

Princess Gyda and the Dragon

Dragons are talked of in the legends of many cultures which cover the globe. Sometimes they're fire breathing monsters who can fly, taking to the air to attack their enemies. Some are named and legends tell us they guarded vast piles of treasure. In some legends Dragons are called 'worms' and they are nothing more than huge mindless brutes. What is the truth ?

No one really knows, though many cultures talk of Dragon slayers in their legends. Mostly nonsense of course, one puny warrior against such a formidable creature. Ridiculous really, though there may be one group of people savage and brave enough for the stories to be true.

When the Vikings talk of Dragon slaying, they may well be telling the truth.... Though I'm not claiming this tale definitely happened.....

A short story of 14.700 words, an interweaving of fact and fiction that I hope you enjoy.

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The summer had been a good one in 1062, though the date would have meant nothing to Princess Gyda. She would have looked at you for a while if you'd asked her age. If she knew you well and was in the mood, she'd have admitted to living through eighteen winters.

"Of course dragons really exist." Said Jhorn Sharp Sword. "Your own grandfather killed one; it's mentioned several times on stones on the island of Frösön."

She liked Jhorn and unlike Bodrin Blood Axe, he didn't get angry if she argued with him, or questioned things long held to be true.

"Where are they now then ?" She asked. "Have any of you seen a dragon ? A live one I mean, not a few bones in a cave that could have been any large beast."

"Sigurd killed the great dragon Fafnir, everyone knows that." Said Brynhild.

Brynhild was from Sweden, where they seemed to think of all legends as the truth. They were her teachers though, her six constant companions. Her father Harald Sigurdsson Viking King of Norway, had ensured she was schooled in the basics, but he was always away in foreign lands. Her mother Elisiv had become very good at running things in his absence, though that didn't leave much time for looking after a daughter who was just one out of many children. Neglect could be a blessing though, no one had tried to marry her off to a foreign prince. As for her education ? The six often seemed to forget she was there and told tales of battles and adventures that were often too graphic for her tender years. Actually there were seven in the group, if you counted Bodrin Blood Axe.

"You really believe in Fafnir ?" She asked. "A man turned into a dragon. As for the beast my grandfather killed....."

She stopped talking as Bodrin came into the great hall. Bodrin was a famous warrior, who'd lived through thirty two winters. He was moody because he wanted to be with her father, fighting in the lands to the west. Someone had to remain behind and maintain discipline among the fighters left to defend the King's lands and property.

"Princess Gyda, you must stop questioning such matters." He said. "It is inappropriate for your position and status."

Status indeed, she was a daughter with many far more promising older brothers. If she was lucky, the husband her parents found for her wouldn't be too old, or live anywhere too dreadful. Not that she ever told anyone those feelings, apart from her maid Hervör.

"Tell the truth Bodrin." She said. "You've travelled far to the north, have you ever seen a dragon?"

"My uncle saw one." Said Borlas Hairy Trousers. "He claims that it carried off his favourite goat."

Borlas was the joker of the group and his tales were fun, but rarely factual.

"Knowing your uncle he sold the goat to buy ale." She said. "Let Bodrin answer."

Gyda felt comfortable about pestering Bodrin for an answer. His scarred face looked fairly grim, but he'd started teaching her to fight when she was barely large enough to hold a blade. And as Hervör had once said to her.

"You don't spend time teaching someone to fight, if you don't like them."

Gyda now thought of herself as a good fighter, as good as any of the women who called themselves shield maidens. Most of that was due to training by Bodrin, though everyone sat around the table had taught her their own particular weapon skill.

"I have never seen a dragon Gyda." Said Bodrin. "I have spoken to people who have though, warriors, people I respect. Besides, we all know the dragons went further north, into the cold wastes they love."

"Excuses and hearsay." Said Gyda. "If they went north someone in Sweden should have seen them. If they went east, my mother's kin in Kiev would know of them. It seems to me that if there ever were dragons, they've now died out."

"Like good deeds and virgins." Said Borlas.

"You forget yourself." Said Bodrin. "Always remember you sit with a princess, a daughter of Harald Sigurdsson, our King."

"Of course, I apologise."

Gyda merely nodded her acceptance of the apology. In truth she enjoyed the conversation more when they forgot she was there, or had drunk too much ale. They'd all travelled beyond the borders on Norway and tasted pleasures she could hardly imagine.

"I agree with Gyda." Said Arne One Arm. "I don't doubt that dragons once flew over our lands. Now though..... They've gone."

Gyda was a little wary of Arne. Most of those in charge of her informal and unofficial education had seen just over twenty winters. Arne had seen thirty five and had once led an army into battle. Arne had lost an arm fighting in the west and often seemed to brood on it.

"Probably all slain by Sigurd and Gyda's grandfather." Said Borlas.

"There are carved dragons everywhere, even on our ships." Said Erik. "They must have once lived in these lands. As for now..... I think Bodrin is right, they've flown further north, into the lands of perpetual snow and ice."

Erik had no fancy name, or at least not yet. He was a Bowman who'd taught her how to use that weapon. He was only twenty and still had many years to earn a name for himself.

"I hope the dragons haven't gone forever." Said Lagertha. "It would mean I'd never have the opportunity to slay one in single combat."

Lagertha, the last to speak out of the group Gyda spent most of her waking hours with. Gyda liked to think of them as her teachers or her friends. They were really there to guard the royal household.

Lagertha was a fierce shield maiden after just twenty winters and no one was laughing at her ambition to kill a dragon.

"I will only believe they ever existed at all, when I see one for myself." Said Gyda.

"It might eat you." Said Erik.

"But your own grandfather killed one." Said Jhorn.

"According to the legends he did." She replied. "If you believe in legends....."

Bodrin Blood Axe hammered his fist on the table for silence. His expression wasn't one of anger, he was actually smiling at her. Bodrin had been left in charge of the Royal Estate, he was her guardian until her father returned from the west. He filled a cup with ale, his way of announcing he was off duty.

"The King's father is now feasting with Odin in Valhalla." Said Bodrin. "It is never wise to criticise those who now dwell with the Gods, or call their fame a lie."

"No Bodrin, I'd never call grandfather a liar." She said. "He never created the legend though, or talked about killing a dragon. I never knew him, but those who did tell me he was a great ruler. But he never once talked about killing a dragon."

"I too heard he was a good King." Said Eric.

"Those who told the stories probably weren't liars." Said Jhorn. "To them it was just adding a few extra heroic deeds to the life of an already great man."

"Yes, that's it..... Just embellishing the story a bit." Said Lagertha.

"A lie is a lie..... You can't call slaying a dragon just an embellishment." Said Brynhild.

Bodrin didn't bang the table or shout, he just filled everyone's cup and waited for silence. When it never arrived, he did thump the hilt of his dagger on the table.

"There's no harm meant Bodrin." Said Jhorn. "We may talk a little too openly about these things, but only among ourselves."

"The people, the warriors who protect you." Said Bodrin. "They wouldn't be amused by the idea that the King's father never really did slay a dragon. Those are the fighters defending you and the King's Estate."

"We are very careful." Said Gyda.

"I never tell anyone what we talk about, even Helga." Said Jhorn.

"How about other people's wives?" Asked Bodrin, thumping him on the arm.

"Oh, he tells them everything." Said Borlas.

"Fine, just remember how dangerous it might be if certain people knew you questioned some of the old legends." Said Bodrin. "Keep it here, among yourselves in the King's great hall....Agreed?" Everyone muttered an agreement and Gyda might have slowly forgotten about dragons, if the traveller hadn't arrived from the east.

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Autumn arrived with a smile that year, the weather good enough for Gyda to practise her weapon skills outside. Her favourite sparring partner was Brynhild, mainly because she didn't treat her as though she was a princess. Gyda was hot, sweaty and had a bruise on her cheek, when a member of the guard arrived.

"Excuse me princess, there is a merchant from the east waiting to see you. A merchant who arrived with no goods to sell and just the clothes on his back."

"He sounds like a beggar." Said Brynhild. "Why didn't you send him away?"

"There is something about him. The name he gave is Bági ulfs and he's seen a lot of winters. No weapons on him and he wears a patch over his right eye... He's harmless."

"You don't pester the princess about one eyed old men." Said Brynhild. "Send him on his way, with a warning not to come back."

"No, I want to see him." Said Gyda. "Where is he now?"

"In the guardroom princess."

"Have him taken to the great hall and make sure he has food and drink. I'll be there once I've changed."

Brynhild was a good enough friend to wait for the guard to be out of earshot before questioning her decision.

"Why are you bothering with an old beggar?"

"Odin sacrificed his right eye for knowledge."

"Ridiculous Gyda, you can't really be suggesting that Odin wants to see you."

"I'm not sure what I'm suggesting. Get to the great hall and keep an eye on this Bági ulfs while I change. He might not be as harmless as the guard thought."

Gyda was very much her father's daughter and Harald Sigurdsson was known as a very wise monarch. She wasn't sure what she was suggesting and wasn't really thinking that Odin was currently sat in the guard room. Gyda was curious about why an elderly merchant would come to see her.

"Hervör, where are you? Oh that girl, never here when I need her."

Gyda wasn't being unfair, her maid had become far too fond of a particular member of the guard. The result was that Gyda frequently had to do the chores her maid was supposed to do. This time though, the love struck Hervör didn't seem to have wandered far.

"I'm here..... Yes sorry, what's happening?"

"There's a visitor waiting. I'll need a dress, the green one I think, with the blue collar."

"Oh, you're not seeing the old beggar?"

"Never you mind!" Shouted Gyda. "Give my dress a good brush and then you can help me with my hair....It needs to look less like a bird's nest."

"Yes, of course princess."

Gyda felt strange wearing clothes befitting a daughter of the royal household, but it was expected. Jhorn met her as she entered the great hall.

"We've looked after him Gyda." He said. "Your merchant was cold, so we put him near the fire and gave him something to eat and drink. Brynhild and Erik are watching him at the moment."

"Thank you Jhorn. If he starts to look agitated or anything....."

"Don't worry, we'll give you privacy, but if he tries anything.... We'll have him out of here and thrown out into the street in the blink of an eye."

Her guest rose to greet her, giving her a chance to look him over. A patch where his right eye had once been and his left eye was cloudy. The wrinkles on his skin and grey hair spoke of an immense age, at a time when most men were lucky to see forty winters.

"Thank you for seeing me princess, my name is Bági ulfs. I was a good friend to your grandfather and watched your father grow up."

"Please sit, have you had enough to eat?" She asked.

"Yes, everyone has been so kind.... It's been so long since I was here. No one remembers me, though I haven't changed that much."

It seemed a strange thing for an old man to say. The cloudy left eye now looked clearer, there was almost a twinkle forming. Gyda asked the question automatically out of politeness.

"How are your family?"

"My family princess....We'd both be sat here for eternity if I was to tell you about my family."

It was visceral, her gut actually began to ache. Gyda suddenly knew with certainty that Odin was sat across the table, Odin God of wisdom, war and death, overseer of Valhalla. All thoughts about small talk left her mind.

“Why have you come to see me ?” She asked.

“To tell you about the dragons of course.” He said. “And to upset your comfortable life by giving you a destiny, if you wish to accept it.”

Gyda wanted to look down, to get away from the that one very clear all seeing eye. Her mother had once told her the Gods didn’t respect weakness, so Gyda carried on looking into his face.

“I’m sorry for doubting the legends.” She said. “I never did think my grandfather had lied about slaying a dragon.”

“But you thought it was invented by those who carved his exploits into the stones on Frösön.... And you’re right. Your grandfather was a very wise and brave King, but he never fought a dragon.”

Part of Gyda was glad to be right, but she was also immensely sad.

“Did dragons ever exist ?” She asked.

“Yes, of course they did and they still live, if you know where to look. Your grandfather never slew a dragon, but I believe you might.... If you decide to accept your destiny.”

“Me..... How can I kill something so.... Powerful ?”

“Do you have a good memory Gyda ?” He asked.

“Yes.”

“I can’t stay for long, but I will tell you what you need to know, if you decide to accept your destiny. You may fail of course and even if you slay the dragon, you might die.”

“How would I accept this destiny you offer, if I wanted to ?” She asked.

“As autumn gives way to winter you will see a sign. A clear and unmistakable sign Gyda. Follow that sign or ignore it, the choice is yours. Now, remember this, I will not be here to repeat any of it.”

“Yes, go ahead.”

“You will need help in your journey. Seek out those who are outsiders now, but were once fiercely loyal to your father. This is very important, you must take Odin’s Torque with you.”

“But that is used to crown every new king. I’ll be a criminal, every guard will be sent to find me.”

“Exactly.... I knew you’d be clever. As with all things, people forget the real use of an artefact after a few generations and invent nonsense. The torque is a powerful weapon, powerful enough to kill a dragon. I’ll leave you to work out how to use it.”

“Why can’t you tell me ?”

“This is your destiny Gyda.....Find some warriors to go with you and take the torque. Head north east and rest in Frösön for a while, you will find help there and guides. You need to travel further east and a little north to Böðgæðir Peak. There you must find and kill the dragon.”

“I will remember, though I’m not sure whether I will go.”

“That is for you to decide.”

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Princess Gyda might still have ignored the words of Bági ulfs, she might have forgotten all about dragons. Even the next day she wondered if the man she’d thought of as Odin, might just have been a crazy old beggar after all. The sign arrived a few days after the one eyed trader had left and headed west.

“Gyda..... Gyda..... You must see this.” Yelled Hervör.

It was dusk, the time of day so beloved by bandits and burglars. Light enough to see without lamps, but dark enough to hide details. The time of day to make even the most alert and clear of vision

doubt their own eyes. Not that Gyda doubted what she was seeing, as the dragon flew overhead and headed just a little east of true north.

"It's huge..... Nothing that size could fly.... I must be going crazy." Said Hervör.

"Then it's a shared craziness Hervör, I see it too."

They were outside of her quarters, watching the huge beast fly slowly north. It was flying high, it's huge wings keeping up a steady beat. The creature looked the colour of charcoal in the dusk, it's long tail stretched behind it. There was no bird that large, or even a hundredth of its size.

"A dragon, heading north into Sweden." Said Gyda.

"What does it mean?" Asked Hervör.

"It means we're going to be very busy. I'm travelling north, but it will have to remain a secret. Begin packing a few essentials into a bag I can carry over my shoulder."

"Are you taking me?"

"Don't look so worried Hervör, I'd never drag you away from your young man. You'll be remaining here, though there will be a letter for you to give to Bodrin."

Gyda had been giving the words of Bági ulfs some thought, despite wondering if he'd been just another beggar at her father's door. After seeing the dragon she'd decided to accept her destiny. The only person she could trust was Hervör, which meant her maid being unusually busy. A meeting had been arranged for the following evening.

"I hate coming here and I've now walked through the mud twice in one day." Said Hervör.

"Keep your voice down, these are my mother's kin."

A few dilapidated houses some distance from the Royal Estate, was home to the few surviving Vikings from Kiev. A small group had arrived with her mother, many years before. There had been an attempted revolt against her father Harald Sigurdsson. There was some doubt about who had organised the rebellion, but rightly or wrongly, the strangers from Kiev were blamed. They were the outsiders and became an easy target for hatred. Apart from a belief in the same Gods, the people from the east had little in common with King Harald's Vikings. Most of the outsiders had been killed, though a few direct kin of her mother had been spared.

"We're a little early." Said Hervör.

"I'm sure Yegor will be waiting, even if only out of curiosity."

Normally an armed guard would have opened the door for her, but Gyda was travelling in secret, dressed in clothes suited to the area. She pushed open the house door and entered, Hervör almost hiding behind her.

"Am I a welcome guest in your house?" Asked Gyda.

The room was full, several women and children, all staring at Gyda. Yegor muttered something and they left, leaving just him and Bohdan sat by the fire. Both men were famous fighters, now reduced to small time banditry to survive. Related to her mother, the men from Kiev should have hated her father, but rather surprisingly they still honoured their oath of fealty to the king.

"You are always welcome princess." Said Yegor. "It has been a long time since you've visited to play with my children.....It must be four summers, maybe five."

"Five, definitely five." Said Bohdan.

"It's awkward..... Are they well?"

Yegor was waving her forward, even if Bohdan still had a face full of thunder.

"Please princess, come and sit with us, your maid too. There is ale and the food is freshly cooked.... As for my children.... Wēland will always walk with a limp from falling out of that tree, but he lives and the others are well."

More guilt to add to the ever growing pile. Gyda hadn't visited her mother's people for years, mainly because the tutors hired by her father kept telling her not to. Wēland had fallen out a tree while trying to get her the highest apple on the tree. They'd both been mischievous and about twelve, an age when children think they're indestructible. It seemed poor Wēland would walk with a limp until his dying day. Gyda just hoped she wasn't going to get Yegor and Bohdan killed, if they agreed to help her travel east.

"And your family Bohdan.... The small ones must be big ones by now ?" She asked.

"All thriving princess and my wife."

"Good, good." Said Gyda.

The ale was good and the food, but Gyda only picked at it. She'd asked for the meeting, they were patiently waiting for her to say why she'd asked to meet them. Supposing they wanted money ? She had some money of her own, though not enough to begin hiring fighters.

"I intend to travel east and I have to travel in secret." She said. "Anyone in the royal guard is duty bound to stop me leaving, so I came looking for help outside of my father's fighters."

"Winter is almost here, travelling east will be difficult." Said Bohdan.

"I need to travel now, the dragon flying north was a sign." She said. "You must have seen the dragon, or heard about it ?"

"I heard that some people saw something." Said Yegor. "As to whether it really was a dragon..... Where do you intend to travel to princess ?"

"I've been told to travel east to the shores of Lake Storsjön and from there to the island of Frösön. There will be willing guides there to accompany me to Böðgæðir Peak."

"I've heard of it, though most call it Odin's Peak. Far to the east and in winter." Said Bohdan. "I hope you're prepared to lose a few fingers and toes to the frost ?"

"Oh, dreadful." Muttered Hervör.

"Is your maid travelling with you ?" Asked Yegor.

"No, she has duties to perform here."

Gyda was feeling more relaxed. They'd been told where she wanted to go and so far they hadn't laughed at her, or called her crazy.

"I have a little money." Said Gyda. "Obviously your families will need to eat while we're away."

"I never said I'd go, I'm still thinking about it." Said Bohdan.

"If we do go with you, there will have to be a payment before we leave." Said Yegor. "Winter is a cruel time and my children can't live on twigs and berries."

"I understand." Said Gyda. "I have enough gold to keep your children fed this winter and a little extra..... In case none of us return."

"We'll need horses, I'm not walking to Odin's Peak." Said Bohdan.

"So you are going with me ?" She asked.

"One last question." Said Yegor. "Why are we going there.... What are you going to do once we reach Böðgæðir Peak ?"

Now it came, the really crazy part of her plan, actually it was Odin's plan.

"I intend to use Odin's Torque to slay the dragon that lives there." She said.

They both laughed, though not in an unkind way. Yegor made sure everyone had a full cup of ale.

"You mean the famous Odin's Torque, the one used to confirm every new king ?" Asked Bohdan.

"Yes, but he told me it's really a weapon. We will be pursued by my father's fighters of course, though it may take them a day or so to get organised. That too is part of the plan, they should arrive just in time to help me fight the dragon."

“They might decide to simply kill us.” Said Bohdan.

“Vikings missing an opportunity to kill a dragon.... No, she’s right, they’ll follow her into Böðgæðir Peak. I know Bodrin Blood Axe, he’d charge into hell itself for a chance to slay a dragon. There is one thing you haven’t told us princess. Who told you all this, who told you where to go ?” Asked Yegor. Now it came, almost the end of the conversation, where she told them Odin had offered her a destiny, if she chose to accept it. The Vikings from Kiev had little in common with her father’s fighters, apart from the Gods. They all believed in Odin, the one eyed keeper of Valhalla.

“It was Bági ulfs, the merchant who recently passed this way. He was really Odin, who’d come to offer me a destiny, an opportunity to be cursed by prophecy. He told me about the torque and the dragon. He told me to find friends to travel with me..... I’m hoping you are those friends.”

“Odin indeed.” Said Bohdan.

“Don’t.... Don’t doubt her. Remember what happened when she was a child.” Said Yegor.

“Yes, the plague....My mother died that year.” Said Bohdan.

“What happened, I remember little from my childhood ?” She asked.

“Not surprising, it must have only been your fourth summer.” Said Bohdan.

“What did she do ?” Asked Hervör.

It was strange seeing two grown men, both about to live through their thirtieth winter, trying to recall a memory about her that was a complete mystery to her

“It was.... Yes, your fourth summer princess. You came into my father’s house shouting about the God Freyr. Such a noise from one so tiny, yet you refused to shut up. All about the God telling you a plague was coming and we had to prepare.” Said Yegor.

“Such words from one so tiny. People listened to you and word spread.” Said Bohdan.

“I remember my mother talking about that once.” Said Hervör.

“You had leaves in your hands.” Said Yegor. “The God Freyr had said the leaves would cure the plague, or so you kept yelling. Most believed you and started chewing on the leaves. Nearly everyone had gut ache after chewing the leaves. Pains bad enough to make the bravest beg the Gods for mercy, but they survived the plague.”

“My mother said it was all nonsense.....She died.” Said Bohdan.

Gyda had a vague recollection of people either be angry with her or thanking her for something, but it was all before the time she’d begun to form solid memories. Her father rarely had long conversation with her, but he had once told her she had the sight, whatever that meant.

“Does this mean you’ll go with me ?” She asked.

Yegor nodded at Bohdan, who nodded back at him.

“Yes, but you will need to buy horses.” Said Yegor.

“When do we leave ?” Asked Bohdan.

“At first light, the day after tomorrow.”

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Bodrin Blood Axe was angry and only had the young girl who cleaned the royal apartments as a target for that anger.

“This letter was left for me four days ago, it’ll be five days in the morning.” He yelled. “Why has it taken so long to get to me ?”

“I thought it was.....”

“Talk to me, answer me girl of you’ll be sorry.”

“I have spoken to her about it.” Said Jhorn. “Celli saw the piece of paper and thought it was rubbish. It was only today, that she recognised the writing of princess Gyda.....”

“So where has the note been for four days ?” Asked Bodrin.

“In a sack, waiting to be burned with the other rubbish.”

Bodrin wanted to have Celli flogged, but the girl hadn't really done anything wrong. She'd read a private note from a member of the royal family, but that too had been by accident.

“Did you read this note ?” He asked her.

“I can't read.....I just recognised the marks the princess makes.”

Of course she couldn't read, his anger was making him stupid. He doubted if more than half a dozen people in the royal estate could have read the note.

“At least you acted quickly once you realised it was important.” He said. “Go home now, though the note is secret, at least for now. Do you understand ?”

“Yes, thank you.”

The note had been crumpled by Hervör, as she'd added a few scribbled lines. She was supposed to have given him the letter from her mistress, but had decided join her on the journey to the north east.

“.... Let them try and stop me...”

She'd added at the bottom. Bodrin was angry, but he had to admire the loyalty of Hervör for the princess. The note was crumpled and the added notes looked like scribble. It was no wonder that Celli had put it in the rubbish sack.

“Are we going to follow princess Gyda ?” Asked Jhorn Sharp Sword.

“You are, I have to stay here and look after the King's property and protect his people. You will be chasing our rogue princess, you and the other five overgrown children. I blame you, all of you.... Filing her head with tales of heroic deeds, most of it nothing but legend. You all caused this, so you can spend the winter chasing her across Sweden.”

“I don't think any of us thought she'd do something like this.” Said Jhorn.

“Well she has and she's taken Odin's Torque with her. This is your mess to clean up Jhorn, so don't come back without the princess and the torque.”

Poor Jhorn, he probably had plans made for the next few months. It served him right though and the others. It might make them think twice in future, before filling a young girl's head with wild stories.

“She took the torque.....My reading isn't that.....What did she put in the note ?” Asked Jhorn.

“I'll read it to you and you can tell the others Jhorn.” Said Bodrin. “Princess Gyda is travelling overland, heading for the island of Frösön on Lake Storsjön. There are lots of lakes in that part of Sweden, some large and some small. Brynhild is from that region, so don't be afraid to let her lead the way.”

“I won't, did Gyda say anything else ?”

“Once I read the note, you'll know as much as I do. You must recover the torque Jhorn and the princess, even if it's just her dead body. I don't need to tell you that we're all going to have some hard questions to answer from King Harald when he returns.”

Bodrin looked at the note and thought about not reading a few parts, but Jhorn deserved to hear it all.

“Bodrin Blood Axe my dearest friend and guardian.

I do hope my actions don't cause you too much trouble, but I have to accept my destiny. I've taken the torque, so you will have to send fighters to find me, or there will be no more true Kings of Norway. Odin's torque is a weapon, one powerful enough to slay a dragon.

I have companions enough to reach Frösön on Lake Storsjön. Send your fighters to follow me there and the Holy Ones on the island will tell them where I'm going. I will need their help to kill the dragon. Tell them to hurry.

Punish me when I return if you wish, but please don't punish my friends while I'm away.

Princess Gyda."

"You should have been just one day behind her." Said Bodrin. "You must leave in the morning, but instead of one day, the princess will be five days ahead of you. See the Holy Ones on Frösön and use your own initiative."

"Do you think she really intends to fight a dragon?" Asked Jhorn.

"I'm certain of it..... Now go, tell the others they're going to have a winter in Sweden. Make sure you have provisions for a long trip and be on your way north as the sun comes up in the morning."

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The Vikings had a reputation for being tough people, but they liked to travel in comfort. They bred horses to give a smooth ride, nothing too jarring on a long journey. As far as Gyda's group knew the King's guard were only a day behind them, so they were moving quickly towards the border with Sweden. Yegor and Bohdan were some distance ahead of them, giving Gyda and Hervör a rare moment of privacy.

"This is wonderful, the countryside is so beautiful." Said Hervör.

"Late autumn is being kind to us, giving us a kiss before winter. Soon everywhere will be covered in snow and ice. You're not equipped for a hard winter Hervör, we must try and buy you better clothing as we travel."

"I left in a hurry..... How long until we're in Sweden?"

"A week maybe, two if we run into early snows. I'm glad you came..... Yegor is an old friend of my parents, as is Bohdan, but they're both men. You know what I mean."

"Ahhh I do, my mother says that men are just bears who've learned to live indoors."

"And bears can be nice Hervör, but not all the time." Said Gyda.

They laughed, causing Yegor to look back at them, as if checking they hadn't gone crazy. He and Bohdan did look like bears when dressed in their winter furs. They'd agreed to protect her on the journey though, missing the mid-winter celebrations with their families. Gyda had paid them some gold, but it had seemed so little for what they were doing. Gyda waved at Yegor and he waved back.

"Bohdan is going to be the grumpy one." Said Hervör. "Yegor on the other hand....."

"Behave yourself, he's married and anyway..... You have enough admirers."

More laughter and this time it was Bohdan looking back at them. He was definitely going to be the awkward grumpy one of the group, he didn't even return her wave. They stopped at a village near the bridge over the river, at the end of Lake Bygdin.

They were offered hospitality, a freshly cooked meal and beds for the night. It wasn't always going to be that easy of course. Once they were over the border into Sweden winter would turn a pleasant journey into a living hell.

"You need to buy her better furs than that." Said Yegor. "Or Hervör will lose a few fingers before we reach Lake Storsjön."

"I know, but it's the best they have in the village." Said Gyda. "We'll need to keep looking for better winter furs for her."

The intention had been there, but villagers weren't selling their best furs so close to winter. They all sacrificed an item of clothing to give to Hervör, but she was still poorly dressed for the cold when

winter hit them. Two and a half weeks after starting out and just over the border into Sweden, winter hit them like a curse from an angry God.

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Borlas Hairy Trousers had found it hard to leave his family, relatives were coming from the new colonies in Wessex to celebrate Jól, the mid-winter festival. The princess had to be found though, preferable unharmed and alive. There was no question of refusing, he'd long ago sworn fealty to King Harald. Besides, he liked Gyda and wanted to see her safely back home before spring. As for the Odin Torque ? It was solid gold and worth a small fortune, but it was just a thing and things could be replaced. Princess Gyda on the other hand.....

"Don't daydream Borlas." Said Erik. "Fall off your horse here and the ground is covered in sharp stones."

"I was just thinking about us all missing Jól." He said.

"Yes, my mother's people are Danes and they're crossing the sea all the way from Skagen this year. A dangerous trip and I won't be there to see them. Even if we do find Gyda, King Harald probably won't give us a reward."

"More likely he'll have us beaten." Said Arne.

"Enough, we've a long way to travel." Shouted Jhorn. "Less idle chatter and more speed. Too much idle chatter probably caused this mess."

"Is Bodrin really going to blame us ?" Asked Lagertha.

"Of course he will, so would I, if I was in his place." Said Brynhild.

There were many lakes and many tracks past a great many villages. Yet by pure luck Borlas followed Jhorn along the southern bank of Lake Bygdin. They crossed the same bridge Gyda had used, though the welcome in the village wasn't as warm. The local people did tell them princess Gyda had stayed there, before she'd carried on travelling a little east of north.

"You can't expect a group of fighters to receive the same welcome as a princess." Said Borlas.

"Just remember we're reinforcements, not angry guards sent to capture her." Said Jhorn.

Not that the villagers knew much, just that they didn't like the look of her travelling companions.

"A maid without proper clothing and two men who..... No disrespect to the princess, but they looked more like raiders than guards." One woman told them.

"I heard them talking about Odin's Peak." Said an old man.

They had spare horses and another two being used to carry their stores and rolled up tents made of skins. Add six fierce looking fighters and no one in the village offered them a bed for the night, or a place in a barn for their horses. They were shown a sheltered spot to camp for the night though and several villagers brought them food. It was to be their last pleasant night of late autumn. The next day a blizzard swept in from the north and didn't show any signs of abating in the near future. It was still with them, blowing freezing snow into their faces, as they crossed the invisible border into Sweden.

"It's the Gods, Odin doesn't want us to catch her." Said Lagertha.

"Just winter Lagertha, just the start of winter." Said Arne.

"I was born in Sweden." Said Brynhild. "This storm is too fierce for the start of winter. I agree the Gods are trying to slow us down."

"Then the Gods don't like Gyda either." Said Jhorn. "I guarantee the same winds from the north are blowing ice into her face too."

Borlas wasn't a good rider, he'd thought the first person to fall off his mount would be him. They were on a narrow track leading through a wood, when something startled Arne's horse. At first it was amusing when Arne hit the ground and began to curse the weather.

It stopped being amusing when the side of the track began to crumble away, causing Arne's horse to lose its footing. Horses aren't good in the cold, their hooves aren't designed for ice. The edge of the track crumbled and the horse fell on its side, right on top of Arne. Borlas heard the crack of bones breaking and he was sure they weren't the horse's bones.

Still no orders had been given by Jhorn, it had all happened so fast. Horse and Arne became as one, tumbling over each other as the entire side of the track gave way. Eventually and after falling for quite a distance, Arne and his horse rolled into the side of a tree.

"Borlas..... You hold the horses.....Lagertha come with me." Shouted Jhorn.

Discipline was good, only Jhorn and Lagertha went carefully down the side of the track to see if anything could be done for Arne One Arm. They were both dead of course, man and horse. The only question was what to do with Arne's body. After a little discussion, it was decided to set up camp early for that day and cremate Arne at nightfall.

"I hate horses, I was sure I'd be the one to fall off." Said Borlas.

"Then you can be the one to butcher the dead beast." Said Jhorn. "Cut as much meat off the body as you can and wrap it well.... The cold weather should make it last for days."

Fresh horsemeat was a welcome addition to their stores, though the work of butchering the animal was messy. They made a funeral pyre from the dead branches of nearby trees and said farewell to Arne One Arm as the sun began to set.

"The smoke will carry his soul to the afterlife." Said Brynhild.

She was a Swede of course and everyone knew the Swedes believed in anything and everything.

"Do you think being crushed by a horse is enough to get into Valhalla?" Asked Borlas.

"Maybe, maybe not, but it's better than dying in bed of old age." Said Jhorn.

The next morning they carried on riding towards Lake Storsjön.

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Yegor had fought during one winter in the freezing cold lands east of Kiev, but that hadn't been as bad as the storm that seemed determined to blow freezing winds straight into their faces. It really did feel as though the Gods were against them reaching Odin's Peak. He might have suggested returning the princess to her home, if she hadn't been so determined to carry on, so adamant that something compelled her to reach Frösön, the island of the Norse god Freyr.

"I see Odin every night in my dreams." She'd told him. "I feel it all the time in my mind, like an itch that can never be scratched. I must see the Holy Ones on Frösön or I will go mad. They will help us, I'm sure of it."

"My family has been loyal to your mother's family for many generations, Bohdan and I will be with you to see this through Gyda, you have my word." He'd told her.

It wasn't just loyalty; he really did believe there was a dragon to be slain in the caverns below Odin's Peak. Yegor had survived thirty winters and had fought some formidable enemies. Two bad scars made him wince as he stood up and the cold had stiffened his left shoulder. He hoped to have many summers left to him, but there was no way of knowing for sure. A dragon to be slain was the stuff of dreams for all Viking boys, a feat certain to gain him a place at Odin's table. The torque though, that was a mystery. Gyda has passed it around, allowing them all to look at the priceless arm ring. It was beautiful and looked incredibly old, but how to use it as a weapon? It was obvious that the princess had no idea.

"We need to stop..... It's the cold..... Hervör is unwell." Said Gyda.

There was no need to worry about getting lost, Gyda not only felt compelled to keep going north east, she was being unerringly drawn to the island of Frösön. They'd seen it in the distance that morning and should have been making camp on its shores that night. It was a time to push on, not a time to stop and make camp while there was still useable daylight. She was the princess though and he'd sworn an oath of loyalty to her family.

"Well set up camp here, near the river." He shouted.

"Thank you, the pain in my hands is so bad now." Said Hervör.

"You'll feel better once we get a good fire going." He said.

They should have brought someone who knew about healing the effects of the intense cold, but there were a lot of things and people they should have brought with them. Two dozen extra fighters would have been nice and spare horses.... They'd left in too much of a rush.

"We'll all feel better after something to eat." Said Bohdan.

Putting up the tents was hard in gloves, it took some time to get poor Hervör some shelter. No worrying about their fire being seen, Yegor piled it high with all the dead wood he could find. They were close to Lake Storsjön and wanted their pursuers to find them. The main thing now was warming everyone up enough to get a good night's sleep. After looking at Hervör's hands of course, he wasn't looking forward to that. He waited until after they'd eaten.

"May we enter your tent ?"

"Yes, come in." Answered Gyda.

There wasn't much room and the only light was coming from the camp fire. Cramped or not, he knew what he might have to do to save Hervör's life. Yegor had known many fighters who'd never returned from the east and many who'd come home with missing fingers and toes. The intense cold killed the flesh, and he'd often been the one to remove what was left.

"Bohdan has some ointment Hervör." He said. "It depends how deeply the cold has penetrated the flesh. You need to unwrap your fingers."

"Can't I just leave them as they are ? It's so painful."

"You might die." Said Bohdan. "We need to see how bad they are."

"I'll help you." Said Gyda. "Come on, do it quickly and it'll be done."

Yegor had given her his best gloves, to wear over her bandaged hands. Some people were just more suited to living in the royal estate, than travelling in the northern winter. Hervör was strong and brave, she barely made a sound as Gyda unwound the bandages. It was bad, he'd known it would be.

"Some ointment and new wrappings and the fingers on your right hand will be fine." He said. "We're not that far from Lake Storsjön now and hopefully we'll find help there."

He touched the index finger on her left hand and she should have screamed. The finger next to it was black too, black as burnt wood. Even pressing it between his fingers brought no response.

"Did you feel that ?" He asked.

"No, nothing at all."

"I've dealt with this before Hervör, far too often." He said. "Those two fingers need to be cut off."

"Not my fingers ! Tell them princess, don't let them cut off my fingers."

"I've heard about people dying Hervör." Said Gyda. "Those fingers need to go."

"Where do you think Bjorn Eight Toes got his name ?" Asked Bohdan.

Yegor had known men who'd ignored black fingers and toes. It was fine until they reached somewhere warm. The pain always came first, so intense that brave fighters had begged him to cut

off their whole arm or leg. After the pain came the dreadful decaying of the entire arm. He wasn't going to scare Hervör with such stories, but her fingers had to be removed.

"I'm sorry Hervör.... Like it or not, I'm going to remove those two fingers." He said.

"I'll hold you..... Be brave." Said Gyda. "Don't look, keep your eyes closed."

Yegor went outside and let his dagger rest in the hottest part of the fire for a few minutes. The hotter the knife the better it would clean and cauterise as it cut. When he returned to the tent everything had been organised by Bohdan. Hervör had her face pressed against Gyda's shoulder, her hand resting on the flat of an axe. No time to waste, his dagger would cool quickly on such a cold night.

"Hold her arm Bohdan."

With luck the girl would pass out at the first blow. The worst were battle hardened fighters who began to struggle and cried out as he'd done what needed to be done. Yegor did it all in one smooth movement. He placed his dagger across the top of her fingers and struck it with own small axe. Hervör yelled once and passed out, going limp and needing to be held up by Gyda.

"For the best, there a lot of tidying up to do." He said.

It was easier when they weren't conscious and he could do a better job. Three more strikes with axe on knife to cut away the dead bones and tissue, before binding the wound up in strips cut from one of Gyda's few clean dresses. He then used ointment to cover her right hand, before wrapping that in clean cloth.

"I've done what I can for her; it's now up to the Gods whether she lives or dies." He said

"Thank you.....I wish I hadn't let her come now." Said Gyda.

"You began our journey to fulfil your destiny didn't you ?" He asked.

"Yes I did."

"Then perhaps it was Hervör's destiny to be your companion on that journey ?"

"I can tell you're related to my mother." Said Gyda. "That's the sort of thing she would say."

"Does it help ?"

"Maybe, I'm not sure."

Yegor knew Hervör would be in pain the next morning. He helped her onto her horse and tried to offer her a few words of comfort.

"We'll need to ride fast today, if we want to reach Frösön before dark." He said. "Just hold on to your horse, it will follow where our horses lead."

"I'll be alright..... It'll be nice to get a proper bed again, at least for a few nights." Said Hervör.

"Just shout if you need to stop, but try not to."

"I'll look after her." Said Gyda.

There was no need for Gyda to point the way, they quickly reached Lake Storsjön and kept it on their left. Yegor kept up a fast pace, which increased as the rough track merged with others to quickly become a wide roadway. The ground was hard, packed down by the feet and hooves of the many visitors to Frösön, the island of the Norse god Freyr.

"I see it, the village by the lake." Yelled Gyda. "Just as it is in my dreams."

It seemed a very long way around the lake to get to the small row of buildings and it was fast approaching dusk. They'd been out in the snow covered wilderness for so long, that it felt strange to see houses again, homes with lamps hanging outside. Not that the storm was giving up, it blew freezing winds into their faces until they stopped in the small village.

"Where do we go princess, who do we need to see ?" He asked.

"The ship by the jetty..... It was sent for us."

A Viking long ship with enough room for over a hundred men. Two came towards them from the ship, a man and a woman, both tall and blonde haired. It was the woman who spoke to princess Gyda.

"You are expected, we all saw you approaching in our dreams."

She said it as though it was the most natural thing in the world to see beyond the normal range of seeing and expect someone you'd never seen before.

"There is room in the boat for all of you and your horses." She added. "Once you've been fed and found beds, we can talk about where Odin wishes you to go."

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Brynhild may have been born in Sweden, but that had been twenty two summers ago. She had lived quite close to Lake Storsjön, though they'd moved to Norway when she'd been no more than five. It all looked so different and her local knowledge was no substitute for the God given force that compelled Gyda to travel in the right direction.

"I'm sorry Jhorn, I'm sure the woods weren't so thick then and every lake looks like the right one."

"Just take a while, the memories are there, let them surface."

She'd got them lost in the woods that had once been her childhood playground. All the tracks looked the same, all the woods looked the same, even all the lakes looked the same. The sun looked to be in the right place, when the constant blizzard let them see it.

"That way is north east, I'd swear to it." She said, pointing. "Let everyone take a short rest, I need a few minutes to think."

"Your old memories are still there Brynhild." He said. "Just relax and let them rise up to the surface."

She could hear everyone muttering about getting lost, as they dismounted. Brynhild moved further away from her friends and knelt on the cold ground, bringing her eyeline down to the level of a five year old.

"Think.... Think you useless creature." She muttered at herself.

She was five again, running away from Elsa, who'd been teasing her with a dead spider. Brynhild closed her eyes and stopped trying so hard to remember. Smells surfaced first, the glorious scent of the forest at the height of summer. Sounds next, the birdsong and the rustle of wind through the leaves.

'I see you.....' Elsa was yelling at her.

Brynhild had run away screaming, but actually loving the thrill of it all. She'd run towards home, towards the village on the shores of Lake Storsjön. As she opened her eyes and stood up, she knew the way to go; only one out all the tracks would take them to Frösön. As a child she'd known the way without thinking and her childhood memory was there again, making one particular track almost glow. She re-joined the others and found something in her pack to eat. Dried salted fish, she was becoming heartily sick of it.

"Well, did you work it out?" Asked Jhorn.

"That way....." She said, pointing. "We'll be at the lake before dark."

"Are you sure?" Asked Borlas.

"Yes."

"You were sure about the last track." He persisted.

She gave him a playful punch to the chest, which was a little too hard to be genuinely playful. She liked Borlas, but she still enjoyed the pain in his expression.

"This time I'm certain." She said.

~ ~

Princess Gyda had been taken to see the carved columns just after breakfast. Not having another day riding a horse was such a relief, that being dragged across to the other side of Frösön Island on a freezing cold morning, was almost pleasurable. The woman from the night before had been replaced by a tall man, a Holy One who'd known her father.

"This is the carving depicting your father's last visit here."

No name had been offered by any of the Holy Ones on the island. They were all tall and blonde and most spoke her language. They were the descendants of the original inhabitants of Frösön, the humans brought there by the God Freyr and tasked with preserving the holy site.

"You carve on wood." She said. "I always thought it would be on stone."

"The wood is cleaned and preserved, the carvings created again when the wood is too rotten to save. When we are gone the wisdom written here will be lost.... It is the will of Freyr."

They were in a circle, surrounded by the eight foot tall carvings that had been set into the ground. Some looked very old, while others looked fresh and new. The carving about King Harald Sigurdsson, her father, was one of the newest.

"What does it say?" She asked.

"It foretells his death in the lands to the west. With the death of your father, the true age of the Vikings will be at an end."

"Did my father know what was written here?" She asked.

"Yes."

Her father had always looked so happy, especially when setting off for a raid to the west. Yet he was a believer, he would accept the fate carved into the wood. It was strange to her that he could know the manner and time of his death and still function.

"Will you put my fate onto one of these after I leave?"

"Yes, but not until your destiny is fully known. At the moment, Odin hasn't made your destiny clear to us."

"Good..... Whatever the Gods have in store for me, I'd rather not know until it happens."

There were always four or five of the Holy Ones with her, eager to read what had been carved into the various columns of wood. To her the writing just looked like grooves created with a sharp axe, yet the Holy Ones could read them.

"This is the story of King Sweyn Forkbeard, who many believe to be....."

The stories went on and on, often making her revise her ideas of who had and hadn't been the true father of this or that famous figure from history. Eventually she had to ask.

"What of me, what do I do next?"

"You go further north and a little east princess. Guides from the village will help you, though they will not enter Böðgæðir Peak. From there.... As I mentioned before, we are not yet permitted to see your fate."

"I was thinking about leaving Hervör here, she has suffered badly from the cold. May I leave her with you?"

"You should take all who arrived with you princess, their destinies are now irrevocably entwined with yours. The guides will help her travel as far as she is able."

"Very well, I'll take them all further north." She said. "You saw me coming here, can you see my father's army? I'm hoping Bodrin is bringing an entire army with him, though I'd be happy to see Jhorn and a hundred of the King's best fighters."

“There is no army following you princess. We sensed death on the road three days ago, but that was a long way from here. I’m not saying a small force isn’t coming this way, but they must be many days ride away, or we’d see them.”

Could it be, had Bodrin decided to sacrifice her and the torque to the whims of the Gods ? It did make sense, now that the Holy One had mentioned her father being the last true Viking King.

“You’re certain no one is following me ?”

“If there is an army looking for you..... They are many miles from here.”

“Then I shall go with just the three who came here with me. We’ll rest for one more day and leave the following morning.”

“The guides will be ready princess.”

They’d been given the accommodation reserved for visiting royalty, a building large enough for a visiting King and his entire entourage. Everyone had a bedroom and there was a certain amount of privacy, a rare thing while travelling on the open road.

“I feel clean again.” Said Hervör.

It was the evening and they were eating together, around a table big enough for ten times their number.

“So the Holy Ones say no one came after us.” Said Yegor. “In a way I’m not that surprised. It is well known that the King was worried about an attack while he was away.”

“That must be it..... Bodrin didn’t want to leave the royal estate unguarded.” Added Hervör.

“But to just leave you at the mercy of the winter..... It’s not right.” Said Bohdan.

It all made dreadful sense when Gyda thought it through. She did remember talk of a threatened rebellion, yet another Jarl from the north with an ambition to be King of all Norway. Bodrin was all about loyalty and duty to his king and as for her ? She was just a young daughter of the king, one of his many children. Yes, she could see why Bodrin hadn’t sent an army to find her.”

“And left to the mercy of the dragon.” Added Bohdan.

“If there really is a dragon.” Said Hervör.

“There will be one and it will breathe fire.” Said Gyda. “Odin wouldn’t offer me a destiny without there being a real dragon to slay, though I still haven’t worked out what the torque is supposed to do.”

They’d all played with the heavy gold arm ring, achieving nothing for their efforts. The damn thing hadn’t reacted to anything they’d done.

“So we’re going on our own then, just us four ?” Asked Bohdan.

His tone worried her a little, Gyda had assumed they’d all still follow where she led.

“If you want to..... I’m hoping you’ll all still go with me, but if I have to.... I’ll face the dragon alone.”

“Don’t be silly, you couldn’t stop me going.” Said Hervör

Yegor had a grin on his face, like a raider who’d just found a chest full of gold.

“Of course we’ll go Gyda.” He said. “One man among many may be a hero, but he’ll never be remembered. Four facing a dragon..... Even if we die, they’ll create epic poems about us. We’ll be famous forever.”

“Look what they say about Sigurd..... We’ll be talked about whenever warriors meet to feast and drink.” Said Bohdan.

“Men, they’re all crazy.” Said Hervör.

Gyda tended to agree with her.

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Borlas Hairy Trousers was a lousy rider, always at the back of the group. Horses seemed to sense his lack of love for them; one had even bitten him, leaving a nasty scar on his forearm. As for the name? He'd once worn trousers that weren't dry after being washed, the fabric had a hairy look about it. He'd been called Hairy Trousers all that day and being Vikings.... He'd become Borlas Hairy Trousers from that day on. He might perform many heroic deeds in his life, but he would always be known as Hairy Trousers.

"There..... I see the village." Shouted Brynhild.

Lake Storsjön was long and wide in places, they seemed to have been following its southern shore for hours. His bottom felt like it had more saddle sores than unmarked skin. Hopefully the village would mean a rest for them and their tired horses.

"Decent food and a proper bed at last." Said Erik.

"I always knew you were soft Erik." Said Lagertha.

"Stay alert and be careful what you say." Said Jhorn. "There's no knowing what princess Gyda has told them."

It took them another half an hour to reach the village, which was really just one row of wooden houses and a jetty. There were no boats tied up at the jetty and if there was a predominant attitude among the villagers, it was indifference.

"I was born near here." Said Brynhild. "They do what the Holy Ones tell them to do. We won't find anyone who'll talk to us apart from the headman, he might tell us if the princess was here."

"She might still be here, out on the Island." Said Jhorn. "Is there a boat we can hire?"

"We need to see the headman, nothing will happen unless he agrees."

Even finding the village headman was frustrating and the wind wasn't helping. Few were out and about in the icy cold and even they refused to say much. If one or two hadn't remembered Brynhild from when she'd been a child, it might have been impossible to find the man they sought.

"There...." Said a woman, pointing. "...Bang hard on his door or he won't hear you. The wind is bad for the beginning of winter and our headman has seen many winters."

"What is his name?" Asked Jhorn.

"Bang on his door, make sure he hears you."

"Well, at least they're not attacking us." Said Borlas.

It took a lot of banging on his door before a very old man opened the door to his house. Living to an old age in a small village was an achievement in itself and earned respect. Jhorn went through the usual pleasantries and small talk, before they were allowed inside. The house was small but warm, several small children were huddled up close to the fireplace.

"Is there somewhere we could spend the night?" Asked Jhorn.

The headman looked them over before answering.

"There are too many of you and I'm told you have horses. No one will take you in, but there is a sheltered area behind the boathouse, you can camp there. I can probably find someone to bring you some food."

A simple conversation began that took a while, the headman often failed to understand Jhorn and Brynhild had to translate. Probably a lie, he seemed to understand well enough when Jhorn offered to pay for their food. For some reason they weren't welcome in the village.

"Can anyone take us out to Frösön Island?" Asked Jhorn.

The headman shook his head and looked as though Jhorn had asked to sleep with his daughter.

"No, they won't send a boat and no one here will take you. You're late and there are too few of you....What King only sends so few to find his daughter?"

The attitude made sense now and Borlas had been thinking much the same thing since Bodrin had ordered them to find the princess and bring her home, with the torque of course. There had been rumours of an attack by someone seeking the throne, but every year saw a similar threat. King Harald was popular and had a large army. Few had ever attacked the royal estate and they'd all been defeated, the would-be Kings executed.

"You saw the princess?" Asked Jhorn. "When did she leave here?"

"Princess Gyda was here, talking with the Holy Ones. We gave her our best guides to help her find Böðgæðir Peak."

"When was this? How many days ago?"

"She spent a day on the island and left three days ago. You should have brought more fighters, she only had two with her and an injured woman. Trying to slay a dragon with just two men....."

They weren't welcome and for one dreadful moment, he thought the old man might strike Jhorn.

"Do you have guides to show us the way? We can pay them." Said Jhorn.

It was amazing how the mention of gold coins improved the headman's understanding of their language.

"The best went with the princess, but there are two who can travel with you. Pointless of course, she'll be at Böðgæðir Peak long before you can reach her."

Someone did take pity on them, taking them into their home and providing a fresh cooked meal. No beds for the night, they'd still be sleeping in tents. No one said much over the meal.

"All that hard riding and we're still three days behind the princess." Said Erik.

"She probably didn't get lost." Said Borlas

"Do you want another bruise to go with the other I gave you?" Asked Brynhild.

Borlas held up his hands and gave her the smile that had saved him from quite a few bruises. Brynhild didn't smile back, though she did thump him playfully on the arm as they walked back towards their tents. The night was bitterly cold and in the morning, they found that one of their horses had died during the night. They had spare horses, though one of those had developed a cough.

"How far to Odin's Peak." Jhorn asked their guide. "How many days travel?"

Only one guide had shown up to show them the way and he didn't look happy about it. At least he had his own horse and another to carry his food, tent and equipment. The guide looked at the snow laden sky and thought about it for a while.

"Fifteen days, maybe twenty."

At least another fifteen days hard riding, Borlas resigned himself to more bad food, cold nights and saddle sores.

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"Look for dragons hard enough and for long enough and you will find one."

- Old Norse Proverb

The guides had helped Hervör to reach Odin's Peak, she'd never have made it without having them there to get her on and off her horse and safely into her tent for the night. Poor Hervör, all the remaining fingers on her left hand were black from the intense cold and her toes were beginning to suffer too. It was amazing that she'd made it to the wide crevice, which led into the interior of the mountain.

"It was her destiny princess, to follow you this far but no further." Said Yegor.

It hadn't been a surprise to find Hervör dead and cold in her bed, but Gyda had cried and was still crying as the two fighters carried her dead maid out of the tent.

"I should have made her stay at home." She said. "Poor Hervör..... She should still be at home, driving her young man crazy.... She should have been safe and warm, not cold and dead in this dreadful place."

"It was her destiny, the Gods decided she was to be your companion until you reached the peak. The rest of your journey must be without her." Said one of the guides.

They all believed, belief in Odin and the other pagan Gods covered the Viking lands and most of the east. Many kingdoms speaking many different languages, yet bonded together by a common faith in Odin, Thor, Freyr and an afterlife in Valhalla.

"We can wrap her body and take it back with us." Said a guide. "I'm sure the Holy Ones will give her the correct funeral rites on the island."

"She would have loved that." Said Gyda. "I need a few moments with her."

The others gave her privacy, though Yegor remained close enough to defend her from any attacker. They were close to the entrance to the dragon's lair and all feeling a little on edge. Gyda knelt beside the body of her maid.... No, more than a maid, her friend for many years.

"I'll probably be joining you soon." She muttered. "I'm not sorry you came, it was nice to have a good friend among the bears. Your talk about that guardsman of yours kept me sane on the long road here. If I live, I'll pray to Odin and tell him of your bravery."

It felt wrong, seeing Hervör slung over the back of a horse like a sack of provisions. It was the only way for the guides to take her body back to Frösön Island. Gyda stopped crying when the horse carrying Hervör was lost among the trees. Now there were just three of them.

"I brought lamps, nice and bright they use whale oil." She said. "Expensive and I only brought two of them."

"You kept that quiet when we were stumbling about in the dark." Said Bohdan.

"I was determined to save them for when we entered Odin's Peak."

There was no sign that a fire breathing monster used the gash in the side of the mountain as an entrance. No burned trees, no charred grass and thankfully, no fire scorched bones. There was a smell though and it began as soon as they'd gone about twenty feet inside the mountain.

"Something has died in this mountain." Said Yegor. "Probably many things."

She recognised the odour too; every Viking woman knew the stench of death, just as well as any male fighter.

"It's here, I feel it." She said. "The dragon is in front of us and below. I should lead the way."

She had a lamp, with Yegor behind her and Bohdan at the back with their second lamp. The whale oil had been expensive, by it burned with a nice bright light. Perhaps too good a light as they had no idea what might be waiting for them inside Odin's Peak.

"What about the torque princess, is it doing anything?" Askes Bohdan.

The heavy gold armband was under the sleeve of her dress, wedge right up under her left armpit. It had been there for so long that Gyda had begun to ignore it. She stopped for a moment to retrieve Odin's Torque and hold it in her right hand.

"Nothing, perhaps it'll do something when we're closer to the dragon."

"Does this beast have a name?" Asked Yegor.

"None that I've been told." She said.

Both her hands were full, which meant her only weapon was the torque and that seemed to be just a useless piece of very expensive jewellery. They were about half a mile inside the mountain, the

ground slowly descending, when she saw the way down. No stairs of course, part of the floor had collapsed.

"It'll be a rough climb, but we can do it." She said.

Yegor sniffed the air.

"The stench is coming from down there." He said.

"Is..... It down there?"

She simply nodded at Bohdan and began to climb down the pile of rubble. It led to a vast cavern with stalagmites rising up from the ground, to be met by stalactites coming down from the ceiling high above them. Everything was twinkling in the light from their lamps.

"This place would be beautiful, if we weren't looking for a dragon." Said Yegor.

"Ours are probably the first eyes to see these wonders in centuries." She said. "It's this way, not far now."

What were they to do, now they were close enough to the dragon to hear its breathing? Yegor and Bohdan had axes and swords, though she couldn't see them doing much damage to a dragon. She held out her hand, the torque thrust in front of her.

"Nothing..... What should it do?" Asked Bohdan.

"You ask as though I'd know..... Odin just told me it was a weapon capable of killing a dragon. He never gave me any clues as to how."

"Think..... How did the ancient heroes slay dragons?" Asked Yegor.

"Sigurd killed Fafnir with a sword, before ripping out his heart." Said Bohdan.

"And Fafnir had been a dwarf, before being turned into a dragon." She said. "The more I think about it, the more I think that no one has ever killed a dragon."

"We'll be the first then..... Imagine our fame." Said Bohdan.

The cavern floor was difficult to walk on, there were small boulders waiting to trip up the unwary and puddles that might be shallow or six feet deep. Plus the dragon had felt the same distance from them as it had for several minutes. Gyda began to ignore the dragon and concentrate on where they were walking. It might have been her carelessness that brought them face to face with an angry dragon. Princess Gyda heard a sound, as if something huge had taken a deep intake of breath.

"Princess..... Move..... lookout!" Shouted Yegor.

He pushed her with some force, sending her sprawling behind a large glittering boulder. Gyda's head hit the ground, she was hurt and confused. By the time she looked back at Yegor, he was engulfed by dragon's fire. So sudden and intense was the heat, that he'd had no chance to cry out. She could smell her own hair being singed by the heat, the cuff of her dress began to smoulder. The terrible fire stopped quite suddenly, leaving nothing of Yegor apart from a small pile of smoking ash on the ground.

"Stay down princess, it's still there." Shouted Bohdan.

Gyda's head had hit the ground hard; she could feel blood running down her cheek. She was feeling a little dizzy and nauseous, but she had a boulder to hide behind and Bohdan didn't. Princess Gyda stood up, holding Odin's Torque in her right hand.

"No..... Get down Gyda."

She ignored him and walked right up to the pile of ash that once been Yegor. Perhaps Odin was a trickster, but she was determined to avenge her friend, or die in the attempt. Gyda turned and looked straight at the dragon.

"I am going to kill you." She shouted.

Could it understand her ? There was definitely a look of hate in its yellow eyes. The beast was huge and like everything else in the cavern, its grey skin glinted in the light from her lamp. It moved slightly, stretching its wings out a little and lowering its head. Horns, it had two short horns on the top of its dreadful head.

“At least that part of the legends is true.” She muttered.

The beast opened its mouth and there was that sound again, as if it was taking in a huge breath of air. Gyda knew what was coming next and was prepared to die. If her destiny had all been a lie, a trick by the Gods, she didn’t want to live.

When they came the flames engulfed her, making her feel hotter than she could ever remember. She lived though and when the dragon’s fire ended, she was still stood there, angry and defiant. It understood enough to look surprised, it definitely wasn’t a dumb beast.

“It worked, the torque worked princess.” Shouted Bohdan.

The sound again, the intake of air, and the dragon was turning to look at Bohdan.

“Run !” She shouted. “Get out of here Bohdan.”

Was there anywhere for him to run to ? The cavern was large, but was it possible to outrun the fiery breath of an angry dragon ? As the flames went past her she heard Bohdan scream and feared for the worst. No time to look back though, the dragon was staring at her again. The torque though, the wonderful golden torque was glowing red in her hand. Gyda held it tight and thrust it out towards the dragon, somehow knowing the way to activate it with her thoughts.

“Now it’s just you and me dragon.” She shouted.

A small twist of her hand, a thought of power and anger in her mind. Something left the torque, almost invisible, like a ripple in the foul air of the cavern. Gyda thought it had been nothing but harmless movements in the air, until the dragon’s head was smashed into the cavern wall. It was hurt, the beast actually screeched in its pain. Its wings went back, its tail began to twitch. Best of all, there was its green blood forming a small pool on the cavern floor.

“My mother always said..... If a thing can bleed, it can die. I’m going to kill you.”

That sound again and more fire, enough to make her hair crackle. The edges of her jacket were smouldering, but Gyda lived. The torque was now glowing white hot, though Gyda felt no pain from holding it. She thrust it towards the hate filled eyes of the huge beast.

“You caused the death of my friend Hervör, you killed Yegor and Bohdan. Who knows how many other deaths you’ve caused. Now I bring your death dragon.”

Gyda let her anger build and used it all, while thrusting Odin’s Torque at the huge grey beast. The ripple was more opaque this time and looked like a blue mist heading towards the dragon. The torque crumbled in her hand, falling away as dust. If the enchanted arm ring had slain other dragons, it certainly wasn’t going to slay any more. Its job was done though, the blue ripple hit the beast and threw its head hard against the cavern floor. The dragon’s vast wings were thrown back and ripped from its body. Large cracks opened up in its skin, thick green blood oozing out of every one of them. Gyda knew it was dead, when she ceased to see its presence, its life force, in her mind.

Her first thought was for those who had fallen. Gyda knelt next to the pile of black ash where Yegor had died.

“I will tell everyone our story.” She said. “When fighters meet to drink and feast, they will remember the bravery of Yegor, Bohdan and Hervör, I give you my word.”

Even caverns that have existed since the dawn of time can be damaged by dragon’s fire and enchanted weapons. The dragon had melted the deep ice with its fire and the ripples from the torque had cracked the solid stone floor. The floor cracked and began to disintegrate, the body of

the dragon falling first. Gyda tried to turn and run, but there wasn't time. The floor below her feet fell apart and she fell and fell and fell. Princess Gyda, Dragon Slayer, fell for a long time before hitting something solid.....

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"It's a miracle he made it this far." Said Lagertha.

Jhorn Sharp Sword looked down at the badly burned body of a Viking fighter and had to agree with her.

"I recognise him, it's Bohdan." He said. "One of the Vikings from Kiev who honoured his oath of fealty to King Harald. We'll have to leave him for now, the princess might still be alive."

"I'll stay with him until your return." Said their guide.

"Thank you." Said Jhorn.

The guide probably meant that he'd give them a day or so before taking Bohdan's body back to Lake Storsjön, but was too polite to say. Everyone was aware that a living and angry dragon was likely to be waiting for them in the caverns below Böðgæðir Peak.

"No time to rest, princess Gyda might be in danger." Said Jhorn. "We'll need the lamps and ropes and did someone bring a miners pick?"

"That was me," said Erik, "I'll get it out of my pack."

"Do we take food and water with us?" Asked Brynhild.

"Yes, but only what you can easily carry." Said Jhorn.

He had no idea how large the cave system was, he'd heard of people being lost in caves for days, some were never seen again. Their lamps were lit by beeswax oil, which wasn't as bright as whale oil, but they did have one each. Jhorn led them into the caves, hoping that they'd all live to see another day, or at least die fighting heroically against a dragon.

"Oh, it stinks in here." Said Borlas.

"There is an old Swedish proverb about dragon hunting." Said Brynhild. "Shut up, they might hear you."

"Very funny."

They knew something huge and epic had occurred in the cavern, as soon as they saw the blasted walls and the large ragged hole in the floor.

"Something melted these rocks." Said Lagertha.

"Here, over here." Said Borlas. "This is Gyda's dagger."

There were scuff marks on the ground and blood stains on the side of a boulder. Most worrying was finding princess Gyda's blade, she never went anywhere without it.

"We'll need to split up and look for the princess." Said Jhorn. "She might be injured and need our help."

"She might be here, I think it's her blue dress down there." Called Erik.

Erik was far too close to the unstable hole in the ground, waving his lamp about. Even all their lamps combined, failed to penetrate the gloom at the bottom of the very deep hole.

"I'm sure that hint of blue is her dress." Said Lagertha.

"Look, there..... That's the head of a dragon." Said Borlas.

"It could be anything, we need to use the ropes and get down there." Said Jhorn.

"Our ropes will never get down that far." Said Brynhild. "Even if we tied them all together."

"We could drop a lamp and hope it doesn't go out." Said Erik.

They continued to come up with weird ideas, which inevitably turned into bickering. Jhorn's eyes had become used to peering into the gloom, he saw what looked like the entrance to another cavern at the bottom of the hole.

"She fell into another cavern, it all makes sense now." He said. "There will be other ways to get there, passages leading down. Split up and find a way to get to her, and do it quickly."

Borlas found the route down. It was fairly straightforward, though there was some loose rubble to clamber over. The body of the dragon dominated the cavern, filling two thirds of the space.

"I'm glad that's dead." Said Erik. "I can stop looking over my shoulder all the time."

"Unless it had a mate." Said Borlas.

"No legend talks about two dragons." Said Brynhild. "Let's assume there was only one and it's now dead."

Very obviously dead, the dragon was lying on its side, its wings almost ripped from its body. The neck was the most disturbing thing, twisted around at an impossible angle. Green blood was everywhere, Jhorn's hand was covered in it as he touched the dragon's lifeless head.

"Urgh.... You should wipe that stuff off your hand." Said Lagertha.

"It's only blood Lagertha, it's only blood."

The flash of blue they'd seen from above had been princess Gyda's dress. Jhorn still didn't believe she was dead, until he saw her body lying among the rubble. He couldn't bring himself to touch the princess, that was left to Brynhild.

"Cold, she's been dead for some time." She said.

He hated himself, but it was his duty to ask.

"Does she still carry the torque?"

More feelings of guilt, as Brynhild went through Gyda's clothing, searching for the priceless artefact.

"It's not on her Jhorn."

"I'm not staying here to search for it, we'll take Gyda home." He said.

He bent down to pick up the body in his arms, to carry Gyda out of that awful place. The green dragon's blood on his hand was thick and congealed, yet some dripped onto Gyda's neck. It was impossible of course, yet the flesh where it fell looked pink again, alive.

"Bring me the dragon's blood." He yelled. "Lots of it, all of it if you can."

"We've nothing to carry it in."

"Use your helmets, your water flasks, scoop it up in your hands if you have to." He barked.

Once they understood what he wanted it for, they used everything they could find to carry the sticky green blood. Erik even filled up the back of his shield.

"That's it, rub it all over her....Over her clothes, her hair..... Cover her in it." Said Jhorn.

The dragon had a lot of blood and soon Gyda's body was covered in a thick layer of it.

"It's being absorbed.....Her skin looks..... It looks alive again." Said Borlas.

Jhorn knew something miraculous was occurring when he saw a pulse in a vein in Gyda's neck. As she took a deep breath and coughed, he went down on his knees.

"Odin!" He shouted.

The others joined him, shouting to the Allfather to give homage and thanks. It took a while for Gyda to stand up and even then she was unsteady on her feet. Jhorn helped her, though Gyda only seemed interested in one thing, the dead dragon.

"So, I did slay it then.....I thought it might all have been a dream."

"No dream Gyda, you killed it." Said Jhorn. "Let's get you out of this dreadful place."

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Princess Gyda, Dragon Slayer, had a lot of time to think about things on the long journey home. She was fairly certain that Odin was a little bit of a trickster. It occurred to her that not only was it her destiny to slay the dragon; it was also the dragon's destiny to die by her hand. The blood had brought her back from.....The place of dreaming. It had also given her something else and that might have been another part of her destiny, or the dragon's. Gyda felt it inside her, the spirit of the dragon, its essence. It was deep down inside her..... Waiting.

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~ The End ~

This story is dedicated to Jennifer Montoya.