

THE SAGA OF THE BROTHERS

(A tale of old Denmark)

By

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Dedication, to:

AELFWINE DUNEDAIN
MARIAN OF EDWINSTOWE
KALI HARLANSSON OF GOTLAND
GYRTH OLDCASTLE OF RAVENSPUR

"May their word fame live forever."

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

| | |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| HUGI | A mysterious one-eyed old man. |
| HJALMAR | King of Denmark. |
| GUNNAR | Liegeman to Hjalmar. |
| FRODHI | One-eyed cousin to Hjalmar and usurper of the throne. |
| HELGI/HALFDAN aka HROT/HRANI | Sons of Hjalmar. |
| REGIN | A Sherriff and foster-father to the brothers. |
| OLGA | Wife to Regin. |
| HALETH and HALGERDE | The Forest Girls. |
| SNORRI | A dwarven smith. |
| DAMNIR | A dragon. |
| Servitors, Soldiers | |

ACT 1, SCENE 1: A DARK FOREST

Before a closed curtain enter HUGI. Ravens sit atop his shoulders, he carries a staff.

HUGI LORDS! I call thee! LADIES list now to my tale.
In Denmark's far days came these doings dire,
when men of might were mickle and many,
when dwarf spoke doom in caverns dank,
dragons with demons vied to bring disaster,
ere even the pernicious pipes of the Scots
did assail the innocent ears of Northmen.

Curtain rises, enter GUNNAR and HJALMAR with drawn swords, tattered and tired.

Here now does hie a warrior, Hjalmar,
Denmark's king, hail him all!
This day in death Hjalmar has dealt,
scores of slain bespeak his wrath.
Yet overthrown is he, unmanned in flight
and only Gunnar the Grim gangs with him.
Learn of the liege's love for his lord
and of evil deeds befallen.

GUNNAR Come my lord! We may rest no longer! Onward we must
fly, for our pursuers are feckless in their onrush.

HJALMAR Nay, good Gunnar. Too fleet is Frodhi, that attacked
in the night. My cousin will have my life in this
wood.

GUNNAR I, Gunnar, will return to delay the dastards!

HJALMAR Again, nay, Gunnar. Know you, I am gifted with the
foresight of my people and it is not my wyrd to be
delivered by weapon-play, or to be bound like a bunny
before the hounds of Frodhi. Yet I grieve Gunnar, for
surely you will be slain, most loyal liege. And more,
my most magical blade, Scofnung (*brandishes his sword*)
will be taken by unworthies.

And last, Gunnar my friend, I grieve for my sons,
Helgi and Halfdan. Never now will they grow to manhood
and come to rule Denmark. Ah, Gunnar! If only these
griefs were gone, and I might take twenty or thirty of
Frodhi's pigdogs with me, I might die a happy man.
(*Hjalmar buries his head in his hands.*)

GUNNAR My king! What's done is done, for better - or norse.
Brace up! Weapon in hand, I'll slit the weazands of
those weaklings before you can say Wotan!

| Hugi gives a look of indignation.

HJALMAR I fear we could slit a leagues worth of weazands, lop
off a furlong of forearms just for good measure and
still not triumph. Frodhi does not do things by
halves.

GUNNAR *(Looking up)* I don't know about halves but we may soon
be in separate quarters, I trow. Even now I hear
Frodhi and his men approach.

HJALMAR *(Imploringly)* Oh foul is my fate! Who can answer this
riddle?

| Hugi looks up.

Where is the wit to solve these troubles?

| Hugi fidgets.

Who knows enough to deliver us?

| Hugi tries to attract attention.

Where, oh where, is the WISDOM I need?

| Hugi clears his throat, Hjalmar and Gunnar are startled. Hugi steps
forward

HUGI Greetings Hjalmar King! Greetings Gunnar!

HJALMAR How now? Who art thou, oh ominous one-eyed stranger?

HUGI My name is not important. But list and heed my rede.
Atop my steed I see many deeds; it is thus decreed. In
your need I heard you plead amidst these weeds. Thy
plight is not slight, and thou must fight. But thy
might is a fright and thy foes are fools, so I see a
score or more shall snore the eternal snore ere the
night is through. Even now I have made a shade for
your blade, a magic glade safe from raid.

| Hugi waves his hand. A ROWAN TREE is revealed.

I bid the blade be hid, and thou face the foe fearing
not! Hjalmar, your griefs are gone and, though the
years be long, Frodhi will fall and thy line go on!

Hjalmar is stunned.

GUNNAR Old one, is it so?

HUGI Verily, yea! And I must away. *(Exits)*

Hugi retires and Hjalmar stirs.

HJALMAR A good omen is this! Come Gunnar, we will do as we
were bid.

They hide the sword in the ROWAN TREE.

Now give me your sword, for I perceive you will need
it not.

GUNNAR My Lord - !

HJALMAR Come, you will survive this night, I will not, that I
see. Wouldst deprive me of a fighting death?

GUNNAR Forgive me lord! *(Gives Hjalmar the sword)* Wield it
well. I still have my hands though, and a heavy boot
may wreak much scathe. Fear not! I'll send some of
these hounds home, but as bitches, ha! *(Demonstrates a
savage kick)* I will harry their hauberks, harangue
their helms, I sneer at their spears -

Enter FRODHI and company, noticed only by Hjalmar.

- a grim blade-trade will I deal, give as good as I
get -

FRODHI With windbags for warriors it is no wonder you have
come to this pass, cousin.

HJALMAR Oh? It is said you are a coward, Frodhi. But now I see
this is not so.

FRODHI What mean you Hjalmar?

HJALMAR Just that if I led **your** men, I could never stand
with my backs to their spears. Watch it!

Frodhi starts and his men look sheepish.

FRODHI Enough! You die now, Hjalmar, and I shall King it in Denmark. But first, where are your sons hid? Where is the sword Scofnung?

HJALMAR Insolent boar-chasing son of a demented dwarf! My sons are my hope and I pray someday they meet with you. As for Scofnung, look to your own sword, for a brand in the hand is worth two in the bush! HAVE AT THEE!

Hjalmar and Gunnar charge forward, shouting many battle cries. One or two soldiers fall to the ground. Frodhi does not take active part.

SOLDIER You shout well, for a king.

HJALMAR Remember the saying, swine, in Denmark the nimble-lungs-lead!

More fighting, more soldiers fall.

HJALMAR These fellows have soft heads, Gunnar! This sword splits their skulls with ease.

GUNNAR No doubt they'll coif the day they left their helms at home.

More fighting. Finally Frodhi leaps forward to stab Hjalmar in the back. Wounded soldiers groan in pain.

GUNNAR Foully done! Hjalmar King, art thou in pain?

HJALMAR Not so much as if I were alone in agony.

Volume of moans rises and falls

Farewell most faithful friend. Remember me, and the words of the old stranger ... *(dies)*

Soldiers seize Gunnar.

FRODHI Hjalmar is dead, Gunnar. Wouldst serve the new king?

GUNNAR That depends on whether you were rare or well-done.
(Frodhi slaps Gunnar)

FRODHI That is your answer? Gunnar, well do I remember how I lost my eye, as punishment for raiding -

GUNNAR Your eye? You're in luck! We hid it with Scofnung!
(*Frodhi slaps him again*)

FRODHI - and now the wheel of Skuld comes full circle.

| Frodhi whips out a dagger and slashes Gunnar's eye.

Leave him, men! Search now for Scofnung, and then for Helgi and Halfdan. Hjalmar's whelps must not survive the week! (*exit, curtain*)

ACT 1, SCENE 2: THE HALL OF REGIN

| Curtain rises to reveal a hall. At high-seats are REGIN and OLGA. SERVANTS are nearby.

REGIN Loyal servitors! On this day, when my son Hrot is twenty-one years of age, there will be feasting! Let pullets be roasted and bullocks be broasted! Let there be foaming horns, sloshing urns, and titantic tankards! Now go and make things as I have said. Summon my sons as well.

| Servants bow and depart.

OLGA You are joyous, my husband.

REGIN Yea, wife. And why should I not be? Today I reveal to Hrot and Hrani - or should I say Helgi and Halfdan - their royal lineage! Then, after merry revelry, we shall gather warriors to work our vengeance on Frodhi. Glad will be that hosting, for Frodhi is a fruit I am longing to peel, a nut I am longing to crack. Not only did he slay Hjalmar my King and friend but, at the last tithing he took my finest sword, imported from Gotland!

OLGA No!

REGIN Yes! Oh, how I hate the man who got my geat!

OLGA They are such splendid boys. Halfdan is the image of his sire, and so clever.

REGIN And fierce as well. But Helgi is destined to be the famous fighter of the two. Ah, here they are!

| Enter HELGI and HALFDAN.

HALFDAN Greetings, father!

HELGI And greetings, mother. There is to be feasting this day?

REGIN Indeed, Hrot. Today you are twenty-one, full come into manhood. I must now tell you a thing I could not all these years, for I feared for your lives. Hrot, Hrani, your real -

SERVITOR1 *(Bursting in)* Lord Regin!

REGIN What is it, lackwit?

SERVITOR1 Ill omens befall! A crow has landed atop your helm, and cawed thrice!

REGIN Havamal says only the unjust need fear omens, thus they are naught! Away! *(Servitor exits)* Now, Hrot, Hrani, you are not -

SERVITOR2 *(Bursting in)* My lord!

REGIN Hammer smite you, oaf! What is it?

SERVITOR2 An ill omen, lord! The cow has bit its tongue while chewing its cud!

REGIN Cease they bovine banter! Off with you! *(Servitor exits)* Now boys, what I mean is that, in truth, you -

SERVITOR1 *(Bursting in)* Sherriff Regin!

REGIN Is there no peace in my own hall? Say on, simpleton, and it best be good.

SERVITOR1 An evil sign my lord! The rats are fleeing the granary!

REGIN Argh! What care I for vacationing vermin - save when they are my own servants! Away, dolt! Before I send you to join your rodentine relatives. *(Servitor exits)* Now Hrot, Hrani, as I was saying your father -

SERVITOR2 *(Bursting in)* Deliver us, lord!

REGIN AIEE! *(Rising up with sword in hand)* Compose your last utterance, idiot! I am about to trim your pate down to the navel!

SERVITOR2 But lord, please listen! We, your loyal servitors, are all fearful. A stranger has come asking hospitality.

REGIN Oh, has he asked that I personally bring him a biscuit, that you bother me about it? Prepare for the end!

SERVITOR2 *(Cowering)* But lord, he is an old man! With a single eye! And, very ominous ...

REGIN *(Falling heavily back into his seat)* This is the worst of omens. I am gifted with the foresight of my people, and I see disaster for the house of Regin. Oh, what a sorry pass!

HALFDAN Tell us father, what were you going to say?

REGIN *(Confused)* Oh, ah yes. Merely that Hrot is now twenty-one and both of you are grown, so the time has come for you to seek adventure and renown - by the back door. *(Hands his sword to the brothers)* Here is gold and weapons. Take them, the All-Father smile on thee.

Hugi, in the wings, smiles. The brothers look surprised but pick up their goods and exit.

OLGA Is it as bad as that, husband?

REGIN I fear so wife, I fear so. Alas, there go two I love much. But they go to face their wyrd, as must we. *(To the servants)* Bring in the stranger!

Olga, you must away with your maids, and let me deal with this one.

OLGA Away? Never would I, husband. Well do I know the duties of a wife, especially when one-eyed strangers come calling. Nay, with you I stay.

Regin and Olga clasp hands.

Enter a ONE-EYED STRANGER, who is in reality Frodhi.

FRODHI Greetings, Sherriff Regin!

REGIN Greetings, stranger.

Olga brings a guesting cup and Frodhi drinks.

Tell me, what is thy name?

FRODHI My name is not important. I am but a traveler. I have longed to meet you, Sherriff, for I hear many things in my travels.

REGIN And what hast thou heard, hoary one?

FRODHI Nothing but that Regin was a fine lord with fine lands; but his pride was two hunting hounds, clever and strong beyond the measure of dogs. I would fain see them, for they are said to be a marvel.

REGIN Alas stranger, luck is not with you today. Those hounds ran away years past; and I wonder at it, for I was as a father to them. What else do they say of Regin?

FRODHI Nothing but that Regin's wife was as wise as a sage, and beautiful besides; but most beautiful of all he owned were two fine falcons, black and sleek, sharp pinioned, with eyes of malachite! I would fain see them, for all men speak of them with admiration.

REGIN Ah stranger! Had you chosen any boons but these. For those falcons took wing years ago, as I flew them at seagulls in the north. They are gone; and I wonder at it, for I never mistreated them. What more do they say of Regin?

FRODHI Nothing but that Regin was the best favored of men, that he wanted for naught, ale, mead, or rings to break. The best favored of men they say, save that he had no sons - or is that so? Tell me Regin, hast thou sons? Best favored of men, hast thou? I missed they hawks and hounds, oh Regin, but bring out sons for me to see!

REGIN You are impertinent, old stranger. I have no sons! Choose gold and weapons from my hoard, rings from my arm; but get you gone. Ere the rash guest is treated in kind.

FRODHI No! You may not dismiss me. For behold! *(Removes hood)* I am King Frodhi! And you are my sworn man. I command you, where are the sons of Hjalmar?

REGIN Never would I tell!

FRODHI By your oath, answer!

REGIN By my oath, I know not where they are.

FRODHI No, not within a foot or two. Ill dost thou keep faith, Regin.

REGIN Better than ever you did, dog!

FRODHI Enough! (*Shouting back*) Forward men!

| SOLDIERS enter the hall.

 We will kill you all, Regin, and burn the hall. That
 is the wages of your loyalty.

REGIN Better an honest wage than a traitor's wealth. But one
 boon I beg Frodhi! Slay me if you will but let my wife
 and her maids go free.

OLGA Regin, I will not!

REGIN Silence!

OLGA Nay, I say I will not!

FRODHI Ha! Most touching, but this is a foolishness I cannot
 understand.

OLGA (*Stepping forward*) You would not, beast! For I
 perceive there is no honor in your bones, but only
 yellow tallow. And beware! Lest the heat of a brand
 melt it out!

FRODHI Ai! You wish her spared, Regin? This is my answer!

| Frodhi lunges forward, to stab Olga with his sword.

REGIN Olga!

OLGA Farewell husband. Alas that another shall close your
 eyes for you. (*dies*)

| Regin turns to face Frodhi, pauses an instant, then lunges to take
Frodhi by the throat.

REGIN Evil, evil you are, Frodhi! And I curse you!
 Ignominiously shall you die, by the hand of a woman!

FRODHI (*Struggling*) Slay ... him ... men ...

| Soldiers rush forward, killing Regin, servitors, assorted ladies.

FRODHI Now we burn the hall! Then search for the sons! They
 cannot be far! (*Exit, curtain*)

ACT 2, SCENE 1: A WINDING FOREST ROAD

| | | |
|------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| HUGI | Alas, Regin! Thy to see thee slain Vie in Valhalla victories, in high halls till at last Foster father Hrot and Hrani safe from scathe but their royal right | royal liege would grieve thus suddenly. with Einarjahar for hail thy lady the serpent rises. fear not! renown do seek and Frodhi's soldiers, unrevealed. |
|------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

| Curtain rises to reveal a forest and the two BROTHERS.

| | |
|---------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| HELGI | Ah, the road to renown! Is it not wonderful, brother? |
| HALFDAN | Indeed it is, Hrot. But meseems it is a road of indistinct length. |
| HELGI | Oh, how so? |
| HALFDAN | Well certainly we seek renown, but, where might it be? Hast ever seen it upon a map? Are there any road signs? Ah brother, I am perplexed as to where we should travel. |
| HELGI | Brother, you speak sooth! I will wrack my brains for a plan! <i>(Helgi beats his forehead while Halfdan looks on impatiently)</i> I have it! Hrani, how did the heroes of song and story come by their renown? |
| HALFDAN | <i>(Surprised)</i> Excellent idea, Hrot. Ha, hmm ... it seems to me that all heroes sooner or later run into some sort of magical or fantastical creature. |
| HELGI | You mean like ogres? Ha, let us kill ogres! |
| HALFDAN | I don't know, ogres are so troll. |
| HELGI | I suppose ... |
| HALFDAN | ... but then again they griffin easily! |
| HELGI | Orc else! Perhaps we will fare like King Rangnarr, the Much Confused, did in the old tale. He aided the elves in their war with the goblins, and Odin rewarded him with lands and kingship! |
| HALFDAN | As the saying goes, Odin helps those who helps his elves. |

HELGI You are very wise, Hrani. I've never heard of half the old sayings you seem to know.

HALFDAN I hav-a-mal-titude of such sayings.

HELGI And what about Bungo the Baresark, who slew the Gnome? How did he find the Gnome to slay him?

HALFDAN As I recall he was led to the cave of the Gnome by a magical deer. Thus the saying ...

HELGI Oh, no ...

HALFDAN ... Gnome is where the Hart is.

HELGI Yes, yes - but how do **we** find them?

HALFDAN Find them? Well, usually the monsters end up finding the heroes, or else the heroes discover them through ominous portents, significant signs, sayings of wise women and the like.

HELGI You mean we wait? Wait? Oh, how long that could take! Days, weeks! Months, years! Hrani, it could take years!

| Enter HALETH and HALGERDE, unnoticed by Helgi.

HALFDAN (*Stepping forward*) Perhaps not.

| Surprised, Haleth and Halgerde fit arrows to their bows.

HALGERDE Hold it there, else I pin thee to a tree!

HALETH Aye! Haleth and Halgerde will not be taken by any masterless marauders!

HALFDAN Fear not! I am Hrani, and this my brother Hrot. We seek adventure and high renown; we will neither ravish nor raid your girlish riches ...

| Helgi snorts in indignation, Haleth and Halgerde look crestfallen.

... well, at least not without permission.

HALGERDE (*Lowering her bow*) You are uncommonly courteous for a norseman. I hight Halgerde, this my sister Haleth. We are the Forest Girls of Snorri the Dwarf.

HELGI Forest girls? Do you at whiles sprout foliage and greenery?

HALETH *(Laughing)* No, tall one! Snorri spends his time making weapons, we hunt his food. It's a living I suppose, but not very merry.

HALGERDE Haleth, they are brothers. Let us tell them of the prophecy!

HALETH *(Considering)* Hmm, they do not seem ill-favored ... very well! We Forest Girls bear this prophecy. First, we may only marry brothers ...

| The spirits of Helgi and Halfdan rise visibly.

... who have won high renown ...

| Their spirits rise higher still.

... and who are crowned Kings.

| The brothers are crushed.

HELGI *(Dejectedly)* Ah well, it will take quite a few ogres before we win that much renown.

HALFDAN Yes. Come Hrot. I feel a strong desire for a forty-year quest coming on. Farewell girls. Alas for this wyrd, else we might have had fine revelry. *(They turn to go)*

HALGERDE Wait, oh wait! Why did I mention it? Oh, must we chase chipmunks forever?

HALETH Please come back! Must we lordless abide midst bramble and bush, with never a face to see but Snorri's?

HALGERDE Aye! And I have the foresight of my people; not by chance is this meeting.

HELGI But what can we do? We have heard the prophecy.

HALFDAN Aye, no Kings we.

HALETH You seek renown, do you not? Why not become Kings?

HELGI & HALFDAN *(Together)* KINGS? HOW?

HALETH Well ...

HELGI & HALFDAN *(Together)* YES?

HALETH I'm not sure.

HELGI & HALFDAN (*Dejected*)

HALETH But ...

HELGI & HALFDAN (*Together*) YES?

HALETH It would be easier with fine weapons from Snorri.

HALFDAN Hmm, yes! Conflict often leads to kingship.

HELGI And warfare to woyalty!

HALFDAN How might we obtain such weapons?

HALGERDE Well, Snorri, after the manner of dwarfs, is as stingy as a ... a ... a dwarf. He covets dragon gold above all else.

HELGI Dragons! Do you hear, brother? Dragons! Better even than ogres!

HALFDAN "Better" remains to be seen. Tell me, oh fate-struck Forest Girls, are there any such near to hand?

AHLETH Oh, aye! In a cave beside yonder hill lives Damnir the Dragon. Not very famous, but her hoard is very fine.

HELGI "Her"?

HALGERDE Yes, she is a lady dragon. Have you not heard tell of such?

HALFDAN Only figuratively. Well girls, we're off!

HELGI Aye! Doom for Damnir today!

HALETH & HALGERDE (*Together*) Wait! We would wish you luck ...

HALFDAN Luck? But Havamal says that heroes -

HELGI - Need all they can get. Enough sayings.

| Quick kisses.

H & H Farewell!

H & H Farewell!

| The brothers exit, the girls watch a moment, giggle, then exit.
Curtain.

ACT 2, SCENE 2: THE DRAGON'S LAIR

HUGI Hrani and Hrot high renown do seek,
 Haleth and Halgerde a hearth to tend.
 Yet deadly Damnir fell dragon,
 Cunning creature crafty was she.
 The wily worm in ire did wait
 Eager to incinerate hoard-seekers bold.

| Curtain rises to reveal a cave. Enter HALFDAN.

HALFDAN *(Whispering)* The dragon's very den! Desolate, but I
 expected no less. *(Shouting)* Ho, Damnir! Come forth,
 thou rock lizard! Come forth!

| Silence.

 Hmm. No dragon yet. Mayhap the hoard remains. *(Looks
 about)* Aha! The very hoard!

| From behind a rock Halfdan pulls a chest into view. Atop the chest is
resting a large green tail. Halfdan stumbles back, surprised. DAMNIR
speaks.

DAMNIR Oh, be not so fearful, thief. That's not the dangerous
 end of me.

| Offstage noises. The dragon's head comes into view.

DAMNIR Ah, now you may fear indeed. I pray you, intruder,
 stand further back. Thus when my breath withers thee
 to a cinder, then you will fall outside my cave. And
 replace my treasures first.

HALFDAN *(Confidence regained)* Verily, Damnir the Fierce! But
 first, I would have words with thee, oh calamity of
 the skies! For, mighty pinioned one, many questions
 assail my thought and only one such as thou, owl-wise
 mistress of reptiles, might answer them.

DAMNIR Think you so, lad? Tell me, what is your plan? To
 beguile me with riddling talk, and thus trick me out
 of my treasure? *(Halfdan is surprised)* Frail youth,
 hardly an original plan! Though it might have proved

useful if I were one of those overblown male dragons. Pride is their downfall, but I am wiser. No riddles!

HALFDAN By the hammer, how un-draconic!

DAMNIR If you will. But I warn you, I have a particularly strong dislike for young adventurers, so mind your tongue.

HALFDAN Yes, ma'am.

DAMNIR Ah, much better! Ha, hmm, you seem familiar to me; your face especially. Tell me, are you alone?

HALFDAN Oh yes, quite alone. Really alone. So no riddles, eh? I'll just be on my way then ... *(Turns to leave)*

DAMNIR HOLD! I am unsure whether you deserve immolation or perhaps clemency. You do seem familiar. I have the foresight of my people and I sense an air of fate about you. Come, I shall tell you why I despise young adventurers and, at the end of the tale, I will decide your destiny.

HALFDAN Oh, Damnir, how many choices do I have?

DAMNIR How many? The difference between Heimdall's mothers and Sleipnir's legs. Now list! It was a score of years and ten, a young warrior came to visit me. He was about your age, but taller. His name was Hjalmar, new crowned King of Denmark, eager to test his blade on dragon hide. But did he come fairly, with an open challenge? Nay, he did not. Hjalmar crept to my cave in crass disguise.

HALFDAN Not a bad plan.

DAMNIR Nay, twas not, for him. And more, he played on the sympathies of my sex; for he portrayed an old woman seeking companionship. She was so courteous, burnishing my scales and the like. So moved was I, I relented from devouring her. The counterfeit crone feigned the sweetest gratitude - oh, why couldn't I see it? Alas that I listened to that honeyed voice!

HALFDAN Say on, dragon. What happened next?

DAMNIR Next? In token of gratitude, she would tell the future, for she said **she** had the foresight of her people. She brought forth a brazier and other oddiments; soon lights and smokes began to dance about. My very dragon eyes were beguiled! I suspect there was a magic in it, for Hjalmar and all the

Skoldung kin are from Odin descended. You're sure you're alone? No friends, companions?

HALFDAN None, I am destitute. Say on, dragon!

DAMNIR Aye. So potent were those magics I was caught in a spell! I was soon believing that Hardratha was King in England, that Rome would rise again. Alas, I thought her portents pure, her signs sage, her forefendings fortuitous. And then I spoke those fell phrases: "Old crone, a boon I will grant thee!" and do you know what she asked for? Bats. Do you hear? Bats!

HALFDAN Bats? Even as inhabit such caves as these?

DAMNIR Even so. Hmm, you seem more familiar every minute. What are you named?

HALFDAN Uh, call me, Vandrade.

DAMNIR An ominous name, and perhaps appropriate. Well I'll recognize you soon enough. But the insolent Hjalmar! I asked him, why bats? And he replied "I distill their essence, and with such potions I perceive the future." And so I reached for bats. My claw snatched out, but alas! Too high they flew. And the crone screeched, "Reach higher, oh Damnir!" I stretched further, but still they eluded me. But the crone screeched on, screaming "Further, higher!" Finally I reached up to my full height, with my dragonish chest exposed. It was then the crone leapt forward and cast off her shawl! There stood Hjalmar, with the sword Scofnung at my chest. Any other warrior I would have brushed away, but he was so strong, his sword particularly fierce. I, Damnir, stood in quaking fear before the King of Denmark. But you know, he did not slay me.

HALFDAN Indeed, how came that?

DAMNIR Twas passing strange. I felt sure he was about to make an end of me, when he leapt back. But then he scabbarded his sword, saying, "Ha, Dragon, I have out-tricked you! But I see it is not fated that I slay you. But beware my kin! They may yet be your bane." He left, never to return. Thus is the tale of my shame, and why I have ever since disliked young adventurers. You are so familiar! Did you perhaps have a famous father?

HALFDAN No, not very. Well that is a fine tale, Damnir. But I confess a certain incredulity.

DAMNIR Insolent whelp! What is your thought? Answer well, lest our discussion become more heated.

HALFDAN Well Damnir, surely this cave is no so large that you need expose your, er - softer parts merely by reaching for the ceiling?

DAMNIR Not so large ... ? No other dragon has as fine, as airy and expansive a home as I!

HALFDAN Be that as it may it is easy to see you could rake the roof without as much as exposing a hairsbreadth.

DAMNIR Crass man! Beware ...

HALFDAN Of course, if I could see you stretch thusly ...

DAMNIR Done! How was it? Ah, atop this rock ... I reached out ... a bit more ... farther still ... you see? I -

HALFDAN *(Toward cave mouth)* HROT!! Now!

HELGI charges in with a leveled sword. The stunned Damnir is stabbed square in the chest.

HELGI Die, Damnir!

DAMNIR Ai, I am slain! Oh, fate, you are cruel! For now I know you, lad, but too late. Gunnar's companion, from the hel-road returned. And his brother beside! Ah, Fate ... *(Dies)*

The brothers consider a moment.

HELGI Ah, Hrani, I knew you would outsmart the monster.

HALFDAN I'm not so sure I did the out-smarting. Strange things were told here, brother.

HELGI Aye. "Gunnar's companion"?

HALFDAN Indeed. But no more of it. The hoard is ours! Let us be off!

HELGI We have won renown this day! We may yet be kings!

HALFDAN Ha, yes! Away! *(With chest, exit)*

ACT 2, SCENE 3: THE FORGE OF SNORRI

HUGI A dragon-doom the Norns did weave
with victory-thread for Hrani and Hrot.
The devious dwarf does now await
squat Snorri gnarled smith
hammer-master but great in greed.
Fear him!

Curtain rises to reveal the cave-forge of SNORRI. The dwarf paces to and fro when suddenly he is struck by an idea.

SNORRI A sword! This day I forge a sword! Ah, my mind has conceived of a wondrous brand, a mighty war-blade to heap shame atop the swords of heroes! It will be counted as kin beside elven Lovi, fierce Excalibur, even cursed Tyrfing. And this sword too will bear a curse! A curse of death-doom, ill fortune eternal! Then, I'll give it to some stupid hero. He'll kill his father, marry his sister, betray his brother, slay and loot the length and breadth of Denmark! The north will plunge into a dark lawlessness that will last a century! And why? Why, do you ask? Because I'm a dwarf, that's why! Gods, I love life!

FOREST GIRLS enter.

What's this? Haleth and Halgerde returned from the hunt. Ho, forest-girls! Attend upon Snorri.

HALETH Oh, Snorri. We return, with wondrous news!

HALGERDE Aye! Even now -

SNORRI No time for it! My smithy-ing presses. Three things I require: a hogshead of wine, a pot of honey, and a goat. Bring these to me.

HALGERDE Yes, yes, Snorri. But outside - why a goat?

SNORRI Leave us dwarfs our secrets. Just fetch one here.

HALETH To be sure. But even now, two warriors of high renown await to have words with you.

HALGERDE They come seeking weapons, Snorri.

SNORRI High renown? I have no time for the harriers of pitiable kobolds. Bring on the goat!

HALETH Nay, Snorri, they truly -

SNORRI Neither do I care for their tally of backstabbed
gnomes! The goat!

HALGERDE But they have treasure!

SNORRI I care naught for filched ogre-copper! Probably been
alley-bashing hobgoblins. I have business with my
goat!

HALETH & HALGERDE THEY KILLED DAMNIR THE DRAGON!

| Snorri is stunned.

HALETH & HALGERDE THEY HAVE HER WHOLE HOARD!

SNORRI And you waste my time with talk of goats? Bring them
in; then back to the forest. I anticipate dwarfish
bargaining this day, and the sound of such should not
assail your innocent ears. Away!

| Exit Haleth and Halgerde. Snorri picks up an axe and toys with it as
HELGI and HALFDAN enter.

HELGI Hail Snorri! We would have words with you.

HALFDAN Indeed. Hight I Hrani, this my brother Hrot. It is
weapons we seek, such as only you may make.

SNORRI Well, Hrani, Hrot, I am no common smith, tis true. But
I share one thing with smiths of lesser skill; I do
not work for free. It is one of the axe-iomes of the
trade, I fear.

HELGI We do not doubt it, dwarf.

HALFDAN Aye. Look, Snorri, here is treasure! (*Helgi drags in
chest from offstage.*) None less than the hoard of
Damnir the Dragon. (*They open the chest; Snorri's eyes
goggle.*)

SNORRI I do no business with thieves.

HELGI (*Enraged*) Ai, beware, dwarf! The dragon we slew
fairly; we'll take no such names from you.

HALFDAN Indeed; the wagging tongs of smiths oft lead to ill-
temper.

SNORRI Hmm, mayhap I misjudged. I see you are masterful lads with whom I may deal without shame. Therefore, I make my usual offer: one hoard, one sword.

HALFDAN One weapon? Your prices are steep, Snorri!

HELGI Too steep. I dislike this dwarf. Let's be off, brother.

SNORRI Very well! If it's weapons you seek, try my cousin Albrecht in the Rhine valley. It's a mere six-month journey. Or maybe Bolverk in Jotunheim - but dress warmly.

HALFDAN Half a moment. *(Thinking)* I'm afraid he's right, brother. Well, what sort of weapons do you have?

SNORRI That's better. Tell me, who will wield it?

HALFDAN He will. Tis better thus.

SNORRI *(Looking up at Helgi)* You're a big one. But even now my heart swells with generosity. No sword for you, but an enchanted halberd.

| Snorri brings forth the ENCHANTED HALBERD and presents it to Helgi.

HELGI Enchanted? How so, Snorri?

SNORRI Its virtue is this: first, it will cleave any armor; second, if you are ever in danger, it will ring like unto a bell!

HELGI This is a mighty weapon! My thanks, Snorri.

SNORRI Just hand over the hoard. *(Drags chest away.)* And you Hrani, I would not send away from my forge empty handed. Come, I will be generous! This I grant; any question ask, and if be not beyond me, I will answer.

HALFDAN *(Cheerful)* My thanks, Snorri. Well, strange words passed betwixt the dragon and I. First she said she recognized me, when I had never seen her before. But stranger still, as she died she named me "Gunnar's companion, from the hel-road returned". What was her meaning, oh Snorri?

| Snorri is struck aghast.

SNORRI *(Aside to audience)* Can he mean Gunnar the Grim, the liege of Hjalmar of Denmark? This lad is the very

image of the dead king. Then - they must truly be Helgi and Halfdan, the sons of Hjalmar, that Frodhi has sought for twenty years! And they seem not to know their heritage. If I could deliver them to Frodhi, his gratitude would be boundless ...

(To brothers) Alas, I cannot answer. Dragonish wiles are beyond me. Ask another, if you would.

HALFDAN Oh well. Then - how might we win high renown? Our wish is to someday become kings.

SNORRI *(Slyly)* Ha, I don't know about kingship, but the best way to win renown is to enter the service of a mighty lord. A great king even. If you serve heroically and well, he may make you his under-kings.

HELGI Brother, that is wisdom itself! What lord would be best, do you think Snorri?

SNORRI Well, all men north and south say there is no lord like King Frodhi of Denmark. He is known by all for his -

HELGI Frodhi it is! Let us away.

HALFDAN Aye, farewell, Snorri. Our thanks for the rede. *(They turn to go)*

SNORRI Wait! Oh lads, you can't just gallumph up to a king with a halberd over your shoulder. You must show your wit! He sees a hundred such lads every day; you must catch his eye.

HALFDAN Yes ... but how?

SNORRI This rede I give free. I have the foresight of my people, and I say: Go in disguise. You, Hrot, disguise yourself as a one-eyed old man. Hrani, you be his nephew. In this part of the world, one-eyed old men are always put to the head of the line. Once there, I'm sure your wit will get you into his good graces.

HALFDAN *(Uncertain)* I sense something strange in this.

HELGI Oh bother, brother! It is a fine plan. Again, our thanks, Snorri. *(Brothers exit)*

SNORRI Ha! What a day. A dragon hoard gained, two brothers betrayed, what a fine life for such as I. But now, I must away to the castle of Frodhi. By dwarfish ways I shall arrive there first, to seal the fate of Helgi and Halfdan! *(Exit, curtain)*

ACT 2, SCENE 4: THE FOREST

HUGI Deadly this dwarf dastardly his plan
 Hjalmar's heirs hie unto doom
 in Frodhi's hall, fated usurper.
 Yet aid unlooked for oft is found
 by lords when lemans are loyal.

| Curtain rises on Haleth and Halgerde, picking flowers in the forest.

HALETH Oh Halgerde! For the first time in weeks I am truly
 happy.

HALGERDE You are youthful sister. But still, I too am joyful.
 Such splendid fellows, taking up the quest for
 kingship in our name.

HALETH Ah Hrot! He could never fail!

HALGERDE *(Laughing)* Ha, ha, how is that, sister?

HALETH Well, he is so big, and strong ... and big.

HALGERDE "Big in the biceps, small -"

HALETH Sister!

HALGERDE "- on sympathy."

HALETH That's not how that saying goes.

HALGERDE I know. *(They laugh)* So you truly fancy this Hrot?

HALETH Oh yes, truly I do.

HALGERDE No doubt you think him cunning in weaponplay?

HALETH Yea!

HALGERDE Then he will sound a mighty horn ...

HALETH What a sound!

HALGERDE Unlimber his pole-weapon ...

HALETH Keen and sturdy!

HALGERDE Rush to the fore-playing havoc ...

HALETH Thoroughly!

HALGERDE Finally burst through the defenses ...

HALETH Mercilessly!

HALGERDE And lay about himself manfully!

HALETH *(Clapping hands)* Aye! So fiercely no one will be left for a second try at him!

HALGERDE Oh I hope not. *(Sudden realization , then they laugh)* Really sister, you should not be so besotted. Remember, as mother said "Men have a roving foot, so women should have a roving eye."

HALETH Pish. Your eye didn't rove very far when Hrani looked at you.

HALGERDE I was merely appraising him.

HALETH Like a gem, eh? I wonder what sort of setting you had in mind for him.

HALGERDE So perhaps he's handsome, still I -

HALETH You're right, sister. He is handsome. Perhaps I was hasty, Hrani seems so clever, so nimble-fingered, perhaps he and I -

HALGERDE Beware, chit!

HALETH Besotted, am I? *(Mimes staggering)* You are fair inebriate! *(They laugh)*

HALGERDE Very well! Drunkards together are we! Oh, how I hope they return soon.

| Wistfully they return to flower picking. Enter HUGI.

HUGI Hail, Haleth and Halgerde!

HALGERDE Who are you, old stranger, that knows our names?

HUGI My name is not important. But list! Did I not hear you bespeak the names of Hrot and Hrani?

HALETH Aye, so we did.

HUGI And are they dear to you?

HALGERDE Yea! What is your meaning, old stranger?

HUGI Haleth, Halgerde! Grave danger awaits the brothers! Snorri has betrayed them, the king plots their deaths! If you would see them alive again, go to the castle of Frodhi, and aid them as you would! Farewell! *(Hugi retires)*

HALETH Sister, how can this be? Why would Frodhi seek the lives of our Hrani and Hrot?

HALGERDE (*Grim*) I cannot say. But this I know; that old man does not lie. We must aid them, else lose our loves forever!

HALETH But what avail our two bows 'gainst the soldiers of Frodhi?

HALGERDE Alak, I do not know! My heart is breaking, what shall we do? Wait!

HALETH Oh sister, what is it?

HALGERDE I have bethought myself a plan. Thanks for the sight of that old man. Come Haleth! To the castle of Frodhi!

 (*Exit, curtain*)

ACT 3, SCENE 1: THE HALL OF FRODHI

| | | |
|------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| HUGI | Long the road | Norns have wrought |
| | Fated fighters | Hrani and Hrot |
| | may even yet | be delivered |
| | Haleth and Halgerde | ride to aid |
| | chosen champions | with all their heart. |
| | Hear now at last | the full measure |
| | of Fate's plan | full revealed. |

Curtain rises on a hall, FRODHI at high-seat, with SOLDIERS, and SNORRI.

FRODHI So, what brings you here, dwarf? Let me guess - the sheen of silver? The gleam of gold? The glitter of gems?

SNORRI Oh, I hope so! My king, wondrous news! I, Snorri, have done you great good. I have sent you two likely lads, hight Hrani and Hrot, each some score of winters old -

FRODHI Most generous, Snorri.

SNORRI My king! Their true names are Helgi and Halfdan! The sons of Hjalmar!

FRODHI (*Shocked*) Speak you sooth? How are you sure?

SNORRI The one called Hrani is the very image of Hjalmar. And more - he was named "Gunnar's companion, from the hel-road returned" by Damnir the Dragon.

FRODHI Then it must be so. What was their business with the dragon?

SNORRI My king, they slew her.

FRODHI *(Again shocked)* Dragon slayers! This bodes ill. But how may I slay them? Twenty years ago, my men would have leapt to the task. But now, many grumble, they whisper of the days of Hjalmar. If I reveal the brothers, my men may decide to slay me instead. And if the brothers see you, they will suspect skullduggery. What is the answer to this?

SNORRI Frodhi, fear not. Am I not Snorri the Devious? I have tricked them into traveling in disguise. They will arrive dressed as a one-eyed old man and his nephew. I will hide myself, the brothers need not see me, and you may order them slain on some pretense.

FRODHI *(Pleased)* Snorri, you are a dwarf's dwarf. And when this is done, I shall reward you well.

SNORRI A thousand thanks! Look you! Servitors approach.

| Enter from left, SERVITOR1, and from right, SERVITOR2.

SERVITOR1 & 2 *(Together)* My king! *(Servitors look at each other.)*

FRODHI Well, what is it?

SERVITOR1 & 2 *(Together)* A one-eyed stranger and his nephew have arrived. *(Servitors look at each other again.)*

FRODHI *(To Snorri)* What is this?

SNORRI Doubtless they both saw them.

FRODHI Aha, yes! *(To servitors)* Bring them in! *(To Snorri)* Now, hide behind the high seat. *(Snorri hides while servitors bustle)*

| Enter from left, a ONE-EYED OLD MAN, with staff, and his NEPHEW, while from right, another ONE-EYED OLD MAN, the top of whose staff is covered in cloth, and another NEPHEW.

FRODHI *(Whispering to Snorri behind high seat)* Snorri! Is this a joke?

SNORRI I do not understand. But I sense the hand of fate in this - you must inspect them.

| Frodhi nods and rises from his chair.

FRODHI *(To group on left, in reality Haleth and Halgerde)*
Greetings, old one. Tell me, what is your name?

HALGERDE *(As old man)* My name is not important.

FRODHI No, it never is. *(Walks over to other old man)* My, but you are no dwarf. What is your name?

HELGI *(As old man; stumbling)* Um, name? Well, ah, you see ...

HALFDAN *(As nephew)* My uncle's name is - Vandrade, lord King.

FRODHI An ominous name. I wonder ...

| Snorri peaks out from behind the high seat. At that moment comes the sound of a ringing bell - the ENCHANTED HALBERD signaling danger. Snorri leaps from hiding.

SNORRI *(Pointing)* It's them!

FRODHI Men, assassins! Slay them!

| SOLDIERS begin to mill about.

HALFDAN Snorri, here? Hrot, we are betrayed! Kill this Frodhi!

| Helgi tears the cloth from the halberd and takes aim at Frodhi

HELGI HEY-AH!

| Helgi swings at Frodhi but oddly misses.

HALFDAN Again!

| Helgi swings again, and misses again. Frodhi laughs and backs up towards the other old man.

FRODHI Ha! Strange fate! The curse of Regin, whom I slew, protects me. I cannot fall to the hand of a man. And since there are no women here - urk!

| Halgerde steps forward and backstabs Frodhi. Staggering, Frodhi turns towards her.

FRODHI How comes this? (*Grasps Halgerde's false beard*) You have - a nice - fine - beard? (*Falls dead, pulling off beard*)

| Brothers and sisters quickly doff disguises.

HAFDAN Haleth! Halgerde! How?

HALETH The old stranger warned us. We will die with you!

HELGI Mayhap, but first - Snorri! (*Snorri is attempting to sneak away*) This is a fine halberd you sold us - (*kills Snorri*) - see?

| Brothers and sisters stand together, SOLDIERS muster into a group.

SOLDIER1 Strangers, you have laid low our lord!

SOLDIER2 Slain our sovereign!

SOLDIER3 Killed our king!

SOLDIER4 Regicides even! They must die!

ALL SOLDIERS Aye, kill them! Death! Prepare for the end!

HALFDAN Aye, and thou as well! Unflinching we face thee, though surely we must fall. Is there no one to deliver us? Stand ready brother!

HELGI Ready, brother!

| HUGI, all the while in the wings, makes gestures of reassurance to the audience. He steps forward ready to take things in hand.

HUGI Wait!

| At this moment, yet-another one-eyed old man enters, from opposite side. This is GUNNAR THE GRIM.

GUNNAR Wait!

| Brothers, sisters, soldiers all look back and forth between the two one-eyed old men.

HUGI (*Indignant*) What is this? Who are you? Don't you KNOW who I AM?

