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*The Bloodsworn Saga*

The Shadow of the Gods

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The Wisdom of Wolves

THE  
FURY OF THE  
GODS

JOHN GWYNNE



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## WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

**O**rka: Orka's husband Thorkel has been murdered and her son Breca abducted. With her companions Lif and Mord she has tracked her son Breca to the Grimholt, a fortress in the north of Vigrið. Once there Orka is captured by the Galdurman Skalk, but with the help of the vaesen Spert and Vesli she breaks free, letting the wolf in her blood loose to rip and tear and rend.

Orka discovers that Breca is not there, although she finds a number of other Tainted children held captive. At the Grimholt she is reunited with the Bloodsworn, a mercenary band that she used to lead, her by-name Orka Skullsplitter. The new chief of the Bloodsworn, Glornir Shieldbreaker, is the brother of Orka's murdered husband.

While at the Grimholt, Orka and the Bloodsworn learn that Lik-Rifa the dragon-god has been set free from her imprisonment beneath the roots of the ancient ash tree, Oskutreð.

Glornir is in pursuit of Skalk, a Galdurman of Darl, because he has abducted Glornir's wife, Vol the Seiðr-witch. He asks Orka to come with him, but she declines, hearing that Glornir and the Bloodsworn have fought a dragon-born at the recently discovered chamber of Rotta the rat-god. Orka hopes to find clues of her son's whereabouts at this place. Glornir sends a handful of the Bloodsworn to show her the way to Rotta's chamber and then they part ways on their separate quests.

At Rotta's chamber Orka and her companions find evidence that children were recently held captive here.

While at the chambers Myrk of the Raven-Feeder arrives. She is a dragon-born, sister to Iiska the Cruel and brother to Drekr, who murdered Orka's husband and abducted Breca, and she is leading a small group of the Raven-Feeders. Myrk discovers the body of her father, who had been slain by Varg No-Sense of the Bloodsworn. Both Orka and Myrk want answers. A fight ensues, the handful of Bloodsworn with Orka coming to her aid. Together they defeat the Raven-Feeders and Myrk is taken captive.

Myrk agrees to lead Orka and her companions to Breca in return for information on who killed her father. They travel to Starl, a trading town on Lake Horndal, where Orka meets Elvar and the Battle-Grim, and Ulfrir the thrallled wolf-god. She discovers that Myrk is leading her on a false trail, and she makes a deal with Elvar and the Battle-Grim. They help stage an escape for Myrk in return for Orka sending word to Glornir and the Bloodsworn from Elvar, saying that Elvar wants to hire them in her fight against Lik-Rifa the dragon-god.

Myrk escapes and Orka tracks her, following her to Nastrandir, the halls of Lik-Rifa, and then on to Svelgarth, where a warband of warriors and vaesen under the command of the rat-god Rotta are assaulting the fortress town.

Orka infiltrates the camp while the attack is underway, finds Breca and escapes with him. She is pursued and caught by frost-spiders and tragically bitten, poison seeping through her. With her last strength she throws Breca into the river in the hope that the current will take him to the meeting point with her companions.

**Varg:** Varg is a slave who has killed the man who owned him, Kolskegg, and escaped the farm he has worked on all his life. He knows that his sister Frøya has died, he felt her die, but he does not know how. With a lock of his sister's hair he has sought a Seiðr-witch to perform an akáll, a spell that shows the last moments of someone's life, and that is how he became involved with the mercenary band the Bloodsworn. They took him on as an appren-

tice, and he has recently discovered that he is tainted, the wolf-god Ulfrir in his blood, and that the Bloodsworn are all tainted, too, their secret closely guarded.

He is at the Grimholt when the Bloodsworn are reunited with Orka, and he travels south with the Bloodsworn in pursuit of Skalk the Galdurman. They take with them the Tainted children they found as captives in the Grimholt.

During the journey to Darl, Varg meets a thrall he used to know at Kolskegg's farm, and she tells him the name of the slaver in Darl who purchased Varg's sister from Kolskegg. Brimil.

Once at Darl the Bloodsworn assault Skalk's Galdur tower, only to discover that it is already under attack by Prince Jaromir of Iskidan. They fail to find Vol or Skalk in the tower and so continue into the main hall of Darl, attacking Queen Helka and taking her son Prince Hakon captive.

Glornir negotiates with Queen Helka, and Helka agrees to loan the Bloodsworn a longship and hire them to hunt Prince Jaromir in return for the safe return of her son, Hakon.

While in Darl, Varg tracks down the slaver, Brimil, with the help of Svik, Einar and Røkia. They discover that Brimil sold Frøya to Brák Trolls-Bane, a huntsman in the employ of Drekr.

The Bloodsworn sail to Liga and find out that Prince Jaromir has already set sail for Iskidan. They set out in pursuit. During their voyage they are attacked at sea by two crews of tongue-eaters, an abomination of a parasite creature that slowly eats the tongue of its host and takes over their mind. The Bloodsworn defeat them, wipe out one crew and give chase to the second ship as it flees. They follow the tongue-eaters to an island, where they destroy them and their queen. While on the island they discover *druzhina* warriors of Prince Jaromir who have been captured and had the parasites laid inside them. Glornir offers them a quick, honourable death in return for knowledge of where Jaromir is taking Vol.

Varg and the Bloodsworn sail to Iskidan, past the port of Ulaz and up a river, eventually leaving the *Sea-Wolf* to travel across country and catch up with Jaromir as he reaches his fortress of Val dai. A battle ensues, where Vol is set free, Jaromir is killed and

dungeons are found full of Tainted thralls, all of them the Tainted children of Kirill, the Khagan of Iskidan. They also find maps and plans in Val dai that suggest Jaromir was plotting an invasion of Vigrið.

**Elvar:** Elvar has travelled to Oskutreð with the mercenary band the Battle-Grim. Their prisoner Uspa the Seiðr-witch has made a bargain with them, offering to lead them to this fabled place of untold treasure in return for the Battle-Grim hunting down and rescuing her abducted son Bjarn from Ilska the Cruel and her Raven-Feeders. Uspa and a handful of the Battle-Grim – Agnar, Sighvat, Elvar, Grend and Agnar's Seiðr-witch, Kráka – all bind themselves to each other, swearing the magical *blóð svarið*, the blood oath.

Once at Oskutreð they were attacked by the Raven-Feeders, Ilska and her dragon-born kin conducting a Seiðr-ceremony involving many abducted Tainted children, and they set the dragon-god Lik-Rifa free. Agnar chief of the Battle-Grim was deceitfully slain by Biórr, a young man who had become Elvar's lover, but was secretly Tainted and one of the Raven-Feeders. It was Biórr who orchestrated the abduction of Bjarn.

Lik-Rifa bursts from the bowels of Oskutreð, slays two of the three winged women who have stood guard over her for three centuries, and the Battle-Grim can only stand and watch as the dragon and Raven-Feeders leave Oskutreð.

The survivors of the Battle-Grim set about gathering as much treasure as they can, while Elvar and those who swore the blood oath struggle over how they are going to complete their task of rescuing Bjarn, now that he is in the company of a dragon-god.

While searching the battle plain for treasure the winged warrior Skuld regains consciousness. There is a brief struggle and Elvar manages to bind her with the thrall-collar taken from one of the tainted. Skuld agrees to guide them deep underground into the tunnels beneath the great tree, where she says greater treasure is to be found.

Once underground they discover the remains of Lik-Rifa's

chamber and find a Galdrabok of Seiðr-spells that she has written. Within this book Uspa comes across a spell that can raise a dead god. They construct a Seiðr-spelled thrall-collar in a forge beneath Oskutreð and resurrect the wolf-god, Ulfrir, but he is weak from his ancient injuries.

Elvar and the Battle-Grim travel south. A meeting is held to decide who the next chief will be, and Elvar and Huld fight a *holmganga* duel to decide the new chief. Elvar wins, slaying Huld.

Elvar decides to travel south to Snakavik. On the way the Battle-Grim stop at the lakeside trading town of Starl to restock their supplies. While here they meet Orka and agree to help her in return for Orka getting a message to Glornir and the Bloodsworn: that Elvar wishes to hire them in her efforts to defeat Lik-Rifa.

Elvar continues her journey south to Snakavik to see her father, Jarl Stórr. She asks to hire his *Berserkir* guards, but he refuses. Instead, he attempts to take her captive and steal the treasure that the Battle-Grim have taken from Oskutreð.

Ulfrir assumes his wolf-form and eats Jarl Stórr, a battle ensuing, during which Elvar slays her older brother, Thorun, and as her father's oldest heir she becomes the Seiðr-lord of her father's *Berserkins*.

**Biórr:** Biórr is a Tainted rat-blood who has infiltrated the Battle-Grim. He orchestrated the abduction of Bjarn and left clues for the Raven-Feeders to track the Battle-Grim to Oskutreð.

He slays Agnar, chief of the Battle-Grim, and sets their Tainted thralls free – Kráka the Seiðr-witch and Ilmur the *Hundur*-thrall. Then he leaves Oskutreð with Lik-Rifa and the Raven-Feeders.

Biórr is reunited with his old comrades in the Raven-Feeders, Storolf Wartooth, Red Fain and his old lover, Myrk, sister of Ilska and Drekr. The Raven-Feeders travel east as Lik-Rifa leads them to her ancient hall of Nastrandir. She feels weak after three hundred years of captivity and has sustained injuries from her fight with her three-winged gaolers, and so wishes to recover in the safety of her halls. During the journey the Tainted children abducted for the ceremony to release Lik-Rifa are taught about their heritage, their tainted bloodlines and weapons craft.

Once they reach Nastrandir they discover that it is not empty, the rat-god Rotta is there waiting for them.

Lik-Rifa summons the vaesen to her, as they are her creations.

While Lik-Rifa is recovering, many gather to them, and Myrk arrives, vowing vengeance against Orka.

Guðvarr, a servant of Skalk the Galdurman and Queen Helka, arrives. He tells Lik-Rifa of Skalk and Helka's plan to resurrect the eagle-god, Orna, and thrall her.

Biórr travels south. The warband splits, Lik-Rifa leading half to Darl, and Rotta leading the rest to Svelgarth, a fortress town ruled by Jarl Orlyg. They assault Svelgarth, and during this attack Biórr sees Orka and a handful of the Bloodsworn infiltrate the camp in search of Breca. There is a bloody fight and Biórr's friend Storolf Wartooth is slain. Biórr kills one of the Bloodsworn, Revna Hare-Legs, but Orka manages to escape with her son.

**Guðvarr:** Guðvarr is a *drengr* of Fellur village, nephew to the village's Jarl Sigrún. He had been pursuing Orka, Lif and Mord, and when he arrived at the Grimholt he found them as prisoners and slew Mord while he was spider-poisoned and chained to a wall. He fled when Orka unleashed the wolf in her blood and ended up on a boat with Skalk and the Grimholt survivors, rowing south for Darl.

Guðvarr is ambitious and in Skalk he sees opportunity for advancement, so makes himself useful to the Galdurman. He becomes embroiled in the plans of Skalk and Queen Helka of Darl, but in an unpleasant turn of events he is strapped to a table in Skalk's Galdur tower and the Galdurman used his power to command a *hyrndur* – a type of large, aggressive hornet – to eat its way into Guðvarr's veins, settling close to his heart. Skalk orders Guðvarr to befriend Prince Hakon, Queen Helka's son, because he suspects Hakon is involved in some kind of plot against his mother, Queen Helka. Guðvarr is still strapped to the table when Prince Jaromir of Iskidan attacks the Galdur tower, defeats Skalk and takes Vol for his own prisoner. Shortly after the Bloodsworn attack and Guðvarr escapes during the chaos.

Guðvarr applies himself to becoming part of Hakon's inner circle,

and in time uncovers that Hakon is plotting with the dragon-born Drekr, the killer of Thorkel and brother of Ilska the Cruel. Hakon has been helping in the abduction and movement of Tainted children through Helka's realm.

In an attempt to remain useful and avoid death from Skalk and Helka, Guðvarr volunteers to carry a message north to Drekr and Lik-Rifa. He meets the dragon-god and confesses all, telling her that Skalk and Lik-Rifa are planning to resurrect and thrall Orna the eagle-god, to use her in battle against Lik-Rifa.

In an act of betrayal against Skalk and Helka, Guðvarr helps to orchestrate Lik-Rifa's attack against Darl. His aunt, Jarl Sigrún, slays Queen Helka and Guðvarr slays Prince Hakon while Lik-Rifa descends upon the recently resurrected Orna and rips her to shreds.

## CHAPTER ONE

## VARG

“Ach,” Varg hissed as Røkia pierced a flap of skin hanging from his cheek with a fishhook, then stabbed into the flesh of his face and drew a line of thread through it. He felt fresh blood trickle down into his beard. “Ach,” he grunted again.

“Stop complaining,” Røkia muttered as she began stitching his cheek back together.

“I’m not, but it hurts,” Varg said.

“Pain is an enemy. Defeat it,” Røkia muttered.

Varg sighed.

A face loomed in front of him: Svik, handsome, braided beard and oiled red hair. Not looking at all like he had fought a vicious battle the day before. Svik frowned at him.

“First your ear, now your cheek. If you keep allowing people to carve pieces from your body soon there will be nothing left of you,” he said.

“I didn’t *allow* it,” Varg scowled, causing Røkia’s stitching to pull. He winced. *She is better at stabbing than stitching.*

Røkia sat back and threw her hands in the air. “This is ridiculous,” she said.

“First Røkia saves your life, and now she stitches you back together. What would you do without her?” Svik continued, ignoring Røkia.

“I am in her debt,” Varg agreed. *Although I gained this wound*

because I climbed the fortress wall and leaped into a score of enemies to save Røkia. But it turned out that it was she who saved me.

"Your mail needs cleaning," Svik observed, pointing at bloodstains. "The blood will rust it."

Varg looked down at it, saw dark patches where blood had crusted. Even his silver arm ring given to him by Glornir was caked with blood.

"I've told him that," Røkia said.

"You should listen to Røkia," Svik said with a smile.

"I do." Varg said. "I will. Clean the mail, I mean."

"Do you want me to continue stitching your face back together, or is the pain too great for you?" Røkia asked mockingly.

Svik laughed.

Varg sucked in a deep breath. "Please, continue," he said.

Røkia grunted and went back to her stitching.

They were seated on a bench in the courtyard of Valdai, Prince Jaromir's fortress in Iskidan, a cloudless sky and searing sun overhead, carrion birds circling. The courtyard was stained with patches of blood, corpses piled in a heap to one side of the shattered gates. A tangle of arms, legs, faces, pale in death. Black crusted wounds like open mouths. Jaromir's *druzhina*, all stripped of their weapons and mail, boots and breeks, anything worth taking. Buzzards perched on limbs, their beaks red. Beyond the mound of the dead lay a line of freshly piled stone barrows running along one wall, fifteen of the Bloodsworn fallen in battle yesterday. Varg had helped dig those graves, had shed tears as stones had been piled over his comrades-in-arms. Edel still stood there, looking down at the graves. She had buried one of her hounds with the fallen, her surviving hound lying across the stones. The old huntress was weeping. Varg looked away, his gaze coming to rest upon the largest of the barrows, where Ingmar Ice had been laid. Killed by the blade of Jaromir.

"I only knew him a short while," Varg murmured to himself. "It feels . . . longer." *Like family. Until now the only family I've ever known is my sister.* His hand strayed to the pouch at his belt, where he kept a lock of Frøya's hair.

"When you stand in the shield wall together the bonds of kinship grow strong," Svik said, resting a hand on Varg's shoulder.

"The more you talk, the worse your scar will be," Røkia murmured, focused on her handiwork.

"Scars make you handsome," Svik said. "And irresistible to women."

Røkia snorted her contempt, making Svik grin.

Members of the Bloodsworn were sitting around the courtyard, most of them tending to wounds or to damaged kit, either repairing rents in their flesh or rents in their coats of mail, sewing, stitching, darning, greasing. Some stood on the walls and towers, standing watch.

Glornir and Vol stepped out of the doors of the feast hall, Glornir's long-axe balanced across one shoulder, his other hand protectively on the Seiðr-witch's arm, supporting her as she walked. Though, after having seen what she'd done to Jaromir with her powers, Varg suspected she was fully able to look after herself.

Sulich walked with them, head freshly shaved, dressed in the coat of lamellar plate that Varg had given to him, a bow case and quiver hanging from his belt. Behind him followed more than a score of people, men and women, a mixture of pale and dark-skinned. The prisoners that had been discovered in the rooms behind the feast hall.

"Are they really all Tainted children of the Great Khagan?" Varg asked.

"That is what Sulich said, and he would know, as he is one of them," Svik said.

Vol looked around the courtyard and saw Varg sitting with Røkia and Svik. She said something to Glornir, and they made their way towards them.

"Finished," Røkia said, sitting back and examining her handiwork with narrowed eyes. She tied off the gut thread and cut it with her seax. Varg gently touched the wound, the skin feeling swollen and lumpy.

"My thanks," he said.

"Huh," Røkia grunted.

Glornir nodded a greeting, his bulk casting Varg in shade.

"Chief," the three of them said.

"Vol," Svik said, "it is good to have you back."

Vol was thin, her face bruised, the Seiðr-tattoos on her neck blending and almost hidden by the bruising. There were red pinprick-wounds around her mouth where her lips had been stitched together. But strength emanated from her dark eyes.

"It is good to be back, Svik, good to see you, and all my brothers and sisters," she said through swollen lips, then looked to Varg. "Glornir tells me you have grown. That you are truly one of us now. I have not forgotten that I made you a promise, back in the caves of Rotta's chamber. I owe you an akáll."

"Are you strong enough?" Glornir asked.

"Tsk, I managed to eviscerate Jaromir, did I not?" Vol said.

"Aye, you did," Glornir said, a hint of pride in his voice, a rare smile twitching his lips.

Vol reached out and touched Varg's shoulder. "Is it still something you wish for? To view an akáll is no small thing. It may reveal things that are best left . . . unseen."

Varg's breath caught in his chest. To find out how his sister had died. It had been all that had driven him for so long. *I will see Frøya's last moments.* He had longed for this, but as he thought on it he felt a seed of dread bloom in his stomach. It was one thing to know someone was dead, another thing entirely to watch it happen, even if it was a glimpse of the past.

*She is my sister. The only person I ever loved, or who ever loved me. I owe it to her.*

"I must know," he said. "But only when you are healed."

Vol nodded, smiled. "I am well enough. Tonight, then."

"Tonight," Varg echoed.

"Your mail needs scouring," Glornir grunted at Varg, frowning at the bloodstained patches. "Else it will rust."

"We've told him," Sulich said.

"I will do it soon," Varg promised.

Vol reached down and put her hand to a blackened iron ring hanging at her belt, two keys hanging from it.

"Where are they?"

"In the tower," Glornir said, waving a hand to one of the gate towers. Two of the Bloodsworn stood before the tower door.

Vol began walking to the tower, Glornir a step behind her.

"Come on," Svik said as he set off after them. Røkia shared a look with Varg, shrugged and they both followed them.

"Chief," the guards said, Glornir nodding, and they opened the door for him. He paused a moment, looking back at Vol.

"You are sure about this?" Glornir said to her.

"Yes," Vol said. "They were thrall to Jaromir, compelled by him. I travelled with them; they were not his willing servants, they are not our enemy." She stroked his cheek. "Trust me."

Glornir entered the tower, Vol behind, and Svik a few paces behind her. Varg quickened his pace to slip in through the door before other Bloodsworn crowded it.

A shaft of daylight from a high window pierced the room, and Varg blinked, allowed the wolf in his blood to filter through him, sight and senses abruptly sharper. The air reeked of blood and sweat.

They were in a square chamber, a staircase at one end leading up to the walkway on the wall. More Bloodsworn sat on chairs, playing a game of knucklebone. Two figures sat inside a pen in the middle of the room, a shaven-haired woman lying on a bed of straw, and a black-skinned, hulking man sitting close to her, frowning at Vol and Glornir. Both were bound with rope, thrall-collars about their necks.

"Leave Iva alone," the bull-man said, his voice a rumble like distant thunder. Blood-caked bandages wrapped his neck and head, from where Ingmar Ice had stabbed and clubbed him with a broken spear shaft. It had taken the combined effort of Ingmar, Røkia, Svik and him to knock the Tainted thrall out. Varg had never seen a strength like it.

"Taras," Vol said gently, stepping forwards, "I have come to help Iva." She paused. "And you, too, if you will allow me."

"Help?" Taras frowned. "Help Iva, not hurt her?" He looked worriedly at the woman lying on the straw. Her head was shaved to stubble, her tunic removed, bandages wrapped around her back