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The Shadow of the Gods
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THE
HUNGER
OF THE
GODS

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- Nálbinding** – to bind or weave. An early form of knitting used to make clothing
- Raudskinna** – red-skin, a book of magic, made from the flayed skin of a dead god
- Seax** – single-edged knife, often with a broken back, of varying sizes. A multi-purpose tool, from cooking/shaving to combat
- Seiðr** – a type of magical power, inherited from Snaka, the father of the gods
- Seiðr-witch** – a woman who wields magical power
- Skáld** – a poet, teller of tales, often employed by a jarl or chief to sing of their heroic deeds
- Skál** – good health
- Snekke** – a smaller version of a longship
- Tafl** – a game of strategy played upon a board with carved figures
- Thrall** – a slave
- Úlfhéðnar** – person descended from Ulfirir the wolf-god
- Vaesen** – creatures created by Lik-Rifa the dragon-god
- Weregild** – a blood-debt
- Winnigas** – cloth covering for the legs, from ankle to just below the knee
- Whale-road** – the open sea

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

Orka: Orka lives a solitary life in the hills with her husband Thorkel, and their ten-year-old son, Breca. They have built a home for themselves in the wild, and trade in furs and skins with a nearby village when they need supplies.

During a hunting trip they discover a homestead burned out, two people murdered and the murdered couple's son gone.

Orka reports this to the local village, to Guðvarr, a *drengr* (warrior) and nephew of the local jarl, or lord, Jarl Sigrún.

Breca, Orka's son, finds a wounded tennúr (a magical creature with a liking for teeth) in the woods and brings it home.

Orka, Thorkel and Breca attend an Althing, or meeting, as all residents of the district are summoned by Jarl Sigrún, the local lord. At this meeting they hear that Jarl Sigrún has sworn an oath of allegiance to Queen Helka, a powerful woman with ambitions to rule all Vigrið. A *holmganga* duel is also fought between Virk, a local fisherman, and Guðvarr. Virk wins the duel but breaks the *holmganga* rules and so is slain by Jarl Sigrún's Tainted warrior-thrall.

Upon returning home Orka and Thorkel decide that it is time for them to move on and build a new home elsewhere. Orka goes to consult the Froa-spirit (the powerful spirit and guardian of the Ash Tree) for guidance but finds the Froa-spirit dead, slain with fire and axes. Upon returning to her steading she finds her home in flames, her husband, Thorkel, slain, and her son, Breca, gone. She

tracks the abductors, catches up with some of them and kills them, questions one and discovers that the man who took her son is called Drekr.

She returns home, buries her husband and swears an oath, both of vengeance and to recover her abducted son. She arms herself and slips into Fellur village at night, finding Virk's two sons, Mord and Lif, tied to a post to await punishment for their attack on Guðvarr (in a failed attempt at vengeance for their dead father). Orka sets them free, then breaks into Jarl Sigrún's hall, wounds the jarl and interrogates her warrior-thrall, a woman named Vafri with the blood of Ulfrir the wolf-god in her veins. Vafri tells Orka that she should be looking for a man named Drekr, and that he can be found in the fortress town of Darl. A fight ensues and Orka escapes, fleeing Fellur village by boat with Mord and Lif.

They head for Darl, Mord and Lif agreeing to row Orka in return for training in weapons craft. When they reach Darl Orka leaves the two brothers, advising them to bide their time before they return to Fellur to seek their vengeance against Guðvarr.

Orka searches for Drekr, eventually finding him in a secret meeting with Prince Hakon, the son of Queen Helka. They fight, but the fight is split up by the arrival of town guards. Lif and Mord appear and pull Orka to safety.

Orka discovers that Drekr has left Darl and is headed to the Grimholt, a tower that guards a pass through the Boneback Mountains, and at the same time Guðvarr appears, hunting Orka, Mord and Lif for their crimes in Fellur village. They leave Darl, chasing after Drekr, with Guðvarr in pursuit.

Orka, Mord and Lif reach the Grimholt, and during an altercation with some frost-spiders and two giant ravens, they are captured by Skalk the Galdurman and warriors from the Grimholt. They are taken to the tower and put to the question, where it is revealed that Drekr has some kind of business arrangement with Prince Hakon.

Guðvarr arrives with his *drengs*, bursts into the tower and kills Mord, who is in chains. During this Orka hears the cry of a child and suspects it is her son, Breca. The hope, fear and rage combine to release the wolf in her blood, because Orka is Tainted, an *Úlfshédnar*,

with the blood of Ulfrir the wolf-god in her veins. She proceeds to break free and go on a killing spree. At first the guardians of the Grimholt fight back, but they cannot stand against her savage fury and so they break and run.

Varg: Varg is on the run. He is a thrall who has recently killed his owner, a wealthy farmer, and fled. Varg's sister has been killed and he is seeking either a Galdurman or a Seiðr-witch (two forms of magic-users) to perform an akáll for him, which is a magical invocation revealing the last few moments of the dead. Varg wishes this done for his sister so that he can discover who or what killed her.

Varg reaches the trading port of Liga, where he discovers that the famed mercenary warriors, the Bloodsworn, are in town and have a Seiðr-witch among their ranks. But she only uses her magic for the Bloodsworn, so Varg enters a tournament where he fights one of the Bloodsworn to earn the right to join them. He is beaten unconscious and left on the banks of a fjord. When he wakes, he tends to his wounds and builds a fire, only to be set upon by Leif Kolskeggson and his crew, son of the farm owner whom Varg killed. Varg is captured, but then rescued by the Bloodsworn.

They take Varg in as one of their own, but on an "apprenticeship" agreement, so Varg has to learn weapons craft and prove his loyalty and trustworthiness to the Bloodsworn before Vol their Seiðr-witch will perform the akáll he seeks.

As the Bloodsworn leave Liga they are attacked by Prince Jaromir of Iskidan and his mounted *druzhina*, who wish for one of the Bloodsworn, a man named Sulich, to be handed over to them for crimes he is alleged to have committed in the far-off country of Iskidan. Glornir, chief of the Bloodsworn, refuses to hand Sulich over, and so a short and bloody battle follows, broken up by the arrival of Liga's guards and three longships carrying Queen Helka and her retinue into port.

Queen Helka hires the Bloodsworn for a job. People on her north-western border have been going missing and turning up dead. She wants the Bloodsworn to find out who or what is doing this and kill them. She sends her Galdurman, Skalk, and his two *dreng* guards with the Bloodsworn.

Once in the Boneback Mountains the Bloodsworn discover an old mine that is being excavated by a collection of warriors and vaesen – skraeling and a troll – who have enslaved the local populace and forced them to work in the excavation. As the Bloodsworn investigate a battle ensues, where a dragon-born (a strain of the Tainted descended from the dragon-god, Lik-Rifa, long thought to be extinct, if they had ever existed at all) emerges from the mine with a bone of the dead god Orna in his fist. In a bloody battle Varg kills the dragon-born but is seriously injured himself.

When Varg awakes he is told that the Bloodsworn have found evidence to suggest that the mine is in fact the chambers of Rotta, the rat-god, who was chained here and sentenced to a life of pain and torture by his brother and sister. Copied fragments of a Galdurbok (magic book) called the *Raudskinna* are found.

Vol comes to tend Varg's wounds, and while she is there Skalk and his two *drengr* guards enter the room. They club Vol unconscious, kill Varg's friend, Torvik and steal the bone fragment of the god Orna, along with other items of worth that have been discovered.

Skalk gives Varg the choice to go with him, offering to perform the akáll that Varg so desperately wants, but instead Varg hurls himself at the *drengr* who killed his friend, and in a frenzied blood rush he rips the man's throat out with his teeth. Skalk strikes Varg unconscious.

Upon regaining consciousness, Varg discovers that Skalk has escaped with Orna's talon, a chest full of relics and Vol as his prisoner. He is told by Svik and Røkia of the Bloodsworn that he is Tainted, that he has the wolf-god Ulfrir in his veins. Not only this, he is told that all the Bloodsworn are Tainted, and that they recruited him because they discovered his bloodline. This comes as a bit of a shock to Varg, but soon he comes to terms with it and joins the Bloodsworn as they set out in chase of Skalk, vowing to avenge Torvik and get Vol back.

They follow Skalk's trail, which takes them to the Grimholt. Here they find a scene of death and savagery, Orka sitting upon the steps of the Grimholt. She is blood-drenched with her dead enemies piled at her feet. Children are gathered around her.

Glornir, the chief of the Bloodsworn, dismounts, because he

knows Orka. She was known as the Skullsplitter, most famed warrior of Vigríð, and the once-chief of the Bloodsworn. Thorkel, Orka's husband, was Glornir's brother. Orka is grief-stricken because she has not found her son, Breca.

Glornir and Orka embrace.

Elvar: Elvar is a young warrior, a member of the famed mercenary warband the Battle-Grim, and she is out to make her name, her battle-fame.

The Battle-Grim land their longship at Iskalt, a volcanic island off the north-west coast of Vigríð. They are hunting a man named Berak, who is believed to be of Tainted blood, a *Berserkir* with the blood of Berser the bear-god in his veins. Their chase leads them through a battle in a village and up into the mountains, where they eventually catch up with Berak as he is locked in combat with a bull troll. Elvar sees a woman and child, the woman throwing some kind of book into a pool of molten lava.

Agnar, chief of the Battle-Grim, orders his warriors to kill the bull troll before it harms or kills Berak, and a brief, bloody fight ensues, where Elvar lands the killing blow against the troll. Berak is then captured, subdued and chained, his wife and child also captured. His wife, Uspa, is revealed to be a Seiðr-witch.

The Battle-Grim leave Iskalt Island with their prisoners and travel to Snakavik, a fortress built within the skull of the dead serpent-god, Snaka. Jarl Störr rules here, and he is famed for having an honour-guard of enslaved *Berserkir* warriors.

He is also Elvar's father, although there is little love between them. Elvar left her family and life of privilege to escape her father's plans for her, and to make a name of her own.

Jarl Störr purchases the *Berserkir* Berak from Agnar. While the Battle-Grim are still in Snakavik they are ambushed and Bjarn, the son of Berak, is abducted by Ilska the Cruel, who is the chief of a mercenary band called the Raven-Feeders. Uspa the Seiðr-witch then makes a deal with Agnar; if he will swear a magical blood oath to get her son back, she will lead them to the fabled battleground of Oskutred, where the war between the gods was fought and riches beyond imagination are said to be found.

Elvar swears the blood oath, along with Grend, her faithful companion, and a few others. The Battle-Grim set out for Oskutred, along the way encountering a swarm of tennúr, a magical bridge and a forest full of long-dead gods. During the journey Elvar takes Biórr, a young warrior of the Battle-Grim, as her lover.

Upon reaching Oskutred they find an ash-covered plain full of the scattered bones of dead gods, and the blasted stump of a great tree. A Froa-spirit named Vörn confronts them, forbidding them access to the tree, but allows them to scavenge the treasure from the plain. Before the Battle-Grim can do this Ilska the Cruel and her Raven-Feeders arrive. Agnar and Ilska's champion, a giant of a man named Skrið, fight a *holmganga* duel to decide who has access to Oskutred. Agnar wins, but is then slain traitorously by his own warrior, Biórr, who we discover is Tainted and is part of Ilska's crew. It was Biórr who arranged the abduction of Bjarn, and enabled Ilska and her Raven-Feeders to follow the Battle-Grim north to Oskutred.

A shield wall battle ensues between the Battle-Grim and the Raven-Feeders, though at the same time Ilska leads a number of warriors who are all revealed to be dragon-born against the Froa-spirit and Uspa. Once they are defeated, a large number of chained children are unloaded from wagons and led onto the shattered stump of the Ash Tree. Here Ilska conducts a spell, using blood magic and a Galdurbok, and breaks the magical bonds that keep Lik-Rifa the dragon-god caged inside a chamber deep within the bowels of the great tree. Lik-Rifa explodes into the light of day and fights a brief and bloody battle with her gaolers, three winged sisters, children of the gods Ulfrir and Orna. One of the winged women is thrown unconscious to the ground, and the other two are slain.

Lik-Rifa meets Ilska and the dragon-born who set her free, and she flies away, leading them south.

Elvar is wounded during the battle against the Raven-Feeders and watches in shock, horror and awe as the dragon flies into the distance.

Eagles should show their claws, though dying.

The Saga of Olaf Haraldsson

CHAPTER ONE

ORKA

Orka stood in a tempest of fire and smoke. Flickering flame and clouds of ash were a storm-lash all about her. Death's-reek hovered thick in the air, clawing into her throat. The crackle and hiss of fire drowned all else out as the world burned. A shadow overhead and a turbulence in the air, like the beating of great wings. Then a child's scream ripped through the storm, her son Breca calling for her and she twisted and turned, searching, desperately seeking in stumbling footfalls, but the world was all acrid clouds of billowing smoke and grasping, flayed fingers of bright-searing flame. She tripped over something, a figure lying prone upon the ground at her feet, blood oozing, dead eyes staring. Thorkel, her husband, her friend. Her love. His glazed, empty eyes held her gaze and his lips moved, a death-rasped, snake-slithering hiss of breath issuing from his husked corpse.

"They took him."

She jerked awake with a gasp, eyes snapping wide, and saw a shadow looming over her in the wolf-grey light. Without thought she was moving, one hand shooting out to grip the shadow's throat, her other hand ripping a seax from its scabbard on her weapons belt, which was rolled and clutched close like a pillow.

A choked gurgle.

"It's . . . me," a voice squeaked. *"Lif."*

Orka froze, the seax's sharp tip a finger's width from Lif's eye.

She fought the urge to kill, the silent storm that had been lurking dormant in her veins now whipped to sudden life. A tremor rippled through her and she shoved Lif away, sat up, sheathed the seax.

She tasted blood in her mouth, licked her teeth, crusted and clotted, spat and rose to her feet with a groan. Her body ached, muscles and joints protesting, the weight of her mail *brynja* heavy on her shoulders and she glowered at Lif.

“What?” she growled.

They were standing in the burned-out remains of the Grimholt’s hall, Queen Helka’s fortress that guarded a pass through the Boneback Mountains. Members of the Bloodsworn lay about them, wrapped in cloaks, snoring and twitching. One man groaned, face shuddering in some dark dream. A hearth fire had burned itself out, grey ash in this grey world. It was *sólstöður*, the long day, when night was banished from the sky for thirty days, but judging by the pewter haze that leaked through the roof of the torn hall it was somewhere around dawn. Orka stretched, bones clicking.

“Wanted to talk to you,” Lif said. His face was pale, blue-tinged lips looking black in the half-light, the remnants of frost-spider venom still lingering in his veins. He held something in his arms.

Orka stooped and swept up a long-axe from the floor. Earlier, she had taken it from a warrior, carved him open with it, and then turned that hooked blade on a score of others. Its blade was clean, now, as were her two seaxes and a hand-axe hanging from her belt. The rest of her was thick with clotted blood, but she had tended her weapons before sleep had taken her. She rested the long-axe across her shoulder, a shiver running through her at the familiar weight. She loved it and hated it at the same time.

“Talk, then,” she said striding away, towards the hall’s entrance and out into the day. She bit back the harsh words that formed on her tongue, not wanting to talk to anyone. The sound of Breca’s voice from her dream still lingered in her thought-cage, echoing like some Seiðr-magic spell. All she wanted was to find her son. She thought she had found him yesterday, thought she had heard him calling for her, and the joy of it had lit a fire in her veins. She had carved a bloody path to get to him. But it had not been Breca,

though she had found other Tainted children, bound like thralls, all stolen by Drekr for the dead gods knew what.

But not my Breca. His absence had hit her like a sword-blow, piercing deep, almost breaking her. Grief had flowed from her like blood from a sword thrust. But today the wound was seared and stitched closed again, her heart cold and hard. She would go on. She would find him, and did not want the distraction of anything else. Of *anyone* else. But there was grief carved into Lif’s face and dripping from his lips like poison from a wound. He had watched his brother Mord die, shackled to a wall and gut-stabbed by that *niding*, Guðvarr. A bad death, and so Orka pressed her teeth together and did not snarl at him to leave her be when the slap and scrape of his footfalls followed her.

A cold breeze tugged at her blonde-braided hair as she marched down wide steps splattered with congealed blood. The bodies were gone, now, piled in a fresh-dug trench in the courtyard. Despite the mountain-cold, the flies were already buzzing, a cloud hovering over the heaped corpses. The courtyard was ringed by a cluster of outbuildings that tumbled down to a river, a track curling down a slope towards walls and a barred gate. Near the gate a hearth fire crackled, a pot hanging over it and Orka saw Glornir, chief of the Bloodsworn, standing and talking with a handful of his warriors. Einar Half-Troll was there, a shadowed boulder of a man, stirring whatever was in the pot and talking to Jökul the smith. He had a bandage wrapped around his thinning hair, and his snarl of a beard had more grey in it than she remembered. She put a hand to her belt and the bronze buckle and fixings, remembered him forging them for her. She saw other figures lurking in the shadows of buildings, another by the gates of the Grimholt. One of them looked at her, a man, wolf-lean, his hair short for a warrior of the Bloodsworn. His mail coat glimmered and he held a spear in his fist, shield slung across his back and a helm buckled at his belt. She returned his gaze with her own flat-eyed stare and he looked away.

Orka reached the river, flowing cold and fierce from the Boneback Mountains, the sound beneath her feet changing as she walked out a few strides on to a wooden pier. There had been two *snekkes*

moored here yesterday, shallow-hulled and sleek-straked, like a *drakkar*, but smaller, only a dozen oars on each. They were both gone now, frayed ropes dangling in the water testifying to the haste and desperation of those fleeing her vengeance as they leaped from the pier to the boats, cutting at the ropes, rather than taking the time to untie them from mooring posts. Peering over the pier's edge, she searched the ice-blue, white spume frothing around boulders that rose from the riverbed like slime-covered broken teeth. Deep in the clear water, nestled among the boulders she saw the tip of a chitinous, segmented tail. Spert, sleeping still after yesterday's fight. His tail twitched and thrashed as if he were dreaming, stirring a cloud of silt. Close by on the riverbank, Orka spied the shape of Vesli the tennúr laying curled asleep, one thin, membranous wing cast over her hairless body like a cloak. She held a small spear clutched in one pale fist.

Breca's spear.

Orka placed her long-axe and weapons belt on the wooden boards of the pier, then leaned over, heaving her *brynja* up and slithering out of it like a serpent shedding its scaled skin, tugged her boots and nǫlbinding socks off and then her breeches, finally pulled both her woollen and linen undertunics off in one movement, and stood there, huffing clouds of cold breath as her skin goose-bumped. Then she bent her legs and leaped into the river.

A shock like a hammer blow, snatching her breath away as she splashed into the river and sank beneath the surface, felt the current tugging at her but she kicked her legs and carved through the water like a salmon, swimming out into deeper waters, almost to the bottom, then turned, her feet and toes sinking into mud. She paused there a moment, looking around. Sound muted, light filtering around her in fractured beams from above, a many-hued flickering like the glow of the *gudljós* in the northern skies. Here everything seemed to slow, the noise of the world, the anger and terror that raged through her, all stilled for a moment, frozen and languid in this mountain's heart-water. Her chest began to burn, aching for a breath, pressure building in her head, and still she waited, grateful for this respite from the world above. Finally, when her burning lungs could not take any

more, she pushed hard against the riverbed, shooting towards the light and breaking the surface in a spray of water. Lif was standing on the pier beside her weapons and discarded clothes, holding something in his arms. With sharp, deft strokes she swam to the riverbank and stood, still half submerged. Reached down and took a stone from the riverbed, sat on the flat side of a rock and began scrubbing it across her skin, scrapping away what blood and filth the river's current had not managed to scour from her.

Eventually she waded from the river, water falling away like glittering streams of ice. Lif held out a woollen cloak for her, which she took and dried herself with. She looked at her pile of clothes on the pier, all stiff and coated in blood and sweat.

"Here," Lif said, holding out the bundle he had been carrying in his hands. "I found it over there, think it was a store-room for the garrison here." He held clean breeches, linen under-tunic and a thick wool over-tunic. "They're the biggest I could find; I think they'll fit you."

"My thanks," Orka said, taking the clothes and tugging on the breeches, thick wool, then a plain linen under-tunic and finally a blue-grey woollen over-tunic. She rolled her shoulders, stretching the linen and wool, which clung to her damp skin. Then she fetched her nǫlbinding socks and boots from the pier, tugged them on and hefted her *brynja*, realised it needed cleaning before she put it back on. Buckling her weapons belt around her waist, she slung the coat of mail over her shoulder then squatted and lifted the long-axe, leaning on it like a staff.

"You wanted to talk?" she said, fixing Lif with her gaze.

He sucked in a breath, mouth open, the words sticking in his throat.

"Three things," he muttered, then closed his mouth again, shuffled his feet.

Orka looked at the sky, then back at Lif.

"The day will not wait for you," she said. "Nor will I."

"You are Tainted, the blood of a dead god in your veins, a remnant of their power in you," Lif blurted, the words spilling from his mouth in a rush.