

CHAPTER 1 - SKYSHARD

It had stopped snowing. At the foot of the Silfjall Mountain, Eidungruve Hold lay exposed to the frosty blue of the Long Night.

Elward, the young watchman at the top of the gate tower, leaned on his spear. He stared at the crows, circling over the roofs of the buildings, while he waited for the end of his watch. After four hours on the tower, the cold was getting to him. His breath froze in his hairy face, forming icicles in his mustache. For a moment he thought of his wife below in the warmth of the longhouse. She was pregnant. He knew he shouldn't worry, but it was their first time, and it made him nervous.

He started pacing again, the snow crunching under his heavy boots. Six feet forward, six back, the length of his little kingdom.

Something flashed on the edge of his vision. Elward looked up and froze. A tiny ball of light hurtled down from the blue bowl of the sky. It hit the top of Silfjall with a flash, brighter than Thor's bolts. A terrible light engulfed him. He yelled, clutched his eyes, terrified by his sudden blindness. His spear fell to the floor with a thump. He groaned, half bowed, paralyzed with fear, waiting for the end. But the sparks before his eyes died and through his fingers the familiar Long Night returned. *By Thor*, he thought, still shaking. *I thought it was coming for me*. His fingers clawed the railing as he looked at the Hold. He sighed, the longhouse, the barns and the mine buildings beneath him, all were as before. He turned and his heart missed a beat. High up the slope of the Silfjall burned a blue fire. *Oh Gods, what's that?* With trembling hands, he sought the signal horn and blew a single, long note in the silence. The crows fled, cawing in distress, seeking shelter in the woods.

The headman appeared from between the buildings below. He started and stared at the glow on the mountain. Abruptly, he turned around and ran into the longhouse.

Elward shook his spear at the headman's back. 'Damn you, I'm up here, nitwit! I've got a report.' No one heard him. He glanced at the light, pulsing on the mountain like something evil.

The headman returned with someone else and Elward stiffened. Lord Holder Alman's wide-legged walk was unmistakable. For a moment, the men on the ground stared at the light and then they came up the ladder to his high post. The Holder moved slowly, as if his old wound pained him.

Elward slammed his fist to his shoulder in a salute as his lord stepped onto the platform.

Holder Alman nodded toward the blue glow. 'Where did that come from? When did it begin?'

'Only just now, Lord,' said Elward.

The Holder's eyes narrowed in their hollow sockets. 'Be precise, man. How long is just?'

'About half a watchman's round of the palisade,' said Elward, keeping silent about his moment of blindness. Stiffly, he made his report, conscious of his lord's searching gaze. He let out a sigh of relief when the Holder turned his head back to the light on the mountain.

'It is in the high pasture,' said the Holder. 'Is it a sign? But of what?'

Disaster, thought the watchman. He didn't dare voice his thoughts. The Holder would think it a sign of weakness and Alman hated weaklings.

The Holder turned to his headman. 'Send for my son.' Without another look at the light, he climbed carefully back down.

Kjelle stroked Ema's cheek and blew a strand of blonde hair from her ear. She giggled as he put his hand on her breast. Her pose shifted, as if she invited him to lie down next to her. His thumb stroked her nipple and she moaned. 'Yes, oh yes.'

His other hand pulled the brooch from her second shoulder strap. Swiftly he dragged both apron-skirt and shift down. Ema cried softly as Kjelle buried his face between her breasts. Her arms pulled him down on top of her. 'Hurry,' said she, as he started to roll up her long dress.

The door flew open. 'Holderling, your father wants you.'

Kjelle's face went from outrage to guilty shock. 'My father?'

The old freedman on the threshold nodded. 'Yes, it is urgent.' His eyes stared at the girl and he grinned. 'Very urgent.'

Hastily, Kjelle jumped from the bed and pulled Ema after him. 'I must go. Away with you.'

The girl pouted while she tried to straighten her dress.

Kjelle put his arm around her waist and half dragged her from his room. Chagrin colored his thoughts. *Damn, I almost had her.* His manhood moved at the feel of the chubby girl's body and he sighed. *Later.*

His father sat upright in the box seat that kept his valuables. Holder Alman had been a feared warrior once, till he got a spear in his crotch. That battle had been years ago, but the pain had never left him and he looked a shadow of his former self. Only his mind remained sharp as the dagger at his belt, and almost as deadly. Kjelle bowed his head, aware of the sweat on his face. Although he was a brawny fellow, his father still made him feel like a child.

'You have seen the light?' said the Holder.

Kjelle hadn't seen anything but the girl on his bed. Still, he gave a curt nod. 'Yes, Lord.'

Alman growled. 'Could you tear yourself away long enough?'

Kjelle clenched his jaw; of course his father knew of the girl. He knew everything.

Holder Alman didn't wait for an answer. 'A piece of the sky fell on our mountain.' The Holder gave his son a thoughtful look. 'You're of age now. It's time for you to prove that you're a man out of bed, as well. Take three guards and go to the high pasture. Hagen is one of the three. Use his experience and heed his advice. Stay on the path, then the snow will be safe enough. Report to me as soon as possible.

Kjelle felt cold terror drain the blood from his face. *Must I go to the top of the Silfjall for a ... a light?* With an effort, he managed to hide his panic. 'Immediately, Lord.' He saluted as the soldiers did, fist to the shoulder. Sick with fear, he ran from his father's room into the great hall. 'Muus. Where are you, misbegotten spawn of a pig?'

Creaking, the old beech parted from its roots. The earth trembled as the giant tree came down with a scatter of snow and broken branches. 'That's five.' Harald Enske lodged his ax into the stump. He wiped the sweat from his face. 'Enough for today.' The old karl looked around the group. 'Well done, men.' His eyes rested on one of the weary faces. 'You too, Muus. We'll make a real Nord of you, one of these days.' The freedmen grinned at the foreman's jest.

Muus forced a smile, but said nothing. As a slave since childhood, he'd often been the butt of crude jokes, and hard hands had taught him not to show offense. He was sixteen now, a man, and every remark strengthened his resolve to run. His mind wandered to the countless escape plans he'd made and rejected. To run was one thing, to run and stay alive was quite something else. Holder Alman would go to any lengths to recapture an escaped slave and Muus knew he looked nothing like a Nord. He'd once seen himself, reflected in a pool of water. He'd seen his thin, pale face, half hidden behind tangled black hair. It wasn't a Nord's face at all. Besides, he was too

small. Nord's were half as much taller than he. Loki's Joking, even many of their children topped him with ease. Running was not an option. Therefore, he waited and nursed his longing. His head filled with fantasies, he walked into a tree and yelped.

'Ya dreamin', slave boy?' Red Orn, a warrior with a long, ruddy beard, grinned, his rotten teeth bare. 'Y'are a maid, then?' He licked his lips.

Muus' face flushed, and he blessed the Long Night that veiled his shame. For someone to call him a girl was naming him unmanly, a mortal insult. With another Nord, this would've been a fighting matter. However, he was only a thrall. He had no honor, and he couldn't defend himself.

Orn grinned and gave him a poke with his elbow, so that he almost tripped.

'Watch where you're goin', you,' said Harald Enske without looking.

Muus clenched his fists and hurried to the front. *Orn, that brainless grub*. What made it worse, the warrior was one of Kjelle's toadies. Holderling Kjelle, his master and owner.

'Muus.' Kjelle stormed out of the longhouse, red-faced with anger. 'Why didn't you come when I called? I'll teach you not to listen.' He raised his hand to strike, when the calm voice of Harald Enske made him pause.

'Your thrall was with the logging crew, Holderling,' said the foreman.

Kjelle cursed, but he couldn't say anything without losing face. In his agitation he had forgotten he'd sent his slave away with the men into the forest, to have him out of the way while he was bedding the girl. He balled his fist. 'You're late.'

'The supper bell hasn't rung yet,' said Harald. 'We've downed five trees. That takes time.'

Kjelle took a deep breath. Why must they always argue with him? No one took him seriously. And that treacherous slave with his underhand tricks... Damn, he'd teach him. He shook his fist in Muus' face. 'We're going up the mountain. Old Siga's got a bag with my stuff ready. Pick it up and come right back. We leave immediately.'

'It's near the evening meal,' said Harald. 'Like every man here, Muus worked hard today.'

'By Thor!' shouted Kjelle. 'Do what I say. Get those things, we leave now.' While Muus hurried inside, the Holderling looked around the group. 'Hagen comes. I need two more men.' He pointed to Orn. 'You.' The ruddy warrior grinned, as if he were proud to be chosen. Orn would support his decisions. Not like Hagen, his father's *experienced* man. His glance fell on Jal. A timid lad, but a good fighter. 'You too. Go get your gear.' Then he looked up to the blue light on the mountain. *It's alves*.' He shuddered. *Svartalves*. 'Thor's Hammer, why must I go? I am the Holderling.' He realized too late that he had spoken aloud. Luckily, only Harald Enske was still with him.

'You're the Holderling,' said the foreman softly. 'That brings responsibilities. The men expect a leader, Kjelle. A fearless captain.'

Kjelle bit his lip. Harald was a man with authority, not someone to antagonize. 'I know.' He looked again at the light on the mountain. The blue light seemed full of invisible dangers. Alves with wicked axes, like in the old tales. *I can't. What should I do?* The fear fed his anger. What's keeping that bastard Muus? He wanted to shout, to vent his rage, but he forced the feeling down. He was the Holderling.

'Snowshoes?' Siga stared at Muus. 'Are you going up the mountain? After a full day's work in the forest?' She shook her head. 'Well, you're out of luck, lad; I've only this pair left. They are a bit small, even for you. Here is the young lord's backpack. And then ...' She hesitated. 'There is something about that light on the mountain. Something I should remember. Last night I dreamed of ravens. Ravens over Eidungruve.' Her wrinkled face looked troubled as she looked at Muus.

‘Then I saw you and Kjelle in the snow in a forest, alone. A man came, an old one-eye with a beard. It was an oppressive dream, full of anger. Kjelle and you ... You are not friends.’

The Wisewoman was one of the few people who treated him as a human being instead of a lowly thrall, so Muus wasn’t afraid to look her in the eye. ‘Lady, I’m his slave, he is the Holderling of Eidungruve. How can I be his friend?’

‘Friendship between a Nord and his thrall is not uncommon.’

‘Between me and Kjelle Almansen it is, Wisewoman. Too often I felt his hard fist; too often I swallowed his insults.’

Siga sighed. ‘Kjelle is not his father. Everyone follows Holder Alman blindly, but his son has yet to prove his worth. He could make a good leader, if he had more confidence.’ Again, she shook her head, and her long, gray braids danced. ‘He needs your help.’

Muus lowered his eyes and remained silent.

All hesitation vanished from Siga's eyes. ‘Wait.’ She turned to a chest against the wall. Muus watched how she moved herb satchels and small woven caskets, strings of colorful beads, large feathers of a strange animal and other paraphernalia of her craft. Mysterious things that piqued Muus’ curiosity. Siga was a Wisewoman, follower of Freya and a weaver of spells. *Seidr* magic was a woman’s art; men shouldn’t know too much about such things. He frowned, somehow that thought rang hollow.

Then Siga turned back and held her hand out to him. From her fingers dangled a tiny bone on a leather lace. ‘Here, this is yours. You wore it when they brought you here. It has power, but no type that I recognize or can use. Put it on, quick; Kjelle is waiting. Remember my words.’

The little bone was dry and light in Muus' hand. There was a rune word on it, but it was a sign he couldn’t read. ‘What is it? A finger bone? What does it mean?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Siga. ‘It is a finger bone. A human bone and it must be very old. I do not now this rune; perhaps it is a power word. It is male magic; I cannot read that. You will have to find out by yourself.’

Male magic? Was there such a thing? With some trepidation, Muus put the finger bone around his neck. Nothing happened. He shrugged; of course it didn’t work, he wasn’t a Wiseman. Stifling a curse, he hung Kjelle’s pack on his back and grabbed the snowshoes. The amulet had to wait, or Kjelle would burst a blood vessel. If only he did... With a curt ‘thanks’ to Siga, he hurried outside.

‘Muus.’ The arrogant voice of his lord cut through the silent mountain air. ‘Hurry up, you lazybones.’

‘Yes, master.’ Muus moved his shoulders. The straps of the backpack cut into his meager shoulders and bit into his bone. The thick layer of snow on the trail numbed his toes and made him stumble. He hurried to keep up. Of course he was slow. He had rags for boots and the oldest, most worn snowshoes of all Eidungruve. A child’s pair, too small for even his feet. Curse them to Helheim. How could they expect him to walk on these? With balled fists, he stared at the beautifully made snowshoes and the sturdy leather boots of Jal in front of him. Boots. That was a dream. Expensive boots were not for slaves. Holder Alman was a hard master. Hard for everyone: himself, his karls, his cattle, his thralls. For everyone except his son. Holderling Kjelle was a spoiled blowhard, afraid of his own shadow. One of Muus' snowshoes struck a rock and he almost fell. Red Orn laughed at his wild arm waving.

‘The little man wants to fly,’ said he with a dirty grin. ‘Shall I help you, boy?’ He shoved Muus, who ended up sprawled in the snow.

Kjelle snorted with rage. ‘Use your eyes, stupid.’

Before Muus could move, Kjelle's hard hands pulled him to his feet and slapped him in the face. 'Now go.'

Muus tasted the blood dripping down his chin. He grabbed a handful of fresh snow from the ground and pressed it to his nose, while he hurried after the others.

Halfway up the mountain they paused. In the valley below Muus saw the longhouses and the silver mine of Eidungruve, contrasting with the dark blue of the Long Night. A door opened and warm light shone. Warmth, the thought brought tears to his eyes. A plume of smoke rose from the bake-house, conjuring up images of Siga's fresh bread and hot porridge. For a moment, Muus thought he could smell the food and his stomach cried out. That mangy mongrel Kjelle was so fanatical to prove himself to his father, that his thrall missed his meal. And for what? To disturb the spirits of the mountain? Unwise foolishness. Cold, hungry and spitting mad, Muus turned away from the view across the valley.

'Muus,' commanded Kjelle. 'Come here. I'm hungry.'

The young slave hurried to his master, who without a word began rummaging in the backpack.

'Ah,' said Kjelle pleased, pulling out a round loaf of bread and a piece of cheese wrapped in linen. Eagerly he set his teeth in the bread, while Muus, seething, repacked his ransacked bag.

When the Holderling had eaten his fill, he threw the last chunk of bread to Muus. 'Here, that puny body of yours doesn't need much.'

The youngest of the three karls, Jal of the Fine Boots, waited until Kjelle had turned his back and shoved a chunk of hard cheese in Muus' hands. 'Take it,' said he. 'I have enough.'

Muus brought his hand to his head in thanks, his heart filled with bitter resentment. Jal's well-intentioned gift hurt his pride as much as Kjelle's beatings. Just in time he stuffed the chunk into his mouth, because Kjelle gestured them back on the path. Muus started to walk again, his curses stifled by the cheese.

After a bend in the path, Hagen halted. He peered at the ground, uncertain like a hound that found a fresh bear track. 'Holderling, the snow - I don't trust it.'

Kjelle cast a suspicious glance at the ground. 'What about it?'

The karl hesitated. 'I don't know if it is safe to go further. The snow isn't solid. An avalanche ...'

'Nonsense,' said Kjelle, turning away. 'The slope looks fine. Keep moving; we're almost at the high pasture.'

The nearer they came to the plateau where in summer the sheep grazed, the brighter the blue glow became. The last stretch seemed like walking through the cold fires of Helheim, past rocks and snow, covered with dancing light. Muus glanced at Kjelle's face. He noticed the glistening sweat on Kjelle's forehead, the staring eyes and the hasty white puffs of his breathing. Muus knew Kjelle was scared. Muus remembered Kjelle's training sessions with Oskar, the drunken, blustering weapon master. Muus had been there, guarding the Holderling's weapons, watching his master fight, sweating and shaking, while Oskar shouted and pressed him. Kjelle was always angry after those sessions with Oskar, angry at his slave, never at the weapon master. Muus laughed soundlessly. Kjelle must be the only Nord who'd completed his manhood's Testing by hunting a nearly dead bear. Muus had been there. He'd carried his master's spears and he knew someone else had gone first and done the real work. It was because the Holderling's life was precious and he couldn't be risked, people said. Muus knew the truth. The Holderling with his blustery mouth and his hard hands was scared.

After three hours on the mountain, they reached the plateau where the sheep grazed in summertime.

‘By Thor’s Beard.’ whispered Kjelle. In the middle of the field was a round hole, about a foot deep and round as the shield of a giant. The blue light radiated from the shield’s center.

The men murmured uneasily. ‘Alf work,’ shouted Orn. ‘We must get away from here, before the svartalves drag us into the mountain.’ Muus saw his whole face contort in fear.

‘Svartalves are a bard’s tale,’ said Hagen. ‘Shut up and wait for orders.’ He looked at Kjelle.

The Holderling wiped the sweat from his face. ‘Go see what it is,’ said he, poking his slave.

Muus shrugged. The blue glow didn’t scare him and he walked into the circle. The light enveloped him as if in welcome. In the middle lay a shard the color of a cloudless winter sky, translucent like a lump of ice and as big as the palm of his hand. This was where the glow came from. Without thinking, Muus picked up the shard. A noiseless flash covered him; a sharp pain came and went. As he stood there in a daze, staring at the glowing stone, Kjelle came up to him.

‘What have you got there?’ he snapped. ‘Give it to me.’ The Holderling held out a compelling hand.

Muus started to give him the stone, when a voice in his head said, ‘No.’

‘No?’ said Kjelle in disbelief.

With a shock, Muus realized that he had spoken aloud.

His master exploded in wrath. ‘You mangy rat! Give it to me, or I’ll leave your carcass here for the wolves.’

The skyshard strengthened Muus’ resolve and he shook his head. ‘It’s mine,’ said he in a soft voice. ‘I found it.’

‘You’re a slave,’ yelled Kjelle. ‘Nothing is yours.’ He grabbed Muus’ hand and squeezed.

Muus tried to break free, but the Holderling was stronger. When Kjelle bent his middle finger back, he had to give in. He opened his hand and eagerly Kjelle grabbed the blue stone. The moment his fingers touched the shiny surface, a thunderclap echoed against the top of the Silfjall and shook the plateau. A massive tremor threw Kjelle and Muus hard against the mountainside. From somewhere came a cry of deadly fear, which was drowned out by a growling like the awakening of a large, hungry snow bear. Dazed, Muus saw an immense load of snow pass within an arm’s length of where he lay. Without thinking, he pressed himself against the mountain, his ears filled with the wild roar of the avalanche. It happened in three or four heartbeats, before a final boulder bounced past and a swirling cloud of fine powder rose above the pasture. The roar died into deep silence.