

CHAPTER 1 – SKYSHARD

It had stopped snowing. At the foot of the Silfjall Mountain, Eidungruve Hold lay exposed to the frosty blue of the polar 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, crunching the snow 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 polar 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.

A man appeared from between the buildings below. Elward recognized Oskar, the weaponmaster of Eidungruve's troops. The big warrior halted and stared at the glow on the mountain. Abruptly, he turned around and ran into the house.

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

Shortly, the weaponmaster returned with someone else and Elward stiffened. Theyn Alman's wide-legged walk was unmistakable. For a moment, the men on the ground stood watching the light, and then they came up the ladder to his high post. The lord 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. His heart beat faster; Theyn Alman was a stern man. Lord of a rich silver mine and a theyn, a close companion of the king. His people both feared and respected him as a hard but fair leader.

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

'Only just now, lord,' Elward said.

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

'About half a watchman's round of the palisade,' Elward said, 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 theyn turned his head back to the light on the mountain.

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

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

The theyn turned to his weaponmaster. '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 left breast. She moved, as if inviting him. Kjelle's thumb stroked her nipple and she moaned. 'Yes, oh yes.'

His other hand pulled the bronze pin from her remaining 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,' she said, as he rolled up her long dress.

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

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

The old freedman on the threshold nodded. 'Yes, it is urgent.' His rheumy eyes inspected 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 grimly upright in the box seat that kept his valuables. He 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?' the theyn said.

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.

Theyn Alman didn't wait for an answer. 'A piece of the sky fell on our mountain.' The theyn 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 get 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 and wiped the sweat from his face. 'Enough for today; well done.' The old foreman looked around the group. 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. Theyn Alman would go to any lengths to recapture an escaped slave and Muus knew he looked nothing like a Nord. The men of the Norden were big, muscled and loud; Muus wasn't. 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 polar night that veiled his shame. A maid! With another Nord, this would've been a deadly insult. He was but a slave, without 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,' Harald Enske said 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. Theynling 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 slave was with the logging crew, Theynling,' the foreman said.

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,' Harald said. '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,' Harald said. 'Like every man here, Muus worked hard today.'

'By Thor!' Kjelle shouted. 'Do what I say. Get those things, we leave now.'

While Muus hurried inside, the theynling looked around the group. 'Hagen goes. 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.'

He looked up to the blue light on the mountain. *It's alves.* He thought of the wicked little beings that lived inside the mountains, and he shuddered. *Svartalves.* 'Thor's Hammer, why must I go? I am the theynling.' He realized too late that he had spoken aloud. Luckily, only Harald Enske was still with him.

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

Kjelle bit his lip. Harald was a man of authority, not someone to antagonize. 'I know.' He looked again at 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 theynling.

‘Snowshoes?’ Siga stared at Muus. ‘Are you going up the mountain? After a full day’s work in the forest?’ She shook her head. ‘You’re out of luck, lad; I’ve only this pair left. They are a bit small, even for you. Here is the theynling’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 slave, so Muus wasn’t afraid to look her in the eye.

‘Lady, I’m his slave, he is the theynling of Eidungruve. How can I be his friend?’

‘Friendship between a Nord and his slave 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 Theyn 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. ‘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,’ Siga said. ‘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 master cut through the silent mountain air. ‘Hurry up, you lazybones.’

‘Yes, master.’ Muus moved his shoulders. The straps of the backpack cut into his thin 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. Theyn Alman was a hard master. Hard for everyone: himself, his soldiers, his cattle, his slaves. For everyone except his son. Theynling 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,' he said 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 polar 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 slave 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,' Kjelle commanded. 'Come here. I'm hungry.'

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

'Ah,' Kjelle said, pleased, as he pulled 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 theynling 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 soldiers, Jal of the Fine Boots, waited until Kjelle had turned his back and shoved a chunk of hard cheese in Muus' hands. 'Take it,' he said. 'I have had 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 walked on, 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. 'Theynling, the snow—I don't trust it.'

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

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

'Nonsense,' Kjelle said, 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. He remembered Kjelle's training sessions with Oskar, the drunken, blustering weapon master. Muus

had been there, bearing the theynling'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 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. The theynling's life was precious and he couldn't be risked, people said. Muus knew the truth. The theynling with his blustery mouth and his hard hands was scared.

After three hours on the mountain, they reached high pasture.

'By Thor's Beard,' Kjelle whispered. 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,' Orn shouted. '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,' Hagen said. 'Shut up and wait for orders.' He looked at Kjelle.

The theynling wiped the sweat from his face. 'Go see what it is,' he said, 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 theynling held out a compelling hand.

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

'No?' Kjelle said 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.'

Somehow, the skyshard strengthened Muus' resolve and he shook his head. 'It's mine,' he said in a soft voice. 'I found it.'

'You're a slave,' Kjelle shouted. 'Nothing is yours.' He grabbed Muus' hand and squeezed.

Muus tried to break free, but the theynling 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.

It took a while before Muus found the courage to crawl out from under the narrow overhang that had saved his life. He stared in horror at the immense swath of bare rock the avalanche had left. No more snow, no more grass, the summer meadow had been ruined.

A sudden cramp penetrated through the shock and he looked at his hand. His fingers were stiff from holding on to the blue shard. All the light had gone; the stone lay cold and lifeless in his palm. He put it in the pouch he wore around his neck.

He tried to stand, but something clutched his ankles. Gazing down, he saw his old snowshoes, broken and useless. He cursed as he tore them from his feet, and walked to the edge of the precipice. Here, he stiffened. Below him, the hold, if there was anything left of it, lay hidden, unreachable behind a barrier of snow. Muus suppressed a scream and threw the snowshoes over the edge.

An immense calm came over him. This was it. There was no going back. The three Norns had cut his life thread; he'd die on this plateau. He turned around and saw Kjelle, curled up in the shadow of the overhang. A little further away lay Hagen, as a shapeless heap at the foot of the mountainside. Jal with his fine boots and Orn the Red Braggart had disappeared. Over the edge, probably.

He walked back to his master. Kjelle was unconscious; his face saw deathly pale and a trickle of blood ran down from a gash in his forehead. Muus bent over him. He thought of all the times this coward had humiliated him and he felt his anger rise. His hand went for his knife, but with the blade half-drawn, he hesitated. *No. I can't just murder the bastard.* He resheated his knife and hurried over to Hagen.

To his surprise, the soldier still lived. There was blood in his beard and his legs lay folded in an odd angle under his body, but his eyes were alert.

'Well?' he asked when Muus knelt beside him.

The young slave shook his head. 'Everything is gone. I couldn't see Eidungruve, and the path down has been obliterated. It's over, Hagen.'

'For me,' the man said. 'Not for you. Listen, there's a tunnel. A crack in the mountainside; it leads through the mountain. Old Garn fell down it. Took him all summer, but he came back.'

'Truly?' Muus knew his voice was hoarse with sudden hope. 'I thought it was just a tall story. Where is that tunnel?'

'Follow the mountain side. The theyn had large rocks placed around the hole to prevent the sheep from falling in.'

'I'll find it. How are you?'

'Done for,' the soldier said. 'Them snowshoes have broken me legs.' He growled. 'The damned things themselves are still intact. Where are Jal, Orn, and the theynling?'

Muus gestured with his head. 'Jal and Orn have disappeared; the avalanche must have taken them. Kjelle is over there. He's unconscious, but alive.' Something of his disgust must have crept into his voice, for Hagen grimaced.

'Don't hurt him.' He balled a weak fist. 'I know how he treated you, it wasn't right. You're free now. Flee if you want, but let Kjelle live.'

Muus nodded. 'Don't worry. I haven't forgotten so much of my honor, that I would kill an unconscious opponent.'

Hagen relaxed. 'I knew you were a good lad. Straight away I saw it when I bought you at that slave auction. You were the only child that didn't cry.'

'You bought me? Why?' Muus remembered a man who took him away from the auction. His voice had sounded friendly, but he'd been as faceless as all other memories.

‘Theyn Alman instructed me to get a little boy as a slave for Kjelle. He needed a companion. Friendships between master and slave aren’t uncommon.’

‘Ha!’ Muus’ laugh was bitter. ‘Siga said the same—it must have been something you ate. Kjelle and I, friends? Not on this side of Godsdammer.’

‘We saw that soon enough,’ Hagen said with difficulty. ‘Kjelle hated you from the moment he laid eyes on you. Don’t know why. Only that he’s ... not as brave as you.’

‘Kjelle is a coward. Nobody knows that better than you, Kjelle’s bear-killer.’

A spasm crossed Hagen’s face. ‘You know that. Look, Kjelle was the theyn’s only child. Alman’s wound... His terrible secret was the loss of his manhood’s balls in that last battle. The theyn won’t beget any more offspring. As a result he became overprotective of his son, turning the lad into a spoiled weakling.’ Hagen coughed and a trickle of blood leaked from his mouth. ‘Broken ribs.’ He coughed again, pressing his hand to his mouth. ‘Alman repents his coddling. That’s why he sent Kjelle up here.’ The old soldier looked at Muus. ‘Bring the theynling to me, will you? I’ve a request.’

The young slave rose. ‘I’ll fetch him.’

Kjelle sat with his arms clasped around his legs, his head between his knees. As Muus neared he looked up, his face wet with tears.

‘Did you see it?’ Muus said cruelly. ‘Your hold is gone. And your avalanche has wiped out the mountain path. We can’t go back, Kjelle. We’ll die here.’

His master didn’t react. All his bluster had disappeared with the avalanche and naked distress stared from his eyes.

Muus snorted. ‘Hagen’s asking for you. His ribs and his legs are broken.’

Without a word, Kjelle came to his feet.

When they returned to Hagen, Muus found the soldier had wrestled himself out of his cloak and his heavy coat.

‘What are you *doing*?’ he said. ‘You’re wounded.’

‘You take ‘m,’ the soldier said, his face drawn and sweaty. ‘The coat’s warm. Real snow wolf.’ For a moment, his hand stroked the hair plumes along the seam. ‘I killed him meself, when you were small.’ Then he looked at Kjelle. ‘Theynling, I’m of no more use—dead, but for the dying. Let me go like a warrior, by your hand, so that I can enter Valhalla.’

Kjelle’s face was ashen. ‘I ...’ His hand went to his hunting knife and Muus saw how he trembled. The theynling put the tip of the knife into the spot under Hagen’s sternum and froze. With eyes wide with horror, he stared at the precious steel.

Hagen looked at him and seemed to understand his fear. ‘I’m your father’s man, Kjelle. And you are your father’s son. The warrior’s death is my right and your duty, Kjelle Almansen.’

Kjelle hesitated. ‘I can’t.’

‘Do it,’ Hagen whispered. ‘Spare me the suffering, lord.’

Kjelle stared at the knife while the tears ran down his face.

‘I can’t. I ...’

‘Ah, Kjelle, cowardly dog!’ Muus cried. ‘Here then, old Nord.’ He brought his hand down on Kjelle’s fist. The blade plunged deep into Hagen’s chest. The soldier jerked once, his life departing with the blood flowing from his mouth and it was over.

Kjelle stared at Hagen, at the knife and then at Muus. ‘He’s dead,’ he said, and with a trace of his normal anger: ‘Why did you do that?’

‘Why didn’t you?’

Kjelle grew red. 'You ... You ... ' Then his hands pounded Muus' face. Muus had expected something and rolled away. Kjelle dived after him, lashing out with his fist. Muus' head snapped back and he yelled. With Kjelle's fists beating his chest and shoulders, Muus' hands searched for something with which to strike the theynling. *A stone.* he prayed. Instead, he found something metallic. The grip of a sword. Hagen's sword, which had escaped from its sheath during the soldier's fall. Kjelle crouched over Muus, nose to nose, his hands around Muus' neck. The young slave fought for air. With his last strength, he hit Kjelle hard with the sword knob on his temple. Kjelle screamed. His grip slackened and Muus managed to push him away. Muus came to his knees and placed the tip of the sword on Kjelle's throat. 'Are you done?' Splashes of blood from his chin dripped onto Kjelle's coat. 'Are you done or must I kill you?'

Kjelle stared at him with murder in his eyes, but then all the tension flowed out of him. His eyes filled with tears and he nodded. 'Was it true what you said?'

'That we can't go down? Yes, the avalanche swept away the last trees and wiped out the path. At the bottom, you'll see only snow and broken trunks. The hold must be buried deep.'

'Let me get up,' Kjelle said without a trace of his earlier arrogance. 'I must see.'

Muus put the sword under his arm. 'Come.'

Near the edge of the plateau, Kjelle stopped and stared into the valley for a long time. 'You're right,' he said at last. 'We are cut off. It is our fate to die here.'

'We'll see,' Muus said. 'But first I must have other clothes. You're warmly dressed,' said he with a look at Kjelle's handsome coat. 'I'm not.'

'Of course not,' Kjelle said. 'My coat cost more than a new slave.'

Muus spat on the ground, but said he nothing. He knew that Kjelle was right. At Hagen's body, he began to untie the snowshoes from the dead man's feet. The old soldier's boots fit Muus over his own leg wraps and the heavy coat of snow wolf fur came to his knees. He buckled Hagen's sword belt over it and sheathed the weapon defiantly.

Kjelle's eyes followed his every move. 'Slaves aren't allowed to bear swords.'

Muus looked at him. 'I should've given it to you, I suppose? After you tried to strangle me? I'm not crazy, Kjelle.'

The theynling's face twitched. 'I'm your master.'

'No longer.' Muus grinned without a trace of humor. 'I'm a free man. And you can't prove I'm not.'

A spasm of anger passed over Kjelle's face. 'The word of the theynling of Eidungruve against yours?'

Muus' grin became sharper. 'How can you prove that you are who you say you are, theynling?'

Kjelle's eyes widened. 'But I ...'

Muus saw with malicious pleasure how Kjelle realized the truth. He hadn't been presented at court yet, no one outside of Eidungruve knew him. Without a headman at his side, without the sword of his father in his hand, without money and fine clothes, Kjelle was nobody. Then his broad shoulders sank and his clenched fists relaxed. 'I see it now.'

Muus looked at Kjelle's face and recognized the mix of shock, fear, and the strange helplessness that so often preceded one of his rages. But not this time.

'I must go down,' Kjelle said after a while. 'I must know if Eidungruve still exists.'

Muus was silent for a moment. *And I? Do I go with him? Now is my chance to run. Only... where will I go?* He felt heat on his chest and without thinking his hand went to the stone under his tunic. It radiated warmth and as he put his hand over the pouch, the semi-darkness of the polar night faded. Instead, a landscape of red rocks under a broiling sun appeared. With a surprised

yelp he pulled his hand back. The hot vision dissolved into the cold present. He blinked. *Was that a dream? I felt the heat on my skin.* He saw Kjelle staring at him, with a lost look in his eyes. Muus rubbed his face. *I can't trust him.* But he knew he couldn't run and let the oaf fend for himself. Not here on the mountain.

'What will you do with Hagen? We can't bury him here and most stones went down with the avalanche. Still, you don't want him to go walking as a draug.'

Kjelle froze. 'By Thor, no.' He went over to the dead soldier. After a moment's hesitation, he closed the staring eyes and straightened the body in the snow. 'I'll come back for you, Hagen.' His voice trembled. 'Sleep, brave Nord, you don't have to walk. You will receive an honorable burial. I, Kjelle Almansen, so swear.' Then he straightened his back. 'Let's go.'

'Aren't you forgetting anything?'

'What?'

Muus gestured around. 'There's no way down.'

'If we stay here, we'll die,' Kjelle said with despair in his voice. 'We have to get down.'

Muus nodded. 'Sure. But not along the vanished path.' He nodded to the heavy backpack. 'Your turn to wear it.'

Kjelle opened his mouth and closed it again. Without a word, he hung the pack on his back.

The two followed the side of the mountain until Muus saw the spot Hagen had described. There was a dark opening in the base of the rock wall, with large stones around it.

'There's our way out.'

'A hole in the mountain?' Kjelle's voice rose. 'That's svartalf work.'

Muus shrugged. 'Perhaps. According to Hagen it is a tunnel.' His smile was grim. 'Old Garn's Tunnel.'

Kjelle howled like a wolf with his paw in a trap. 'Garn! He had to defeat hundreds of monsters before he passed through the mountain.'

'Old Garn was a great storyteller,' Muus said. 'Hearing him, he'd been eaten a dozen times. Listen, theynling, we've no choice. We can't stay here. Down the slope is suicide. Through the tunnel we may have a chance. And if not, you can show me how bravely a Nord dies.'

The scornful undertone in Muus' words had effect, for with a cry of despair, Kjelle leapt into the hole.