

## Skald

Snow fell heavily, blanketing the valley in a pure moment of stillness, smothering the customary cheer of the yuletide season. Wind howled from the mountain peaks biting at the skin of any who dared venture outside. The moon was nearing its height, coating the village in a soft, blue glow. The night was a night of fellowship, a night of family, a night of home. Above all, it was a night of stories. Most nights belonged to the shadows and the beasts which lurked within. But this time, it belonged to the Skalds.

Opposing the moon's gleam was the warm and welcoming glow of the lodge. With hard and sturdy oak, it loomed cordially in the winter's blanket. It was near silent inside, apart from the low hum of late-night chatter and crackle of fire. The hearth burned bright that night, a raised, circular pit, surrounded by dozens of wooden benches. The fire cast dancing shadows in the back of the room. Near the hearth, a simple wooden chair sat in waiting. The door creaked open, the murmurs came to a stop as a chilling breeze swept through the room and down their spines. A hooded figure stepped inside, his unkempt, snow covered beard jutting from the shadows of his cowl. In one hand he held a gnarled staff, in the other, a leather-bound tome.

*Thump. Knock. Thump.*

He moved slowly, all eyes following him in anticipation. He set himself down on the chair in the center of the room, threw off his cloak over the back of the chair, revealing a wizened face and long hair, a stark, gray streaked brown. His frosty blue eyes scanned his audience - husky, bearded men and well built, strong women. People of the hunt. Their posture was slumped drearily, despite their efforts to hide it. They were a dwindling culture, one fallen from their prime. They fought only to survive, not thrive. That needed to change, he knew just the story to tell, one they had no doubt, heard time and time again. That mattered not. The Skald spoke forth with the voice of the many who came before him, orotund and practiced:

*"There stood a cabin in the heights of the snow dusted peaks, its hearth still lit in the depths of winter, walls still standing despite the peril of the mountains. In those peaks lurked monsters, mercilessly hunting down anything unlucky enough to cross their path. They were beasts of great power and tainted birth. The greatest of these killers was no such monster. He*

*was born a man, like you and I. Abandoned by human parents, he was raised by great mother bear, Gylda. He was man and beast united. His bond gave him power, beyond that of any man and any beast. His name was Asbjorn."*

He could almost feel the chills running down their spines, feelings of pride and reverence. The Skald examined his audience once again. Their expressions revealed indifference, but their eyes told a different story. Inside each and every one was the embers of a once mighty fire of passion waiting to be stoked.

The room quickly grew dim as the flames burned low. The logs in the center gave a vague impression of a building, a cabin. To make this tale memorable, to make it as legendary as it should be, he had to add something himself. A simple touch of Skaldic magic could do the trick. He opened the tome, pages fluttering in absent wind, and continued:

*"Asbjorn was a slayer, every time he killed a beast, their power became his. The first tattoo, the first mark was gifted by Gylda herself. The rest, he garnered through the glory of the kill. Every beast he conquered gave him more power, stealing away its life force and instantly manifesting as a new mark upon his skin. Precision of an eagle, dexterity of a leopard, fangs of a snake, horns of a ram."*

The flames leapt once more, following the Skald's raised hand. The tongues danced between shapes upon his whim. A cat one moment and a bird the next. The audience watched in wonder, the tale brought to life right before their eyes.

*"For years, Asbjorn survived. He conquered the most treacherous lands to protect us from the beasts above. Only one being there could possibly rival his power. Ragnylva the Beastmatron, horned mother of the foul monstrosities who reside in the frosted peaks. She was Asbjorn's prime quarry. To end her would be to end her children's relentless onslaught."*

He stood up with a flourish and surprising dexterity. He swept his hand along the massive hearth's rim, the last night's ashes twirled up in the flame's smoky plume. The onlookers followed the cloud up. For a moment, it defied reason, swirling in the air in winding

patterns. With a thump of his staff, solid and resounding, the ash began to fall in torrents. A nightmarishly tainted and equally mystical blizzard.

*“And so, begins the end of a legend’s journey and the end of a tyrant’s reign.”*

He let the statement sink in following the decent of the ashen snow. He began again, twisting the story’s renowned overture, *“There stood a cabin in the heights of the snow dusted peaks, its hearth no longer lit, walls no longer standing. Asbjorn returned to a home of ash, smoke, and ember. Its welcoming heartbeat extinguished. Its armor against the murder-bent cold ripped to shreds.”*

The flames burned low once again. Charred logs toppled, once strong oak reduced to coals. A cloud of ash sprang up with a hiss. He paced around the hearth, the soft footfalls the only sound accompanying the crackle of flames. The onlookers stared into the embers, allowing a moment of sorrowful silence. The silence was broken not long thereafter by the Skald’s voice.

*“The cabin was dead, but not uninhabited. A beast of nightmare waited within, sent by Ragnylva herself. A daunting beast with crimson red scales harder than the strongest of shields, claws deadlier than the sharpest of daggers, and teeth which could pierce even the toughest of hides. The source of destruction, Gyrd the red drake. He bared his teeth in a menacing sneer, ‘I have heard of you, Slayer. Your sword was once Echelsenir’s serpentine fang, your axe was once wolf Grulben’s claw, and your horn was one of Ogan the ram. You claim to have slain my brethren, taking their weapons and souls as your own. Your greedy lust for power surpasses even my own. Go ahead, Slayer, take another life.’ The drake’s twisted words fueled Asbjorn’s rage. He charged, letting out a furious cry. The drake retaliated; his chest glowed as embers stoked within. A gale of scorching fire spewed from the beast’s maw.”*

Once again, the flames roared to life. The draconic burst of orange light spewed sparks across the room, illuminating the entire chamber. The audience murmured, poorly hidden grins spilling out across their faces.

*“Asbjorn tapped into the snow leopard’s agility to evade the flame. His rage muddled his reflexes, causing him to stumble and sear half of his body. It pained him but did not stop him. He*

*tapped into the ram's power as a pair of thick, curling horns sprouted from his head. Asbjorn charged once more."*

With each word the Skald spoke, his voice grew louder and increasingly powerful. It swelled in strength as the battle did itself. The onlookers leaned in closer, sitting on the edge of their seats. They knew what was coming, they lived for the triumph of the kill.

*"He roared with a power which caught the drake off guard. He reached the dragon and swung his head upwards under the dragon's chin."*

The Skald slammed the butt of his staff onto the smooth stone with a resounding crack, like that of ivory on bone.

*"The beast reared, exposing his thinly armored chest. Asbjorn tapped into his eagle's mark, his sight sharpened, he knew where to strike. Asbjorn thrust his sword in between the dragon's scales. The beast's roar of pain was cut short as its heart was pierced, and the blade was ripped up through its throat. And with that, Gyrð was slain."*

The audience collectively released the gathered tension, letting out unconsciously held breaths. The Skald paused, letting them gather themselves.

*"A new mark manifested on this throat, a scaled beast of immense draconic power. The drake was no more. Asbjorn knew it was time to take the fight to Ragnylva."*

He began to move again, circling the hearth, noticing the hopeful faces wishing for the story to continue. So he continued.

*"Gyrð was the only one of the beasts careless enough to leave tracks. Asbjorn followed the draconic footprints up to the heights of the peaks. He faced a cave, a tunnel leading deep inside the mountain. It reeked of unwashed fur, waste, and bile. But as far as he could tell, nothing stood between Asbjorn and his quarry. They were alone."*

The door to the lodge cracked open, a gust of wind coursed in and doused the flame's heat and light as if drenched by water. Shadows fell over the room, not before the Skald caught eye of the newcomer. A young girl, about ten in age, crept into the room wrapped in a bearskin

cloak. The rest of the lodge's inhabitants were too affixed on the Skald to notice the new presence. The two locked eyes for a moment, he saw the unmistakable glimmer of youth's curiosity he sought to satisfy. With the darkness settling in an uncomfortably dank atmosphere, befitting of Asbjorn's predicament, he continued.

*"The tunnels seemed to twist and stretch for an eternity, the anticipation of the hunt gnawing at his chest. He tapped into his wolf's mark, picking his quarry's scent out from the jumbled trails of the now empty caverns. Hers was quite distinctive, a scent of no beast that walked the caverns and then that of all of them at the same time. It was a foreign scent to Asbjorn, foreign to the natural world. The walls of the tunnels were rough-hewn and uneven. Asbjorn was rarely able to get an even footing as he traversed the winding paths. It was dark, but his owl's mark allowed him to pierce the darkness, making the journey significantly easier. He arrived at the crux of the tunnel system, an open chamber rising to a great height with a ceiling of ice from a lake frozen solid by a frigid spell cast long ago. Dry icicles hung from the ceiling, jagged teeth which seemed to threaten to impale any who would make a wrong move. In the center of the chamber stood Ragnylva herself in waiting. Her serpentine eyes pierced through the shadows, a bright, sickening green. A similarly serpentine tongue flicked out of her mouth, tasting the air for the newcomer's scent. Two pointed horns curved out of her forehead, a glistening silver. A peculiar mix of feathers, scales, and fur adorned her skin in place of clothing. She stood tall and expectant, she knew her visitor was coming."*

The hall continued to chill; the meager fire unable to dispel the night's unkind bite. Shivers ran down the audience's spines, they glanced around, watching the low shadows dance behind them. He silenced himself, letting the tense dread of the situation set in.

*"We finally meet, great slayer. I knew this day would come, I sought not to postpone it too long. I have... a gift for you, Asbjorn. A family reunion, so to speak. Did you ever know you had a brother?' she smiles. Out from the shadows of a branching tunnel lumbered a bear. Patchy, ragged fur; a frothing mouth; and an oddly familiar face, which Asbjorn could not tell why he recognized. 'Asbjorn, meet Eskil, son by blood, of Gylda herself. Your brother and your slayer. Your presence will no longer plague these mountains. Eskil... kill him.' The bear charged,*

*Asbjorn raised his blade defensively. He did not want to kill his newfound brother, but the wild look in Eskil's eyes told him they were no longer kin. Hesitantly, he raised his sword and tapped into the bear's mark, Gylda's gifted mark. His muscles thickened and grew heavy. He knelt to one knee and pointed his sword out before him to brace against the charging bear. The mindless beast payed no heed to the blade, bestial fury muddling all reason, focusing only on his target. Asbjorn clenched his muscles, locking his jaw defiantly. The bear impaled itself on the edge of the blade, piercing its own heart. He drove himself further up the blade, pushing it deeper into his chest, until he was nose to nose with his enemy. His brother. The madness flickered out of his gaze, Asbjorn saw the recognition in his eyes. He saw the sorrow and regret. The bear's breathing grew slow and labored. Asbjorn placed his forehead to the bear's as his brother released his final breath. The body slumped to the floor as Asbjorn drew his blade out from the bear's chest."*

He paused once more, judging the audience's reaction. Shock. That part never happened in the stories the others told! He could almost hear the thought in the forefront of their minds. Still, they leaned forward to the edge of their seats, interested in the new, twisted story the Skald had to tell. He smiled, pacing around the hearth.

*"Ragnylva was shocked. Her champion slain of his own fault. 'Stupid beast!' she cried, 'Sons and daughters, rally to me! Avenge the lives of our fallen brethren! The slayer is here! He dies tonight!' she let out a howl, which echoed throughout the tunnels. More howls, shrieks, and cacophonous cries responded to their mother's call. Beasts of all manner rushed in from the tunnels leading to the central chamber. Claws, horns, and fangs were ready and out for the blood of the slayer. The once silent caverns now alive with sound, alive with rage and vengeance."*

He could feel the audience's anxiety growing. Their eyes bright and their postures alert. The Skald's pacing around the hearth grew quicker, the clacking of his staff resounding among the silent chamber. Despite the silence, the room was alive with tension and excitement.

*"Asbjorn moved to the center of the cavern, as far as he could from the beasts. He slammed the point of his blade into the ground and knelt. The beasts encroached and Asbjorn*

*waited. He tapped into his drake's mark and took a deep breath. Heat built in his chest as the beasts charged ever closer. His chest began to glow the bright orange of the embers in the depths of a fire. Fangs were bared. Claws were brandished. Eyes were furious. They were only heartbeats away from the kill. Asbjorn looked up to the icy ceiling and let out the heat inside of him. A torrent of flames spewed forth from his mouth. Ice began to melt, icicles crashed to the floor, impaling many who stood below. Water began to surge down, extinguishing the fire's heat. In one last desperate push, they leapt. They sought vengeance for the lives lost. They sought to take the life of the great slayer. The lake above swallowed the cavern before they could get the chance, consuming beast and slayer alike, the spell freezing it over once more and trapping the beasts only moments away from their enemy."*

Silence remained. A stunned silence of thought and reflection. All eyes looked to the floor, looked to each other, confused. One set remained fixated on the Skald. He met the young girl's eyes: drops of blue stuck wide in shock. He sat back down in his chair.

*"That is the fate of your revered slayer. He no longer roams these mountains, only his memory does. He lives no longer in the peaks; he lives through each of you. One thing does remain: a mantle. A mantle waiting to be filled. The ruins of his cabin remain buried under the snow, waiting for someone to rebuild and reside in once more. Asbjorn is gone, but his legacy is not."*

He stood up from his chair, donned his cloak, and made his way out of the building. *Thump. Thump. Clack.* He locked eyes with the girl and smiled once more and knelt before her. She beamed back at him, standing tall and proud in the shadows of the back of the room.

*"I believe one of you will be the one to fill the mantle, retake Asbjorn's legacy. Protect these people from the dangers which come from the mountains. Take heart. Be brave. Do not relent."*

The girl stared at him in wonder and pride. He could see it in her eyes, in her people's eyes: these people needed more heroes. They needed legends that will stand throughout the

test of time. They needed something to look up to and something to fight for. He needed heroes beyond the minds and memories of their people.

Heroes come from the spirit. The will to fight and overcome trial and hardship. A Skald's duty was to inspire, evoke emotions people did not know that they had. To evoke actions that will spur the passage of tales for generations to come.

*"Be the hero your people need. Be someone they can look up to."*

The child smiled boldly, straightening her back, raising her chin high. She spoke proudly, "I won't let you down."

He nodded, *"I'm sure you won't."*

Satisfied with a tale well told, he pulled on his hood and returned into the silence of the frigid night. He reclaimed the pale gloom in his own name, reminding the shadows that the darkness of the evening did not belong to their horrors, but to the legacy which lived within him. The night was his.