assessment of her own property. She seemed literal-minded. At this time the girl came into the house bundled in wools and furs with firewood and a hatchet cradled in her arms.*

*"She is daughter of us, my man and I, and she is called Kráka," said Grima.*

*The differences between the girl and Grima, her supposed mother, were so striking as to make the proposition ridiculous. A vain attempt to disguise her beauty had been made by smearing tar on her head, which must have been applied every day, but this could not conceal what he saw. The girl was even featured, almost feline, where Grima had one eye which was slightly larger than the other and moon-shaped cheeks. The girl's hair was golden where it peked out beneath the tar, Grima's was brown. Her skin was shining and clear, where Grima had a face perforated with blemishes and large pores, though this could have been explained by age. But this was also incongruous, because Grima was just slightly too old to be the mother of a girl so young.*

*The girl stared at him with those keen eyes which were like polar ice caps shining in the sun. They told him she was the one he searched for.*

*"Aslaug, I am glad to have found you alive and well."*

*Her eyes widened in surprise. "Who are you? How do you know my true name? Let me see your face," she demanded.*

*"I knew your true father and mother, Sigurd, the bane of Fafnir, and Brunhild, the Shield-Maiden. You are a Völsung. There are those who would seek you out to have you killed. I am not one of them. And, in the future when men come calling, it would be wise not to admit your true name."*

*“I repeat, who are you?”*

*“I am a guest in your home.”*

*“Why have you come here?”*

*“I have come to tell you the story of your kin. Hearing it from the mouth of one who knows it all is your inheritance, and I would not have you denied that.”*

*She sat down across the fire from him on a short stool. “I have no reason to trust you.”*

*“I’m a lone old man with no weapons and nowhere else to go for the moment. I am in your power, and I would not violate the obligations of a guest to honor those who shelter him.”*

*“A man may say many words, but it does not mean he is true to them.”*

*“Then swing your axe into my head. I will not object. But if you do, you will never hear what I have to say.”*

*“I may not care to hear what some old man has to say. But, if I were, what would you tell me?”*

*“I will tell you about the great women of your line as they saw their lives. First, your great aunt, Signy, who saved your line from peril. Then your mother, Brunhild, who avenged herself on your father. You may learn their great deeds and their mistakes.”*

*“I would prefer to hear about Brunhild.”*

*“I thought you did not care to hear.”*

*“I lied. I want to know.”*

*“Then you shall, but we will begin with Signy.”*

## Chapter 1: Signy

The story begins here: Signy sat in her high seat beside her father, King Völsung, as the man he wanted her to marry entered the hall with his men. The Völsungs and their trusted followers were having the evening meal. King Siggier, a Geat, was not unhandsome, but he was much older than Signy, only slightly younger than her father, with a long coal black beard braided with expensive golden beads. He was tall, though quite thin. Signy hid the scorn she felt, and kept her face expressionless. She glanced over at her twin brother, Sigmund, seated beside her brothers and honored hunnish companions on the benches.

He was the tallest of her brothers, and they were not short men. Golden blonde like herself, though he kept his hair short and shaved the back of his head. He was looking back at her with a mocking grin, then raised his eyebrows and shook his head.

There was something in Siggier's eyes she did not like. They were narrow and uncaring, yet also watchful and covetous as he looked around her father's fine hall: the great tree Barnstock with its wide trunk thrusting upwards and spreading its limbs above the roof, and around it well shaped beams loomed tall-ly overhead in a circular manner, seeming to radiate from the trunk. The wood was ebonized with fire and carved with magic runes so they would withstand the elements for a thousand years. One hundred fires burned around the rim to keep it warm, and many thralls from foreign lands tended the flames. The tables and benches were covered with Roman gold, silver cups, and blown glass from northern Italy. Sitting about the hall were the many Hunnish and Germanic warriors of strong birth in King Völsung's entourage.

King Siggier approached the hall and spoke in private with Völsung. They returned a short time later, and her father sat beside her. He said, "Your suitor has told me you make his

heart burst with your fairness, and would like your hand in marriage. I told him I must confer with you.”

Signy turned and leaned over to whisper in her father’s ear. “Lord, I do not want to marry this man. He is not to my liking. His eyes tell me he is not a man of honor. And, I think he covets your possessions.”

“Daughter, you are speaking like a girl. He is wealthy, and has a great many Geats under his rule. If we are to remain strong once the legions return we will need men like him.”

“This man?” she said, glancing at Siggier while he made conversation with his men.

“This man is of good birth, and a Geat, the same tribe as Beowulf. We will need them. Siggier will deliver. We have no reason to distrust him. Turning him away could bring his people over to the side of the Romans.”

Signy thought for a long moment. “Then I will consent to the marriage.”

Völsung returned to Siggier and they worked out the terms of their arrangement. Since Signy was his only daughter, a significant part of Völsung’s wealth would pass to whatever children they might have. Siggier would also provide a large dowry as well as men for Völsung’s warband, so they would share in the wealth of their plunder. Siggier smiled, “I am pleased to hear. I will return in two weeks with a dowry, and for the wedding feast.”

Völsung was pleased. “Would you stay the night in my hall? I would not turn away a new friend and soon-to-be kinsman. Please, avail yourself of my meat and mead.”

“Gladly.”

And so Siggier and his men went to unload their luggage from the ship. Signy heard her ten brothers making jokes at Siggiers expense, and marched over to stop this so Siggier would

not suffer dishonor. She approached Sigmund from behind, who was leading the jests, and smacked him across the head. “Ah! Signy! But we were just admiring our brother-to-be’s broad frame!” She giggled then covered her mouth, and smacked him again. Her brothers laughed and asked their mother, Hljod, for more mead.

During the weeks the Völsungs waited on Siggier, Signy sat on soft grass in the shade of an elm tree overlooking the open fields to the south. The thralls tilled the land and shepherds guided the herds. She heard heavy footsteps behind her, and turned to find it was Sigmund coming to disturb her.

“Don’t you have to ride with the Huns today?”

“Why would I do that when I could sit beside my lovely sister?”

She smiled, “You’re a fool.”

“You are wise.”

“Then you should defer to my judgment.”

“Today, I choose to be a fool.” He plopped down on the grass beside her.

“I do not want to marry Siggier.”

“I don’t like that father is asking you to. How much do we need his swords and spears? We have far more ships and riders.”

Signy pointed south, “If we are ever to ride into the horizon, every sword must point south, with the Völsungs at the head of the column. We are the tip of the spear. Without us, the rest are only a shaft.”

“You and father dream too much about being conquerors.”

“Our children will be host-makers, and with Völsung blood in their veins no one will be able to stand before us. They will ride upon fine horses, red and black, to take peace from the earth. Our family will usher in a new age brother.”

“Siggier will not make host-fathers.”

“On this we agree.” They smiled at each other.

“I will miss you, brother, when I go to Gautland,” Signy said, “We’ve never been apart for long.”

“I will miss you too. I will visit you. And, if father’s dream is true and we are wrong about Siggier, I will see you with the hosts. You are not a wife to be left at home for such a war.”

“We shall see.”

Her hair was pinned up above her head, and a golden strand fell out across her brow. Sigmund gently brushed it aside, so he could gaze upon her face.

The day came when Siggier returned. The feast had been prepared from only the finest grain of the harvest, and a hundred cattle and lambs had been slaughtered to feed the guests. Siggier, for his part, had brought a great many jarls of good birth to show the nobility of his clan. She knew that some of these men were the children of Beowulf’s followers during his excursion to the west. How such men of noble birth and proven ability had come to follow Siggier, Signy failed to understand.

When the feast began, Signy was seated beside her new husband. Hljod led the bonds-women as they filled the cups of each guest with fine mead. Siggier was more than a head

taller than her when he sat down. His dark oiled beard contrasted against her bright golden hair. He was thin and hard where she was soft and attractive. Old where she was young.

During the feast, the men of Hunland and the Geats competed to see who was the strongest and drank deeply, as if trying to swallow the ocean, to see whose constitution could manage the most mead. All did this, except Sigmund and Siggier.

An aged man cloaked in gray came uninvited into the hall holding a massive sword of steel folded a thousand times, engraved with runes of power and might. Signy knew it to be of dwarven make, for only the craftsmen of the gods could manage steel in this manner. The old man drove the sword into the tree Barnstock with such force that the full blade was embedded in the wood.

“The man who is worthy of this blade will withdraw it from the bark. He will have it as a gift, and no better blade will ever be in the world of men. It shall be named Gram, the wrathful blade, and many noteworthy deeds shall be done with it,” he announced to the now quiet hall. Then, he left without saying another word.

Immediately, all the men clambered over one another to reach for the hilt, as if the first one to try would have the best chance. Signy watched every one of them yank with all their might, but the sword would not budge. One drunkard’s sweaty hands slipped with his feet braced against the trunk, and his head cracked against the steps leading up to Barnstock. His limp body had to be dragged out by his brothers.

Siggier rose from his place beside Signy, and approached the blade. He was unsuccessful. “I think this hilt will be a permanent fixture in your hall, King Völsung,” and many laughed at the jest.

A moment after, Sigmund approached the hilt, braced to pull, and the blade slid out of the tree with ease. He raised the sword overhead. Signy stood from her place with her horn in hand and cried, "Hail Sigmund who drew the blade!" The Völsung's men returned the toast, and those near Sigmund clapped him on the back two at a time. Even Siggier clapped lightly.

"If you will make this sword as a gift to me and your sister, so that we might pass it down to our children, I will give you three times its weight in gold as a gift to you."

"Siggier," Sigmund said, "you reached for the blade like everyone else in the hall. Had you been worthy of possessing it, the All Father would have given it to you. It will never belong to you, even if you made a gift of all the gold you have."

Signy cringed at the foolishness of her brother's words. He was shaming Siggier before all his men. Siggier's face remained still. "Well, Sigmund, then you have been favored for the moment. May it bring you many victories." Then he gestured at a thrall girl to bring him a horn of mead, and he raised it high over-head. "Hail Sigmund! And the bane-bringer in his stout hand!" and everyone in the hall mirrored the toast, except Signy.

When Siggier sat down beside her again on the bench, she saw he was far too terse as he ate his meal, clutching his spoon and knife. She wondered if they would snap. He maintained a jovial expression, spoke politely with her father, complimented Hljod for her fine stitching on Signy's dress, and served Signy with food from the various courses. But he was seething with hatred, and Signy seemed to be the only one who noticed.

Dread gripped her chest. She heard the croak of a raven overhead, and the room went out of focus. Images came to her and she was not at the feast anymore. Men wrestled in the mud all around her with bloody swords and spears. They groaned as they died. Blood sprayed across her



pale face and congealed at her feet. The sky was black with arrows which fell in seemingly endless waves and the men yelled as they were struck by them. To her shock she saw her arrow-riddled father fighting Siggier, who drove a sword into her his throat. More images came to her. A massive she-wolf ripped out their throats one by one. They wriggled as blood spurted out of their necks. Then they went limp, and their eyes dimmed.

Her chest was trembling, and she could hold neither spoon nor knife. She was breathing shallow insufficient breaths. Hljod recognized her daughter was having a vision, and moved to whisper in her ear, “Breathe Signy. Breathe. What will come to pass has not come to pass. We are only cuts upon the wood. You are at your wedding. Leave fate to those three women who carve the destinies of man on the bark of Yggdrasil. What will come to pass has not come to pass. Breathe... Breathe...” Signy sucked in air, trying to pull herself out of the trance state. Eventually, her muscles relaxed. She had a headache pounding in her temples, but could focus on what was before her.

She rose. Her legs were shaking, but she walked to her father. “I must speak with you alone.”

Völsung was confused. “What is wrong, Signy?”

“Please Babbi, we must speak.”

Völsung considered a moment. “We shall talk outside.”

She was tense and fearful, still shaking, and rubbing her arms while they walked out of the hall. Völsung reached an arm around her and held her as they exited the door.

“Now, what is so urgent?” asked Völsung. He stood back to consider her and crossed his arms.

“Babbi, I...I don’t want to go away with Siggier. Our hearts do not laugh together, and they never will. But even if I did not cringe at the thought of having his children, it is of greater importance that only misery will come of this union. It will come to you, and my brothers, and to all the honorable men who follow you. We will never make monuments for the dead Völsungs at the doors of Rome. I know this through the strange gift in our family. Babbi, you must listen to me.”

Völsung looked away for a moment into the dark night as the north sea crashed against the shore. “Signy, you should not say such things.” Tears welled in her eyes. Völsung continued unabated, “To break our agreement would dishonor us. If we break our alliance without cause, we could not hope to bind him in a friendly alliance, or anyone else for that matter. The oath-breaker has never won glory.”

“I cannot say you did not make this agreement under my protest. Neither can I say my heart is glad.” They returned to the feasting, but for the rest of the evening Völsung didn’t look at her. Signy watched him staring forward. Now and then he took a sip of ale. Hliod touched him on the shoulder. It looked like she asked what was wrong, but he waved her off.

A large tent was pitched at Völsung’s expense, so that Signy and Siggier could have privacy for their first night. It was common for men and women to mate at night in the presence of their fellows. But, she and Siggier were of high birth and would share a bed in private as long as they lived. The tent was made of white sheets, and wide enough to accommodate a large bed

as well as a dining table with a pitcher of mead. She poured a cup for herself, and drank, before giving one to Siggier. She drank again, then walked over to the bed, and laid flat on her stomach. When he entered her, she did not make a sound. His breathing was ragged while his rough braided beard slapped against her back. When he finished himself inside her, she knew his seed would take root. Her mother had fed her magic apples when she was young, and they made her fertile. With all her heart, she wished she was barren.

He rolled off of her and was soon asleep. She laid on her back, staring up at the canopy for many hours, hateful towards fate for placing her beside this man. She wished to tear open her stomach and roll the skin off to her sides, and squeeze the life out of her unborn child. She knew there were women who could do such things, cut children out of common women. But Siggier would know, because she would be wounded for some time. She hoped the child would take after the Völsung clan, not Siggier.

When the sun rose Siggier shook her awake.

“We’re going. Put on some clothes.”

She rolled her head to look over at him and didn’t get out of bed. “Custom demands that wedding feasts last for three nights. We should not leave now, so the bond between our families will be strong. It is harder to kill a man you have shared good meat and mead with.”

“Do not make me drag you.”

Desiring not to be humiliated Signy put on her clothes and a gray cloak and followed him to the ship. Siggier’s men were already packing the hull when they arrived at the docks. She stepped on deck then heard the sound of footsteps down the dock. Völsung approached Siggier

while dressed in his nightshirt. He was such a broad man that even in this garment he had an imposing figure. “Why are you leaving in such a hurry my kinsman? We have prepared three nights of feasting at great expense.”

“My apologies lord Völsung, but the weather is very fine, with gentle winds and a warm sun. I don’t want the weather to turn while I am en route, unnecessarily losing good men and ships. But, come to Gautland in three months time with your sons and all your most dignified followers. I will host you with all the fineries my land has to offer and make up for my absence. I am sure Signy will appreciate a visit from her kinsmen.”

Völsung grimaced and clenched his fist, “Then I will come in three months time.”

“I’m glad you understand.” Siggier stepped on deck.

Signy stared at her father from beneath her hood as the ship pulled away. In his eyes she saw concern and a sort of nervousness. She shivered from the north-sea wind.

“I will send attendants to serve you shortly!” he shouted so she would hear him.

She waved her arm in farewell.

While Signy waited for her tribe to come on the appointed day the child grew inside her. She was alone in the house for two months. Siggier was away with his most trusted men, supposedly visiting his loyal Thanes with gifts of golden rings. He was a ring-giver, and this was his duty. But such a journey, for the number of Thanes in his service, would take only a few weeks. Siggier had also left no orders for a feast to be prepared. No one in the house would answer if she asked when Siggier would return. The bonds-women had a rehearsed line: “Soon

my lady.” She was the lady of the house, but still a foreigner. She never thought she would want Siggier in her bed. But, that way she would have eyes on him.

At two months and one week, her trusted bonds-women and a few manservants from her father’s household arrived. She breathed a sigh of relief. One of the manservants was Skadi, who was both Hun and Burgundian, and had inherited a great capacity for riding. She approached him almost as soon as he got off the ship, and handed him the reins of a red horse. “I have a task for you: you must ride into the countryside and find out where Siggier is, and who he has been speaking with.”

He gave a quick nod. “I will not deny you, my lady of Völsung. Do you know where he first rode?”

“The people of this house do not trust me, and have told me nothing of his doings. But, I saw him take the south road.” The man was soon off with a sack of bread, cheese, and dried meat strung across his back, kicking the horse and crying “hip” to spur it forward.

While Signy waited for Skadi to return, she had her bonds-women integrated into the household to be her ears. Signy learned Siggier had left a quiet order for her to be left in the dark. This she already suspected. However, one of her women, who was sharing a bed with a household guard, learned from him that Siggier had sent word to the local villages that the fyrd was to be at the ready. The fyrd was only raised in times of war to defend the homeland.

A week later Skadi returned, and she met him alone outside Siggier’s fortress.

“What news have you gathered?”

“My lady, Siggier left Gautland across the south sea channel into Germania, but has returned with a small host of Huns. They did not have their horses. Horses fear the ocean. They were not dressed in their usual manner either, but I know the language from my mother.”

Signy pondered this information. “You are a fine man, and loyal. I will need you again, but for now stay in the forest. Find a hidden place where a man can go unnoticed. You must act like an outlaw until I call on you again.”

“Yes, lady.” Then Skadi disappeared between the trees.

The appointed day came. Völsung and her brothers with their trusted warriors landed in a fjord a few miles north of Siggier's fortress. Signy raced to meet the Völsungs upon a white horse. The earth churned beneath its hooves and made muddy sucking sounds as she drove the beast to the edge of its ability.

When she arrived, she saw her father's two finest ships beached in a jagged little bit of coast at the end of a fjord with high cliffs to either side. It meant he had perhaps one hundred men with him. Siggier would have at least four times that number. She did not slow her pace as she yelled “King Völsung! King Völsung!” straining her voice to be heard over the sound of crashing waves and wailing wind. When she finally neared, Völsung had unboarded to see who the messenger was.

“Signy, my lovely daughter. Have you come alone to greet us? Did you ride ahead out of eagerness? It would have been more fitting for you and Siggier to welcome us to Gautland together.”

Signy panted for a moment while she regained her breath, then said, “You will receive no welcome, only a swift dismissal to the grave. Siggier has gathered an unbeatable army of Huns and his Thanes and he will soon be here to have vengeance for his humiliations in Hunland. You must escape two-shiplly, and come back with the strength to defeat him.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“All will now know that in my mother’s womb I swore an oath never to flee from battle. I have fought a hundred battles, at times outnumbered and at others more numerous. I will not flee now, as I have never done so before. When battle closes the valkyries will carry us to Valhalla or not. No man may change the day he dies. If we were to flee, and if today I am fated to die, we would be diced apart on the stony shore, and remembered as cowards. I will not have women laugh at my sons, calling them cowards. We will have victory or we will have death. All men are fated to join that sod which is to be their final bed. If you cannot understand, you never will.”

She understood. She wanted to beg him to flee, but it would be useless. This was who her father had always been, who he would be upon his death.

“Then, at least do not make me go back to Siggier. Let me die with you and my brothers. Let me find a place amongst the Valkyries.”

“You must go with your husband, however it goes with us.”

With tears in her eyes she wheeled the horse and cantered up the slope. She jerked the reins when she reached the top of a cliff overlooking the ships. She watched as her father order the ships be burned, and one honored man was left on deck, and screamed as he died; a sacrifice to Odin, an envoy to the afterlife.

*“Why did they do this?” asked Aslaug.*

*“Men thought that fitting in those days,” replied the old man.*

Siggier soon arrived with all his strength. He had many Huns remounted with fjord horses who began the battle by raining arrows down upon the Völsung men in seemingly endless volleys which blotted out the sun. The Völsungs advanced behind their shield wall with their king bellowing “Claim the warrior’s gift! To Valhalla! To Valhalla!” so loud that even Signy could hear. The men did not break. They advanced together as one. They were without fear. They had honor. The Huns retreated before the shields twice, but for not a moment did the arrows cease to fall. Men died choking on their blood as the shafts inevitably found small openings between the shields, and were left lying in the mud which congealed around them, as if sucking them in.

When Siggier and his Geats finally locked with Völsung, the fighting became ferocious. Signy saw a formation led by Völsung with Sigmund and the rest of her brothers beside him depart from the main shield wall. They drove their way through the Geats with such blood-letting that they appeared on the other side of Siggier’s army. Then, they turned and drove back into the fray leaving a path of bodies wherever they went. They did this eight times, but upon their final push through Siggier’s formation, the Huns charged with long slashing swords in hand. Some beat at the Völsungs, now drawn up into a circle, wheeling around on their horses, while others sat ten paces back and fired careful shots to expose any weakness. Eventually, Völsung was shot



in the eye, and his sons huddled around their king to protect him from greater harm, but by now the main party of Völsungs had been hacked to pieces by Siggier's men.

The whole of Siggier's army turned on Völsung and his ten sons. They were overwhelmed and captured, disarmed then bound. They continued to resist by throwing themselves against their attackers and trying to wriggle out of their ropes.

Siggier approached King Völsung as he was forced to his knees in the mud. With his one remaining eye, Völsung stared at Siggier. "The gods scorn oathbreakers and conniving cowards."

Siggier smiled through thin lips, and replied, "The line of Völsung dies today." Then he swung his sword and took Völsung's head clean off. Signy screamed until her throat could no longer in a wordless oath of vengeance: Siggier would pay, she would see his blood, and that of all his men.

Siggier's men loaded her brothers who still struggled against their bondage into wagons to bring back to Siggier's fortress. She rode ahead of the main party so they would not know she had been there. By the time Siggier arrived she'd steeled herself and set aside her loathing. She walked out of the fort to Siggier, who stood gloating over her brothers who lay in the mud. The hateful man was beaming. She asked to speak with him alone.

"Anything you must say to me, surely you can say before your brothers."

She glanced over at Sigmund lying unconscious in the mud. "I ask only one thing of you Siggier, as your wife. Do not have my brothers killed so quickly. Watch them die more slowly in the stocks. It would bring me some comfort to see them still alive, even under such circumstances. I'd ask you to spare them, but I think such a request would be worth little."

“You are mad,” he said, and laughed. “You would ask for a worse fate for your brothers? You’re a vile creature. But I will grant your request, since it would be pleasing to me for them to die tortured deaths.”

Siggier’s men found a large old tree somewhere in the woods, and hewed it down. The ten brothers were fitted with chains around their ankles, and fastened to the trunk in a line.

For nine mornings, Signy sent a bonds-woman to meet with Skadi and learn what had happened the night before. Each morning, another brother was dead. A she-wolf would come and tear out their throats. The brothers resisted in turn, but they were powerless to stop the beast. Signy was ill, hurling into a bucket beside her bed and shivering. Siggier had procured some potions from a healing woman in the local village, and one of his servants would pour it down her throat. Siggier said that it would help with the morning-sickness. The nausea, stomach pains, and cold sweats clung to her morning and night. She could not nourish herself either, and felt the baby eating her alive. By the ninth night, all but Sigmund were dead. She imagined him standing beside the corpses of their dead brothers, bleeding from open wounds, covered in dry mud, stinking of their own excrements. She would not allow the line of Völsung to die in such indignity.

Signy rose from her bed and her head swam with nausea. She could barely stand, let alone walk. But she kept going, leaning against the walls and stumbling, trying to reach the kitchens. If her brothers could endure grisly deaths, fight even without hope, she could make it down a stairwell. Finally, she leaned on the doorway with matted blonde hair obscuring her eyes and the cook looking at her confused.

“Honey...” she demanded.

“My lady, you must return to your chambers and rest,” replied the cook.

“I am the lady...” she was out of breath, “of this house. Wife to your king. I demand honey.”

The cook brought her a jar of honey. “Another, or I’ll have your eyes cut out.” He did as commanded. She turned back up the stairs with the jars cradled in her arms, and almost slipped without the support of the wall. One of her bonds-women realized what was happening, and rushed to help her up the stairs. “No,” she panted, “take these to Skadi.” She whispered, “Tell him to smear the honey across Sigmund’s face and in his mouth. Do this if you have any loyalty.” The woman agreed, but first walked Signy up the stairs to her bed.

Skadi returned on the 11th morning and they spoke in her chambers.

“Check the hallway,” she said before he closed the door.

“Yes, my lady.” Once this was done he sat beside her bed.

“Does my brother live?” she asked.

“Yes my lady. I smeared the honey on his face last night as you asked, though he protested at first. I then returned in the morning to see if your plan worked. When I arrived I found the wolf dead, and Sigmund gone, with only the fastenings of his chains left on the trunk. I followed a trail of bloody footprints to a stream, where I found Sigmund washing off the blood. He told me the she-wolf had begun by licking the honey off of Sigmund’s face, rather than lunging for his throat. He told me that he kept his composure when the she-wolf’s tongue was in his mouth, then bit down as hard as he could. When she yanked back, trying to release her tongue from the vice of his jaw. But he held on until the joints of his chains buckled. The she-wolf’s tongue was torn out at the roots, so she bled to death and he was free. I helped

Sigmund find a hidden underground dwelling deep in the forest, and I will show you where it is whenever you command.”

“Thank you Skadi.”

“I would do anything for your family.”

“You are a very loyal man. Now, you must go before any suspicions are raised.”

That day Signy stopped taking the healing potions, though she did not tell Siggier, and quickly recovered from her affliction. She learned never to ingest anything offered by Siggier which he had not tasted first. All the Völsungs were born with greater zeal than other men, more ambitious. The men could withstand poison, either on the skin or in the stomach. It was unfortunate, she reflected, that Völsung women could not consume poison and suffer no illness. Despite this knowledge, she ate voraciously to feed the baby inside her, and hoped this was a sign the child took after the Völsung stock. Once the baby was sufficiently grown, Siggier ceased trying to have her killed. He could no longer justify poisoning her because if he were found out he would be dishonored as feminine and cowardly. Besides, he now wished for a son. Each night he would visit her and try to double the pregnancy so he would have twins.

She sent Sigmund everything he would need, since he was an outlaw, and outlaws tend not to last long. She would not let him perish, he was all she had.

The boy was born screaming, smaller than she would have liked, and a little sickly. All her brothers had been born plump and healthy. But there was still hope he would grow out of his father’s blood.

Things continued in relative calm for several years. Signy could, on occasion, find the time away from Siggier's fortress to visit her brother. One such visit was during a cold northern winter. She and her brother sat together beside the fire in an underground dwelling, bundled in a supply of furs she'd smuggled to him over time.

"Sigmund, would you like a companion out here? You've been largely alone for some time."

"Well, I've had your visits. If we could live in the same house again, I would like that. But I find it unlikely."

"But if I could give you a companion, I mean."

"I might not object, if the man is to my liking."

"When my son turns ten, I will send him to you. I want you to see if our blood has come through in him, at all."

"Why would we do that, Signy? The boy might tell his father."

"Not if he is Völsung. If he is Völsung, the boy will find it in himself to hate his father. Our line must continue, Sigmund."

"If he is a good son, and honorable in his own way, he will take no part in our feud."

"When he turns ten, I will send him to you. You will learn his nature. He will join us, or not."

"What is there to join Signy?"

She stared at the fire and did not respond for some time. "The line of Völsung is not dead. No yet, while my womb may still quicken."

"If I were to go abroad, find myself a wife—"

“No. You are an outlaw, without kith or kin to support you, apart from myself.”

“Our ancestor Sigi was an outlaw, and became a king of ships, and founded the kingdom we lost. Such things have been done, and I’m man enough to do it again.”

“I...want you here. Do not leave me alone in Siggier’s house. I beg it of you. I do not know how long I could suffer it.”

“I’m sorry, Signy. I won’t recommend it again.”

“No, do from time to time.”

They spent the night in Sigmund’s dwelling, the fire between their furs.

Days before her son’s tenth year, Signy met with Skadi. In the last decade the man had settled in one of the local villages, gotten a wife, and had two children.

They met on a low hill in the forest, away from prying eyes.

“I must ask, Skadi, to see if you are still my man. Would you do me more service?”

“Out of loyalty to your father’s memory I have done much, and will do still more. He was like a second father to me when my own was killed in Dacia, and did much to care for my mother.”

“This task carries risk, I must warn you. And you have more to lose now.”

“I will not flinch. I have sworn an oath of service, and would not break it.”

“I thank you for your praiseworthy honor. This is what you must do: I will send my boy with one of his father’s huntsmen into the woods on the day of his tenth year, and you must kill that man however you see fit. You must be seen by my boy in the act, dressed in the manner of an outlaw highwayman. Chase the boy when he runs, but make sure he suffers no injury. My

brother will lie in wait, and you will fight while my boy watches. I will tell my brother not to injure you, but the fight must seem real, and the boy must feel that my brother has saved his life, so that the boy will trust him and follow him to his underground dwelling. I ask again: will you do this thing?"

"My honor compels me, and I am eager."

"I trust you to handle the specifics."

"Until I see you next, my lady." Skadi turned and rode to find Sigmund.

The day the boy turned ten, Signy called him into her chambers. Siggier, at this time, happened to be on viking in the east for the summer. The boy had inherited his father's narrow frame and dark complexion, but she'd seen him fighting with the other boys in the fortress with zeal. He seemed to like fighting and had an ambition to win. This was a Völsung trait.

"Yes, Signy? You commanded my presence."

"Today, you are a man's age, but not yet a man."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that you will have to prove you are made of hard stuff. There are a number of trials every Völsung boy went through to see if he was more than other men. Come here."

"Am I a Völsung? Babba doesn't say so."

"You will call him Siggier, or father. 'Babba' is a child's word."

"Yes, Signy." He nervously approached her, unsure of what was meant by "trials."

Signy draped a bundle of wool over her left hand, holding it firmly between thumb and forefinger. In her right, she held a finely made deer-bone spindle with a quartz stone weight, and

gently pulled at the woolen fibers with a small hook fashioned at the end. She spun the spindle, allowing the weight to drop, and as it gained momentum, the wool twisted itself into pure-white yarn.

Signy broke the yarn when it was only an arm-length, but this was all that was necessary. She reached for a curved needle, thinly wrought and made of iron, and attached the yarn. She gripped the boy's right arm tight, then pressed the needle into his forearm above the wrist. The boy cried out, and wriggled in a fruitless attempt to free himself. Signy gripped harder. "You mustn't cry out. Bear the pain," she said. As she pulled white yarn through his skin, its length turned red. Then she pushed the needle through again. The boy was no longer struggling to be free, but he whimpered "Why Signy? Why?" and tears were falling from his eyes.

At the third draw of the yarn, Signy pulled the whole length through the stitches. Only then did she release the boy. He had not done well. Völsung children did not cry out in pain, ever. Such things were tolerable in lesser men, but never with Völsungs. However, if the boy was to Sigmund's liking, there was still hope for him to prove his strength. She doubted he would. She hoped she was wrong.

After testing the boy with needle and thread, she sent him to the appointed huntsman, whom Signy knew had been in the battle ten years ago. "My king's son, are you prepared for the hunt? I am told there is a lone wolf which has been terrorizing the herds. You will do a service to the land you must one day rule."

"I understand. I will do this thing. But, will it take long?"

"However long is necessary. Now, mount your horse!"



The boy did as he was told, and the pair rode off into the woods.

She knew the plan had been carried out when Skadi returned in the evening to report what had happened. “Your brother diverged from our plan,” he said, then winced from a broken rib.

“I apologize for him. He can be overzealous.”

“Zeal is a gift given to your family. I am a lesser man, and therefore moderate.”

Signy laughed, “Lesser? Only in birth, but you are more honorable than many men of better birth. I thank you for your service. Will you be able to explain these injuries to your wife?”

“I will find a way, though she can often tell when I’m lying. If I tell her that I fell off my horse that may be sufficient. She is a good woman, and honorable.” He smiled, then remounted, pressuring his ribs with one hand, and rode away.

Signy made careful note of this. The wife introduced risk into her plot.

A few days passed, and she met with Sigmund to discuss the boy’s performance as a manly companion.

“Before we discuss my son, what compelled you to break Skadi’s rib? Sometimes, Sigmund, you are such a halfwit! Now he must explain the injury without telling his wife about my plans. This makes it all very untidy.”

“I was trying to make the ploy convincing! You told me to do precisely this. If Skadi was of tougher stock-”

“Make no excuses for yourself Sigmund. It is unbecoming.”

“Sadly, I also have unfortunate news about your son.”

“What?”

“I handed him a bag of flour and told him to knead it into a doe, then went to collect firewood. I had secretly put a poison snake in the bag to test his squeamishness. When I returned, he had done nothing to follow my instructions, because of the wriggling thing inside the bag. He has none of the Völsung zeal and determination.”

“I suspected as much. Kill the boy.”

“What?”

“He need not live any longer. He is no son of mine. I only wish we had not spent so much time on him.”

“Then...it shall be done as you say.”

And so the boy died with an ax to the head upon Sigmund’s return and was laid beside the huntsman twenty feet off the side of a game trail.

Signy allowed several more days to pass before feigning worry about the fate of her son, having been gone for a whole week on the hunt. She sent out a search party to find the boy. The returned with his body. The murder was decided to be the work of outlaws.

When Siggier returned from the east, one of his men was waiting at the dock to tell him the news. He stormed into his fortress and slammed through Signy’s door, and bellowed “You sent my son into the forest with only one man? You vile slut! You half-witted unworthy cunt!”

“Siggier, can you not see the tears in my eyes?”

“You killed my son!”

“Outlaws killed them! Do you see blood on my hands?”

“By your command they died, and for what?” His voice was quiet now, and hateful.

“To test him. See if he could venture beyond your walls without your pampering, and prove himself a man.”

“He was ten.”

“Men have gone to war at younger ages.”

“He was a king’s son!”

“Then he would have needed to be the greatest of the men he leads.”

“What is so ill in you that you could say such things after the death of our own son?”

“It is you, Siggier, who are sick. It is a weakness in you which pampered the boy, and which did not prepare him for the hard facts of life as a warrior, and chief.”

“You are vile. He was a boy, and he is dead.”

“We will have another.”

Siggier could only shake his head, and walk away. “I have brought an illness into my own house,” he mumbled. Signy never imagined anything he could say would hurt her. But this did, because she knew he was right, in a way. He was accusing her of manslaughter. He just didn’t imagine she would go so far as to kill. Men often underestimate the blood-instinct in women.

A funeral was held for the boy. Signy watched Siggier place him in a small ship full of all the boy’s wealth: golden rings, a suite of ring mail, and a small sword with an ornate handle placed on his chest. Siggier could only hope they would reach his son in Valhalla, that the boy had died well. Signy stood on the shore with the rest of the onlookers, but only half grieved for the boy. She mainly grieved that her revenge would be prolonged. The boat was set aflame, and

pushed out to the center of a lake. All in attendance watched the boy burn, the flames reaching for the night sky. Signy knew the boy would not be going to Valhalla. She did not tell this to Siggier.

Siggier sat on the dock all through the night, watching the embers burn out, as the boat sank into the lake.

Signy left with all the rest of the attendants, and managed to detach from the mass of mourners for a secret meeting with Sigmund, who had been watching the funeral from just beyond the treeline.

“We do not have long, Sigmund. There is one more task you must do.”

“Why is this not enough? I just killed a boy.”

“There must be more bloodshed before we are through.”

“When will we be through?”

“When Siggier and everyone he has ever loved are dead. Then we will have our revenge.”

Sigmund sighed. “What is it you would have me do?”

“Go to the home of Skadi when they all sleep then burn it so nothing stands except the foundation.”

“Signy, Skadi has been nothing but a faithful companion and friend. Our father loved him.”

“And now he is a risk. He told me he would not be able to hide the nature of his injury from his wife, or may as well have said as much. It will follow that the whole village will know also. Siggier will pursue this to the end, until no stone is left unturned. Skadi is an outlander,

injured, and from Hunland. If he did the act or not, he would still be accused. He will not break under questioning, if alone. We have no such assurances about the wife, and his love for her may be a weakness in him.”

“Must he really die? Are you sure in this?”

“Sureness is a comfort for those not in peril. But the risk is unacceptable. My womb must still bear a Völsung.”

“Then I will do your bidding, though under protest. ”

“If this is what you must say, then do. But have it done now, and without hesitation.”

Sigmund now left Signy, and she slipped back into the funeral procession on their way to the fortress. One of her bonds-women had taken her place in a long cloak with a high hood, and they switched again. No one noticed.

Skadi’s house was burned, and he died. Signy hoped he was in Valhalla with his wife there to serve him mead in the hall. He had been a warrior, and deserved as much.

In the months following another cold winter came. Signy sat in her chambers alone, staring out the window north at the place where Völsung had died. She did this every night. Then she returned to bed, and tried not to dream.

She heard the sound of wings flapping through her open window, and awoke from her troubled slumber. Standing over her bed was a völvá, a sorceress. Three heavy necklaces made of amber stones were heaped upon her breast. She was beautiful, which would serve Signy’s purpose. A strong jawline, and delicate cheekbones. The shape of her eyebrows and mouth gave her face a wolfish appearance. Stormy blue eyes looked Signy up and down from beneath a black

lambskin hood lined with ermine. She was only wearing her nightgown. She held a staff in her ermine glove, with a knob of ornamental brass, and all around inlaid with gems. Tightly laced around her waist was a girdle made of hair and strapped across her chest was a large skin-bag full of the talismans used in her craft. The hairy calf-skin shoes on her feet were caked in snow, as if she'd only just entered the house of Siggier.

“You're bonds-woman told me you requested my presence,” she whispered huskily. “Wives who call on me usually need to have rid of a child they couldn't have had. But, when I gazed at the runes, while the brilliant mane of Skínfaxi glowed behind the morning horizon, they told me otherwise.”

“I wish you to help me create a child which should not be.”

“That is not within the gifts given to me.”

“You and I can change shapes. You can lay with my husband, while I lay with another.”

Signy blinked, and when her eyes opened, she was standing, looking down on herself lying in the bed. Her own face stared back at her, but something was slightly off. The eyes were stormy blue—the völvu's eyes. Signy had inherited the winter-sky-blue eyes of every Völsung. She moved her gaze down to her chest where the amber stones hung from her neck.

The völvu, in Signy's shape, had a wide mischievous grin. She slid out from under the furs, and when she got off the bed she extended Signy's spine with a lithe rolling motion. Then she felt Signy's breasts with both hands, and ran her palms across her stomach. “Go now and we will take to our dark deeds.” The völvu turned, and exited Signy's chambers.

Signy left the fortress, and outside a winter storm had gathered. The snow crunched under the vólva's calf-skin shoes. Signy walked awkwardly, unused to the strange gate of another's hips.

She searched for her brother's underground dwelling until she could see the faint light of a warm fire peeking out through an opening in the snow.

"I am lost!" she yelled in her most distressed feminine voice. "Help!"

Sigmund heard the cries from within his dwelling, and without hesitation pushed out of the opening to find the distressed woman. Signy sucked in air, as if surprised.

"I am lost! Will you give me shelter?"

Sigmund considered for a moment. She had found his dwelling, which was well hidden and far from any paths. He considered the possibility that she was Siggier's, but decided that she had likely found him by happenstance, and was sincerely lost. "I will not turn away a lost woman in such weather. Join me in my dwelling." He held her by the shoulders, shielding her from the wind with his body, and brought her into his dwelling.

"Thank you," she said breathlessly, and she took off her hood.

He was immediately taken by the beauty of her features. She saw his body tense immediately, stirred with attraction. But he had always been gentle with women, and he sat her beside the fire. She obligingly took off her ermine gloves and felt the sweet painful tingling of her fingers warming beside the flames. "I do believe you've saved my life, mysterious cave dweller. Tell me, what is your name?"

"I am Sigmund. And what is yours?"

"Sigrid Waelingsdottir."

“Are you a Saxon?”

“I am. But I dwelled awhile in Hunland.”

“Then you are very far from home.”

“I’ve been in the north country for some time now.”

“What have you been doing here?”

She smiled coquettishly. “Being questioned by handsome men.”

Sigmund blushed. “I will ask no further then.”

“Ask me according to your will. I will respond in a manner according to my own.”

“Then, did you know the King Völsung?”

“He ruled in Hunland when I was there. He seemed like a strong and accomplished man of noble stock. I was surprised to learn that the king in this land, weak and ignoble as he is, had defeated him in battle. Though I hear it was by trickery.”

“It was. He tricked Völsung into coming to this land outnumbered, and they had a furious battle in which for every Völsung man fallen, three of Siggier’s dead lay being sucked at by the mud. Völsung was the greatest warrior ever to hold a sword.”

“How do you know these details?”

“I...witnessed from afar.”

“And what was your business then?”

“I...” Sigmund grew anxious.

She smacked him on the shoulder playfully. “Do not lose your tongue like a halfwit.” She kept smiling to take the edge out of her words. “Just tell me more of King Völsung and his great doings, since you seem to have so much knowledge of these happenings.”



So Sigmund went on for some time about the glorious dealings of King Völsung and his sons. How they'd raided deep in Roman territory, troubling once powerful borders, taking great masses of wealth back to their hall in the process, and cowed even the mighty Huns into following them south.

"It is as if they were the tip of a spear, and all the rest were merely a shaft," she replied.

"We were!" he bellowed triumphantly, waving his hand in an upward arc. Then his face went slack, as he realized what he'd just done.

"We?" she said, smiling, rolling her eyes and shaking her head. "You know Sigmund, I wonder how you can both be such an accomplished and battle-cunning man, yet never learn to lock your tongue when it serves you."

"Then...you won't turn me over to Siggier?"

"I would not give a better man to the lesser."

"Will you share the furs with me tonight?" he blurted, then blushed.

She moved to his side and kissed him. It began slow, then was faster, and grew in intensity. Then they were clawing and biting at one another furiously, the way wolves do when mating. Signy knew the gods and men frowned down upon mortal siblings meeting in this way, but the knowledge faded away in the feel of his skin gliding across her own. She even forgot that she wore the shape of the völvá, as slow moaned groans escaped her throat, and the battering beat of her heart drummed inside her chest. The whole while they held one another's gaze.

Signy and Sigmund spent three nights together in this manner. Soon, Signy knew she was pregnant with the same certainty as when she'd laid with Siggier all those years ago. She left Sigmund's dwelling early in the morning, while he still slept.

She met with the völvá somewhere hidden in the woods. It was a strange feeling to see herself walking between the trees wrapped in her own woolen cloak and blanket. When the völvá was close, she seemed to disappear behind a tree, then reappear directly behind Signy.

Signy jumped in surprise, then was angry. “Madwoman! How dare you act in such a manner.”

“These are harsh words, when I have done nothing except help you, asking nothing in return.”

“You enjoy this power you have overmuch.”

“You are no different. I do not need to exchange shapes with you again. I could continue living in your house, bear your husband a child, and live very well.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“I would, and do more, if fate were not carved otherwise.”

“What does this mean?”

Signy saw her face, the völvá’s eyes, harden and glaze over. Her shoulders stiffened, and she clasped the sides of the lamb-skin hood and pulled their faces very close together. “I remember,” she whispered, her expression hateful and derisive, “when brother and sister mated in my skin, a cursed act. She knows further that there will be a child of this union who will be scorned as an abomination, only good for war. I see further a great fire consuming the house of Siggier and the land of the Geats, fueled by your bloody carcass. It will consume you as well, and many men of honor.” And the völvá violently closed the hood over Signy’s face then shoved

her to the ground, harshly pressing against her nose in the process. Signy fell, surprised by the suddenness of the völvá's rage.

When she raised herself off the ground, the völvá was gone, and she was wearing her own clothes. They had exchanged shapes.

Signy was shaken by the völvá's words as she pushed through the snowdrift back to Siggier's fortress. But then she thought of the fire, rising and consuming everything Siggier held dearly: his wealth, his honor, his legacy. That brought a smile to her face, and she was no longer shaken.

The child grew very quickly in Signy's womb, in much the same way her father had grown within his own mother. It is said that King Völsung spent six years in the womb, and had to be cut from her so that he could be born. He came out strong as a man and thickly muscled. For a brief time, Signy worried this would be her fate as well, since every day she seemed to eat three times her weight. But the child was born through the gate of her womb. Though early, he was still far larger than a normal baby. Babes of the Völsung stock had a hunger to be in the world which outmatched others, she thought. Despite her pain in the birthing bed, and the days spent in labor, when she gazed upon his face it brought a deep warmth coursing through her whole body. She was exuberant, flush, and desperately happy once he was placed in her arms. He'd already opened his eyes when she held him; her father's eyes and her brother's. Sinfjotli was his name.

As he grew he was mightier than any boy in the fortress, even those older than him. He took to combat training at the age of six, and he hated Siggier ferociously before he could even talk. Siggier did not like this.

He always preferred, when not besting the other boys at games and combat, to stay beside his mother and hold her hand as they walked through the fortress or in the open prairies. During their walks, Signy told him stories about King Völsung, his great legacy, and the reason for his death. “Siggier was a coward to have done things that way,” Sinfjotli said grimly.

For ten good years, she had a true companion in the house of Siggier.

She almost, almost, decided not to send him to Sigmund. But Signy would not shy away from fate, nor break the terms of her oath to avenge her father. She would suffer anything, anything at all.

When his tenth year came, she performed the yarn-test. The boy did not flinch, nor cry out through the entire ordeal. He had the iron will of the Völsungs.

“This must cause you pain.”

“Not so bad. A Völsung could bear more.”

“Will you go and find my brother alone in the forest? Be his companion?”

“I will not fail you.”

She smiled, and kissed him on the cheek.

Signy did not have to orchestrate the disappearance of Sinfjotli, as with her first son. Sinfjotli merely made it seem as though he’d run away on his own. Siggier sent out search parties, but did not pursue the matter vigorously. Sinfjotli wasn’t much to his liking as a son.

A week went by, and as before Signy met with Sigmund to discuss the fitness of her son.

“He is very like the Völsung stock. When I gave him a bag of flour with a poisonous snake alive and waiting within, he simply crushed the snake into the meal. The boy has strong hands, and would not shy away from the task. I did not, however, allow him to eat the meal. I can consume poison without ill effect. I do not think he received this gift, though he may tolerate it through the skin, for the snake bit into him in many places.”

“As I thought. Do you feel you have a companion?”

“Yes. He and I are very alike, both in looks and sensibility. Though I have one reservation about the boy. He tells me constantly that I should pursue vengeance against Siggier, his own father. He may have inherited Siggier’s infidelity.”

“It is only his Völsung blood showing through greater than the Geat. Give him time, and you will see that in all ways he is a Völsung.”

Some years went by for Signy in Siggier’s house. She heard tell of a pair of men marauding the countryside during the summers, taking great amounts of wealth from Siggier’s merchants and other local traders. In one instance, a few of Siggier’s men had come back home from raiding in the east, and while they wheeled their wagons through the forest the two men slayed them all and took their goods. The men’s bodies were found dragged in a circle around the wagons, bloody and disfigured.

A year later, she heard stories of two wolves terrorizing the countryside. They had iron teeth and the strength of ten men, and hungered for the blood of anyone foolhardy enough to enter the forest in numbers less than fifteen. Signy knew these to be the Völsung men as well.

Siggier had fathered two more sons on Signy. They were 5 and 6 years old, and took much after their father. Signy knew this would be so, and had mothered the children begrudgingly. One afternoon, Signy heard one of the boys yelling in the main hall, where they had been playing with golden rings together.

“Intruders brother! We must warn Siggier!”

Signy walked bristly through the halls to silence her sons. A few house guards had stirred and were going in that direction as well. “Calm yourselves,” she said to them, “it is likely some pretending game Siggier’s sons have chosen.”

“Are you sure Signy?” one said, suspicious.

“Stay at your post. I am the lady of this house, and know my sons well.”

“Yes, my lady.” And the man returned to his post.

Signy found the boys running to Siggier’s chambers, and grabbed them roughly by the shoulders. “Why are you screaming hysterically? Calm yourselves.”

“There are intruders, Signy!”

“Take me where these supposed intruders lie, and you will see them to be fantasies.”

The boys nervously led Signy to where one had seen strange men hiding behind the ale caskets. She saw two giant men hidden behind the casks. They were clad in the clothing of thralls, and smelled of cow shit, but held in their hands brutal swords with chipped blades and weathered handles. When she realized they were her brother and their son she breathed a sigh of relief, and the boys tried to run away. She held them firmly by the nape of their necks.

“Who are these men, Signy?” her boy asked. She did not respond to them, looking directly at Sigmund.

“These children have betrayed you. I recommend you kill them.”

Sigmund responded tersely, “I will not kill more of your children. One was more than enough.”

Before either had a chance to say another word, Sinfjotli thrust his sword through the chest of one of the boys. The other looked on, wide-eyed with surprise, and Sinfjotli ran him through as well. The blood dribbled on the floor, and soaked the dead children’s fine cloth shirts. “It is done. Shall we go and claim our vengeance now?” said Sinfjotli. Sigmund was gaping in surprise at the brutal act.

“Wait awhile. Stay hidden here. When Siggier comes to this hall for the evening meal, kill him then. And close your mouth Sigmund. You're made of harder stuff.”

“I am loath to see the death of your children, but I will take our vengeance.”

“Then we are in agreement. You will stay here until tonight.” Signy then roughly dropped the corpses into the place where Sigmund and Sinfjotli were hiding. Sigmund scowled with disgust at the display. The children’s blood pooled at their feet.

When evening came, Siggier and his men gathered in the hall, and food was served to them. A warm fire was burning in the central pit, which ran down the length of the hall. Signy held the mead pitcher for the men of the high table. This was her role as Siggier’s woman. She poured full cups and horns for the men, and let them drink more deeply than usual, always ready to replenish them when a cup was empty.

“You are unusually attentive this evening, Signy,” Siggier said. “Why? And also, where are my sons?”

One of the house-guards responded, “They could not be found, my lord.”

“Then why was I not sent for?”

“You were busy with the ships, my lord. When they were seen running about the fortress, your lady was last seen taking them into this hall.”

Siggier turned to Signy with a scowl, “Where are my sons, Signy?”

“They are very nearby.”

“What do you mean by this? I do not see them. I ask again: where are they?”

“Before your eyes.”

At those words, Sigmund and Sinfjotli came out from their hiding place, holding the limp blood-drained bodies.

“What is this!” Siggier shouted.

“This is justice for the deaths of King Völsung and my brothers.” Then she turned to the Völsungs, “Sigmund and Sinfjotli, kill them all!”

Siggier could only sit there, shocked, for he recognized those names and had believed both of them dead. Sigmund and Sinfjotli immediately began charging down the length of the hall towards the high table, cutting down any man who stood in their way. Several had fallen to the floor before Siggier recovered his senses.

“Rouse yourselves men! Protect your king!” He yanked out the sword which rested beside his chair. Other men grabbed what weapons were available to them, and charged to the bloody work ahead.

Sigmund and Sinfjotli fought with ferocious strength, and carved a bloody path through Siggier’s best men, as King Völsung had done in his final battle. Sigmund even came close to Siggier, who was standing at the end of the hall. But, just as he was about to complete the death



blow on Siggier's neck, a large man bulled into his side, sending Sigmund to the floor. Others piled onto Sigmund, trying to wrestle the sword from his grip. The whole pile of men were lifted off the ground as Sigmund got to his feet by sheer force. But more men piled on and he was brought back to the floor with his sword clattering out of his grasp. All the while Sinfjotli was driving up the hall with a hateful look in his eye, but he too was eventually wrestled to the ground in a similar manner.

When the fighting was done, twenty men lay dead and dying on the floor. Signy felt the weight of her heartbeats, as her plan for revenge was foiled. She'd trusted too much in Sigmund and Sinfjotli's strength to overpower Siggier's men, and thought their drunkenness would slow their response.

Siggier now turned to Signy. A bit of blood had sprayed onto his face, though he suffered no injury. A mad look was in his eye as he said, "I will make you suffer for this," he pointed at her with his sword. "You will watch as they starve to death in a cairn, alone in the dark, able to hear one another but unable to see. They will suffer, I will laugh. You will suffer, and I will smile. Then I will rape you until you give me yet another son of legitimate birth. He will be immediately taken away from you, and you will never touch or see him. He will be raised without ever hearing your voice, except perhaps your screams of anguish. But it would be better if you died in childbirth, since you are now nearing the age where such things happen to women. I always knew you were a vile slut. It should have been in my imagination that you also had murder in your heart." Then he turned back to his men, "Chain them! Their fate shall be prepared by morning."

Sigmund and Sinfjoti were chained and fettered. Signy was dragged to her chambers by Siggier and his men, and at his command they fulfilled his promises.

Late in the night, when Siggier and his men had tired themselves on her, she lay shivering and aching in pain, as her blood and tears soaked into her pillow. Somehow, she found the strength to stand and walk out of her chambers. Stumbling to the main hall, she found that the bodies had been removed, but the food still on the dinner plates had not been cleaned up. She found an empty sack, and loaded it with half-eaten pork. She contemplated the blood which soaked the floor. The thralls had not yet taken rough rags and scrubbed at it over and over until only a faint pink stain remained. She knew that even when they did, that stain would never leave the floors so long as the house still stood. She walked, wincing at the bruises on her legs, and found a loose board in the hall. Beneath she had concealed the sword, Gram, which Sigmund had pulled out of Barnstock.

It had a long wooden handle with supple leather fitted tightly, likely secured with resin. The blade was folded a thousand times, and ripples could be seen along the blade. Its edge was sharp enough to shave with, and held under immense duress. The blade was also inscribed with magic runes, making it light enough to wield in one hand despite being doubly long. Most mysteriously, the sword glowed slightly in the darkness.

Signy left the hall, carrying the sack over her shoulder, and dragging the sword behind her. Outside, the thralls had already half finished the mound where Siggier intended to have her brother and sibling-son buried alive. She took the pork out of her sack, and concealed both items by wrapping them in straw within the cairn.

By the time her work was done, she was completely spent, and collapsed after stumbling away from the mound. Two young thralls found her there.

“What has Siggier done to her?” one asked the other.

“Well, that seems like the wrong question. Beaten her, clearly. But, why is she here?”

Signy rasped a response between painful breaths, “I beg of you, help me to my chambers, and conceal that I was ever here.”

The two glanced at each other anxiously, “What if Siggier finds out, my lady?”

“I beg of you...”

They looked at her, then at each other. One shrugged and cocked his head to the side.

“Come now lady, and try not to cry out so we aren’t killed or beaten.”

She fell unconscious from exertion.

Morning came, and Signy was dressed in the clothing of a bonds-woman. The thralls must have changed her clothing to conceal her identity. She rose and stumbled to her window and watched as Sigmund and Sinfjotli were dragged in their fetters to the mound which Siggier intended to be their final dwelling. Their chains were hammered into the stone floor and both struggled to break free of the men which held them in place, never once submitting to capture.

Siggier had commanded a huge stone slab be dragged to part the center of the mound. As promised, the prisoners would be able to hear, but not see one another. The thralls completed the mounds on either side of the stone, raising up the stony turf so no man could pass through.

Satisfied with the day's work, Siggier left for his hall to eat and celebrate with his men. Signy collapsed back into bed, and fell asleep once more.

In her dreams she saw Sigmund and Sinfjotli grasp on either end the wrathful blade glowing redly in darkness, and saw that great slate carved through with thunderous strength. Saw Sinfjotli driving forward with legs planted in the ground, as foot by foot Gram parted the stone creating great fissures. She could hear the laughter of Siggier's men, unaware of their impending doom. Then the draugr-men crept through the dark like dead things. Soundless, not a footfall nor the crunch of twigs and leaves. She saw burning haystacks and heard the sound of screaming horses.

"Signy," Sigmund said in a hushed voice. It felt like part of the dream. "Despite your hurts you must awaken. We have set the fortress afire and if we are to escape you must come with us."

Signy opened her eyes to Sigmund leaning over her disheveled bed. "Then you must carry me, Sigmund." Gently, he lifted her body in his arms and pressed her against his ash covered chest.

"Take us to the hall," Signy said, "I would see the fruits of our revenge."

The three of them moved through the fortress, which was full of panicked men and animals. The main hall was roaring in flames. The thralls and bonds-women, who were outside the hall, were rushing to the well carrying buckets of water to douse the flames. The men inside could be heard yelling in dismay, trying to throw open the doors, but the whole entrance was ablaze. A few made the bold decision to run through the flames, but they collapsed to the ground as the fire burned away their skin.

By now the whole front wall had collapsed and the ceiling was teetering. The floor was strewn with burning bodies. Siggier and what remained of his men were towards the back of the hall, trying to push open the side entrance, but it would not open.

“Siggier!” Sigmund bellowed, “hear me! I only want you to know that while the Völsungs live on, you are doomed to die!”

Siggier did not react, though he heard the words, and he wondered if the dead had come to life. But, he was more preoccupied with the door which would not open, as the flames worked their way towards him and his men, and the mix of ash and smoke filled their lungs, making them weaker with each passing moment.

“Signy, let us leave now. We will leave behind this carnage, and renew our line. I will sire sons, and the name of Völsung will claim greatness. I would live with you in the same house again, and have you by my side.”

“Sigmund,” she said, reaching a weak hand up to his cheek, “slow for a moment. There is something I must say. When I killed my first child, I thought him weak and traitorous to our cause. When I had Skadi and his wife burned, it was to conceal that murder. I came to you in the shape of a sorceress to conceive Sinfjotli. Only a son and daughter to Völsung could birth a son strong enough for our need. You could not know. It was all to see Siggier die. It was all for vengeance. And now, I am not fit to live. Set me down. I shall walk to my death. I must die with my husband, and his men. ”

Wordlessly, Sigmund set Signy down on her feet.

“Must you go?” he asked.

“Goodbye, my beloved brother. Carry our line forward. Trust me when I say your sons will claim fame and glory. That would not change even if I came with you now. I have honored my oath of vengeance. Already I will be called vile, cruel, and harsh by both gods and men. But they will not call me dishonorable.” She kissed both men on their cheeks, though it stung her battered lips. Then she walked into the flames. She did not scream as the fire claimed her. She smiled. The fiery tendrils were waving blades of golden grass, waiting to embrace her.

## Chapter 2: Brunhild

*“Aslaug, I will now tell you of Brunhild, the Valkyrie-woman who was your mother.” The fire crackled as the old man stretched his legs to make himself more comfortable. He had been speaking for some time now.*

*“This is what I wanted to know from the start.” She stared at him, scowling in annoyance. Her penetrating gaze and icy blue eyes bored into him as she leaned forward intently.*

*“It is not my task to tell you only the stories you wish to hear. I am no bed-time maiden who sings little songs to please and lull you to sleep.”*

*“Then what are you, aside from a very old man?”*

*“Do you want to learn about Brunhild or not?”*

*She leaned back then, hands in her lap. She looked very young to him then, only a child of thirteen. “Yes,” she whispered, so he could barely hear.*

Her story begins here: Brunhild stood in her fire lit chamber at the pinnacle of a tower in her father’s fortress, embroidering on red fabric an image of a dragon being slayed with a huge sword. She purposely left the slayer blank. Instead, she spent many hours and days on the finer details of the dragon’s features. Brunhild even went so far as to spend a whole day amongst the sheep herds to find one whose coat shone silver blue in the sun. She spun the spindle with that sheep’s wool, and she was so deft that the strands came out thin and fine. Then, she embroidered them into the tapestry along the edges of the dragon scale design, to give the sense of their metallic sheen.

Her father Budli entered the room. He was a large man, a good king with many followers, big arms, a barrel chest from years of swinging axes, and a huge white beard which gave him a fearsome look. But, his age showed as he moved to sit on a stool beside the fire; his knee cracked, he needed to press one hand against the cool stone wall, and groaned as the motion was completed. “Why have you chosen this design, and then left it unfinished?” he asked Brunhild with his gravel-rough voice.

“Because, father,” she said, “I do not know yet who slays the dragon. I dreamed that it would happen, but the gods did not show me who bears the sword, whose name I knew to be Gram because its blade was wreathed in wrathful flames.” She spoke without looking at him, still intent on her weaving.

*“How could you know this?” Aslaug cut in, leaning in again.*

*“It was told to me.”*

*“How can you be sure it is correct?”*

*“Can’t you let an old man tell his stories?”*

*“They are not your stories. They are mine, and I want you to have them right.”*

*“If that was true, then no one would care. They belong to the truth of the story. I knew Brunhild well because of the things said about her in that time. Let an old man invent a little to get at the truth of things.”*

*She paused for a long moment. “Continue,” she said, and leaned back.*

Brunhild continued weaving while her father sat on a stool and watched her work.



“What did the gods show you?” he asked.

“They showed me a dragon with a hoard of gold in the east. They showed me that the dragon was once a man who murdered his father to claim the family gold, The Otter’s Ransom. In the dream, I watched as he piled the gold in his arms, still stained with the blood of his father, and he was transformed into a vile serpent with poison in his veins. Then they showed me his stomach pierced by Gram from beneath him.”

“I know the dragon of which you speak. He is Fafnir, and by all accounts he is still very much alive. Do you have any guess at who will slay him?”

*“What is the Otter’s Ransom?” Aslaug cut in, as she crouched beside the fire, pushing about the coals with a thin log.*

*“I will tell you quickly, since it is a tangent. There was a man, Hreidmar, and he had three sons. They were Regin, who some say had the likeness of a dwarf. Then Otr, who was said to transform into an otter each day and fish in the nearby stream for the family’s nearby meal. Then Fafnir, who was by far the tallest, fiercest, and most bold of Hreidmar’s sons.*

*“It is said that one day, when Otr was fishing in his animal form, he crawled onto the grassy bank to bask in the sun. At that moment, the gods Loki, Heimir, and Othin happened to be wandering through the woods. It is said that the gods choose, at times, to wander the world in human form. They slew the otter, believing him not to be a man in animal form. They went to Hreidmar’s house for shelter, and showed him Otr’s fine pelt. Hreidmar was furious, and demanded ransom.*

*“Loki knew there was a dwarf, Andvari, living in a waterfall up-stream. So this place was called Andvari’s Fall, and men knew him to take the form of a spear upon which fish would impale themselves for his meals. Andvari had a great horde of wealth beneath the fall, and Loki demanded it be turned over to him. Andvari did so, since Loki is a god, but he held back a single golden ring, beautifully wrought. Loki demanded the ring as well, but Andvari cursed the object, telling Loki, ‘This ring will bring great misfortune to anyone who possesses it, however precious and beautiful it is.’ Loki took the ring anyhow, knowing that he would only hold it a short time. And so the cursed wealth of Andvari passed into the possession of Hreidmar and his sons. This is the Otter’s Ransom.”*

*“I suppose Andvari’s promise came true.”*

*“I wish to return to Brunhild, or do you want to know other stories and continue another night?”*

*“No. Please continue.”*

Brunhild was still weaving as her father asked who she thought would kill the dragon. “Once more, father, the gods did not see fit to tell me. I know only that he must be the most noble of all men who ever will live in the tongues of men.”

“Is this the man you will finally allow yourself to marry?”

“I could only marry such a man.”

Budli sat quietly for a moment. “Daughter,” he finally said, “there is a battle coming.”

Brunhild took her hands away from the loom, and turned to sit with her father beside the fireplace, then looked him in the eye. “Attila,” she said. The name hung in the room, as if she’d conjured the man’s presence.

“No, by our luck. But one of his allies, Hjalmgunnar,” he said in reply.

*“Was Attila a Hun?” Aslaug asked.*

*“He was. With bow and sword and the thunderous roar of so many horses, the Huns streamed across the Volga in numbers so great that no tribe of Germania could stand before them. In fear, they either ran or gave tribute to the Huns, while the whole world was filled with fire. Hjalmgunnar was an ally of Attila, with hunnic riders in his retinue. He was a very strong king.”*

*“What did Brunhild say then?”*

Brunhild said, “I will lead the men to war.”

“No, Brunhild, I am a king, and a king who sends his daughter in his own place is no king at all.”

“Kings have been known to send sons in their stead.”

“You are my noble daughter. It is not the same.”

“You trained me from youth to hold a sword and spear better than most men, taught me to ride a horse as well as anyone, you named me for war, and I have already gone raiding with the men to the east and in Gaul.”

“I know that well, Brunhild. But I would not send you to this battle, because I’m sure it will be my last.”

“Exactly, you are too old now.”

“This is true. I had hoped to die in my sleep, without another war to fight. I have never dreamed of Valhöll, like so many men I have watched float there on a river of blood. I’m frankly unsure that’s the place men go, despite what the skalds say. But, I’m afraid you do not understand. When I was encamped in a forest with my men, on the path to meet with our friend King Heimir, a raven flew from the darkness and landed beside my bedding. It looked into my eyes, and I knew my death was coming soon. Upon arrival at Heimir’s hall, he told me Hjalmgunnar was coming to take our lands. Othin has chosen me, and all men know it is unwise to flee from fate.”

“Does Othin take men with such shriveled hands as yours?” she responded. Then she smirked.

Budli laughed, then said, “I’d thought not. Perhaps Othin is tired speaking only with men who died young, and wants someone to complain about his aching knees with.”

Brunhild laughed and touched her father’s hand. Few ever made her laugh except him. Then she was silent and grimaced at the fire.

“I will not let him take you from me.”

“I know this look from you,” Budli said, “and remember all the moments in your childhood when it moved events according to your vision. When you were a young girl, your mother did not allow you more than your allotted amount of honey, and you turned to that kind woman, and said, ‘I will have it,’ with fury in your eyes. And so you did. Even so, I do not

believe you can defy the gods. I will send you to your sister and her husband, Heimir. You will be safe there, and no one will force you to marry a man who is not to your liking.”

“Our enemies will make no wife of me, and I will not go.”

“I believe as you sleep tonight, you will see the wisdom of my recommendation.”

Budli prepared for battle over the next weeks while Hjalmgunnar approached from the east. He called the Thaners of his cause with their warbands, sparred with his followers, and discussed strategy by night. The men of the villages came in twos and threes, some in mail shirts, most with only a shield and the family forest axe. Budli had many men encamped around his fortress; Brunhild was amongst them. She knew they had heard of her deeds, and so did not question her presence. She had a way of commanding respect from men. Every day Budli made a point of visiting her to ask her to go to Heimir. Every day she refused. “I will lead the men to war,” she would say. So Budli did not make her part of the war councils. And yet, she was amongst the captains, and always knew the plans.

“Do you have spies in my war councils?” He asked one day.

“No, father,” she said, “I simply know what each man is likely to say.”

That night, a boy approached Brunhild while she cooked her evening meal over the spit. He was brown eyed and gangly, likely only sixteen years old. “Brunhild?” He asked. She turned a cold expression towards the youth. She could tell he was struck to the heart by her bright gray-blue eyes— twin skies with dark gray clouds swirling, and the symmetry of her features, the red spotted blush in her cheeks like small scattered cloudberry, and the burnished—red-gold

hair which broke out in strands from the braids atop her head. Every man who ever saw her got the dumbfounded look on his face. Many had asked for her hand in marriage. She wondered if he would do the same.

“Yes, and who are you?” she said.

“Agnar Hrimfaxson.”

“And why, Agnar Hrimfaxson, have you approached my cookfire?”

“I have a question.”

“It is bold to approach a king's daughter when she is otherwise alone.”

“I only hear that you possess the gift of rune-skill and can know the futures of men.”

“Do you wish to know if you will die in this battle?”

“No,” he said. “I want to know if I will die well.”

“If you do not shy away when the All-Father presents a fine death, a courageous enemy, you will die well. Otherwise, you will live as a coward.”

Brunhild sat outside her tent as the next day began. The sun cast rays low across the shadowy landscape and a raven flew overhead, flying from the east, croaking into the otherwise silent morning. She knew it meant battle. It was a very bad sign the raven was flying in their direction, not that of the enemy.

She raised a cow horn to her lips. The loud hum sounded through the camp, and other horns answered. The sleepers stirred. Everywhere the sound of jingling mail, clatter of shield and ax, and the dowsing of coals left over from the night fires could be heard. Budli and his chief men marched out from the fortress gates. They were clad in thick gray mail and hard boiled

leather, pointed iron caps with nose guards, all with long braided beards bobbing off their chins and clinking against their mail. Their shields were many colors with swirling patterns and bright shined bosses. Budli was distinguished only by his two-handed bearded axe and the position of pride at the head of the column. Some kings rode into battle clad in fineries, and wore the best of equipment. Brunhild had always felt her father's nobility rested in his simplicity. With no ambition to look better than other men, he focused on being better than other men.

As the column marched, the fyrdmen gathered behind them with stern looks upon their faces, ready to fight and die in the name of their war-chief. Brunhild moved to her father's side at the head of the column, spear and shield in hand. Her hair spilled out beneath her helmet and shined red-gold. No blade had yet drawn blood, and no man had yet died, but the smell of blood was in the air. She chanted strange words beneath her breath:

I weave, I weave the web of spear,  
As marches the standards of the brave.  
I shall not let him lose his life,  
For I have the power to choose the slain.

All is sinister now we see,  
Clouds of blood move over the sky,  
And the air is red  
As battle women chant their song.

The two sides met across a shallow stream, an offshoot of the Rhine. Budli and his men chose this place so the Huns could not easily ride them down, since they were men on foot against the finest riders in the north. The strange Hunnish men on their black and gray horses appeared atop a hill, wearing pointed caps and curved riding-boots.

Their horse hooves pounded the earth, men died under broken shields, and gouges in their skulls. Arrows hissed through the air. Brunhild saw Hjalmgunnar dismounting a red horse, then

leading a charge on foot. He took men's lives with a huge spear, clad in roman armor taken from some faraway battlefield, and a helmet with a golden nasal and a fan of bloody horse hairs swinging from the cap.

He seemed unstoppable, and struck fear in the hearts of the men. Every warrior who came before him soon lacked his arm or his life. He charged a young warrior and skewered him through the stomach then threw him off the spear, still alive, into the shield wall of his brethren. The wall was broken, and the Huns came through the breach with sabres in hand.

Brunhild crouched in the water beside Budli within the broken formation. She continued watching Hjalmgunnar while chanting her words, demanding he ride into Hel's cold embrace.

Eventually, she lost him in the fog of war. The battle persisted in a confused mash of angry grunts, moaning men, screaming horses flailing, as hard iron rang against studded helms. Bodies fell and smacked the water, thus pinking the stream until it ran red as blood. In the confusion Brunhild was separated from Budli, and wandered the field in search of him. She stopped being able to recognize the dead, and it had been morning when the fighting began, but now the sun was blood-red as it set in the west. She followed its reflection. There was nowhere else to go.

There were fallen warriors amongst the dead who could not possibly have fallen that day. They were from distant lands and in varying states of rot. The water level rose. Brunhild followed the river of blood through a twisting landscape until nightfall and utter darkness.

There were no longer any sounds of violent war-making, only the dead bobbing bobbing across the surface and flowing westward the stream. She could see nothing, only feel the bodies as they bumped and brushed against her.



“Budli!” she cried out. There was no answer. She kept wading between the corpses, shouting for her father.

Brunhild saw a small yellow-red lantern at the prow of a skiff round a bend with a tall woman dressed in white. She pushed the skiff through the westward stream with a long pole. Her face was gaunt and wide with eyes brooding and terrible. She fixed her look on Brunhild, who answered in kind.

“You are an Angel of Death,” said Brunhild.

The woman did not respond at first, but pushed the skiff until it was right in front of Brunhild. “Give the Sire of the Slain his due,” she croaked. Her voice was rasping and only just loud enough to hear..

Two bodies appeared out of the darkness floating face up. To her surprise it was Budli and Hjalmgunnar, neither breathing.

“Give the Sire of the Slain his due,” she croaked again. “He has chosen you as Angel of Death, Valkyrie, chooser of the slain. You must serve the Hanged-One as he commands. He has chosen Budli, but you must give him.”

Brunhild clenched her fists. “No,” she replied.

“You should not displease he who sits in Valhöl, awaiting the dead who belong to him.”

“You will take this man.” She grabbed Hjalmgunnar’s corpse and tried to heft it onto the skiff, but he was too heavy.

The figure considered Brunhild. Her face showed nothing. “He will not be pleased. He will have his retribution.”

“Let him take it,” said Brunhild. Then, she rolled Hjalmgunnar over the lip of the skiff, shaking the hull. “The count will be the same.”

Brunhild marched through this darkened land with Budli’s unconscious body in her arms, and the water continued to get higher. Gradually, the smell of blood and death receded. Then Brunhild was underwater. Above her was the rippling surface lit by the light of dawn. She threw off her armor, then Budli’s, and kicked to rise upward.

She emerged from the Rhine on a stony shore as dawn was breaking. In the red-purple light Brunhild gathered dry driftwood to build a warm fire. She passed many hours watching her father breathe, waiting for him to wake. Now a Valkyrie disobedient to Othin, she also awaited his revenge.

*“We will now discuss the day that Sigurd and Brunhild first met and began their fated love affair,” said the old man.*

*“I have heard this story,” replied Aslaug. “Many people know of it.”*

*“Many get it wrong as well.”*

*“And you have it right?”*

*“Better than most. My version makes some sense.”*

*“Do truthful stories always have to make sense?”*

*“Do you want to hear it, and then decide? You have your own head.” he said, scratching his matted beard.*

*“You also have not explained what happens in between.”*

*“All will be made clear.”*

*“Continue then.”*

Sigurd rode upon his mighty horse, Grani, to Hindarfjall.

*“Why did he go there?” said Auslaug, interrupting.*

*“Have you forgotten? I thought you wanted to hear about Brunhild.”*

*“Remind me.”*

*He sighed. “It’s a different story for another time. But, he slew Fafnir, and was then told by a conflagration of birds to find Brunhild at Hindarfjall.”*

*“I find that strange.”*

*“Why so?”*

*“Because I’ve never seen a dragon.”*

*“Sigurd slew the last of them. He was the last and greatest of the dragon slayers.”*

*“Continue, please.”*

At the pinnacle of the mountain, there stood a ring of stones atop a rampart of sorts. Brunhild lay trapped in a deep sleep, held firmly by a coat of mail so tight that it dug into her skin at every point. She spent so many years in that deep sleep. She dreamed that she was wandering through rolling landscapes of grasses and herbs, walking beside a great wall, beyond which some men say the land of the dead lies. Not dead, but not alive either.

Then the spell was broken, the mail split from neck to sleeve, her body laid bare. She felt the huge sword, Gram, part the steel like cloth. Finally, she could wake, and see the face of the man who had broken her prison of dreams. His eyes were bright and keen, the color of shining blue glaciers from the bitter north. It was as if they could freeze her, and she would be powerless. They would be terrifying to a lesser woman. She observed other features which were agreeable to her: long auburn locks, a short-cut beard, a high nose, a square chiseled face. Then she saw his shoulders, which were as wide as two men.

“You’ve slept too long, Brunhild.”

“What was so strong that it could cut me free? What was so beautiful as to rouse me from my sleep? Or is it the one whom I saw in my dreams before I antagonized Othin, Sigurd Fafnir’s Bane, son of Sigmund? Do you carry the sword Gramr, which was drawn from Barnstock?”

“I am the one of whom you speak. I have heard you are the daughter of a powerful king, and that you are beautiful and wise. I would have to be a blind man not to see the former as true, but the latter I will put to the test.”

“I am not one to shy away from anything. I will meet any test you put before me.”

“How did you come to be imprisoned in your dreams and a magic coat of mail?”

“I disobeyed the will of Othin,” and she told of the battle between Budli and Hjalmgunnar, of her encounter with the Angel of Death, and her subsequent transformation into a Valkyrie. “I chose my father, and my will that he should live, instead of Othin’s command that he die. For this, Othin placed me here. I was victorious over the god, and I still have my father’s love. But it was my final victory. No victory will ever be my own again, because Othin

commanded that I be married. As All-Father, he has such a right. I countered that I would marry no man who knew fear.”

“Teach me and counsel me in the ways of great deeds.”

“You are more fit for that I think, but if there is anything I know, about runes or anything else at all, I will gladly teach you. Let us drink together, and ask the gods to to carve my wisdom in your heart, and grant us a fair day and blessed night.”

There was a chill in the air, so Sigurd made a fire inside the ring of standing stones. The pair sat across from one another with the stones of Hindarfjall looming overhead, drinking mead from Sigurd’s huge saddle bags, which were otherwise laden with Fafnir’s gold.

She then taught Sigurd how to carve a great many runes when powers were needed. Runes of victory, to secure necessary wisdom. Runes of waves, to safeguard his ships from tempestuous oceans. Runes of speech, to wind and weave his words and be the most eloquent of men. Runes aid, for himself and others. A rune for an ale cup, so she would know he could not be poisoned. For runes of greatest mystery, she spoke in verse:

Learn the mind runes  
If you would be  
Wiser than all men.  
They were found,  
They were carved out,  
They were heeded  
By the Hanged one.

They were cut on the shield  
Held in hand by the shining god,  
On Arvark’s ear  
And Alvsid’s head  
And on the wheel which stands  
Under Hrungnir’ Chariot,  
On Sleipnir’s reins,  
And on the sleigh’s fetters.

On bear's paw,  
 And on Bragi's tongue,  
 On wolf's claws,  
 And on eagle's beak,  
 On bloody wings  
 And on Bifrost's end,  
 On soothing palm,  
 And on the healing step.

On glass and gold  
 And on good silver,  
 In ale and wine,  
 And on the witches seat,  
 In human flesh  
 And the point of Gaupnir  
 And the hag's breast,  
 On the Norn's nail  
 And the neb of the owl.

All that was carved  
 Were scraped off  
 And mixed with holy mead  
 Then carried on the wind.  
 They are with elves,  
 Some with the Aesir,  
 And with the venerable Vanir,  
 Some belong to mortal men.

"I have never heard so much wisdom spoken by one woman. There can be no one wiser.  
 Counsel me in the realm of men's doings."

"Be kind and forgiving to your kinsmen, but vengeful to all others who offend your  
 honor. But, at crowded gatherings do not grow agitated when foolish men speak foolishly— they  
 cannot be more than they are. In war, always treat the bodies of dead men with respect and  
 honor, and do not allow yourself to be attacked in your own home. Trusting false friends will be  
 the end of you. Most importantly, beware the wiles of beautiful women. Do not let them distress

you, ruin your sleep, or be blinded by their kisses. Illness befalls the man who is bewitched by women.”

“Aren’t you a woman of intoxicating beauty?”

“I am, and you should beware of me. There could come a time when I will be your end.”

“I will not flee. Fafnir said the same of his gold. He said its owner would die like a fool, then died at my feet with his poisonous blood steaming on the ground. But all men are fated to meet that sod which is to be their final bed. It is no different with you. I will love you, and marry you, even if that makes me a fool. There is no better woman to be had.”

“I never wanted to marry anyone. And yet, all I want now is to marry you.”

He kissed her beside the fire, she accepted. His back was muscular and his body heavy. She did not want it to end: the two best in the world as one, consummating a sacred oath to which only they were witness. It was very like disappearing as she looked up at the sky from beneath him. The pillars still loomed overhead, a ring of stones, now a portal to the depths of heaven.

*“Mother should have killed him! He treats her like a slave for having sex with her like this,” broke in Aslaug. There was fury in her eyes.*

*“Your mother was no slave. As a Valkyrie, it was her right to choose the man who would be her groom. For her, all that was needed were the words and the act. This is how it was for those so close to the All-Father. Others needed witnesses, a marriage settlement. They could be married in her eyes alone, and so it was.”*

The pair spent three nights in one another's company. On the morning of the fourth day, Brunhild sat beside Sigurd and watched Grani prancing about in the glen below, occasionally pausing to bend his neck and chew the dewy-wet grass. "I think we should leave this place and go to the house of Budli. It will be as if we were of one blood. It will be good to have that."

"You still have kin."

"Yes, my mother is alive and well with her husband Alf. But I was raised by Regin, Alf's blacksmith, not in the main house amongst his sons."

"No hall to inherit, or even call your own. My father has no sons. I'm sure he would be pleased to have a son in law as noble as yourself. But, I cannot leave this place without a horse."

"The house of King Gjuki is a three day ride, and I have enough gold to buy a wagon, horses to draw it, and men to hold the whip. You will be returned to your father's house wearing the finest clothing with flowers in your hair. We will hold the wedding feast, and you will have a dowry befitting you as the most fair, noble, and steadfast of all women."

"Then you shall return in six days."

"I will return."

Sigurd rose, and whistled for Grani to come. He hunted through the saddlebags full of treasure, then turned back to Brunhild to press a golden ring into her hand. "This ring is called Andvarnaut. It is a promise that I will return." His hand was warm and the ring was cold. She kissed him, and held her lips on his, running her free hand through his thick hair.

Sigurd now rode away, and Brunhild watched him until he disappeared in the thicket and she could no longer hear the sound of jingling gold.



Six days came and went. There was no sign of Sigurd. She waited another day, he could have been delayed, she thought. With each successive day, this is what she said to herself. Days became weeks, and the provisions Sigurd left for her dwindled. A life was quickened in her womb. She needed to leave. Brunhild stared up at the sky, and said, "Men are faithless," so Othin could hear.

She then cast magic runes carved upon woodchips from her hand, and where they fell a wall of fire sprang up around the ring of stones. Only the man who knows no fear could pass through those flames, which towered into the sky so they could be seen for miles around. It scorched the ascent now a wasteland of smoke and charred foliage. Within the ring of stones it was not so hot, and Brunhild made a large bed out of blankets and scraps of clothing, and allowed herself to fall in enchanted sleep, much like the one imposed upon her by Othin. The sorrow in Brunhild's heart followed her into dreams. In one, she dreamed of Sigurd's arms and the way they held her, and the soft feeling of his hair clumped up in her hands. But she could not see his eyes, and every time she tried to move his head so she could, he would evade her. "Let me gaze upon you!" she cried out, but he would not listen. She desperately clawed at him, tried wrenching his head, but he was too strong. She screamed in wild rage like some beast. But then she was alone, with no one. She did not cry, would not. Then she heard a hawk make its pitchy call from above, and looked up into a sunny sky. The hawk landed beside her, and stared at her with piercing eyes.

Brunhild was aware as time went by, could count the days and months. She was aware as flowers bloomed at the base of the mountain, and vines climbed the scorched cliffs to reclaim the wasteland. The heat of the fire kept them at bay. She was aware of her womb swollen with blood,

stretching itself in preparation for a child to fill the space. Already the new life was demanding the strength of Brunhild's body, feeding upon itself to feed the child as she maintained her long sleep.

*"Was that me?" asked Aslaug.*

*"It was."*

*"How did I come to dwell in this house?"*

*"You will know soon."*

*"Continue then."*

But then, in her strange realm the presence of two men and two horses kicked aside the charred ash and hollowed out wood, and climbed towards her strange hall. The fire flared, the earth shuddered. The flames towered even higher in the heavens, and hot ash billowed outward. But, they cowered before the one who had courage enough to ride through, the flame hungry one with his radiant harness. She sat up in her rumped bed and leaned against one of the standing stones. When he burst through the wall, wreathed in flames, his harsh piercing eyes shined through the eyeholes of his helmet. Her heart was lifted, "S-" Brunhild began to say, but she stopped cold when the man took off his helmet. It was not Sigurd. He had a tight cropped light-red beard and short hair. A broad frame, but not so broad as Sigurd.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"I am Gunnar, son of king Gjuki."

"And yet, you ride Grani, the mount of Sigurd Fafnirsbane."

“He has lent Grani to me so I could pass through the wavering flames. I have come with your father’s agreement that we should be married. You are my intended wife, provided I ride through the wavering flame, and should you consent to the marriage. I will gladly pay a generous marriage settlement, precious treasures and glittering gold, in exchange for your hand.”

Brunhild gathered the blankets which sat about her, as well the mail shirt with Sigurd had cut open, and wrapped her body to conceal her belly. She looked up at him from where she sat, her expression grave and troubled. “Sigurd could not pass through the flames? Did he lack the courage?” she said, almost whispering.

“...Yes,” he said.

“Gunnar... do not speak to me of such things. Do not speak of them, unless you surpass all men in all ways, and are willing to kill the men who have asked for my hand in marriage. I still desire to taste the blood of men on my blade, to choose who lives and who dies on the field of battle.”

“I know. You have done manly feats in the field, and won great honor. But, remember your vow: that you would go with the best and most noble of men. Only such a man could pass through the wavering flames.”

She considered his words. They had truth in them. “It seems I am capable of self deception,” she muttered, then rose wobbling to her feet. Her legs were weak. “Then you are welcome in my company, and I will not refuse your proposal.”

He gave her a meal, and they laid beside one another in her bed for three nights. But they did not consummate their marriage, for on each night Gunnar would place his unsheathed sword between them on the bed of twigs and blankets.

“Why do you place the sword between us?”

“Once, when I walked alone through a forest, an old man cloaked in gray told me that if I did not celebrate my marriage in this way I would die.”

“Do you fear to die?” she asked.

“I do not fear death, only desire life to go on.” He pulled a ring from his pocket, and held her hand to press it on her finger. In order to do so, he took from her the ring Andvarnaut. “This is a pledge that we will be married in the eyes of men.”

“Once a man gave me a ring, and told me it was a promise. He did not return to me.”

“Consider this as the promise fulfilled.”

And so she allowed him to place the ring upon her hand, and Andvaranaut entered his possession. “We shall meet again at the house of Gjuki. I must return alone to my father's hall alone, and spend some months there with him. I have not seen him in years, and I would prefer to spend some time in his hall before I live in yours.”

“The road is dangerous a woman alone. Myself and my companions will accompany you.”

“I must insist that you go back to the house of Gjuki and await me.”

“Then we will leave you horse tied to a tree below, and supplies for the road ahead. How long must I wait?”

“You will wait eight months, then I will find you.”

Gunnar rode through the flames again to rejoin his companions. Brunhild gathered her belongings: a spear leaning against a pillar, and the mail which had encased her. She then carved strange runes on a pebble, which she threw at the wall of fire. Where it touched the wall there was a whooshing sound, and a strong wind dissipated the flames. Then she descended through the wasteland leaning on her spear in one hand, and holding her belly with the other.

She found that no less than Grani had been left to bear her. He nickered at her when she came close. “Shhh, shhh. You remember me. Don’t you?” She stroked his long golden mane which when running flowed in the wind like nothing else, loaded her belongings into the saddle bags, and mounted. She found the Rhine by intuition, and rode through the grassy landscape dotted with trees and towns. As she came closer to her father’s realm the people began to know her by her appearance. “It is Brunhild, the daughter of Budli,” they would say, pointing. And so it was that word of her arrival reached her father’s ears days before she even arrived. He was waiting at the gate of his fort to greet her when she came.

“Brunhild, I have missed you dearly.”

She dismounted and embraced him. “Oh father, it will always be good to see you.”

They sat again in her tower, her unfinished tapestry hanging on the wall lit by the fire beside them. “Now we know who slays the dragon. I’m surprised you’re not marrying him,” said Budli.

“We must discuss this matter. My meeting with Gunnar atop the mountain struck me as strange. When I swore my oath to Sigurd, I believed him to be the best of men, and that only he would be able to pass through the flames. But, Gunnar told me that Sigurd lacked the courage to

do so. But he rode upon Grani, and he had eyes like those of Sigurd. I also had a dream that Sigurd would return to me. Perhaps I was wrong all along, and Sigurd was not the finest of men. Though he slew the dragon, chance must have played a part. But it was Gunnar who passed through the flames, so he must be the best of men, and I can only marry such a man. Yet my heart still smiled with Sigurd when I met him, and it is for this reason that we have made a child together. It would not be seemly for the child to be raised in the house of Gjuki while I am married to another man. The child must be raised here, with you. Things must remain as they are. This seems to be my fate.”

“You have the truth of it, Brunhild. Oh my daughter, though I will be grateful to you ‘till the end of my days, a part of me wishes you’d let me die. Your courage has brought you great troubles, and the harsh demands of fate are cruel to men.”

“Father, do not say such things. You sound like a young girl worried about trampling daisies. Fate must be faced with a stern look and a forward chest, especially by a man.”

*Aslaug giggled, and said, “I like the way mother speaks to men... spoke.”*

*“It is a rare trait in a woman: to be able to speak so boldly and rarely incur anger.”*

*“They feared her.”*

*“They did, yes. But loved, also.”*

*Aslaug thought about that for a moment. The fire crackled and shined on her face. Her skin was like glowing amber. “What happened when Brunhild left the house of Budli?”*

Brunhild, dressed in mail and still recovering from the birthing bed, set out for the weeks-long journey to the house of Gjuki and his sons. Budli accompanied her with all the men of honor in his company. By the time they arrived she was hail and healthy, having recovered more quickly than most women. She rode upon Grani at the head of her party and came around a bend which opened into a field, where she saw Sigurd sparring with his men. The house of Gjuki was behind them. They were all jeering as one by one they took tries at beating him with wooden swords, and were subsequently thrown into the mud. Sigurd was simply too large and too strong for any of them, and the one handed weapons they used looked small in his hand. Several of the men tried to take advantage of his large size and circle around to his off side. But always his sword would flash up and crack them in the ribs or head. Each time he reached out a hand to lift them off the ground and tell them in kind words how they could have made a better contest of it. Each man seemed to like him so well that when defeated they rose from the mud with smiles on their faces. She liked to see the speed with which he fought, the way his back opened and contracted, rolling over his bones, and the slight reddening of his skin. Then he looked up and saw their party with those keen eyes. "Ah! You must be my brother's intended bride! Before I welcome you properly to the house of Gjuki, I would be very pleased if you returned my horse." He left his men and approached her wagon.

"Hail Sigurd son of Sigmund," she said. Then she dismounted, and led the horse to his master. The pair met in the middle with both of their companies at a distance.

"We are glad you have finally arrived. Gunnar has planned three days of feasting, and your guests will be lavishly accommodated," he said while taking the reins. His tone was quite formal.

“Had you possessed the courage to ride through the wavering-flames, this may have been our wedding feast.”

Sigurd looked confused. “What do you mean? I was already married to Gunnar’s sister, Gudrun when we brothers came to your mountain.”

This created a cold feeling in her chest. He did not remember their first meeting. Was this possible? Had she made a mistake in believing he was the one to wake her? Was it all a phantasm of the strange dreams imposed upon her by Othin? Was Gunnar the one who’d truly woken her from deep slumber? No, these things could not be so. Otherwise the mail would not have been split, the wavering flames risen around the mountain, and there was proof in the form of a child with Sigurd’s eyes.

“It is an honor to fight alongside him. I’ve often counted him amongst the best, most noble, and courteous of men,” he added. “Well, it is an honor to greet you. My men and I must wash and dress for the feast. Gunnar and the others will greet you at the entrance to our hall.”

Brunhild furrowed her brow as she mounted a different horse, and stared ahead. Budli’s mail jingled as he rode up beside her. “Your face is changed, daughter. What troubles you?”

“Sigurd does not remember our first meeting, nor that we conceived a child.”

Budli furrowed his brow. “I suppose that means Gunnar knows nothing about it, which is to the good.”

“It makes me doubt my perceptions, though I am sure Gunnar rode through the wavering flames, and so I am bound to marry him by all my oaths.”

“So it is.”



They proceeded to the hall, and the feasting began. She was seated beside Gunnar towards the far end of the hall. To his left was his brother, Hogni, who looked very like Gunnar laughing. Beside Hogni was their young brother Guttorm. He was more darkly featured than his brothers with black hair and dark eyes, dazzling with youth, and just coming into the fullness of his body. In only a year he would be ready to ride into battle with his brothers. Guttorm was the son of Grimhild, King Gjuki's wife, who sat beside King Gjuki and Budli in positions of honor to Brunhild's right. King Gjuki's beard was short cropped and well combed. He and Budli spoke with one another about past battles.

She heard the pair of kings discuss other military affairs.

"They have many allies now, and command tribute from an abundance of tribes. They have no one fortress to attack. I was foolish enough to meet them in the open field, and barely escaped with my life."

"You are to the north of our lands" replied Gjuki, "and I think it would benefit us both to act in one another's defense. This marriage secures a link between our families, and the children of your daughter and my son should inherit both our lands thus making our kin all the stronger."

"You are a sensible man, King Gjuki. I remember, though dimly, the good days when King Völsung united us behind his spear. That you have his grandson in your company gives me assurance that our two kingdoms may again have peace by the strength of our arms."

Grimhild's jet black hair was bound up in braids with amber beads woven in. Brunhild didn't like the way she looked at her. Grimhild was not unpleasant or discourteous. But when she

would look over at Brunhild from her seat, she wore a smile which was too self satisfied. At one point during the feast, she came up behind Brunhild with an ale pitcher in her hand. "Brunhild, it is so wonderful to have a daughter-in-law like you. Please, allow me to honor you by refilling your drink." She was bent at the waist, whispering in Brunhild's ear. Her voice had a seductive rasp which only added to Brunhild's suspicions.

"There is plenty in my cup, Grimhild."

"But I would not have you grow thirsty under my roof."

"Wise men say that drinking too much is like a hawk flying over your head and taking with it your thoughts. All you gain is a momentary forgetfulness. This is a poor exchange."

"My, but it is true what they say about you. You are wise. Perhaps overly wise. Wise men say that it is not good to know too much, and escape life's pleasures."

"My thirst is quenched. I have no need of you."

"It is also said you have no courtesy." And she went back to her seat, seemingly unaffected. But she did not glance at Brunhild again. Brunhild sipped the ale before her.

Later in the evening, she touched her husband on the shoulder. "Gunnar," she said, "look me in the eye for a moment."

"Of course my lady." He looked at her and smiled from his eyes. He was handsome, she liked his face well enough. But his eyes were not so keen as they had been on the mountain. They lacked that stark cold which cuts through layers of wool and fur in the deadly night of winter.

She fell silent. She looked away.

"What's wrong my lady?"

“I am considering all the things before me.”

“And what has been brought back to you?”

“I am waiting for the thought to arrive.”

She glanced at Sigurd every now and then. He did not seem merry, though he fawned over Gudrun, occasionally running his large fingers through her hair and kissing her on the cheek. But, he retired early. All three days of feasting, she never once saw him stay long.

When the wedding was done, Budli prepared to leave the house of Gjuki. Brunhild hugged him before he mounted his horse at the outskirts of the town. “I had a strange dream last night, father. Before you leave I must tell you about it. You were riding a horse, and you realized you had left me behind, and so you turned to ride back for me, but a great fire was now between us. And I was moving away from you upon a wagon. Father, I think this dream means that I shall never see you again. I want you to go forward with my love.”

Budli dismounted, and held his daughters smooth hands in his large palms, gnarled with age. Her face was tense and hard, which Budli knew meant her heart was heavy with emotion. He caressed her knuckles and breathed out a sigh. But then, he smiled. “You sound like a young girl worried about trampling daisies. Fate must be faced with a stern look and a forward chest, especially by a shield maid, and a Valkyrie.” Her expression broke, and against her inclinations she giggled, for just a moment a little girl playing in her father’s arms. Then she collected herself, and looked him in the eyes. They were warm and wrapped in wrinkled and mottled skin.

“There are moments when I wonder if I should have made you the only man in my life,” she said. “I would have fought your wars, and given you the death you wanted when the time came.”

“Fate is not so kind. So you must be made of the hard stuff.” He tousled her hair. “If there is a place that all men go, I hope to see you there.”

They embraced again. She let him go. He rode away. It is here that Budli exits the story.

Several days later Gunnar and his brothers, alongside Sigurd, left to fight in the east. There was a warband of Huns mounted on geldings who refused to pay Gjuki’s tribute in exchange for passing through his land. Brunhild stayed in the house of Gjuki. Once, she would have ridden out with the men and chosen the dead, her spear threshing the chaff.

She bathed in the Rhine with a small bucket and her maids standing behind, pouring the clean water over her head, which dripped down from her hair back into the river. Gudrun approached from behind in the shallow waters, and began bathing several paces to her right. Brunhild grew angry. It was an offense to her honor, since it indicated that Gudrun considered herself an equal.

Brunhild moved ahead of Gudrun, deeper into the water. Gudrun furrowed her brow in confusion, “Why have you moved away from me Brunhild? Is it wrong for sisters-in-law to bathe beside one another?”

“We are not equal in honor,” she said with her back to Gudrun, “so it is not fitting of you to bathe beside me.”

“In what way are we unequal in honor? We live in the same household, and are the wives of great men.”

“My father is a far more powerful king than yours. My husband rode through the wavering flames where yours did not dare. Gunnar is heir to a great kingdom. Sigurd is heir to nothing, and spent his first years a prisoner in his father-in-law’s house.”

Gudrun now screwed up her face in anger. “It would be wise for you to hold your tongue.”

“Why is that?”

“Because everyone agrees that Sigurd has no equal amongst the great men. It is not fitting for you to insult him because he lay first with you.”

Brunhild whipped her head around to look at Gudrun. “How did you know that?” she snapped.

“Look at the ring on my hand,” said Gudrun, raising the back of her hand to Brunhild. It was Andvarnaut, the ring given to her by Sigurd when they first met. “It was Sigurd who slayed the dragon Fafnir, and it was Sigurd who rode through the wavering flames to meet you. My mother had taught them how to exchange shapes, and Grani refused to ride through the flames with Gunnar as his rider. So Sigurd rode in his place. It isn’t a matter of cowardice on my brother’s part– he was more than willing to ride through the flames for you. I will not have my husband insulted, for he was never a coward. Both our men are equal in courage, honor, strength, and courteousness. What my brother, your husband, has in inheritance, Sigurd has made up for by his deeds. We are equal in rank, Brunhild, so it was you who offended my honor.”

Brunhild knew the ring, and went pale as death. The water suddenly felt freezing, and she was numb all over. She barely heard Gudrun as she made her speech. She was too focused on the red glint of gold on Gudrun's hand.

Gudrun looked confused again, "Have my words grieved you Brunhild? Why should they? You've married the man you most wanted."

Brunhild whispered her reply, almost muttering under her breath, "You are somehow blind, grim, and malicious all at once."

"Do not think that," she said. "Tell me instead what about my words have grieved you."

"You would do better only to ask questions which are best for you. Noble women do not need to know much, especially those so young of heart like yourself. You do not see what grieves me because everything has gone as you wish."

"You are goading me. Why?"

Brunhild felt hot fury rising in her ears and the hairs on the back of her neck standing on end. Her arms and shoulders shook with tension and she clenched her fists until the knuckles turned white, as if only a slim act of will kept her from murdering Gudrun, then and there. She could see the fear in Gudrun in the way she closed her body language, and covered her breasts. When Brunhild's words finally came, they were icy and dripping with poison, "You shall pay for marrying Sigurd. You shall pay for enjoying his body and his gold. He and I swore oaths to one another. You knew. And now you shall pay."

"I-I I did not know of your agreement," Gudrun said, "but my father was free to make whatever arrangements he wished without consulting you. A-And, Brunhild, Gunnar is so great in power and abundant in wealth that who has the greater husband is uncertain."

“I know how this has happened. Had I drunk the ale offered to me last night by your mother, I would have forgotten ever meeting Sigurd, or even making my vows to him. She made him drink the Ale of Forgetfulness so he would not know my name, my face, or the love shared between us. There is no way you could have no knowledge of this. If you did, you were willfully blind. Sigurd slayed the dragon and passed through the wavering flames. There is no man his equal in the honor of the gods. Wealth will die, cattle will die, but glory never dies.” Then suddenly Brunhild let her face become emotionless. Her body relaxed. She turned away from Gudrun again. Began washing herself as before. “We will speak no more of this. Continue to enjoy Sigurd as if I knew nothing, and you had not betrayed me by acting out of place. You do not deserve it. I foresee misfortune in your future.”

When Brunhild came ashore she draped her body in a large linen gown. The clouds had gathered and it began to rain, and the sun was setting in the west shining fire-like light across the rhine. She walked barefoot across the sand and up a staircase carved in the slope. Her wet feet slapped on the stones. She hobbled through the town wearing the face of death.

She saw her reflection in a puddle. Her eyes were gaunt, the skin pulled tight against her skull, her hair seemed thin and matted as if it would fall out at any moment.

Brunhild stumbled into her chamber, and fell on her feather bed. She turned her head towards the tapestry of Sigurd slaying the dragon, and focused on the spewing blood she had embroidered into the image. Then she closed her eyes, and lay completely still, as if dead. She stayed like this for days contemplating what she would do next, and how she would bring about

the fall of all those who had wronged her. She was not sleeping. She could hear the bonds-women opening the door and suck in their breath.

“Is she dead?” one asked.

“No, look, she’s breathing.”

Brunhild was breathing, but each breath was shallow.

“Gunnar returns from the east today. We should send word.”

Some time later she heard the door open again. “Brunhild?” Gunnar said. He sat on the bed next to her motionless body. “What vexes you my love? Are you awake? Can you hear me?” She gave no response. “Brunhild, please, wake up.” She listened to him breath for a few moments.

“What was the name of the ring you took from me on the mountain?” Her voice was thin and raspy.

“What do you mean?”

“Say its name.”

“I do know what you mean. I only gave you one ring.”

“You took one from me. What was its name?” She still had not opened her eyes.

“Brunhild, you sound like you’ve gone mad.”

“I have not lost my wits. Sigurd must not have told you that we shared one bed before your wedding. Your sister knew. Your mother as well.” Now she opened her eyes, and stared straight at him. He was in shocked silence. “Have heart, Gunnar. Your humiliation is small by comparison to mine.”



“How is this possible?” he said, shaking with anger.

“When Sigurd came to me atop the mountain in your shape, he made our bodies one. We were not married. It is as if I were a slave. That should double your humiliation: you have married yourself to a discarded woman. But it was you who deceived me because you were too cowardly to ride through the flames. No one dared to ride except Sigurd. He killed five kings, Regin who would have betrayed him, and Fafnir the dragon. He is the most nobly born man to ever walk this earth, and it was to him that I pledged my life and my love! You will have neither. You are a coward and a cuckold, neither king nor champion. You made a fool out of me. Now I’m an oath-breaker, and do not have the only man I ever loved. For this, I will cause your death, and that of your evil mother. All of you in the house of Gjuki shall pay.”

Gunnar was silent when Brunhild had finished. He turned away for a moment, stood up, then looked down at her. “You have spoken many false words,” he said, “You are malicious to blame my mother. She has taken you in and treated you well. Grimhild is far above you, now that I see you for what you are: a tormenter of the dead and the living alike. It is strange to imagine that I ever wanted to marry a mistress to the slain.”

“You do not mean these words. You still love me. But you shall never again see me happy again in your hall. You will not have my laughter. I will not play at dice or any other game. I will not entertain with witty words. You will not have my counsel.” Then she leaped out of the bed. In one smooth motion she snatched a knife which lay on her bedside and was across the room slashing at the tapestry she had made. Gunnar moved to restrain her, so she whipped around and began slashing at him, with cold deliberate strokes. He dodged away from her and gripped her wrists forcefully. With her hands restrained she widened her stance and pushed forward. For just

a moment, she possessed the inhuman strength of a Valkyrie at war and backed Gunnar into a wall.

Hogni burst into the room and helped his brother to restrain her. The power in her arms just moments ago was gone. He forced the knife from her grip and began binding her hands together with rough hemp rope. Brunhild struggled to break out of the restraints. Gunnar was on his knees crying.

“Brother, get yourself together.”

It took several minutes for Gunnar to compose himself while Brunhild writhed beside him. “Untie her,” she heard him say. “I cannot bear to see her this way.”

“I do not think this wise, Gunnar.”

“Do as I say. I am your king.”

So he did. Brunhild restrained herself from trying to kill the both of them. She held their gaze for a very long moment. “I forbid you to see me, or share in my wealth, unless you are willing to pay me a dowry in blood.”

“What do you mean by this?” asked Gunnar.

She did not answer, only fell back into bed as before, barely breathing and completely limp.

Over the next seven days a storm brooded over the house of Gjuki, and a heavy rain flooded the walkways. Brunhild, from her sleeping trance, could feel the emotions of all who dwelled in the house. Grimhild’s indignance, Gudrun’s fear, Gunnar’s troubled grief, Hogni’s

anger, Guttorm's confusion. None of these troubled her, except that she knew Sigurd was despondent.

Her bondswoman would come to tend her fire, or urge her to eat and drink. She gave no indication she knew they were there. Soon, they did not try.

She knew by way of her sleeping power that Gudrun was trying to get the others to ignore events. Several times Gunnar tried to visit her. He did not enter the room, but would only say her name. At first timid, then eventually screaming through the wooden door, enraged. He received no reply. Hogni came, though against his will, but he also heard nothing.

On the seventh day, they turned to Sigurd. She could feel his large presence. He opened the door and made no effort to placate her. "Rise Brunhild, you have slept long enough. You speak to no one, you bring this storm to plague us. You plot against us in your dreams. Throw off your sorrow. This brings no good to anyone."

"You are arrogant to come and see me this way. You have wronged me most of all."

"You received the husband you chose."

"No. Gunnar did not ride through the flames to greet me, and he is not the greatest of men. I saw your eyes in his face when you came to my place on the mountain, but I could not perceive clearly."

"I am not any nobler than my oath-brothers. They are great men with noble followings and stouter hearts than I have encountered elsewhere in the world. They have slain kings and won many victories against Romans, Danes, and Huns alike."

"You killed the serpent and rode through the fires for my sake. The sons of Gjuki could not do that."

“I did not become your husband. You did not become my wife. In my view, the finest man in the world has paid you a marriage settlement in gold taken from the hands of fallen enemies.”

Her nostrils flared and her chest rattled with each breath. “I loathe him,” she said, “I conceal it from others, but whenever he lies beside me, my heart is not gladdened.”

Sigurd furrowed his brow. “It must be terrible not to love such a king as Gunnar.”

Brunhild now sat up in the bed, leaned against the headboard, and stared with cold intensity at Sigurd. “Do you remember our meeting on the mountain? Do you remember the oaths we made to one another? How then are we not husband and wife? You must loathe me to treat me like this. Your heart must be like mine when I look at Gunnar. You treat me like a slave. You treat me like a slut. Am I to live on with an empty chest and no glory? And now the only thing which would satisfy me is to see your death at the end of a blade, then die myself. I care nothing for life.”

“These things,” he said, “are far from the truth. I did not remember our meeting until your wedding feast. The spell laid on me broke that day and I remembered our nights beneath the stars when we became one.” He rubbed his left knuckles with his right hand, and looked down at his feet. “It is true that my heart smiles with Gudrun, though it only grins. With you, each time we meet, my heart is gay with laughter. Hold your judgment. I feel there is not much time left for us. You can live and love both me and Gunnar. I would like to live on with you, in a house to which we both belong.”

“Everything has changed. Your words come too late to bring me any comfort.”

“Then I will forsake Gudrun and marry you instead of watching you die.” Sigurd sighed with such force that the chain links of his mail burst at the sides, sending rings flying across the floor and jingling as they bounced.

“You do not altogether know my character. I am no soft woman to be placated with sweet words. I will have no payment in gold.” Her eyes hardened, she clenched her jaw, “I do not want you.”

Sigurd’s eyes bore into her like blades cutting through ice. It released no warmth in her. There was none left. Then he was gone.

She muttered these words at the empty open door:

Out goes Sigurd,  
 Leaving talk behind,  
 Heroes’ worthy friend,  
 And so deeply grieved  
 That the heaving breast  
 Of the battle-willing one  
 Sundered the sides  
 Of his iron-woven shirt.

Some time later Gunnar returned to her bedchamber. He sat on a stool beside her bed. “I heard you are awake. Will you finally end this misery and rejoin our house?”

“Nothing will satisfy my grief, neither land nor power, wealth nor life-ongoing, because Sigurd betrayed me. But he betrayed you as well when he laid with me in one bed. Here, I shall give you counsel: you must kill Sigurd. You have no choice. He has defiled your wife, and so honor compels you to take his life. Either you will succeed, or he will take yours. If neither of you act, Gudrun will have my life to keep the love of Sigurd, because she knows all of this and reviles me. Or, I shall take my own life out of sorrow and grief.”

“Brunhild, you are more precious to me than anything else. But must I do this? Hogni and I swore an oath when Sigurd came to us and married our sister. It is as if he were kin. I have fought in many battles with him. My sword and my heart are less bold when he is not with me. We are all devoted to him, because he devotes himself to us. He is gentle and kind to my sister—which makes you hate her, I know. But you married *me*, Brunhild! In the sight of your father and mine, before all our friends and companions. You are my wife, and I am your husband, and we must respect that bond. Even if you do not care for me. I think you could, one day, if you try. I would rather lose my life than lose you.”

She did not speak for several minutes. She just looked him in the eye.

Hogni burst into the room. He had been listening from outside the door, and he spoke in a rage, “You have given my brother bad counsel! Even if we succeed, we will pay for betraying such a man.”

Gunnar turned to his brother, and said, “Hogni, Brunhild is right. The crime of taking her maidenhead is punishable by death.”

Hogni threw up his arms, “We shall never have such a brother-in-law again. That woman on the bed before you, whom you beggar yourself to, has stirred up this trouble. We will have nothing but disgrace and destruction if we follow her advice. No king is our equal with Sigurd at our side, not even Attila with his mass of men and horses. Or have you forgotten Attila? The one who threatens our father’s house from the east?”

Gunnar glared and replied, “Never accuse me of losing sight of my responsibility. If I lose Brunhild then our father’s alliance with Budli will disappear. And, besides this, I would rather die than lose her love.”

“You never had it!” Hogni cried, “She cares nothing for you. You were stronger before this woman came to us, and you will surely regain yourself when she is gone. Sigurd’s friendship is worth more than any alliance, and I do not want to ride into battle without him at our side.”

“Gunnar, you shall never regain my bed until this thing is done,” Brunhild said.

“You see!” roared Hogni as he threw a hand in her direction, “Even now she manipulates you! I am your loyal brother, and will follow your commands, but you must heed my counsel.”

“Have Grimhild work her strange art,” replied Gunnar, who was staring at the floor, hunching from his seat on the stool. “She will take a serpent and the flesh of a ravenous wolf, mix them with ale, then give it to Guttorm. He was too young to take our oath. He will become more violent and fierce than his age, and will do the bloody deed.”

Hogni thudded his fist against the wall and left the room with his face twisted in anger. Gunnar followed soon after.

In the night Brunhild waited. She spent the time lying in her bed and chanting throatily:

All is sinister now,  
With clouds of blood over the sky,  
And the air is red  
As battle-women chant their song.

I weave, I weave the web of spear,  
As marches on the bloody dawn  
For he shall lose his life,  
For I choose the slain.

She chanted these words over and over until sleep overtook her. Then she dreamed of the ill-fate which awaited Gunnar and Hogni. When dawn broke the sky was blood-red, and the wall-legs of Gjuki’s hall seemed to ooze as if covered in a sea of wounds. She heard Guttorm’s violent cry as

he did the bloody deed, sensed Sigurd's final breath in the world, and heard Gudrun's anguished cry as she felt Sigurd's warm blood pooling in the bed beside her. Far did she see and hear. It all made her laugh so loud that she could be heard throughout the whole house of Gjuki. She walked through the hall over to where Sigurd and Gudrun had shared one bed and she held her gut as she wailed with laughter and tears fell across her cheeks and dripped from her chin.

She saw Guttorm's body split in half in the doorway with Gram stuck in the wall where Sigurd had thrown it when Guttorm tried to run away. The boy's lower half had fallen forward and his upper half had fallen backward. It lay motionless, his eyes staring blankly at the ceiling with his arms outstretched. Brunhild leaned backwards against the wall across from the doorway while Gudrun kissed Sigurd's face and moaned in torment. Gunnar and Hogni ran down the hall to look at the bloody scene.

Brunhild heard Hogni say, "You do not laugh because you are glad at heart. Or why are you so pale? I see you now for the twisted monster you are. Gunnar and I must now sit over our brother-in-law, who slew our father's youngest son."

Gudrun was inconsolable, wailing, "Why did you kill him? My own kin! He was our luck, our strength, my love! Our sons would have been the same. You were fools to listen to that ill-begotten crow."

Gunnar and Hogni moved to console their sister and separate her from Sigurd's corpse. At first, she refused, and would not stop clinging to her man's body. But, eventually, she relented and allowed her brothers to haul her up to her feet.

While they were at this, Brunhild had stood up and begun yanking Gram out of the wall. By the time the others noticed, Brunhild had already positioned the butt of the handle where the



floor met the wall. She heard Gunnar cry, “Brunhild! I beg of you, live and accept compensation!” But Brunhild replied, “This was fated to be.” Then drove her body into the tip of Gram and pushed until the blade had fully penetrated her stomach. She smacked against the wooden floor, and felt her warm blood begin to pool beneath her. Gunnar flung his arms around her neck. “Live!” he cried once more.

“Gunnar...” she whispered, “heed my final request, as is properly done for those about to die. Let a huge funeral pyre be built in that great field just outside your father’s hall. Raise a great mound of my gold beside it, and as our funerary procession walks in circles about the flames, have each take a gift of gold, but allow my bonds-women to choose first. Lay Sigurd the king of Hunland upon the pyre, and lay me beside him with Gram between us, like it was when we first met and swore oaths to be man and wife. The gates of Hel’s land will not close if I soon follow him into death. Lay over us a tent soaked with blood, and allow five of my bonds-women and eight of my men to join us in our journey to the land of the dead. I would speak more, but I must reserve my strength.”

“It will be done,” replied Gunnar.

Gunnar called to his side Brunhild’s men, and they helped him lift her body as well as the sword still protruding from her stomach. She gritted her teeth and grunted as this was done. As they went to the field, all those who dwelled in the house of Gjuki gathered to them. She heard those who followed Sigurd in battle weeping as they bore his body. They leaned her against a tree at the edge of the field, and she watched as the work was done.

It took all the hours remaining in the day. When the wood was piled high, Sigurd’s body was laid at the center. His horse, Grani, willingly joined him. All those who were to follow

Brunhild and Sigurd into death climbed atop the pyre. They first pierced Grani's windpipe, then slit their own throats. Two fell above his head, two at his feet, two to his right, and two to his left, with space left for Brunhild. The bonds-women laid themselves in a circle around the men, still clutching their gifts of gold. The attendants unfurled a large piece of tent fabric above them. It pinked then reddened with their blood. The fire was lit and roaring in the light of the sun setting in the west, where soon the dead were to follow. All the grief stricken were gathered in a circle to watch, including Gudrun with her tears still running.

Brunhild rose from her place outside the circle and pulled Gram out of her stomach. She dragged the blade behind her as she walked barefoot through the grass, leaving behind a trail of blood. As she clambered onto the burning pyre her gown burned away, her flesh began to blister swell with pain, but she was in such a trance that the fire did not affect her. She found Sigurd's body with a few shreds of sizzling tent still clinging to him. Then she laid Gram between them. Together, they made the final journey as man and wife.

Their lives ended thus.

### Epilogue: Aslaug

*By the time the old man concluded his tale, many hours had passed. The whole while Grima had been lying on a straw bed and trying to sleep.*

*“You are talking-man. The story went on far too long,” Grima said.*

*“I do not think it went too long,” replied Aslaug. She turned back to the old man.*

*“Though I suppose she is right: you are a talking-man who must enjoy the sound of his own voice.”*

*The man chuckled a little, and it sounded more like a cough, “I suppose so, though I know there will come a day soon when people will stop listening.”*

*The old man was allowed to sleep beside the fire on the bedding he carried in his pack. He rolled out two woolen blankets and laid on one then covered himself with the other. Aslaug rose up and laid upon her bed of straw beneath the hovel’s low roof. She had a dim memory of the day Budli left his home with her beside him, “To go on here will be too dangerous for a daughter of Sigurd,” he’d said. She’d trusted him, and they went. When they were with people Budli encountered on the path, he concealed her within a large harp which he carried with him. She was old enough to remember when he was betrayed by her step-parents. They had him as a guest and believed he hid wealth in the harp, but when they forced the harp open all they found was a child. They’d taken her in and raised her as their child. She recognized they had protected her from those who would do her harm, but Aslaug knew she was not meant to live her whole life as an impoverished farmer. The old man’s tale had confirmed this feeling.*

*She faced the wall, a blanket pulled over her shoulder, with the light of the fire outlining her shadow. Grima snored in her bed. From this position, Aslaug asked one more question of the old man, "Who are you?" He hadn't answered earlier. There was no reply.*

*She rolled over to look at him, but he was gone. The door hadn't opened, she would have heard. She stood up and padded about the hovel in woolen socks trying to find him. He was just gone, with nothing left behind.*

*Several months went by, the winter months passed away, and summer was reborn. Aslaug was away from the farmstead herding sheep with the family buhund. He ran in quick circles around their small herd, only five heads, barking and wagging his fluffy tail. Aslaug wondered how the dog would have reacted had he not been with her step-father that night when the old man came to visit. She had been herding for several days living off small oat-cakes cooked on stones above her night-fires. It was time to go back to Spangarheid.*

*She came over a grass covered rise overlooking the farmhouse and the nearby haven, where she saw that a warship had docked on the shore. Even from this distance she could see that the prow was gilded in gold, that the men who came off the ship wore fine clothing expensively dyed, and they bore fine weapons only affordable to a king's private retinue.*

*Signy immediately moved back behind the rise with the sheep and her dog. "Dveljr!" she commanded the dog, then she planted the shepherd's staff in the ground so the dog would know where to keep the sheep. She found a nearby stream and began the arduous work of getting the tar out of her hair.*

*After dumping her head into the water, she ran her hands across her scalp and pulled away large chunks of the tar between her fingers. She rinsed the sticky stuff off by wringing her hands together, then repeated the process. Grima had commanded her never to wash like this so that visitors would not suspect she was of noble birth, but Aslaug also believed that Grima did not like to compare herself to Aslaug's beauty. By the time she was done, Aslaug's hair reached from her head all the way to the ground, wet and glistening. She gazed at herself in the water. Staring back at her was a woman with piercing eyes which would strike men to the heart, and hallowed in silky hair of radiant grace.*

*She arrived at the farmhouse and saw five serving women using the outdoor cookfire to bake bread. Grima was watching from the door to her house.*

*"What are you doing here? Whom do you serve?" Aslaug said in her most commanding tone.*

*They seemed dumbstruck by her appearance, including Grima, so she received no answer. The bread, which had been close to finished, was now burning because of their distraction. An older woman amongst them noticed the burning bread. She yanked the iron pans clearly brought by the women off the fire with iron tongs and they hissed on the wet grass. "You all are morons," she said. The women gathered their things and started making the half-mile trek back to the ship to tell their king what they had seen, leaving Grima and Aslaug alone.*

*"You washed. You are foolish," said Grima.*

*"I am no fool. Fools do not understand what they do. This king waiting on the ships will see me undisguised and know that I am worthy to be his wife. It is time that I meet my fate. The line of Völsung will not die with me."*

## Afterward

The *Saga of the Volsungs* is an Icelandic Saga likely written between AD 1200 and AD 1270 in Iceland by an unnamed author. Icelandic Sagas tend to focus on the histories of prominent families, and many of them were written in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Retelling the saga has been an effort in seeking to understand the Old Norse ethos, and the meaning deeds would have held for the women who are the focus of this project. Understanding does not arise through imposition, so to the extent it is possible I have avoided trying to understand the saga through a contemporary lens. Doing so would only result in pathologizing these characters likely through some sort of pop-psychological analysis, entirely missing how these women might have understood themselves, their landscapes of meaning, and the strange beauty of the world they occupied. However, my situatedness in the modern world inevitably followed me into the mythic past of *The Saga of the Völsungs*. Broadly speaking, we live in a culture which is heavily preoccupied with questions of identity; what makes a person who they are? What is the role of inheritance in modern life, especially in a situation where it cannot necessarily be tied to a particular bit of land? So, I entered this text asking these same questions to try and see how these characters would have answered. Despite the hotly contested specifics of these questions in our own time, they are still eternal, and so they remain relevant when we ask them of the past. I wanted to surmount the gap between the past and our future, which Hannah Arendt described, in one way, as the strange necessity of modern people to read ancient texts as if they have never been read before. I also sought to partake in a tradition of retelling by taking inspiration from the legacy of orality which pervades the text; a tradition in which the act of telling and retelling are

synonymous. Between tellings in oral tradition the details of a story can radically shift, but something of what is essential to the tale remains embedded. Because of this, I cannot claim to be the sole author of the text you just read. If I have succeeded in my task, then I only hope to be considered part of a continuation in the life of the story.

The life of the story seems to have begun in the Germanic Migration Period in the fourth and fifth centuries. At least amongst the rural people of Germania, the memory of these migrations and tales of great heroes persisted as part of their cultural inheritance, and would spread across the continent as time went on. By the Viking age in the eighth to eleventh centuries, another time of migration and resettlement, tales like that of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer had become an integral part of Scandinavian folklore and seem to have gained popularity.<sup>1</sup> We know this because by the year AD 1000, stone and wood carvings of scenes from *The Saga of the Völsungs* could be found across the whole cultural area of the northmen, which stretched from Iceland to modern day Russia.<sup>2</sup> The unnamed Icelandic author of this text was working within an already well developed tradition around the Sigurd in Iceland.

The vast majority of orally based literature available to modern readers is written in Old Icelandic, and Icelandic people were renowned for being great storytellers, referred to as Scalds. Amongst the Icelandic Scaldic literature available is the *Poetic Edda*, the most important manuscript of which is called the *Codex Regius*, likely written down around 1200. It contains a number of poems referring to events in the Saga, and it is likely that the unnamed author of the Saga was reliant on the *Poetic Edda* to supplement the text. *The Edda* is roughly divided between mythological poems about the Norse gods and the heroic poems, most of which refer to

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<sup>1</sup> Jesse Byock, Introduction. In *Saga of the Volsungs*, 2, Penguin Classics, 1999

<sup>2</sup> Jesse Byock, Introduction. In *Saga of the Volsungs*, 5, Penguin Classics, 1999

characters in *The Saga of the Völsungs*. The author often quotes eddic material directly, such as in the first meeting between Brunhild and Sigurd where *The Lay of Sigdrifa* composes a significant portion of their dialogue. The author was likely also working with other materials as well. Jesse Byock speculated that the author may have been engaged in a project of historical reconstruction, since he or she may have been influenced by *The Saga of Thidrek of Berne*, written around 1250, which is a rambling account of the life of Theodoric, the Ostrogothic king in Italy. This is based on the fact that in *The Saga of Thidrek*, Sigurd is mentioned as a heroic figure.<sup>3</sup>

The author was not working with many of the sources now available to us, but the text seems to be a distant memory of the fall of the Burgundian Kingdom in AD 437 at the hands of the Huns, though in the process of oral transmission many of the specifics changed. For instance, the Huns attacking the Burgundians, who at the time were allied with the Romans as *foederati*, were not led by Attila. The Saga is linked with an imagined version of Attila's death written in AD 451<sup>4</sup> (which does not correspond with his actual death in AD 453) at the hands of a Germanic concubine. *Völsungs* remembers these events as the direct actions of Attila, and instead of a concubine, Attila's killer has been reconfigured into Gudrun the daughter of Gjuki.

The sections of the *Völsungs* pertaining most closely to the fall of the Burgundians did not make it into the retelling, due to their only partial relevance to Aslaug. I mainly reference contemporary historical sources to inform my treatment of the Huns.

The Huns are not remembered by the *Völsungs* tradition as the historical Asiatic riders from the east. They are instead remembered as a pseudo-Germanic tribe vying for position in the

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<sup>3</sup> Jesse Byock, Introduction. In *Saga of the Volsungs*, 4, Penguin Classics, 1999

<sup>4</sup> Finch, R G. Introduction. In *Saga of the Volsungs*, xxxii. Thomas Nelson (Printers) Ltd, 1965.



chaos of the migration period. However, the Hunnish presence in *Völsungs* is complicated by the detail in the saga that King Völsung was a king over Hunland, which could indicate that oral transmission has made King Völsung into a Hun of sorts. The text never tells us much about what Hunland is. It is only a name given to the land over which Völsung rules. At least, the Völsung name is not of Hunnish linguistic origin, and instead seems to have carried over from the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, which was written somewhere between the seventh and tenth centuries AD.<sup>5</sup> Though the name Völsung does not bear relation to Hunnish linguistic origins, the saga indicates a complex relationship between Germanic peoples and the Huns who would, for a time, become their rulers.

There was certainly antagonism between these groups. The Hunnic invasions were an impetus for migration into Roman territory to avoid Hunnic rule. However, over the course of the Hunnish presence in Europe the Huns came to preside over an ethnically diverse empire. The following is from an account given by a Roman ambassador to Attila when he visited the Hunnish encampment in AD 448/449:

For the subjects of the Huns, swept together from various lands, speak, besides their own barbarous tongues, either Hunnic or Gothic, or--as many as have commercial dealings with the western Romans--Latin; but none of them easily speak Greek, except captives from the Thracian or Illyrian sea-coast; and these last are easily known to any stranger by their torn garments and the squalor of their heads, as men who have met with a reverse.

The linguistic and cultural variety of Attila's camp indicates that the Huns likely integrated the Germanic tribes into their developing empire outside of Rome. In addition, the name of one of Attila's honored chiefs, Onegesius, may have a name of East Germanic origin, coming from the

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<sup>5</sup> Jesse Byock, Introduction. In *Saga of the Volsungs*, 22, Penguin Classics, 1999

name Hunigis, with “hun” in this case meaning “child of a bear,” “young man,” or “high.”<sup>6</sup> If this etymology was correctly surmised by Otto J. Maenchen-Helfen, then this would strengthen the image of a Hunnish society which was not homogeneously Asiatic in cultural origin.

This is certainly an image which would resonate with the saga. In *Völsungs*, Atli (the Norse name for Attila) is a son of Budli and brother to Brunhilda (a detail cut from this retelling for the purposes of simplicity). This would make the house of Budli a Hunnish household, though they marry into the Burgundian family of King Gjuki. The detail that the Völsungs ruled over Hunland could also make them rulers over Hunnish subjects.

Even so, the Huns still seem to represent something *other* to the Germanic house of Gjuki in a manner which is not just a competition between tribes of the same society. When Grimhild convinces Gudrun to marry Atli, Gudrun at first rejects the idea by saying, “I will never marry Atli. There is for us no honor in augmenting our kin through such a union.” The same objection was not made when Brunhild married Gunnar, and the phrasing of “augmenting our kin” seems to indicate that she may be objecting to something more along the lines of an otherness particular to the Huns, perhaps along the lines of ethnicity (though the Icelanders wouldn’t have used that language). Grimhild describes the women who would be serving Gudrun in her marriage as “Hunnish maids.” This would resonate with what can be gleaned from the details of Priscus’s account, which appears to indicate a Hunnish society integrated with the Germanic tribes even though a sense of ethnic and cultural difference remained.

This retelling makes use of the historical record in order to balance it with the saga’s representation of the Huns. I chose to restore the Huns to *Völsungs* as Asiatic riders from the

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<sup>6</sup> Maenchen-Helfen, Otto J. (1973). *The World of the Huns: Studies in Their History and Culture*. University of California Press.

east. However, I could have made greater use of Atli as a character in order to make the Hunnish proximity to the Germanic tribes more intimate. Instead I opted for a larger distance, so that Attila and the Huns operate as a kind of force which looms over the whole story, as they do in our contemporary memory of the fall of Rome. They are both integrated into Völsung's kingdom, but partake in its fall. They return to the story again as the decisive force which gives Brunhild's actions all the more weight, since the death of Sigurd will mean the house of Gjuki's demise.

Though there may have been an element of historical reconstruction, the author was also engaged in an attempt to create a synthesis of various versions of the Sigurd story, but in this he fails by the standards of narrative coherence. *Völsungs* is littered with episodic scenes which often overlap both temporally and logically. However, there is still an artistry to the original saga which cannot be overlooked.

The decision on the part of the unnamed author to create a compilation produces for the reader a different experience with each reading. Sections previously overlooked on a first read are suddenly put into focus in the second. Each version of Brunhild's meetings with Sigurd have their own appeal. The first meeting in which Sigurd awakens Brunhild is profoundly romantic, because one cannot avoid being taken with the image of a woman opening her eyes after a deep sleep and seeing the eyes of her eternal lover. The second episode, in which Sigurd sees Brunhild in a tower and falls in love at first sight, also holds a particular appeal. Their conversation in this meeting communicates Brunhild's awareness of their doomed relationship (since with her prophetic capacities she already knows he will marry Gudrun), which makes her decision to go on loving him anyhow all the more powerful. In the third when Sigurd rides through the

wavering flames disguised as Gunnar, the mix of romance and deception is unsettling because the reader knows Sigurd is unwittingly breaking his oath to her.

However, the second meeting introduces a lot of confusion for the reader, because the text reads as if Sigurd and Brunhild have not met before. Brunhild's nephew-in-law, Alsvið, and Sigurd come to the house of Heimir, and when he sees her, he "realized it was Brunhild." He then acts as if they have not met before. During their subsequent conversation, they never once mention the previous meeting in which they likely conceived Aslaug.

As another example of narrative confusion in the original, there is a scene in which Gudrun has a dream and visits Brunhild to have it interpreted. It is rare for the Icelandic sagas to include interactions between women, and so the scene is interesting on that level alone. Gudrun dreams of a hawk coming flying to her, and she knows intuitively that this dream has prophetic significance. Brunhild is able to interpret that the hawk is Sigurd, and that Gudrun will marry Sigurd and thereby betray Brunhild. This is, on its own, an interesting scene and holds a similar appeal to The Kiss of Judas. But it does not coherently fit the narrative because precisely *when* Gudrun goes to visit Brunhild is unclear. It temporally overlaps with Sigurd's arrival at the house of Gjuki.

To retell the saga, I therefore had to make the uncomfortable choice of cutting out many of these episodes to create a version which is logically and temporally coherent. I also partook in a fair amount of invention in an effort to fill out the story with a greater wealth of detail. I also made formal choices, such as rooting the narrative in the subjective point of view of characters, and placing the saga into a frame with the old man (who is Odin in disguise) telling Aslaug the story of her ancestors.

This version of Aslaug's backstory does not exist in the Norse canon. Despite the focus on material deriving from and around the *Saga of the Volsungs*, this retelling could also be considered an elongated beginning to the *Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*, another Icelandic Saga which refers to events in the 9th century. It begins with the backstory of Aslaug who eventually becomes Ragnar's second wife. The formal decision to situate *Völsungs* in this frame gives the reader an understanding of who is telling the story— an element totally lacking in the original.

Aslaug is mentioned only briefly in the original saga as the child of Sigurd and Brunhild conceived after they marry one another by oath. Brunhild leaves Aslaug with her foster father Heimir, who is married to Brunhild's sister, Bekkhild. This was to protect her, likely because by this point in the story Brunhild had become compelled to marry Gunnar, but the reason is never clearly given. This reading is corroborated by the opening section of the *Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*, in which Heimir leaves behind his life as a ruler to hide Aslaug in the countryside, because he "knew the foes of the maid would strive to destroy her and her race." In this retelling, Heimir has been substituted with Aslaug's maternal grandfather, Budli. This was done both for dramatic effect and so the reader has fewer characters they must keep track of.

The most invention by the yardstick of sheer page count occurs in chapter on Signy. In the original, sections pertaining to her comprise only seven pages. Her chapter is forty-seven pages. The dialogue interactions between Sigmund and Signy, such as their conversation before her wedding, are products of my imagination. However, I would like to contend that these are conversations they would have had given the nature of their characters. In both the original and this retelling, Sigmund seems to do whatever Signy asks of him whether or not he finds what she tells him to do agreeable, such as the murder of the sons she had with Siggier. She makes such a

request twice in the original: first when she sends two sons into the forest to be his companions and they prove themselves cowardly, then when two other sons discover Sigmund and Sinfjotli hiding behind the ale casks. The first time, Sigmund simply does the task. The second time, he objects: “I will not kill your children, even if they have betrayed me.” So Sinfjotli kills them instead. This was incredibly revealing to Sigmund’s character. In both instances, not killing the children could easily result in Sigmund’s death. Thus it is entirely reasonable to conclude that Sigmund would have found the action objectionable both times he is told to do it, not just the first. Thus, in this retelling, Sigmund agrees to kill Signy’s child (a fusion of two children in the original) the first time Signy commands it, though he does so hesitantly. In the second he outright refuses. Their relationship is defined by these kinds of interactions: Signy makes requests and demands on behalf of her quest for revenge, and Sigmund reluctantly accepts or is powerless to stop her. On the basis of this dynamic, I have constructed their conversations and find this to be reasonable and not out of bounds.

In the chapter on Brunhild, a glaring moment of invention is the battle with Hjalmgunnar and his Hunnish allies in which Brunhild’s Valkyrie characteristics are revealed. This was created on the basis of a story mentioned by Brunhild in which she disobeyed Odin by preferring a warrior named Agnar over Hjalmgunnar in battle, whom Odin had already promised victory. For this, Brunhild was punished and put in a deep sleep. In this retelling, I substituted Agnar for Budli in order to strengthen the relationship between Brunhild and her father.

In the eddic poem *The Lay of Sigdrifa*, the Valkyrie whom Sigurd meets and falls in love with is named Sigdrifa, not Brunhild. However, there is another eddic poem called *The Hel-ride of Brunhild* which overlaps with the Sigdrifa material, in which the Valkyrie woman who

follows Sigurd into the afterlife is named Brunhild. In the *Nibelungenlied*, a thirteenth century continental Germanic epic which is close to *Völsungs* in terms of content, the idea of Brunhild as a Valkyrie is totally absent. It is therefore sensible to conclude that the story of Sigurd and the Valkyrie, and Sigurd and Brunhild, were separate tales which became conflated (in my opinion to great effect) in the Norse tradition.

The dissonance between Brunhild as a human woman and as a Valkyrie needed to be bridged both on a theoretical basis and on the level of narrative. I first had to ask the question of what precisely is meant by the word “Valkyrie,” and there are a number of different manifestations. The word itself means “Chooser of the Slain,” which aligns them with Odin who’s primary area of authority is those who die in battle. Snorri Sturluson, an Icelandic author in the 13th century responsible for the composition of a Norse mythological text *The Prose Edda*, represents them as the handmaids to Odin who are sent out to fly over fields of battle to carry chosen warriors to Valhalla. They also dole out victory according to Odin’s will. This is by far the most famous understanding of their role. However, there is a wider tradition around female “choosers of the slain” in northern Europe.

Valkyries are often defined as a type of Norn, which is a class of mythological beings who decide the fate of humans. Many Valkyries have individualized relationships with male warriors. In *The Prose Edda*, a character named Gangleri asks why some people have good lives and others bad ones, and a figure who may be a version of Odin, Just-as-High, responds that some norns are good, and others are evil. Thus, the luck a person will have is dependent on the disposition of their personal Norn. From the poem *The Lay of Fafnir* in *The Poetic Edda*, which is a dialogue between the dragon Fafnir and Sigurd, Fafnir says tells us that Norns “descend from

different races, they have no common kin, some from the gods, some from the elves, some are Dvalin's daughters.”<sup>7</sup> It isn't a far stretch to imagine that this includes humans, since humans are often understood to be the children of the gods. Therefore, human Valkyries could act as Norns to other humans. Hence the relationship we see between Brunhild and Sigurd in which she decides the day he joins the slain.

The manifestation which was most informative to the opening sections is that of the Angel of Death. A Muslim diplomat named Ibn Fadlan during his visit to the Rús, a name given to Norse settlers in modern day Russia, in AD 921 gave an account of a Rús chief's funeral. A “old Hunnish woman, massive and grim to look upon,” who is called the Angel of Death by Fadlan's Norse translator directs the ritual, which included the killing of a slave girl. This figure was the inspiration for the Angel of Death which Brunhild encounters in this retelling. Hilda Roderick Ellis Davidson speculated that these women became part of the foundation for legends of the Valkyries:

It would hardly be surprising if strange legends grew up about such women, who must have been kept apart from their kind for these gruesome duties. Since it was often decided by lot which prisoners should be killed, the idea that the god “chose” his victims, through the instrument of the priestesses, must have been a familiar one, apart from the obvious assumption that some were chosen to fall in war.<sup>7</sup>

Here is where the bridge between Brunhild as a woman and Brunhild as a Valkyrie was made for the purposes of the retelling: women of sufficient character, or some other mysterious essence within themselves, might *become* Valkyries by some mysterious choice of Odin. Though this is not the case for every single Valkyrie in the mythic logic of the Norse, it would make sense for

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<sup>7</sup> Hilda R Ellis Davidson. *The Valkyries of Odin*. In *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, 62. First published with Pelican Books, 1964, republished with Penguin Books, 1990.



Brunhild. In both traditions around her as a Valkyrie and a Shield Maiden, she has a heavy association with war and the death of men. It is also potentially reflective of a historical process by which some shieldmaiden was mythically transformed into a Valkyrie by the process of oral transmission. This is, however, entirely Euhemeristic speculation.

Hopefully, this next point of discussion came across in the story, however, it must be discussed in relation to Brunhild's transformation into a Valkyrie. Brunhild can be said to have journeyed to the land of the dead three times in this retelling: when she meets the Angel of Death, during her punishment of sleep, and upon the funeral pyre with Sigurd. The first of these was an attempt to imagine how one would become a creature so heavily associated with death. I thought it made sense for her to first choose the slain, Hjalmgunnar instead of Budli, and so do the actions of a Valkyrie. But, I thought it also made sense for her to pass through death in a literal sense, and to walk at least part of the path to the land of the dead.

It is interesting to note that the Norse never really discussed a definite notion of the afterlife. The focus in the Norse canon tends to be more on the way one dies and the journey to the place where people go. Even the stories of Valhalla, in which Odin's chosen enter after they are slain, their final death is yet to come and will only be fulfilled after the final battle of the gods in Ragnarok. I tried to carry something of the poetry in the Norse heart which drove them to never paint a definite picture of the life after death, but focused instead on the mystery of passing away.

As mentioned above, with all the women I chose to focus the story on, Signy, Brunhild, and Aslaug, I rooted the narrative in their subjective point of view. This is a formal choice which would have been foreign to the storytelling habits of the medieval Norse, and so is an import of

modernist literature. The idea that stories ought to, in a realistic way, depict the experience of an individual subject whose knowledge is limited was not common at the time. There are a few sagas which are focused on an individual perspective, but overall the goal of saga authors was to write down the deeds of great men and the histories of great families. In that context, the unnamed *Völsung* author's decision to have a wandering style which jumps between points of view makes sense. *Völsungs* doesn't seem to be entirely interested in narrative form, but more in recording what had been said about Sigurd and those who surround his lineage. This comes with the consequence of the narrative being patchy for the reader. By rooting the narrative in subjective experience as I have done, the reader is able to spend more time with the characters' psychological experience of events, and in an illusory manner experience the thoughts of these women as their own. That is, if my literary task has been achieved.

However, the choice to frame a story in a pattern of question and answer (with moments of debate), as I have done with Odin and Aslaug, would have been more recognizable to the medieval Norse. This is pretty much exactly the structure used by Snorri in *The Prose Edda* in the section called *The Gilfading*. Gangleri asks questions of various storytellers who impart the *Prose Edda*'s narrative in their responses. The question and answer format is also a hallmark of Eddic poetry, such as *Vafthrudnismál* (a conversation between Odin and a giant named *Vafthrudnir*), *Völuspa* (which can be considered a question and answer poem in which Odin is silent), and *Hárbarðsljóð* (a conversation between Thor and Odin). This format can also be seen in *Völsungs* itself, such as when Regin, Sigurd's foster father, tells Sigurd the story of how Fafnir acquired his cursed mound of gold. Thus, my decision to frame the stories of Brunhild and Signy in this frame was a choice which arose from within the Norse literary tradition.

### Concluding Note

This retelling should not be considered definitive in any sense, but rather an invitation. For all the formally unsatisfying qualities which dominate the original *The Saga of the Völsungs*, the author has done a great service to posterity by preserving within one text many versions of the tale passed down in tradition. It has no author, in the sense that no telling can claim full authority. The work of the unnamed author has found expression in my own. If it has been done well, others will follow up on its shortcomings out of love for this story, or some character who was left out.

The contemporary relationship between modern people and the stories of the past tends to be characterized by neglect, or an idea that we have no need for them. This relationship is still in need of rectification. Hilda Ellis Davidson once wrote, “We can learn much from the mythologies of earlier peoples if we have the humility to respect ways of thought widely differing from our own. In certain respects we may be far cleverer than they, but not necessarily wiser.” So this project was an exercise in humility, because I couldn’t come up with a better story than that already told in *The Saga of the Völsungs*. Praise be to those who came before.

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