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Opening extract from

Olaf the Viking

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Published by

Oxford University Press

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CHAPTER ONE

Olaf looked at the pig.

The pig looked at Olaf.

Olaf reached for the rope on his belt, but then lost his balance, and slid a little down the slope. The pig barely looked up. Olaf retrieved his rope and tried another throw. This time, the loop dropped loosely on the pig's head, and Olaf managed to pull it tightly around the thick, grey neck. The pig began bucking and wriggling. Olaf released his hold on the sapling he'd been hanging on to, and gripped the rope with both hands. Suddenly he found himself tumbling downhill in the company of an indignant pig. There was a musical twang as the rope pulled tight. Another tree had stopped pig and boy just as they tumbled over a drop. At one end of the rope was the pig, swaying quietly; in the middle was the tree, which had brought a temporary halt to their tumble. At the other end was Olaf.

Olaf looked at the pig.

The pig looked at Olaf.

The pig wriggled his head sideways, and began to chew at the rope that was holding him over the drop.

Olaf had opened the hurdle-gate of the pen earlier that day with the intention of killing the pig. But he hadn't been able to bring himself to do it straight away. The pig had looked at him so piteously, as if he knew exactly what was going to happen, and as Olaf hesitated, knife in hand, the pig had lunged past him and then galloped off with Olaf running behind. The chase had lasted for hours, taking Olaf through marsh and mire, ravine and river, and, finally, up the steep-sided mountain from which he now found himself helplessly dangling.

For a moment, Olaf hung motionless, waiting for the drop. Then the pig paused to look at him before going back to work on the rope. Olaf wasn't very strong, it was true. On the other hand, Olaf wasn't very heavy, and he managed to swing himself, hand over hand, to within grasping distance of the ledge. He grabbed a tree-root and swung himself up, then scrambled to his feet, still gripping the rope. He summoned all his strength and tugged until the pig was dangling just under the ledge, then grabbed at the rope-ring round its neck and wrestled it up to safety.

Olaf straightened his clothes, and began the long walk home. The pig now trotted obediently, as though tumbling down a mountainside and dangling on a rope was a little hobby he indulged in most Sunday afternoons before dinner. As they went, Olaf rubbed some of the pig-dung from his face and eyes, and tidied his hair with the bone comb that had been his father's. By the time he was in sight of the village enclosure, most of the dung was gone, and he felt ready to present himself at the special meal that was to take place that night.

Kveld-Ulf was standing with his back to the fire, drinking deeply from a horn cup, surrounded by other men of the village. When he caught sight of the bedraggled Olaf, he bellowed with laughter.

'Well, look at that,' he choked. 'A piece of rope with a filthy animal at one end . . . and a pig at the other!'

Even the slave Loki, tied to a post nearby, joined in the fun.

'Nice to see you back again,' he shouted. Then he knelt and spoke confidentially in the pig's ear. 'But did you have to bring *him* with you?'

'Very funny,' Olaf snorted, tugging at the pig's tether.

Around the fire, the feast was already beginning, and the smell of roasting meat reminded him that he was achingly hungry. Grimnir had decided that it would be fun for the pig to join in, and took the tether to lead the animal towards the fire. Soon, the pig was happily settled on the ground, eating discarded crusts, and lapping from cups of mead which were offered from all directions.

As he took his place by the fire, Olaf could see that Uncle Kveld-Ulf was already well on the way to being drunk. But the meat tasted good, and there was plenty of it, in spite of the fact that one of the dishes that should have been on the menu was happily snorting and scrabbling for scraps. Olaf was exhausted, and sleep would soon have kidnapped him, if he hadn't been anxious to remind Kveld-Ulf about something close to his heart.

'Uncle Kveld-Ulf, you were going to make a speech.'

'So I was,' roared Kveld-Ulf. 'Quiet, you rabble.'

The enclosure lapsed into nervous silence.

'My people,' he bellowed, 'our ship is loaded and ready, and tomorrow we set off to scour the coasts of Normandy and Ireland and Angle-land and Scotland . . . '

'To look for my father!' Olaf interrupted.

'To look,' Kveld-Ulf continued, 'for gold.'

'And my father!' Olaf interrupted, anxiously.

'But of course,' Kveld-Ulf said, with a look at Olaf, 'I don't want anyone to think that gold and money is all that we care about.'

'Hooray!' shouted Olaf, and the pig grunted loudly, and nosed at a big puddle of spilt mead under the table.

'No, we also care about emeralds, and rubies, and diamonds.'

There was a great cheer, and Olaf tried desperately to raise his voice above it.

'What about my father?'

'Then, of course,' said Kveld-Ulf, 'there is the question of my dear brother—Olaf's father, Sigurd Toludsen. Has he been shipwrecked? Nobody knows. Where is he? Nobody knows. Is he alive or dead? Nobody cares! So here's to our treasure and plunder, and to Hel with Sigurd Toludsen!'

And with that, he downed another horn of mead, to the accompaniment of hilarious cheers from his followers.

Olaf said nothing at first. He thought of the weeks he had spent gutting and pickling herrings for the voyage, salting pork in barrels, grinding the

meal for biscuits, heaving helmets and swords to the smith to be mended; and he thought of his father, who had left six long years ago, but whom he still remembered tossing him lightly into the air, and laughing, in the days when his mother had still been alive. In a kind of dream, Olaf went to fetch the steaming cauldron of sweet oats that had been simmering all day over a cooking fire. He walked around the table, to where Kveld-Ulf was still laughing at his joke. Kveld-Ulf impatiently gestured him to put the cauldron on the table, and he considered pouring the boiling mixture straight over his stupid hairy head. Then he caught sight of the pig, who by now was lying trotters upwards in a blissful drunken stupor, and paused for a moment before setting down the sweet oats in front of Kveld-Ulf.

'I'll get rid of the animal,' said Olaf, and he dragged the unconscious pig away.

If anyone had been watching, they might have noticed that Olaf took the pig, not in the direction of the pig-pen, but towards the longhouse in the middle of the enclosure. He returned soon enough, and then quietly ate, watching with disgust as Kveld-Ulf gobbled and guzzled and glugged. Finally, Kveld-Ulf stood, belched loudly, and staggered off

through the darkness to collapse into his bed. It was so quiet when Kveld-Ulf was absent, that everyone decided that the best thing to do was to go to bed themselves. Olaf stayed by the dying fire as the last tired Viking stumbled off to bed, alone except for the slave Loki.

'I know it's a lot to ask,' said Loki, 'but I don't suppose I could be allowed to get within a mile or two of the fire? And a little food wouldn't kill me.'

Olaf took a small knife from his belt and sawed away at the cord holding Loki to his post. Loki rubbed at his wrists and eased himself towards the fire with difficulty. The iron manacles on his legs made it hard for him to move far or fast.

'Tell me about Angle-land, Loki.'

Loki took a piece of pork-fat from the table and chewed.

'You know the rhyme,' he said, 'what more is there to say?

> '"Ireland's men are bald and holy,
> Russia's men are lofty.
> Vinland's men wear feathered crowns,
> But Angles all are softies."'

'My father was planning to go to Angle-land,' Olaf said, thoughtfully.

'Then I imagine he's still alive,' said Loki. 'I gather he was a good fighter.'

'The best. He could . . . ' and Olaf tailed off, realizing that although he had been told by others that his father had been a fierce warrior, from what he remembered, he was gentle, and fun to be around.

'And if he went to Ireland?' asked Olaf.

'Oh, I think he'd survive there too. Vinland, of course, is another thing altogether. It's a long voyage, you see, to where the vines grow on the shores of the sea. And the people there, the Skraelings, as they're called, well . . . but why don't you find out for yourself?'

'What, me, go on a voyage? Why would I do that?'

'I thought you wanted to be reunited with your father.'

'I don't know,' said Olaf, 'I'm only twelve and . . . '

'I know, a trip like that would be too frightening for a little chap like you,' Loki twinkled.

'It's not that!' Olaf protested. 'It's just . . . well, I don't know the way to Angle-land.'

'Exactly. You'd need someone with you—someone more mature than yourself. Perhaps a slave, who would jump at a chance to escape . . . '

'Do you know anyone like that?' asked Olaf.

'Hmm. Now let me think . . . ' Loki rubbed his chin with his hand, as though deep in thought. 'That's a tough one. Someone who's being tied up as a slave, and would like to escape.'

'Just a minute,' Olaf said, brightly. *'You're* a slave, and you've been to Angle-land.'

'You're right!' Loki cried, as if the thought had just occurred to him. 'Only problem is . . . '

And he pointed at the shackles which fastened his legs together.

Why Olaf suddenly came to that drastic decision, he would never be able to explain to anyone, least of all himself. Perhaps he suddenly realized that with his mother dead and his father missing, there was no earthly reason why he had to stay, and almost any fate would be better than being bullied by Kveld-Ulf for the rest of his life. Olaf got up and trudged as quietly as his boots could carry him towards the longhouse.

All the tools and weapons were hung on a wall at the far end, where Kveld-Ulf slept. Olaf knew that what he needed was a large axe, but simply getting from one end of the longhouse to the other was going to be a problem in the dark. The heavy boards creaked as Olaf crept among the sleeping

bodies. Carefully, he lifted the axe from its hooks, and began to stagger along under its weight. It wasn't long before disaster struck. His foot caught in a blanket wrapped around one of the sleepers, and he stumbled. As he tripped forwards, he felt the axe making contact with something soft. The only thing as soft as that, Olaf thought, was Grimnir's head. He was right! Grimnir began groaning, and scrambling to his feet. Olaf thought quickly. If Grimnir continued complaining, then Kveld-Ulf and all the others would soon be awake, and there would be no escape. He kicked at the spot where he guessed Grimnir's wife would be, and was rewarded with an agonized groan.

'Who's that?'

'It's me, my love. Grimnir.'

'Well, what you kicking me for?'

'Someone hit me.'

'Well, someone's going to hit you a lot harder if you don't get back to bed and stop kicking me.'

'I didn't.'

'Well, someone did, and you're the only one up.'

Another voice joined in.

'Will you two shut up!'

'Don't you tell me to shut up!'

As the squabbling continued, Olaf made his way to the door, and he was soon outside.

Loki was sitting by the fire, with his manacle propped on a stone, ready for Olaf to swipe it with the axe. The first blow did nothing. The second grazed Loki's thigh and made him howl quietly. The third bent the metal a little, but the fourth knocked off the head of the rivet that held the manacle together. One more swipe, and it opened enough for Loki to squeeze his leg out.

Things would probably have been different if Kveld-Ulf had stayed asleep. But it's a well-known fact that you are unlikely to enjoy a long and refreshing sleep when you are sharing your bed with a medium-sized pig. Kveld-Ulf had been slugged into unconsciousness by a gallon and a half of strong drink, and he awoke again just as suddenly, screaming with horror, convinced that he was being attacked by an evil spirit with big horny hooves and a wet nose. Kveld-Ulf squealed, the pig squealed, then Kveld-Ulf squealed even more. When the pig calmly trotted off in the direction of the fire, looking for more food and wine, Kveld-Ulf caught sight of his floppy ears silhouetted against the dying embers, and finally worked out what had happened.

A mean half-moon was swimming through thin clouds, but it was still too dark for Olaf to see Kveld-Ulf poking his head out of the door, or to watch his face contort with rage as he wiped the fresh pig-dung from his tunic, or to see him disappearing inside to find the biggest, nastiest weapon the village possessed in order to get his revenge. But Olaf could certainly *hear* Kveld-Ulf, whose bellowing was loud enough to start avalanches two countries away.

Olaf ran. Then he realized Loki still had a manacle on one leg, and came back to help him to his feet, and ran again—this time at the pace of a tortoise with a wooden leg. Kveld-Ulf and the others had gone back for more weapons, and after some painful clashes in the thin moonlight, gave chase at speed. Olaf began by heading for the boats, but then Loki took charge and changed direction, heading for the cliff path. He scrambled up the rocks with surprising agility, considering the rusty manacle that still hung from one leg. Olaf could hear Kveld-Ulf's clumsy bootsteps behind him as they stumbled along. He knew the place well. Three more paces and they would reach the edge of the cliff. That was when Loki began scrabbling desperately among the rocks, and then digging at

the dirt with his nails. After a short while he had scooped a small hole in which there was the gleam of metal. Olaf watched, fascinated, as Loki began to tug the shining object from the hole. But soon he had to look away, because something more urgent was claiming his attention.

Kveld-Ulf was by a considerable margin the ugliest of the Vikings. He was also the fastest and angriest, and had been the first to scramble up the rocks. He had managed to find the most enormous sword the village possessed. Melted down, it would have yielded enough metal to arm an entire raiding-party and still have some left over for some fancy cloak-pins.

There was a moment when everything seemed to stop, giving Olaf the opportunity of a really good look up Kveld-Ulf's nostrils. Olaf could hear Kveld-Ulf's furious breathing as he brought the sword downwards. But the blow never reached its target. Sparks flew, there was a loud metallic clank, and then silence. For a moment, Kveld-Ulf stood dumb-struck, looking down at the gleaming metal object that had blocked the blow. Then he looked at Loki, who was still holding the thing, protecting Olaf from any further harm. It was a war-hammer, with a gold handle and a killing blade of diamonds.

Loki lifted the hammer high above his head, and swept it back. Olaf had no doubt that his next action would be to bring it down on the head of his Uncle Kveld-Ulf. But what Loki hadn't noticed was that by this time, Grimnir had sneaked up behind him. Grimnir wrestled the hammer from the grip of the unfortunate slave. Olaf looked up at his uncle, who once more raised the enormous sword. But catching a glimpse of the bejewelled weapon in Grimnir's hand, he suddenly lost interest in both Olaf and Loki. He stepped across to Grimnir, and grabbed at the hammer. Grimnir yielded it reluctantly, and watched as Kveld-Ulf weighed it, first in his left hand, then in his right. He brandished it above his head and swung it joyously, and then headed back for the longhouse.

'Bring them, and tie them up!' he cried. And many hands grasped at the terrified prisoners.