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opening extract from

Olaf the Viking and the Pig who would be King

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CHAPTER ONE

The air tasted of old straw and sheep-droppings. Olaf tried to open his eyes, then realised that they were open already and that he was in some dark, confined space. He reached out, and found himself touching rough fabric. His body felt bruised, and he ached as if he had been in this cramped position for some time. He was moving – bouncing along very uncomfortably. As far as he could work out, he was being carried in a sack. This was odd, because he wasn't in the habit of getting into sacks.

Olaf thought. There wasn't much more he could do in the circumstances. He ran his mind through the happenings of the previous day, trying to work out how he had ended up bumping along in a bag carried by … well, carried by whatever it was that was carrying him.

It had been one of those dull Norwegian days when the sun just manages to struggle over the rim of the world before it decides it doesn't like the look of the place, and drops back out of sight. Olaf had spent most of the day building a fence in the top pasture, to prevent the livestock from straying over the precipice at its edge. It was a craggy, wind-pummelled hill-top, overlooking the fjord and the boiling, distant sea. Single handedly building a fence was not easy for a twelve-year old boy, but the adults of the village had been dreaming of foreign plunder for weeks, and when they were going through one of these phases, they lost interest in the business of farming. So it was little Olaf who had to struggle up the steep slopes with tools and heavy timber, slam in the fencing posts, and nail on the split planks, with only the mild-eyed sheep for company. When he had finally flopped into bed, he had dropped immediately into a dream of sheep tumbling over a cliff before taking to the air, and then swelling into fuzz-fleeced clouds, floating towards a fiery sunset. After that, nothing, but the darkness of sleep, surrounded by the snoring and breathing of the twenty-six other Vikings – men and women, close friends and deadly enemies, who shared the squat, turf-roofed long-house, close to the rambling, shambling collection of shacks and pig-pens, houses and cow-sheds that made up the tiny village of Skirringsvijk.

There was a little light showing from time to time. Not from the top of the sack, but from a small split in the side. Wriggling himself into a position in which his head was bouncing up and down reasonably close to the hole, Olaf looked out, and he saw:

Rock (rugged and grey)

Tree (scraggy-leaved)

Fur (brown and shaggy)

More trees (clinging to a precipice)

More fur.

From this, Olaf guessed that he was being carried up a mountain. However, it was impossible to establish WHICH particular mountain it might be, as most Norwegian mountains had their share of trees and rocks and crags. He also guessed that whatever it was that was carrying him was large. He had no weapon, or any kind of blade with which to make a hole in the bag. But he did have a belt with a buckle. He undid it, and then wriggled close to the hole again, so he could begin sawing away at the material with the buckle-pin. After a while, the movement stopped. It took a moment to realise that he had been placed on the ground. The little hole was now a slit two hands wide. Cautiously, he raised his eyes to it. There was a river, dropping down into a gulf, and for a moment, the rainbow blur of a fish leaping upwards. On one side, the ground dropped down towards a scrub of hungry-looking trees. On the other, something was moving. A large something.. A large, furry something. A large

Bear!

So this was the creature that had carried him up the mountain. But why would a bear put a boy in a bag? It was all very perplexing. Crouching still by the river, the bear was waiting its moment to pounce on the bright, metallic flashes of the little salmon as they leaped downwards through the frothing waters on their journey to the sea. Olaf decided that this was the moment to make a run for it. He pushed his hands into the split in the material, and forced the gap wider. There was a tearing, rasping sound as the threads gave way, but the bear was too near

the river, and too intent on his prey, to hear. Olaf emerged slowly through the hole in the sack, wriggling his hips to free himself, before bounding off towards the trees.

If Olaf was to stand any chance of escaping, he had to reach the cover of the trees before the creature realised he had gone. Just as he arrived at the patch of fern and bracken that surrounded the woodland, he became aware that something was wrapped around his ankles. Some kind of snare or trap? Or even more frightening, a snake? He nerved himself to look down, only to find that it was his own belt. In his rush to escape from the sack, he had forgotten to do it up properly. He readjusted the belt, and scampered on all fours towards the trees. Having wriggled past one or two straggly spruces, he leapt up and began running through the wood. Collecting many cuts and grazes as he tripped on tree-roots and hidden rocks, Olaf propelled himself forward, with many a backward glance. But there was no sign of the bear.

The trees thinned into a clear, rocky shelf in front of a sheer cliff-face, broken only by a cave as high as Olaf's head. Olaf stopped a moment. A cave *might* be a good place to hide. On the other hand, it might contain still worse dangers than a large brown bear – perhaps a whole family of furry beasts. He stooped at the cave-entrance, sniffing the air.

Then he heard something – he wasn't sure what, but unmistakably a something – moving around behind him. He looked around, expecting to see the bear, rearing on its hind legs and towering above him, ready to fracture his skull with a swipe of its paw. But there was nothing. And yet, there had definitely been a sound. If not the bear, then what? It was said that some parts of the mountains near Skirringsvijk were guarded by ghostly warriors.

"But there's no such thing as ghostly warriors," Olaf said to himself.

It was at this point that a ghostly warrior put his hand on Olaf's shoulder.

"I am Tyr, god of battles and Guardian of the Fenris Wolf," he bellowed.

Then, without releasing his grip, he continued, this time in verse:

“Woe to him who falls into my hands
or sets his foot upon my lands.
Enter where you should not tread,
And I will soon remove your foot ...

just a minute, that can’t be right.“

The owner of the voice stopped a moment to consider, and stepped back, giving Olaf a chance to look at him. Tyr carried enough weapons for a whole Viking raiding party. He was clothed almost completely in antique metal. He had an axe, a sword, a spiked hammer and a spear. This was a little awkward for him, as he only had one arm. But by a little deft jiggling and juggling, he swapped weapons from time to time, shuffling sword and hammer and spear from under-arm to hand, to the crook of his elbow. Tucked into his belt were swords, daggers, and throwing axes. His beard wagged fiercely as he growled to himself.

“Got it,” he said, “Try again.”

And once more, he began his fierce rhyme:

“Woe to him who falls into my hands.”

“Hand.” Olaf corrected.

Tyr looked down at his one remaining hand and nodded.

“See what you mean,” he said. “Fair enough”

And he continued:

“Woe to him who falls into my hand,
or sets his foot upon my land.
Venture where you should not tread,
And very soon, you will be ... badly injured .” Tyr stamped his foot in frustration. “No, wrong again!” He looked at Olaf, his head cocked on one side, in apology.

“Sorry about that. I used to be quite good with threats. I learned them as sort of rhymes you see, ages ago. I mean, just a threat with no poetry seems a bit flat, don’t you think? Especially from a god of war and battles. It’s kind of

expected of me. But it's been such a long time. I'm afraid I'm just going to have to skip the threats and move straight on to smashing you with my hammer. He hasn't eaten for a hundred years you see. He must be starving."

With that, he pushed Olaf, who sprawled on his back, helpless, and gazed up at the bearded figure.

"Who must be starving?" asked Olaf, not really wanting to find out the answer. Tyr ignored him.

"Shall I start by removing your head, or would you rather leave that until after the limbs have gone?" asked Tyr, politely.

"I'd rather you didn't remove anything, really," Olaf said.

"Awfully sorry, that's out of the question. Fenris needs his food, I'm afraid."

Tyr raised his rusty sword, and brought it whistling down towards Olaf's neck. The blade stopped just under his chin.

"Only practising," Tyr said, pleasantly. "I'll do it for real this time. Now how does that threat go? Tremble mortal at my tread, because … er … because … "

For a moment, Tyr had closed his eyes in concentration as he tried to recall the rhyme. Olaf seized the moment, and retreated. The sheer cliff-wall was at his back, and not daring to try to dodge past the fearsome warrior, Olaf headed for the cave. Tyr leapt after him in pursuit. He seemed to have no problem at all in matching Olaf's speed. His boot-steps and breathing were clearly audible as Olaf leapt through the oval mouth of the cave, landing on a floor that was slimy with something unidentifiably wet and greasy. Olaf saw a gleam of light at the opposite end. He got to his feet and began slithering towards it. For some reason, the footsteps behind him had stopped now. That was when Olaf realised that the light he had seen was not daylight filtering through a handy cave-exit, but the reflected gleam of an eye. The eye was not alone. There was another eye next to it, and underneath them both were two rows of gleaming teeth, gaping wide apart. The eyes and teeth launched themselves at him, and he sprang back, but not quickly enough to match the supernatural speed of what Olaf could now clearly see was a colossal wolf. Olaf had never encountered a creature like this before. Its head was bowed low, but that still brought it to just

above Olaf's eye level, and each pointed tooth was the size of a spear-head. The wolf hurtled towards Olaf, and then, when it was close enough for him to feel the stinking breath pouring out against his face, there was a metallic clank. The wolf had reached the end of the chain that secured him, and though he wriggled and howled mightily, he could not get free. Olaf could see things more clearly now. Each link of the chain that encircled the wolf's neck was as big as a fist. Olaf retreated a pace, then turned back towards the entrance.

"I wouldn't go near him, he'll have your arm off," said Tyr, who was now standing between him and the cave exit, "That's what happened to me. It was the only way he'd allow us to chain him up, you see. I stuck my arm in his mouth as a sign of trust. I have to admit it did sting a bit when he bit it off. Now if you'll just let me hack your limbs off with a sword, it'll hardly hurt at all."

But before Tyr could move a muscle, Olaf ducked between his open legs and scrambled frantically out into the open air. He managed a few paces before Tyr's iron grip on his shoulder stopped him, and forced him down onto the ground.

Standing above Olaf, and casually waving his sword in time with the rhythm of the verse, he launched tentatively into a new threat:

"You will soon be good and dead,

Because I shall remove your … limbs."

Tyr tailed off, hopelessly, and dropped his sword into the grit.

"Oh, it's no use. I mean, I've waited day after day, year after year, century after century, patient as anything. And what happens? Someone drops in, maybe someone interesting, someone with a bit of conversation, and suddenly, I've forgotten how I'm supposed to maim them. What is Fenris-Wolf going to do for lunch if I can't slice up some nice tender boy-steaks for him?"

"Tell you what," said Olaf, "It's probably just nerves. Why don't you try counting for a long time, and then when you've finished counting, you can have another go."

"How many shall I count to?"

“Oh, about nine thousand.”

“Can’t count to nine thousand.”

“Well, how many can you count to?”

“Twenty-five. “

“Twenty five?!”

“One, two, three …”

Olaf looked around, desperately for some means of escape. He thought of returning to the cave, but then he didn’t fancy another encounter with Fenris-Wolf, who was frightening, even chained up.

“eight, nine, ten… “

He thought of running into the forest, but with his long legs, Tyr would easily catch up with him, and no doubt the bear was by now prowling through the trees, searching for his lost quarry.

At his feet was a knobbly-looking stick. He picked it up, and swiped Tyr across the head with it as hard as he could.

“Twelve, thirteen, fourteen …”

He thought about his escape routes again, and for a mad moment, considered the possibility of digging a tunnel to safety in the next ten seconds.

“Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen … “

Olaf wondered if it would be worth running round in circles, hoping Tyr would drop with exhaustion.

“Twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three…”

“Wait! What about the number between twenty two and twenty three?”

“There is no number between twenty two and twenty three.”

“Never heard of twenty-tonk?”

“Twenty tonk?”

“Exactly.”

“All right. Twenty two, Twenty tonk, twenty three …”

“Also there are several numbers between twenty three and twenty four.”

“Are there?”

“Oh, yes, lots.”

“Well,” said Tyr, affably, “Thanks for telling me, but I don’t think I need to know them. You see, I’m not nervous any more. Thanks for the tip. That counting thing really works. Here goes. Fenris! Nearly time for dinner!”

And he brought the sword in a broad sweep at Olaf’s neck level. Olaf ducked and turned at the same moment, and as the blade crashed against the rock close to his ear, he caught sight of a movement in the forest. Perhaps someone from the village had followed as Olaf was bundled away?

No such luck. It was the bear. He had reared up to sniff the air for a moment, then bounded across the rock-shelf towards Olaf.

It was an interesting situation. Olaf couldn’t help taking more than a passing interest in the question of whether he would be torn apart by the bear, sliced in pieces by the warrior, or chewed to death by the wolf. The bear went down on all fours, bringing his head close to Olaf’s face.

“Jump on my back,” it said.

For a moment, both Olaf and the warrior were too astonished to do more than stare at the animal, who turned and loped slowly off, in the direction of the trees. Olaf bounded off after the bear. It was, after all, his only hope of survival. And besides, there had been something familiar about the voice… Olaf raced after the animal, and leapt onto his back, just in time to escape the sword-blow that the warrior aimed at his head. He grabbed handfuls of the creature’s fur, and then hung on as the loping gallop increased in speed. As they dived into the cover of the trees, Tyr called after them, apologetically:

“What did I do? I’m so sorry, did I offend you in some way? Please come back some time if you’re passing, and have your head cut off. I’ll learn all those numbers between twenty-four and twenty-five, promise!”

But the bear loped on, through the trees, and on up the steep mountain-slope, towards the flattened, tree-lined peak.