

**SEVEN DAYS
TO
THE WOLVES**

Seven Days To The Wolves
Works by Victor Hurtado

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DAY I

THE MARK OF THE TRICKSTER

It was a bitterly cold and grey day in Wotankeld. The wind was streaming through the branches of the trees, and ragged clouds were hurrying overhead. It was a cold day indeed, but that did not stop Jarl and his twelve year old son Ragnar. They woke up just before the break of dawn and prepared themselves to go out hunting and to gather wood. Winter was drawing near and it was vital to prepare before the cold winds became unbearable.

“I am ready...” Yawned Ragnar at his father. Jarl looked at him and smiled, he knew it was too early for such a young boy to be awake but the fact that his son wanted to accompany him on his duties made him proud.

“Here take this small axe with you my son.” He said. Ragnar eagerly took the weapon in his hand and strapped it tightly on his belt. Jarl took little gear of war, for their task lay in the power of an axe not in battle.

“It is time to go Ragnar. Alric and Goll will be accompanying us,” Said Jarl.

“Alric will help you collect some wood; Goll will be coming with me. Lets us make haste they should be waiting for us near the dock.” With these words, Jarl and his son parted.

Morning mists still hovered above the still waters of the river. In the distance, Jarl could make out the silhouette of three men sitting near the landing pier. The three figures quickly leaped to their feet as soon as they saw Jarl, it was Alric and Goll as expected but with them was a third person, Sigard. Jarl approached the Vikings and greeted each and one of them patting their shoulders.

“It is a cold morning my thane.” Said Sigard in a grim tone. “It is indeed, Sigard son of Sigrunar,” Replied Jarl. “What gives us the honor of you presence?”

“I have come to warn you my thane.” Answered Sigard. “Warn me against what? For there is nothing that occurs in this village or in the near surroundings that I do not know of.” Said Jarl.

“Then you must have heard of the resent goblin attacks upon the nearby villages under the command of an unknown warrior.” Said Sigard in a dubious tone.

“I have my dear Sigard and that is why I take few men with me. In case of any misfortune there will be enough men to defend our village.” Said Jarl.

“But why would you risk the life of your own son my thane?” Asked Sigard. “Has he not been proclaimed the future savior of our village by the elders and the Oracle himself?”

“Your concern for my son honors me Sigard, however, as you know, Ragnar is now old enough to begin his training and learn his obligations as a man and a warrior of this village.” Said Jarl. “In any event, Alric will be accompanying him and Goll and I will be close enough. I understand your concern Sigard, but there is no need to worry.”

“I trust in your wisdom my thane; I was just concern for the well being of the young boy.” Said Sigard. Jarl walked closer to the warrior and patted several times his shoulder as a sign of acknowledgement and gratitude for his concern.

“Perhaps you would like to join us, Sigard.” Said Alric in a friendly matter.

“I am afraid I must decline your offer, it is just like our thane has said; there must be enough warriors to defend the village in case of any illness that may fall upon you.” Replied Sigard.

They all gave their backs to Sigard – except for Ragnar – as they started to prepare a small boat to sail. Sigard smiled down upon Ragnar before returning to the village, but Ragnar paid no attention to anyone other than the raven resting on the higher slopes of the rift. It stared at Ragnar straight in his eyes for a couple of seconds and then fled north, where the small company leaded by Jarl would sail.

“Everything is ready my thane!” Shouted Goll.

“Very well, let us take our leave then.” Commanded Jarl.

They all got on the small boat and all but Ragnar were rowing the boat. They rowed north and made their way swiftly until they reached the shores at the other end of the river, there it was said that the trees grew tall and their wood strong, which burned slowly but steadily. When the group landed, they took all their gear with them and headed off. Jarl and Goll moved northward, deep into the woods where they could hunt without scaring the animals, while Alric and Ragnar stayed close to the shore collecting wood and putting in inside the boat.

“Alric can I ask you something?” Said Ragnar.

“Sure thing Ragnar, what troubles your mind?” replied Alric.

“Why are collecting wood and hunting for fur and meat when we have plenty in Wotankeld?” Asked Ragnar.

“Last night a group of children and women arrived in our village, they said their village was raided by goblins and they had been walking for days. There was plenty of food, fur and wood but your father did not want to waste our reserves incase more people would show up in need of our aid.” Alric paused for a few seconds to pick up some branches before continuing.

“Besides, since your father became our thane it has been long since he has been outside the village and he took this as the perfect opportunity to – ” Alric paused and rapidly drew his sword. “Did you hear that?” he whispered. Ragnar nodded and loosened the axe strapped to his belt.

A thick fog quickly descended upon them from the north, they could hear the sound of chatter and mocking laughter around them. Alric recognized those shrieking bursts of laughter. "Goblins!" he muttered.

"Where is this fog coming from Alric?" shouted Ragnar. "I can barely see anything!"

"Stay near me and don't speak aloud. This mist and this sudden appearance of goblins it is not normal. Someone knew we were coming here."

Alric reached for his belt-pouch and pulled out a small rune stone. He briefly checked on it, making sure he pulled the right one, it was Eihwaz, a power stone with multiple purposes. He concentrated on the rune stone calling on the defensive and protective aspect of the rune repeatedly in his mind until he spotted the first goblin. He swiftly drew his short sword, "Shield!" He shouted. The rune stone crumble in his hand and a translucent shield made out of energy appeared strapped into his arm where the rune was held. He brought the shield in front of him, the charging goblin smashed against it, dropping to the ground unconscious.

"Ragnar, there is one rune stone left in my pouch, take it and use it!" He shouted.

"Did your father teach you how to use power stones?" Ragnar replied with a nod and retrieved the power stone. He read the carvings on the stone, and concentrated on his desire to become invulnerable. Ragnar grabbed the axe given to him by his father, "Spirit!" he shouted and his body and his gear became translucent. Goblins charged at Ragnar, he fell to the ground and cowed holding his hands to his face. The goblins slammed against each other as they tried to trample over the young boy, Alric quickly stabbed them all and at the sight of their comrades dead, the remaining goblins fled north where they were met by the sharp end of Jarl's axe.

"Is everyone alright?" shouted Jarl. A humming sound came in waves originating from Alric and Ragnar, after the sound stopped the shield strapped to Alric's arm disappeared and Ragnar was translucent no more. "We are alright." Said Alric.

"We came as soon as we could, we were attacked by wolves." Said Goll still panting from the battle. "Father you're hurt!" shouted Ragnar. Jarl was covered completely in blood, but it was not entirely his own, his garbs were all with scratches from the wolves claws, some of them reached deep enough to wound him.

"You have managed to defeat my precious wolves." Before them appeared a man tall and fair, bearing nothing more than his pants. His eyes crystal blue and his hair dark grey.

"Who are you and why did you attack us." Demanded Jarl.

"I am Rirnef, I have been sent by Conrack to retrieve the young boy."

"Conrack? The son of Lofar, the chieftain of Rothtun?" asked Jarl. Rirnef laughed maniacally at his question. "You mean Conrack the chieftain of Rothtun, his father had an... what was the word he used to describe it?" Said Rirnef in a mocking tone. "Ah yes!

Accident, that was the word, his father suffered an accident and died. How unfortunate don't you think?" Rirnef chuckled as he spoke.

At that moment, the mysterious fog slowly deepened and the cry of goblins could be heard from afar. "We better get started before they arrive, I don't want Conrack to have all the fun." Rirnef extended his arms to the sides, his claw-like nails ready to taste their blood. "You have 30 seconds to prepare, after that I will attack without warning."

They looked at each other in wonder, finally Jarl spoke: "I only brought one rune stone with me, what about the rest of you?"

"I had two, Ragnar and I used them fighting the goblins." Goll simply shook his head. Jarl fell into deep thought for a few seconds and finally passed his rune stone to Alric. "I will only ask for one thing." Said Jarl facing Rirnef.

"And what is that?" he replied.

"We will leave my son out of this battle, that's all." Said Jarl.

"Conceded." Replied Rirnef as he quickly charged Goll delivering a power kick to his chest, sending him flying a couple of feet away. Rirnef then proceeded to charge Alric, as he did Alric called "Shield!" out loud and the translucent shield appeared strapped onto his arm once again, the rune crumbling away. Alric brought the shield forward in time to stop Rirnef's blow, but his attack came with such strength that it made Alric tumble upon his own steps and fell prone to the ground. Rirnef howled in pain as Jarl landed the sharp end of one of his axes on Rirnef's back. He turned to face him, his eyes were now yellow and his hair on his arms, chest, and face grew thicker. His nails became sharper and longer and fangs slid out of his mouth.

"Return from once ye came from foul beast!" shouted Jarl in anger and desperation. Rirnef laughed maniacally once again. "It would take at least ten of your mightiest men to stop me." Alric and Goll gathered around Jarl, both of them still holding their weapons firmly.

"Here stand three, that will be enough." said Alric.

"Four!" Quickly replied Ragnar as he stood next to his father. "I will not stand idle waiting for my fate to develop right in front of my eyes without me taking any part on it."

"Very well, Four it is." said Jarl.

Rirnef leaped high in the air landing on top of Alric, he quickly rolled out from under Rirnef and stabbed him on his side. Rirnef howled in pain once again, tossing his arms around until he knocked all of them – except for Ragnar – to the floor. "Now Ragnar!" shouted Alric. Ragnar grabbed his axe with both hands and stroke Rirnef, the beast cowed to a tree for it feared pain, great were the number of battles he fought and seldom the times he got hurt. Rirnef climbed a tree and began to leap from branch to branch until he was visible no more. "Well done my son." said Jarl. "let us return home." In the distance the screeching of the goblins could be heard still, the vikings gathered around Ragnar and congratulated him.

“Well done indeed.” Said a voice in the distance. “Just as the Oracle said, Ragnar son of Jarl would defeat the Master of Wolves, Rirnef with only one strike.”

In front of them appeared a bald tall man clad in heavy dark armor, his beard was trimmed, his face covered with strange runes, and he bared no weapon. “I have come to give this boy the mark of the Trickster, and he will follow his path or succumb to a painful death.”

“My axe will strike you down before you even lay one finger on my son!” shouted Jarl.

“Is that so?” said the stranger. “How exactly will you be able to stop me, without any rune stones? That I wonder.”

“We don’t need runes to stop you Conrack.” said Jarl.

“Perhaps not.” he replied. “You are the mighty wielders of Eihwaz, but the Trickster holds knowledge of many other power stones. “Isa!” he cried, and Jarl could see no more. Alric and Goll charged at Conrack. “Hagalaz!” Conrack shouted, and a gust of wind pushed them away, both of them landing their heads on the trunk of a tree. Dust fell from Conrack’s hands; it was the crumbled of the rune stones he used, which always leave a trail of dust and stone in the user’s hand. Conrack slowly approached Ragnar.

“Do not come near me or I will attack you.” said Ragnar. Conrack pulled out another rune stone. “Isa.” He said softly, and Ragnar could move no more. “All runes have multiple purposes, but your village only focuses on one, that’s a pity.” said Conrack.

He extended his arm and grasped Ragnar’s forehead with his hand. He muttered in words that Ragnar could not understand. Ragnar’s forehead began to shine with a pale light; it now bared a strange symbol. “The Mark of the Trickster you have received, embrace it or succumb to its destructive power.” With these words Conrack headed north and with him the mist dissipated and the cries of goblins faded. Conrack looked up to one of the trees, there laid a raven looking down on him, Conrack smiled and said: “It has begun; go tell that to your master.”

DAY II

THE ORACLE & THE HEALER.

When the full light of the morning came no signs of the goblins or wolves were to be found, no traces of the battle remained but the scars that each of them bore. Jarl regained his vision hours ago but the others were still unconscious. With no strength left to carry any of them back to the boat, Jarl patiently waited for them to wake up, specially his son who was still stiff from the effects of the rune. After several hours, Jarl heard a groan; it came from Alric, who was now lying down next to Jarl under a big tree.

“Welcome back.” Said Jarl. Alric looked around him, he was still stunned from the blow in his head, yet he was able to recognize Jarl. “What happened?” he said. “I was not able to see until a while ago, but from what I could hear I think Conrack placed the mark on my son.” replied Jarl.

“How could you be so calm!” shouted Alric.

“I am not.” replied Jarl. “For the past four hours I’ve been thinking on what to do. Once Goll awakes, he will row the boat back to Wotankeld and deliver the wood that was collected.”

Jarl looked down at his son and fell in deep thought. “What about your son?” asked Alric. Jarl stayed silent for a minute and finally replied: “If it is not too much to ask, I would like you to take Ragnar to Hilda, she is a well known healer around this area. I need to pay a visit to Erilaz, he has much explaining to do.”

“Of course.” Alric replied.

“Very well then, head east until you find a road, after you do head north you will see a small house upon a hill, that will be hers.” said Jarl. “All we have to do now is wait for Goll to wake up.”

After a couple of minutes Goll regained consciousness, soon after he was briefed with what happened and the actions that needed to be taken. Alric carried Ragnar and headed east, Goll headed back south to Wotankeld. Jarl stayed behind for a couple of hours and rested. After his short rest he sprang to his feet and headed north where he would see the Oracle’s house eventually. Jarl stood in front a compact house, built of grey stone and set beside a lake. It belonged to Erilaz the Runemaster, also known as The Oracle. Jarl walked by a wide paved road until he entered the house. A sweet fragrance reminiscent of incense filled the air in this high-ceilinged room, in the far corner of the room sat a man with runes casted on the floor. Jarl set in front of him without saying a word, waiting for Erilaz to speak.

“It has been a while, Jarl. I have been expecting you.” said Erilaz.

“Have you now?” replied Jarl in a fervent tone.

“There is no need to get angry, I saw your forthcoming in someone else’s rune cast.” Jarl looked at him sharply examining the Oracle’s behavior.

“Conrack’s?” he said, to which Erilaz replied with a nod. “Then he knows of my arrival?” asked Jarl. “Not quite my friend, I saw it in his casting but he did not ask me about that matter.” replied Erilaz.

“I have already cast your runes, you may ask me four questions.” said Erilaz as he placed his hands on the runes. “How can I remove the Mark of the Trickster from my son?” asked Jarl.

“You will need Conrack, well, a rune stone he carries, actually.” said Erilaz.

“Where can I find Conrack and how can I recognize the rune I need?” asked Jarl.

“That’s two questions. Conrack is heading north towards Thorstadt, his stronghold. Regarding the rune, it is Dagaz, the rune stone of breakthrough and awakening.” replied Erilaz. Jarl stood up and walked slowly towards the exit. Standing under the arc of the door Jarl turned his head and said: “For how long will my son live if I don’t find the rune on time?”

“He will live for six days, counting the day he was inflicted with the rune, which was yesterday.” replied Erilaz. As he said those words, the rune stones crumbled, this was the sign that the divination was over and all four questions have been answered. “Thank you.” Said Jarl as he left the house. “He never pays, I wonder if he knows he has to or maybe he just ignores it?” said Erilaz as he sighed.

The afternoon was wearing away when he stumbled with Hilda’s house. Alric was sitting outside gazing the horizon when Jarl finally arrived. “How is my son doing?” Said Jarl.

“Not so well, his body is no longer rigid but he is still unconscious and he has a fever now,” Replied Alric. “You should go inside, Hilda is waiting for you.”

“How are you doing, Alric?” said Jarl.

“I am fine don’t worry, just go inside.” he replied.

Jarl entered the house, the floor in this room was plain unfinished wood. The walls were dark with a border of deep amethyst along the top and bottom. The scent of autumn leaves could be faintly detected, though the light blast of air from the open window dissipated it. Next to his son was Hilda, a black-haired, grey-eyed woman with a slender build and round, flat face.

“Jarl, it has been years.” said Hilda. Jarl gave out a faint smile and looked at his son.

“Whoever gave your son this mark must have the cure.” said Hilda.

“Yes I know, I intend to go after him.” replied Jarl.

“You must rest first,” said Hilda. “You can sleep next to your son.”

“Thank you.” Said Jarl, before quickly falling to sleep.

DAY III

THE SCORCHED VILLAGE.

It seemed to Jarl that he had only dozed for a few minutes when he awoke to find that it was late afternoon. "I need to get going." He said to himself, as he stood and stretched.

"Did you have a good sleep?" asked Hilda.

"It seems I had one but I feel like I only slept for a short while." he replied. "Where is Alric?"

"He slept outside." she answered. "He must be sleeping there still."

After everyone was awake they had a quick breakfast, with no time to waste, Jarl began to prepare for his departure. "Alric I would like you to stay here and protect Hilda and my son until I return." said Jarl.

"I will do so." he replied.

"Before you go take this." Said Hilda. She was holding an old broadsword with runes carved on the blade itself. "This is an Odinsblade sword." said Jarl.

"It is, it belonged to your father." said Hilda. "He left it here as a token of gratitude for my services as a healer, but I am sure that this sword will serve you well in your journey as well as these rune stones." She handed him the sword and three runes tones, two baring Eiwaz, and one baring Fehu the rune of wealth and energy. "Whenever you become severely injured press Fehu to you and it will heal you completely." she said.

"Can we use this to cure my son?" Jarl asked.

"No, but I am using these runes to restore his health, the Mark is quickly draining his life, the runes will slow down the process somewhat." Answered Hilda.

Jarl placed the runes on his pouch and strapped the sword tightly to his belt. Before he left Hilda handed him one last rune stone. "Use this now, it will give you reckless strength and speed, speed is something you will need to catch up with him." she said.

"Ehwaz!" he cried, and he could feel his body bursting with energy. He sprang across the field with great speed, heading north-west. In only eight hours he traveled leagues worth two days of journeying. He looked back, and then he looked forward; and he was amazed to see how far his effort had brought him, but then a dreadful thought invaded him; the village of Garthum was only minutes away and that meant that... "They already reached the village." muttered Jarl. He rushed up the hill and came to a sudden halt as he gazed at the nearly scorched village. He walked slowly down the hill until he reached what used to be the entrance. It was dark and Jarl could barely see anything except what the light of the burning houses emitted. Jarl crept

forward, looking from side to side; the village was most likely attacked not more than an hour ago for the fire was still burning bright. In the distance he spotted the carcasses of warriors and goblins alike. "Men and goblins working side by side?" muttered Jarl. "There are bigger forces at work here. I better be more careful."

Jarl suddenly hear the voices of two men speaking behind a longhouse, he quickly crept to the side of the house to listen. "... and all the villagers have been burned or impaled as Conrack ordered." said one of the warriors.

"Very well, tell the boys to take anything they can carry and move out. We will leave tomorrow and meet up with Conrack's men." Said the commander.

As they left Jarl pondered for a second. "Should I take them down now or let them go?" he asked himself. He finally decided to avenge all the villagers and slowly sneaked behind one of them. Jarl took his sword with both hands and with a swift movement he beheaded the commander. Before the other warrior realized what was happening, Jarl charged him, impaling him with the sword and quickly drawing it out of his chest. "I am sure your friends will come to get you soon." Grumbled Jarl. He removed the two Viking axes that Conrack's men carried and climbed on top the longhouse and sat there, waiting for Conrack's men to show up. After several minutes four of Conrack's men showed up. Jarl threw both axes at his enemies, striking down two of them. As the remaining warriors looked up, Jarl leaped down on one of them stabbing the warrior several times as it lay helpless on the floor. The last warrior drew his axe and threw it at Jarl in a desperate attempt to hinder him. Without time to react, the axe stroke Jarl, but the wound left on his arm by the weapon did not stop Jarl from stabbing the warrior on his chest and finally with a swift slash, he slit the warriors throat and left him there until he bled to death. Jarl then proceeded on picking up the two Viking axes and climbed up the longhouse to wait for more warriors to come.

After several hours passed he realized there were no more warriors left. In the midst of this gloomy village he suddenly remembered that he was very hungry, and he got up to go and see if he could find any food in any of the houses. Jarl searched several houses until he found one with mead and roasted meat already served on a table. It seemed that the owners of the house were about to have dinner when the village came under attack. "This will do for now." Jarl said to himself as he began to eat. As soon as he was done he laid down on the floor and slowly fell asleep, he knew there was no need to rush, he knew Conrack's men would be expecting the warriors that stayed behind by tomorrow. He had enough time to rest.

DAY IV

THE CONSPIRACY REVEALED.

Next day, early in the morning, he came down to the end of the village and went forward, ignoring the disturbing sight of women impaled and children singed to death. After an hour of traveling, he reached the slopes of an enormous mountain; here it was said that underneath this mountain laid the stronghold of dwarf traders. In the distance Jarl could deceive a small encampment. "That must be Conrack's men encampment, but why are they camping so close to the dwarves?" Jarl said to himself. With no time to waste, Jarl conceived a plan to get close to enough to Conrack, and so he swiftly approached the encampment. In what seemed to be the entrance to the encampment stand a tall warrior bearing an odd shaped sword. "A dwarven sword!" Jarl said to himself. "This doesn't seem to be good, the dwarves are allying with Conrack as well?. I must hurry."

Jarl got as close as he could to the warrior without being spotted and from a safe distance he threw one of his axes; striking the warrior down. "Now all I need is his garbs." Said Jarl to himself. He quickly removed the corpse from view as he undressed the dead warrior. "Fits perfectly." Jarl said to himself as he finished putting on the warrior's outfit. He strapped the dwarven sword onto his belt and placed the helmet on him as he walked into the camp. As Jarl walked by two warriors, he came to a sudden stop when he heard one of them mentioned the name Sigard.

"Excuse me did you just say Sigard?" Said Jarl.

"Yes I did comrade, he is being held right past that hill." Said the warrior. "You should go take a look, that warrior can sure take a beating."

Jarl headed straight for the hill, but he was suddenly stopped Conrack himself and was commanded to accompany him along with several of his men. Without a choice Jarl quietly followed. They halted in front of what it appeared to be a large rock roughly shaped as a table. On the other end of the rock stood three dwarves, each of them bore great hammers and axes, — except for one who only held a tablet carved in runes — as well as several pouches, which by judging from the cramped content, they were rune stones. Jarl tried to make out what the tablet said, and from what he could read he figured it was an agreement between the dwarves and Conrack, the dwarves would supply them with their eldritch weapons and in exchange Conrack will deliver any land they conquer held by other dwarf clans to them. Without giving any thought, Jarl knew what he had to do in order to stop the dwarves from providing any more weapons. Jarl leaped on top of the rock and with a swift spin, wielding the dwarven sword, Jarl beheaded the dwarf holding the tablet; as soon as the remaining dwarves saw this both of them draw a small horn and blew them and the sound of other horns echoed

from the mountains. Soon after, dwarves came down from the mountain and swarmed the small camp, as they did Conrack's men clashed against the two dwarves while Jarl removed his helmet.

"Conrack!" Shouted Jarl.

"Jarl you ignorant fool!" Screamed Conrack. "Do you know how hard it was for me to gain their trust? Now it will take me years to find another dwarf clan willing to supply my men with their weapons"

"Hand me Dagaz and I will spare your life." said Jarl.

"Spare me you say?" said Conrack in dubious tone. "My men will take care of you."

Conrack looked behind only to find his men as well as the dwarves dead on the ground.

"I doubt your men will be able to save you now Conrack." Replied Jarl.

"No matter, I will crush you with my bare hands. Hagalaz!" Cried Conrack, and a gust of wind knocked Jarl down. Conrack headed North, towards the slopes of another mountain. If Conrack managed to cross it, he would reach Thorstadt and if he did there would be no hope for Jarl and his son. Jarl quickly recovered and ran after Conrack. Conrack climbed up the mountain until he reached a cavern which he entered, Jarl followed in soon after he did.

The cave was bright and the walls covered with crystalline ice, a cold wind blew from all directions. The cave seemed as if was kept cold by a strange spell, but these things did not matter to Jarl. He was running out of time and he needed to find Conrack before it was too late. Jarl navigated within the cavern for about an hour until he reached an exit. As he reached the other side of the mountain through the cave, he noticed how drastically different was the weather on this side of the mountain. It was all covered in snow and harsh and terrible wind blew. In the distance stood Conrack, the path that led to him was narrow, great cliffs lay on side to side of the path. Jarl approached Conrack slowly and stopped when he was standing right in front of him.

"This is the end of the line Conrack." said Jarl.

"Is it now?" he quickly replied. "Look down below and tell me what do you see."

Jarl cautiously looked down to the right side of the cliff and his eyes widen as he could not believe what he was seeing; hordes of men and wolves alike marching south. All Jarl could hear was the thunderous footsteps and the howls of the wolves.

"Men and Wolves?" said Jarl.

"Yes, men and wolves" answered Conrack. "All of them under the command of Rirnef. He wanted to take revenge against those who hurt him deeply, I believe that would be you and your kin."

"You bastard, leave my people out of this." Demanded Jarl.

"It is too late for that." Replied Conrack. "So what will it be? Will the mighty Jarl make it time to save his village or will he return to his son and deliver the cure on time?"

As he said this, he tossed Dagaz down the left side of the cliff and said: "I believe that was the rune you were looking for." And with these words, Conrack headed north.

Jarl slowly climbed down the cliff until he reached the bottom, there he found the rune stone, and quickly placed it inside his pouch. As he was about to climb back up, Jarl heard a deep growl coming from the shadows casted by the cliff. From the shadows crept a large beast, its fur white and thick, its claws long and sharp, and its eyes full of hatred and hunger. It was a wendol. Without time to react, the wendol rapidly charged at him, knocking him down prone. The wendol stabbed him with his long claws, and all Jarl could do was scream in pain. Jarl suddenly grabbed his only axe left and attacked the wendol's arm until the wendol leaped back in pain. Jarl stood up but he barely had the strength to hold even his axe, and with the few strength left in him, he reached for his pouch and retrieved the healing rune stone that was given by Hilda and pressed it against his chest. He suddenly felt relief and his wounds closed rapidly, but this did not last for long as the wendol charged him once more, this time trampling him. Jarl observed his surroundings as he lay on the ground; he noticed the entrance of what appears to be the wendol's lair, he noticed most of the ground was covered with bones of diverse animals and humans alike, he noticed the sky was dark, and he also noticed the wendol was weak, perhaps it has been starving for weeks. He mustered all the strength that he could and stoop up holding the dwarven sword with both hands. The wendol proceeded to charge him once again, Jarl patiently waited until the beast leaped, in that moment Jarl used all the strength he had left and tossed the sword at the creature. The sword landed on his chest which made the wendol change his course and smash its head against the walls of the cliff. The mighty wendol fell unconscious. to the ground and so did Jarl.

DAY V

A HURRIED JOURNEY.

When Jarl woke the sky above was dim, not lighter but darker than when he arrived. The wendol still lay unconscious besides him, he paid no attention to the beast. He slowly climbed up the cliff until he reached the top, it was dreary and wearisome. This unnatural clammy winter still head sway on this side of the mountain. From there he walked towards the crystalline cave until he reached the entrance, and climbed down the mountain. By the time he reached the bottom it was already day, a windless and sullen morning. No sun pierced the low clouded sky, and Jarl seemed anxious to continue the journey at once, but the wounds on his body demanded for more rest. Jarl slowly walked as he passed near the corpses of men and dwarves alike, a great battle took place here the day before and Jarl could only wonder if the Sigard those men spoke about was the same as the Sigard from Wotankeld. He briefly searched the bodies lying on the ground in the hopes of finding him, but it was all in vain.

Jarl searched the dwarves who had pouches, he kept on searching them until he found one rune stone. He grabbed the rune stone firmly and "Ehwaz!" he shouted. His body bursted with energy and he sprang across the battle field like he had never ran before. Nine hours had passed and he had not reached Hilda's house yet. At that moment he quickened his pace and came with surprising speed until he reached the house.

Night closed about them. At last Jarl halted in front of the house. Alric was seating outside, he was covered in blood and held an axe firmly in his hand. Jarl looked around and found bodies of men and goblin laying on the ground, a sight that now became too common to Jarl.

"What happened?" asked Jarl.

"We were attacked by goblins and Conrack's men." replied Alric.

"Are you alright, is everyone alright?" asked Jarl.

"Yes they are, you should hurry up inside." answered Alric.

Jarl quickly entered the house and handed the rune stone to Hilda. She placed the rune on Ragnar's forehead, as she did the rune crumbled and the symbol on his forehead disappeared.

"He should be fine now." said Hilda. "We should let him rest, and you should rest too."

Jarl had no time to rest, his village was in danger and he had to warn them before it was too late, but Jarl was weary and had no strength to go on, so he rested until the morning of the next day.

DAY VI

JARL'S GUILT.

Next day Jarl woke early, feeling refreshed but still with a troubled mind. Jarl walked outside and watched the pale, cool sun rise above the far mountains. Alric and Hilsa walked beside him, saying nothing, but looking every now and again with wonder in their eyes.

“Did you encounter Sigard?” said Alric. Jarl’s eye widen, for what he feared it seemed to be true. “I am afraid I did not.” replied Jarl. “I heard he was kept captive by Conrack’s men but I had no time on seeing where he was or rescuing him.”

“He came here an hour after you departed, and from here he went on his own to catch up with you in the hopes of aiding you in your quest.” said Alric.

“I will not be able to forgive me if he did not escape.” said Jarl.

“Escape from where father?” Said a voice behind them. “Ragnar!” They all shouted in joy.

“Are you ok my son?” said Jarl.

“Yes father I feel fine, what happened?” asked Ragnar. Jarl then proceeded on explaining them about his journey and the scorched village, the dwarves, the wendol he fought, the rumors of Sigard being held captive, and the attack would soon occur in his village.

“We should head for the village at once. We only have one day to prepare for their attack.” said Alric. They all traveled south for a couple of hours and then headed west, where they saw the house of the Oracle lay in ruins. They searched but could find no traces of him. They mourned him for they feared the worst.

They kept travelling south until they reached the river. On the landing pier rested a boat, Alric and Jarl quickly set it on the water and sailed away to Wotankeld. After an hour or so of travel, they reached the village, there they were warmly welcomed. Many of them asked about Sigard but none of them could give out a clear answer.

“This is all my fault.” Said Jarl facing Alric. “I should have listened to Sigard.”

“There was no way for you to have guessed Conrack and his men were waiting for you.” said Alric.

“Yet I feel responsible.” Said Jarl. “I will need to give out the warning and prepare the rest of our men for war. You should rest my friend.”

With these words each of them parted. The day of the wolves’ arrival drew near and there was no time to prepare.

DAY VII

THE DAY OF THE WOLF.

So it was that in the light of a fair morning that Jarl met upon the rune stones of his village with his men. They had already called for aid and it was a matter of hours for their reinforcements would arrive. They carefully planned their defenses for the enemy would come from land not the sea. During the course of day several boats arrived at Wotankeld, all filled with warriors from the nearby villages. And they all patiently waited until nightfall.

During the night a mist gathered about them. Above them a few stars still glimmered faintly. Voices they heard, whisperings and groaning and an endless rustling sigh; the earth shook under them. Away south-west, in the middle night men hear a great howl; and all were afraid and no one ventured to go forth. Deep within the mist Jarl could deceive the figure of a tall strong man, he bore many scars and his body was covered mainly in blood.

“Sigard?” said Jarl.

“Is that Sigard?” said Ragnar.

But the figure did not answer. It was Sigard indeed, but he did not speak, he simply grabbed his axe and stood there awaiting for the enemy to come. No one knew what happened to him or how he managed to make it back alive, and no one dared to ask, not even Jarl whos mind was filled with remorse and guilt.

“I am sorry, I did not know.” Said Jarl.

“Save it my thane.” Said Sigard in a furious tone. He felt abandoned and betrayed by his own kinsmen as he risked his life for his thane, and he was left behind to rot, yet he stood beside them and was willing to die for his village, but a silent hatred for Jarl and his son would slowly develop over the course of the years in Sigard’s heart.

All became ominously quiet. Until they heard a great howl again, and another howl after that one, and another after another. They all stood firmly tightening the grip as they held their weapons.

“They are coming...” said Jarl with a mournful voice.

THE END?