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Opening extract from

Odd and the Frost Giants

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CHAPTER 1

Odd

There was a boy called Odd, and there was nothing strange or unusual about that, not in that time or place. Odd meant *the tip of a blade*, and it was a lucky name.

He *was* odd though. At least, the other villagers thought so. But if there was one thing that he wasn't, it was lucky.

His father had been killed during a sea-raid, two years before, when Odd was ten. It was not unknown for people to get killed in sea-raids, but his father wasn't killed by a Scotsman, dying in glory in the heat of battle as a Viking should. He had jumped



overboard to rescue one of the stocky little ponies that they took with them on their raids as pack animals.

They would load the ponies up with all the gold and valuables and food and weapons that they could find, and the ponies would trudge back to the longship. The ponies were the most valuable and hard-working things on the ship. After Olaf the Tall was killed by a Scotsman, Odd's father had to look after the ponies. Odd's father wasn't very experienced with ponies, being a woodcutter and wood-carver by trade, but he did his best. On the return journey, one of the ponies got loose, during a squall off Orkney, and fell overboard. Odd's father jumped into the grey sea with a rope, pulled the pony back to the ship and, with the other Vikings, hauled it back up on deck.

He died before the next morning, of the cold and the wet and the water in his lungs.

When they returned to Norway, they told Odd's mother, and Odd's mother told

Odd. Odd just shrugged. He didn't cry. He didn't say anything.

Nobody knew what Odd was feeling on the inside. Nobody knew what he thought. And, in a village on the banks of a fjord, where everybody knew everybody's business, that was infuriating.

There were no full-time Vikings back then. Everybody had another job. Sea-raiding was something the men did for fun, or to get things they couldn't find in their village. They even got their wives that way. Odd's mother, who was as dark as Odd's father had been fair, had been brought to the fjord on a longship from Scotland. When Odd was small, she would sing him the ballads that she had learned as a girl, back before Odd's father had taken her knife away and thrown her over his shoulder and carried her back to the longboat.

Odd wondered if she missed Scotland, but when he asked her, she said no, not really, she just missed people who spoke her language. She could speak the language of the Norse now, but with an accent.

Odd's father had been a master of the axe. He had a one-roomed cabin that he had built from logs deep in the little forest behind the fjord, and he would go out to the woods and return a week or so later with his handcart piled high with logs, all ready to weather and to split, for they made everything they could out of wood in those parts: wooden nails joined wooden boards to build wooden dwellings or wooden boats. In the winter, when the snows were too deep for travel, Odd's father would sit by the fire and carve, making wood into faces and toys and drinking cups, and bowls, while Odd's mother sewed and cooked and, always, sang.

She had a beautiful voice.

Odd didn't understand the words of the songs she sang, but she would translate them after she had sung them, and his head would roil with fine lords riding out on their great horses, their noble falcons on their wrists, a brave hound always padding by their side, off to get into all manner of trouble, fighting Giants and rescuing

maidens and freeing the oppressed from tyranny.

After Odd's father died, his mother sang less and less.

Odd kept smiling, though, and it drove the villagers mad. He even smiled after the accident that crippled his right leg.

It was three weeks after the longship had come back without his father's body. Odd had taken his father's tree-cutting axe, so huge he could hardly lift it, and had hauled it out into the woods, certain that he knew all there was to know about cutting trees and determined to put this knowledge into practice.

He should possibly, he admitted to his mother later, have used the smaller axe, and a smaller tree to practise on.

Still, what he did was remarkable.

After the tree had fallen on his foot, he had used the axe to dig away the earth beneath his leg and he had pulled it out, and he had cut a branch to make himself a crutch to lean on, as the bones in his leg were shattered. And, somehow, he had got

himself home, hauling his father's heavy axe with him, for metal was rare in those hills and axes needed to be bartered or stolen, and he could not have left it to rust.

So two years passed, and Odd's mother married Fat Elfred, who was amiable enough when he had not been drinking, but he already had four sons and three daughters from a previous marriage (his wife had been struck by lightning), and he had no time for a crippled stepson, so Odd spent more and more time out in the great woods.

Odd loved the spring, when the waterfalls began to course down the valleys and the woodland was covered with flowers. He liked summer, when the first berries began to ripen, and autumn, when there were nuts and small apples. Odd did not care for the winter, when the villagers spent as much time as they could in the village's great hall, eating root vegetables and salted meat. In winter the men would fight and fart and sing and sleep and wake and fight again, and the women would shake their

heads, and sew and knit and mend.

By March, the worst of the winter would be over. The snow would thaw, the rivers begin to run, and the world would wake into itself again.

Not that year.

Winter hung in there, like an invalid refusing to die. Day after grey day the ice stayed hard, the world remained unfriendly and cold.

In the village, people got on each other's nerves. They'd been staring at each other across the great hall for four months now. It was time for the men to make the long-boat seaworthy, time for the women to start clearing the ground for planting. The games became nasty. The jokes became mean. Fights were to hurt.

Which is why, one morning at the end of March, some hours before the sun was up, when the frost was hard and the ground still like iron, while Fat Elfred and his children and Odd's mother were still asleep, Odd put on his thickest, warmest clothes, he stole a side of smoke-blackened salmon

from where it hung in the rafters of Fat Elfred's house, and a firepot with a handful of glowing embers from the fire, and he took his father's second-best axe, which he tied by a leather thong to his belt, and he limped out into the woods.

The snow was deep and treacherous, with a thick, shiny crust of ice on top. It would have been hard walking for a man with two good legs, but for a boy with one good leg, one very bad leg, and a wooden crutch, every hill was a mountain.

Odd crossed a frozen lake, which should have melted weeks before, and went deep into the woods, until he reached his father's old woodcutting hut. The days seemed almost as short as they had been in midwinter, and although it was only mid-afternoon it was dark as night by the time he reached his destination.

The door was blocked by snow, and Odd had to take a wooden spade and dig it out before he could enter. He fed the firepot with kindling, and tended it until he felt safe transferring the fire into the

fireplace, where the old logs were dry.

On the floor he found a lump of wood, slightly bigger than his fist. He was going to throw it on the fire, but his fingers felt carving on the small wooden block, and so he put it to one side, to look at when it was light. He gathered snow in a small pan, and melted it over the fire, and he ate smoked fish and hot berry-water.

It was good. There were blankets in the corner still, and a straw-stuffed mattress, and he could imagine that the little room smelled of his father, and nobody hit him or called him a cripple or an idiot, and so, after building the fire high enough that it would still be burning in the morning, he went to sleep quite happy.