



MARVEL

LEGENDS OF ASGARD

The **REBELS** *of*
VANAHEIM

A HEIMDALL PROSE NOVEL BY

RICHARD LEE BYERS

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The REBELS *of* VANAHEIM

A Legends of Asgard Novel

BY RICHARD LEE BYERS

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The bold hero Heimdall returns to battle the undead and his own divided loyalties, in this rip-roaring fantasy adventure set in Marvel's Legends of Asgard

THE DEAD HAVE RETURNED.

Odin, All-Father of Asgard, dispatches the heroic warrior Heimdall and the Valkyrie Uschi to eliminate a mysterious infestation of draugr – the living dead – in the proud realm of Vanaheim. Yet his home is not as Heimdall remembers it. Anti- Asgardian sentiment is rife, and the arrival of just two warriors from Asgard to deal with the draugr threat only incenses its people further. With rebellion growing in Vanaheim, Heimdall must investigate this conspiracy and the undead, even if it pits him against his own kin, to preserve the peace of the Realm Eternal.

PROLOGUE

The house was built of vertical planks, had a thatched roof, and was supported on the outside by sloping posts. It was one of many such homes that had grown up beyond the towering walls of the royal city of Asgard. Odin's capital had grown since its founding, and there was no longer room for new homes within. Hogun waited for Gunhild on the gravel path lined with purple rosebay flowers that ran up to the door.

Gunhild was a skinny little girl with narrow, thoughtful blue eyes, a snub nose, and her pale blonde hair done up in braids. When she saw the stranger awaiting her on the path, she faltered.

That, Hogun supposed, was understandable. He knew he cut an intimidating figure with his dangling black mustachios, dark clothing, and the heavy mace in his hand. His appearance was part of the reason people named him "Hogun the Grim".

"It's all right," he said. "I'm a friend. Your mother's brother was hurt in a hunting accident. A wild boar gored him. Your parents had to run off to see him, and I volunteered to watch you after you came home from your lessons." He tried to

smile, and as was often the case, the expression felt unnatural on his face.

In fact, his account wasn't quite accurate. He'd been inspecting a section of Asgard's fortifications with Gunhild's stonemason father when the man's wife came scurrying up all in a panic. Once she made it clear she wanted to rush off to see the injured brother forthwith, Hogun had offered to find someone suitable to mind the child.

It should have been easy enough, but somehow wasn't. If he'd had the household full of personal servants to which his status as one of the Realm Eternal's finest warriors entitled him, he could have sent one of them. But he preferred to live simply, alone with his thoughts when he retired to his utilitarian quarters, and now he was suffering the consequences. With the end of the school day rapidly approaching, he'd had to come to look after Gunhild himself.

He consoled himself with the reflection that it was only for one night. Surely he could foist off the task on somebody else come morning.

Gunhild eyed him for another moment, and then something, his explanation of his presence or perhaps even his attempt to force a smile, seemed to persuade her of his bona fides. "Is Uncle Varick going to be all right?" she asked.

"Yes," Hogun said, reckoning that if the man hadn't died on the spot, it was probably so. Asgardians were resilient, and their healers were skilled. "Come inside." He tramped to the door, and she trudged after him.

The long structure had twin rows of posts holding up the ceiling, benches along the walls, and chests tucked under the benches for storage. The front half was all one open space, but

partitioning provided a measure of privacy toward the back. Hogun took a glance around and then considered the little girl glumly peering up at him.

“Did you bring work home from school?” he asked.

“No,” she said.

“Do you have chores to do?”

“No.”

Inwardly, Hogun winced. For a moment, he wondered if he could send Gunhild to bed, but of course that was preposterous. It wasn’t even suppertime yet, let alone bedtime. He was going to have to try to entertain the child, a task for which he felt ill-suited due to both temperament and lack of experience.

“Do you have a ball?” he asked. “We could go back outside and throw it back and forth.”

She shook her head. “I mean, I don’t feel like it.”

“Well, how about a hnefatafl set? Or dice?”

“I don’t feel like that, either.”

“We could play the question game. What am I thinking of?”

Gunhild sighed. “Is it a mace?”

Hogun gaped at her. “How could you guess it right away?”

“You glanced at the one in your hand as you were talking.”

“Well... very clever. All right, it’s your turn to pick something and mine to guess.”

“Do we have to?”

Hogun scowled in vexation, but after a moment that feeling gave way to puzzlement. As he and Gunhild’s father inspected the royal city’s ramparts, the builder had often chattered about his family. The merry, lively daughter he’d described

bore little resemblance to the dour child before him.

"I truly do believe your uncle will be all right," Hogun said, "and your mother and father will come home as soon as they can." He paused and continued tentatively, "I think it wise to stay home, in case your parents do return with news."

"I know," Gunhild said, but her demeanor remained as cheerless as before.

Hogun's impatience came surging back, and he took a long, steadying breath in an effort to keep it from showing. "Then what ails you? Tell me, and I'll help you if I can."

His words made the child look a bit guilty. "I'm sorry. I just have something on my mind."

"If it's not your uncle, then what?" Hogun realized that, despite his attempt to seem otherwise, he still sounded annoyed. He felt his own flicker of guilt for that and tried again to soften his voice. "If you tell me what's wrong," he reiterated, "maybe I can help you sort it out."

She looked him up and down all over again, sizing him up anew. Eventually she said, "You'd have to swear not to tell *anyone*."

"I swear it on my honor as a warrior of Asgard," he replied. "I swear it by Gungnir, the spear of the All-Father himself. Now, come sit down and tell me what's the matter." He sat on a bench. She flopped down beside him and frowned as she put her thoughts in order.

"I have these friends," she said at length.

"Of course," he said, to encourage her to continue. Even he, as irascible and taciturn a man as he knew himself to be, had friends, and good ones, too: Volstagg, Fandral the Dashing, and even Thor the God of Thunder among them.

“Girls and boys I know from school,” Gunhild said. “There’s also this man named Yonas. He’s grumpy and mean. He won’t let anybody come on his land.”

Well, it is *his* land, Hogun thought, but what he said aloud was, “Why not?”

“He says it’s because his land borders the edge of the world and he doesn’t want anybody falling off. But we think it’s because he doesn’t want anybody else eating the sloe berries and cloudberryes that grow near the edge. Even though we only ever took a few!”

“Well,” Hogun said, “whatever the man is actually worried about, it is dangerous to go too near the edge.”

The Realm Eternal was a vast expanse of land perched on one limb of Yggdrasil the World Tree. It was both flat and finite. It was thus quite possible for unfortunate souls to fall off the edge. Then they would either smash themselves to pieces on a rocky outcropping protruding from what amounted to a prodigious cliff face or tumble forever through the cosmic void.

Gunhild grunted in a way that somehow conveyed her impatience with yet another adult belaboring the obvious. “Anyway, my friends. There’s this boy, Leos. He’s a year or two older than most of us, and he’s sort of like the leader.”

Hogun thought he had an inkling of where the story was going. “And Leos is angry that Yonas chased you all away? He wants to get back at him somehow?”

The girl nodded. “Kind of. If you’re in Yonas’s wood and you look over the edge, there’s a ledge. It’s pretty far down, but it’s there. It has a lot of berries growing on it, and Leos said we could climb down to it and make it our special hideout.”

“And since it’s on Yonas’s land, give or take, that would make it even more fun.”

“Yes. Nobody could find us when we didn’t want to be found.”

In a way, Hogun approved. It sounded as if this Leos had the fearless spirit of a true Asgardian warrior. He and his brothers had undertaken comparable reckless adventures before his siblings and father died and the world seemed a darker place. Still, he knew it was the job of adults to restrain children when the latter’s notions became too harebrained.

“You and your friends mustn’t do that,” he said. “It’s much too dangerous to clamber around over the edge.”

“I *know* that,” Gunhild said. “But like I told you, Leos is the leader, and he says that anybody who won’t climb down to the ledge is a coward. Nobody wants to be a coward.”

“If you can’t convince the others to give up the scheme,” Hogun said, “then you have to tell someone – their parents, your teacher, maybe even this man Yonas – who can prevent what they mean to do.”

“But that would make me a tattletale! My friends would hate me, and I couldn’t blame them.”

He drew breath to tell her she was wrong and then realized that, according to his own code of honor, she was absolutely right. A person didn’t betray his or her true companions. He could never have found it within himself to betray Volstag, Fandral, or Thor, no matter what the circumstances.

For a second, he imagined that he himself could inform some responsible party, then recalled Gunhild had sworn him to silence.

Scowling, he pondered, seeking a solution that proved

elusive. He was no fool, but he was used to straightforward problems where one side was his own and the other the enemy, and a fellow could drive at the objective without concern for the incidental consequences. In comparison, Gunhild's dilemma was a muddle.

She watched him for several moments as he sought after the answer, and then the hope in her expression wilted into disappointment. "It's all right," she said. "You tried to figure it out."

Perhaps it was her somber acceptance of the idea he couldn't help her, couldn't even help a little girl with a schoolyard problem, that finally shook something loose in his head. If it wasn't the answer she needed, maybe it *contained* the answer.

"Don't give up on me yet," he said. "You've heard of Heimdall?"

"Uh huh."

"Well, long before the building of the Rainbow Bridge, he was a young thane in service to Odin, and he had a problem like yours. It appeared that the only way to do his duty and stop something awful from happening was to betray people he cared about. Would you like to know what he did and how it all worked out?"

"Yes."

"Then show me the larder, help me get started making our supper, and I'll tell you the story."

ONE

Heimdall caught his breath as Golden Mane, his winged steed, carried him from the sky of Asgard into the transcendent reality where Yggdrasil, the World Tree, towered in a star-bedizened and nebula-smeared vastness with the Nine Worlds perched up and down its length. He no longer had reason to fear being here. The preternaturally keen senses he'd acquired by smashing the head of Mimir armored him against the mind-withering influence of the void, and his augmented sight revealed the glimmering pathways that kept him from losing his way. But the vista before him still inspired awe even though it wasn't inordinately perilous anymore.

"I could fly around out here for a long time," he called to his companion, "just to enjoy the view!"

"Fine by me," Uschi replied. "I'm in no hurry to get where we're going."

Long-legged and with a face that currently wore an expression of grim resignation, Uschi commanded a company of Valkyries. Her training and the rituals of her sisterhood enabled her to endure the space beyond the Worlds as easily

as Heimdall did. Save for his color, white to Golden Mane's black, her stallion Avalanche, with his beating pinions, resembled his own.

Her status as a thane of the Valkyries had been immediately apparent when Heimdall met her during the war with the Jotuns. It had taken years longer, however, to discover she hailed from Vanaheim and had grown up not far from his own childhood home, for unlike him, she rarely spoke of her family. Evidently, they were estranged.

Heimdall considered that a pity, and when his duties allowed him time for a visit home, he'd wheedled until Uschi grudgingly agreed to accompany him. It was, he fancied, a concession she would have given to few, if any, others. They'd become staunch friends in the years since the war with the frost giants, facing extraordinary perils together and saving one another's lives on more than one occasion.

He had no misgivings about pressuring her into the homecoming, for surely, he thought, if she and her parents saw one another again, they'd reconcile. His friend was such a valiant warrior, had done such mighty deeds in the service of the Realm Eternal, that her kin could only be proud of her.

"It will be all right," he said. "You'll see." He pointed. "And there's the path to Vanaheim."

The path twisted and shimmered like the lightest silvery dusting of frost on the ground except that there was no ground underneath. Despite the apparent lack of solid footing, the stallions' legs worked as steadily as their wings. As Heimdall and Uschi rode along the way, a stag, colossal almost beyond comprehension, nibbled at Yggdrasil's leaves. The creature was as ghostly as it was huge, and the stars and

nebulae glowed through it. It paid the travelers no mind, and after another moment even Heimdall's eyes couldn't see it anymore. Several heartbeats later, the riders passed from the void into the sky of Vanaheim, and he spotted the first sign that the world of his birth had changed in his absence.

Thanks to the All-Father's magic, Asgard was a land of perpetual summer. Vanaheim, however, ruled by Frey, God of the Harvest, subject to Odin's ultimate authority, had always been an even more verdant and bountiful realm, an expanse of endless green forests of birch, goat willow, and pine, along with foaming, murmuring rivers and blue seas. Mostly, it still was, but there were also patches of woodland where leaves and pine needles had turned brown and fallen, where branches had twisted as if in agony, and cankers on the tree trunks oozed sap.

Heimdall frowned in puzzlement and a bit of dismay and then dismissed the matter from his mind. The blight was troubling, he thought, but surely someone was attending to it, and those people were likely foresters and mages. It was unlikely one of Odin's warriors, even one possessed of astonishingly keen sight and hearing, had anything to contribute, so he might as well get on with his holiday as planned.

To his relief, the blight hadn't touched his father's lands. The woodlands where he'd learned to hunt, the apple orchards, and the rye and barley ripening in the fields all appeared unaffected. Not far beyond the castle, an imposing gray fortress stood as well maintained as it was ancient, the land sloping downward to the sea and the huts of the fisherfolk. He was surprised, however, that no one was trawling or

pulling up wicker fish traps to remove the catch within. On the contrary, all the boats were drawn up on the shore, and he wondered if today was some festival, wedding, or other celebration. Unfortunately, when he and Uschi flew close enough to see down into the castle courtyard, he realized it wasn't that at all.

Half a dozen pallid corpses lay in the center of the space. By the look of them, something had battered and smashed at them until broken bones pierced vital organs, or those organs were simply pulverized, and life left them. A crowd had assembled to inspect the dead: Heimdall's parents and a number of their household warriors among them.

As always, Heimdall's heart lifted to see his mother and father. At the same time, though, he was mindful that he was reuniting with them in the aftermath of a tragedy. It now seemed likely there was work for him here after all.

Such being the case, he might have expected the arrival of reinforcements would elicit some show of enthusiasm from the folk below. Valkyries like Uschi were renowned warriors, and in the years since he and his sister Sif had played a pivotal role in defeating the frost giants, he'd acquired a comparable reputation. But people were peering up uncertainly. If he hadn't known better, he might almost have imagined it was in consternation.

"This," Uschi said, "is the kind of welcome I'll get when I show up at *my* parents' stronghold."

"They're happy to see us," Heimdall replied, meanwhile thinking that surely there was no reason why it wouldn't be so. "It's just that we've surprised them at a sad moment. As soon as we're on the ground, you'll see."

He waved his arm, signaling for the crowd in the courtyard to clear a space big enough for the winged steeds to land, and they understood and complied. Once Golden Mane furled his wings, touched down, and trotted the few extra steps required to shed his remaining momentum, there was no doubt that everyone could see who Heimdall was, but there were still no shouts of welcome. Everyone just watched. He marked it down to the mournful nature of the occasion he'd interrupted.

He swung himself down from the saddle, and the Gjallarhorn, a long, curved ox horn with a mouthpiece and a brass ring around the wide end, bumped at his hip. Like his heightened senses, he'd acquired the enchanted trumpet in the course of fighting the Jotuns and had held onto it ever since. It was useful for signaling on the battlefield and for damaging certain types of foe. Uschi dismounted after him and followed him toward his parents.

"Mother! Father!" Heimdall called.

His mother Estrid, a dainty-looking apple-cheeked woman with a fondness for red garments, returned his smile. His father, Rodric, a burly, square-faced warrior whose fringe of beard, despite the longevity of the Vanir and Aesir, was beginning to go gray, apparently wasn't quite ready to do the same. "Do you bring a message from Odin?" he asked.

Heimdall blinked in surprise. "No. I came home for a few days because I had the chance. Are you expecting a message?"

"No!" Rodric said. He dredged up a smile. "It's good to see you, my son." He gestured in the direction of the corpses. "But as you can see, this isn't a good time for a visit."

"Unless it's the best time," Heimdall replied, surprised

at the implication that his father would prefer him to turn around and go back to Asgard. Was Rodric still seeing him as a little boy who ought to be shielded from danger? “This is Uschi, a captain of the Valkyries. If you need another warrior, you won’t find a better one. And, Father, I still remember the swordsmanship you taught me.”

“Thank you,” Rodric said. “Thank you both. But we don’t need any more help. We know how to handle ... the situation.”

“What is the situation, Lord Rodric?” Uschi asked, a hint of impatience in her tone.

After a moment’s hesitation, Rodric said, “A draug attacked one of the fishing boats.”

Heimdall frowned. Draug were dead men returned from the grave. Sometimes they were folk who’d been spiteful and greedy in life and who appeared to be pursuing their wicked ways even after their demise. In other cases, the trigger for the reanimation seemed less apparent. Perhaps hostile magic woke them, or, wise folk had speculated, it was some evil influence seeping along Yggdrasil from Realms like Niffleheim where malignant forces held more sway. However they came to be, draug often craved the blood and flesh of the living but were also known to kill out of sheer viciousness.

Heimdall was surprised because draug, though not unheard of, had always been rare in Vanaheim and the other worlds perched high in Yggdrasil’s branches. They were a more common affliction in Midgard and other realms lower down. But he supposed wickedness could bubble up anywhere. He and Sif had even unmasked such in the royal court of Asgard itself, with the result that the All-Father had sent the treacherous Lady Amora into exile.

“Plainly,” his father continued, “we must destroy the draug before it comes again to attack another boat or even the homes along the shore. But you needn’t concern yourself, my son, nor need you, Captain Uschi. My warriors and I have the situation in hand.”

“I know you do,” Heimdall said. He didn’t want to offend his father’s pride. “But I’m still one of your warriors even if I’ve gone on to be other things, too. What kind of son would I be if I let my father go into battle without me?”

Uschi smiled a crooked smile. “I’m not your blood, my lord, but since I landed in this courtyard, I’ve been your guest, and I’d consider it poor hospitality indeed if you kept me out of this fight.”

Heimdall’s father and mother exchanged glances. Then Rodric said, “If you’re both resolved to help, then of course I welcome it.”

“Good,” Heimdall said. “Now that that’s out of the way, what’s the battle plan?”

“Well,” Rodric said, “we can’t very well swim to the bottom of the sea and seek out the draug in its lair. So, we’ll go out in ships and lure it up to attack us.”

“That makes sense,” Heimdall said, his mind whirring with possibilities, “but may I make a suggestion? As I understand it, draugr are as intelligent in death as they were in life. The creature might hesitate to attack a longship with folk who are plainly warriors aboard. We should go forth on fishing boats disguised as fisherfolk, without armor and with weapons and shields stowed but ready to hand.”

His father nodded. “Good idea.” He gave Heimdall the warmest, most open smile he’d offered yet. “You always were

clever. Your mother and I could tell even when you were small.”

“We’ll need to set out in the morning,” Uschi said, “spend the day out on the water, and pretend we’re coming back into port late, after nightfall. The draug won’t attack before the sun goes down.” Heimdall noticed her glumness had fallen away. In his experience, she was always keen to put down threats to the people of Asgard, but in this instance, he suspected she was also glad for an excuse to delay returning to her own childhood home.

Rodric grunted, his momentary cheer falling away. “Now that, Valkyrie, is where you’re wrong.”

Two

The hot sun beat down as Heimdall and Uschi, both sweaty and disheveled in the garb of fisherfolk, struggled inexpertly to haul the net aboard. Heimdall was glad that at least he still had his sea legs. His various missions on behalf of King Odin and Queen Frigga had put him aboard ships and boats often enough that his body still remembered what it was to have a rocking, creaking deck beneath it. Uschi, whose duties generally had her either flying on her winged steed or standing on solid ground, was having a bit more trouble keeping her balance. Skarde, the barefoot, shirtless, tattooed mariner whose vessel this was, who'd put to sea with the warriors to help them impersonate fisherfolk successfully, looked on with a sigh and a slight shake of his head.

The decision to embark in smaller fishing boats instead of longships meant there were perforce fewer warriors per vessel. Rodric's fighters were strung out across the entire fishing fleet, two or three to a boat, with one or two of the bravest fisherfolk aboard as well. It wasn't a situation that troubled Heimdall. He and Uschi had defeated Jotuns and

ice giants. Though he'd never before encountered one, he thought a draug was no great matter after that. Indeed, he hoped that when the dead thing came up out of the water, it would attack the boat they were aboard and not another.

Uschi noticed Skarde's reaction to her landlubberly performance and answered it with a scowl. Heimdall chuckled.

"You truly didn't have to come out here," he said to her. "But you were eager to seize any excuse to delay going home to see your parents."

The Valkyrie grunted. "You're right. I would have gone to Jotunheim if you'd suggested it. I doubt the welcome would have been any colder. Let's get this cursed net up." A final heave brought the coarse mesh with gleaming, flopping fish caught in the weave onto the deck. Uschi then glowered at the raw scrapes on her hands, and with that discomfort, Heimdall sympathized. Over the course of several hours, he'd discovered that a person could spend years hardening his palms and fingers by gripping a sword hilt and the reins of a horse, but somehow, the hard work aboard a fishing boat would punish them nonetheless.

He wiped his hands on his wool tunic in the hope that would ease the stinging, and then the tossing surface of the blue sea began to darken. It was as if clouds had covered the sun even though the sky was clear and it shone as brightly as before.

"The draug is coming," Heimdall said.

Uschi looked out across the waves. "Are you sure?" she asked, whereupon he realized that what he'd observed was as yet imperceptible to others.

Such was often the case. He'd learned to rouse his preternatural sight and hearing when he needed them and quell them when he didn't. Life would have been unendurable had they been bombarding him with a thousand details and impressions every moment. But his gifts were never *entirely* quiescent, and thus he was apt to spot things other people missed.

"I'm sure," he replied, and he didn't have to wait long before the process was evident to everyone. The sea darkened as if some colossus had spilled a prodigious quantity of ink into it, and when it was completely black, the blackness leaked on upward into the air. Over the course of a minute or two, what had been a sunny day curdled into the equivalent of a moonless, starless night.

As had been reported, the hunters' quarry was a draug that brought its own darkness with it. Heimdall contemplated the mystical power required to produce such an effect over such a wide area and for the first time felt a twinge of trepidation. Was it possible a draug was a more formidable foe than he'd imagined? He took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and the anxiety mostly subsided.

"Weapons?" Skarde asked. He was a steady man who'd done some fighting in his time. Otherwise, he wouldn't be out here on the water. Nonetheless, his baritone voice came out higher than normal, a sign that he, too, had felt a pang of fear.

"Not yet," Uschi said. "We still have to lure the draug into the snare. Heimdall will tell us when it's time."

Heimdall reckoned that he might be the only person who could judge when it was the optimal moment for that, because

the world continued to darken until even he could barely see from the bow of the modest craft to the stern. Despite his lingering uneasiness, it made him hope even more strongly that luck would send the draug to this boat and not another whose warriors were all but blind. He summoned the full measure of his preternatural sight, peered across the waves, and gasped at what he saw there.

He and his fellow warriors had expected a single draug to clamber aboard a single boat. Once the attack was under way, the other vessels would converge on that one and their warriors would board it and join the fray. Or, if the creature sprang back overboard and sought to swim away, they'd throw spears and loose arrows. If it tried to dive deep, they'd attempt to catch it in the fishing nets.

In other words, they'd laid their plans in anticipation of battling a lone draug, and why not? All the tales and sagas described heroes combatting one such abomination. But now, concealed in the unnatural darkness from every eye but Heimdall's, at least one creature was swimming toward *every* boat.

Waiting until the perfect moment for the warriors to reveal themselves now seemed like a guarantee of disaster. "The weapons!" Heimdall shouted. "Now!"

He, Uschi, and Skarde all scrambled for the boat's little cabin, jamming in the low doorway for a moment as everyone tried to enter at once. The Valkyrie buckled on her sword belt and took up her round pine shield with its iron boss. Skarde grabbed a spear a head taller than he was with a long, leaf-shaped point suitable for thrusting or slashing. Heimdall drew his two-handed sword from its scabbard.

He also snatched up the Gjallarhorn. The fishing boats weren't especially close to one another because bunching up might have given the trap away, and the trumpet's voice was louder than any shout that he could manage.

Back on deck, he drew a deep breath, brought the Gjallarhorn's brass mouthpiece to his lips, and blew. A long note blared across the water and served to draw the attention of everyone aboard the other vessels. "Draugr!" he bellowed. "Swimming toward *every* boat! Arm yourselves now!"

A slight splashing sounded at his back. He realized that as he'd shouted out his warning, calling out over the starboard side of the vessel to the other boats, draugr had reached the port side. Turning, he dropped the Gjallarhorn to dangle on its leather cord and gripped his sword with both hands.

"They're here!" Skarde yelled, his voice now positively shrill.

"Steady!" Uschi snapped. Pale hands gripped the ankle-high gunwale.

"I've got the prow," Heimdall said. "You two, hold the stern!" Hampered by the darkness as he was not, Uschi and Skarde edged toward the back of the boat with their weapons probing before them.

Heimdall stepped to the gunwale with some of the fish in the net still flopping feebly around his calfskin shoes. He cut downward expecting to sever one of the draug's hands or at least maim and cripple it before the living corpse could pull itself onto the deck.

The two-handed sword did indeed cut but only superficially. To his startled dismay, Heimdall felt a jolt as though he'd struck sturdy mail or a tree trunk rather than the spongy, fish-

gnawed flesh of a drowned thing that had been underwater for weeks or even longer.

The draug heaved itself out of the sea. Heimdall scrambled backward to keep away from it. He needed to open up the distance so that he could reach it with his sword, but the creature would be unable to strike or grapple with its empty hands.

The draug's flesh was ragged, and in some places bone showed through gaps. Slimy bits of it fell away to patter on the deck along with the seawater dripping from its limbs. From the shoulders down it was horrific, but also the foe Heimdall had steeled himself to confront. What he hadn't anticipated was the lack of any remaining semblance of a human head. Where the head and neck should have been, rising from a ragged hole in the torso, was a clump of seaweed, the lamina stirring as though still floating in some phantom current.

Beholding the bizarre sight, Heimdall faltered. Seeking to take advantage of the lapse, the draug rushed him. It didn't move in the lurching, halting manner he might have expected of a reanimated corpse, either. Strings of rotted flesh flopping around its upraised half-skeletal hands, it pounced like an arrow flying from a bow.

Only Heimdall's years of training and battle experience saved him. Startled though he was, he reflexively swung his blade in a stop cut. The two-handed sword caught the dead man in the chest, cracked exposed ribs, and halted its charge.

But the draug showed no signs of being any more hindered by the new wound than it was by the first one, or by its lack of eyes, or general decay for that matter. Taking a deep, steadying breath of salt air that had grown cold now that shadow tainted

it, Heimdall insisted to himself that was no reason for panic. Apparently he'd have to dismember the unnatural creature to stop it, but he could do that despite the unnatural hardness of its substance. He just needed to strike with all his skill and every iota of his Vanir strength.

He and the draug circled one another. The confines of the prow provided scant room to maneuver and avoid the creature's attacks. It kept rushing him, and he only barely managed to dodge it. The rocking of the boat and the slippery fish under his soles made the footing treacherous, and once, he caught his foot in the net, tripped, and nearly fell. Meanwhile, Uschi's occasional curses and Skarde's wordless cries revealed that they were fighting dead things in the stern.

Heimdall's foe faked a shift to his right, and, pretending to be deceived, he turned with it. At once it lunged in toward his exposed left. He pivoted and cut.

The stroke sheared deep into the draug's shoulder, all but severing one arm and slamming it to its knees. The injured limb flopped down, useless. Heimdall grinned, but his momentary satisfaction turned to shock when, before he could yank his weapon free, the dead thing, heedless of any damage it might thereby be inflicting on its own fingers, gripped the blade of the sword with its good hand. Heimdall then found himself playing tug of war for possession of the weapon.

For a few heartbeats, with his teeth gritted, he thought he might win. Then he heard more splashing. Another pair of oozing ragged hands rose out of the sea to grasp the gunwale, and a new draug pulled itself onto the deck.

The newcomer was even more rotted by time and immersion than its predecessor, much of its fleshless bone encrusted

with barnacles or host to dangling sea anemones. It had no head at all, not even a clump of seaweed to substitute for one, but for all that it lacked, it moved with the same agility as its companion and oriented on Heimdall immediately.

He feared letting go of his sword hilt even with one hand lest his first adversary succeed in wresting the blade away, but he didn't dare let the second creature close in on him. It would rip him apart or carry him over the side to drown. He kept hold with his right hand, grabbed the Gjallarhorn with his left, and sounded it as he'd learned to do when using it as a weapon.

The second draug's outstretched hands were almost within grabbing distance when the tone caught it. The note didn't break it into a scatter of bones as it had once shattered the frozen forms of ice giants. But the sound did slam it like a battering ram and hurl it back over the side to splash down in the sea.

Meanwhile, though, just as he'd feared, the first draug was pulling the sword from his right hand. Heimdall dropped the Gjallarhorn, gripped the sword hilt with both hands, and discovered to his dismay that even that was not enough. The reanimated corpse was still pulling harder than he was, still relentlessly drawing the weapon in its direction.

For a helpless instant he couldn't think of anything to do, but then a desperate notion came to him. He stopped resisting the pull and pushed with all his strength, lunging forward as he did so.

The reversal caught the draug by surprise, and it failed to compensate in time. Acting in concert with Heimdall's, its own strength helped to turn the forward motion of the blade

into a forceful slicing action. Its gripping hand came apart, and the fingers fell to the deck. So, too, did the maimed arm, entirely severed at last, and the sword sprang free.

Still undeterred, the draug scrambled up off its knees. Heimdall feinted high, cut low, and severed its lead leg partway up the thigh. The dead thing pitched forward onto its face, and he hacked it to keep it there.

Even after he'd dismembered it completely, the pieces kept flopping like the newly netted fish. At least, he thought, the draug could do no more harm that way, whereupon his imagination conjured a ghastly picture of the severed limbs crawling around on their own like serpents. The Vanir would trip over them, and the arm that still had a working hand would grip their ankles and crush them. Heimdall flipped the pieces overboard with the point of his sword.

The second draug clambered back into the bow.

The oozing, rotting creatures sickened Heimdall and he'd learned almost at the cost of his life to be wary of their capabilities. He felt tempted to fling this draug back over the side with another blast from the Gjallarhorn. But even if that discouraged it from attacking yet again, he was here to destroy the draug, not merely send them into retreat, and the trumpet's magic seemed unable to dispatch them. He gripped the two-handed sword anew.

The best tactic, he judged, was still to control the distance so that he could strike while remaining out of the draug's reach. Sidestepping, he dodged one lunge and sprang after another, cutting with all his might the instant he was clear. It still wasn't easy to hack through the dead thing's astonishingly tough substance, but eventually he had it twitching on the

deck in writhing pieces like the first one.

With the prow cleared, he turned his attention to the stern, the low little cabin fortunately not blocking the view. Each of his companions was fighting one of the draugr. Like the ones he'd dispatched, the two dead things had waving strands of seaweed in place of a head. Slashing broadsword in one hand, shield in the other, Uschi was thus far holding her own. The rocking of the boat still had her unsteady on her feet, however, and her foe had smashed or torn away pieces of the shield. Skarde appeared to be in even greater peril. He'd driven his spear into a dead thing's chest, and the leaf-shaped iron point was sticking all the way out of its back. As aggressive as before, however, the draug pushed its way up the ash-wood shaft, and its raking hands would soon be within reach of the fisherman. Screaming, Skarde struggled to shove the reanimated corpse over the side, but his panicky effort was only serving to slide the spear farther through the creature's torso and so bring the combatants closer together.

Much as he would have liked another moment to catch his breath and steady himself, Heimdall had to intervene without delay. He maneuvered around behind the draug and hacked its legs out from under it. That put an end to it working its way closer to Skarde, who then did his best to immobilize it with the spear and hinder its frantic efforts to bash and snatch at its opponents. Meanwhile, Heimdall landed cut after cut to its forearms and shoulders.

By the time the arms dropped away, he was breathing heavily from hacking apart three unnaturally tough horrors in quick succession. But there was at least one left, and so he immediately turned in Uschi's direction.

Uschi didn't need his help. Since he'd last looked her way, her draug had finished smashing her shield to splinters, but despite the rocking deck, she succeeded in inflicting considerable harm on it. It was now missing an arm and prone on the deck with her foot planted in the center of its back to keep it that way. Bellowing "Asgard!" with every stroke, her cries full of mingled loathing and fury, her broadsword rising and falling, she finished the task of dismembering it. When she'd finished, she took a deep breath of composure and asked, "What now?"

Heimdall looked, listened, and could detect no sign that any more draug were about to assail Skarde's vessel. "Now," he panted, "we follow the original plan, give or take. We find a boat in need of help, and we give it." As formidable as the draugr had proven to be, he had a grim sense that such a boat would be easy enough to locate.

When he exerted his senses to the fullest and gazed to starboard, however, he discovered to his surprise that his father's warriors were faring better than expected. A couple had fallen, and draugr were pressing some others hard, but fighters who'd cleared their own boats of foes were coming to the latter's aid, relying on the clamor of battle rather than the sight of it to scull their craft to the proper locations.

Heimdall suspected that the living were prevailing in no small part because of magic. When he used his sight to the fullest, he could see supernatural energies. Not being a warlock himself, he lacked the knowledge to interpret what he beheld, but it was at least always clear to him when such forces were at work. And at this moment, they were. A number of the warriors scattered across the boats cut and thrust with

broadswords that had runes etched along the blades. Now that they'd drawn the weapons from their scabbards and the draugr were at hand, the symbols shimmered with a blood-red phosphorescence.

Heimdall's father bore such a sword. Clad in the simple garb of a fisherman just like his followers, Rodric caught a headless draug's blow on his shield and riposted with a stab to the belly. As Heimdall's recent experiences had demonstrated, the attack should have been useless against one of the living corpses, and in fact, the creature didn't fall down. But it froze with the shock and pain of the wound, and in that moment of paralysis, Rodric yanked the blade free and hacked at its outstretched arm. Seemingly bypassing the draug's supernatural toughness, the sword stroke lopped off the thing's hand at the wrist as easily as if it were a living man. Rodric finished dispatching it and rushed to the aid of a beleaguered comrade.

"Our side is winning," Heimdall said, "but there's still work for us."

He turned to Skarde, who was white-faced and shivering but appeared to be doing his best to shake off the terror engendered by fighting his draug.

"We need to go that way," Heimdall pointed to the nearest boat where things were going poorly, maybe because no one aboard had a sword with glowing runes. "I can see to guide us through the dark."

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