

CHAPTER ONE



He was a sickly baby so his father took him to the beach and left him on the wrack-strewn pebbles for time and tide to claim a life not meant to be.

A kind man, his father had set out twice to do his duty, returning each time with the baby still in his arms. On the third occasion, his arms were empty. The mother flew through the door like a Valkyrie, her obedience tested beyond limits. As she later told the tale, she searched every cove and crevice for days, without food, drink or sleep, until she came across the cormorant.

It stuttered at her and opened its wings in warning, shielding its treasure on rocks velvety-green with moss. The treasure began to cry, the wail of a hungry baby, and the mother scrambled onto the rock, defied the bird's anger, to snatch her baby from the nest and latch him onto her breast.

The cormorant stabbed her once with its beak, drawing blood from her cheek but she ignored it, feeling only the unexpected warmth of the baby in her arms. Warm, like the two other nestlings still huddling under the broody bird, which fixed her in a glassy-eyed stare, demanding what was owed.

What was due for the life of a baby? How could she free him from a debt to the otherworld?

His mother held him up to show the bird.

‘Skarfr,’ she named the baby. ‘Cormorant.’

The bird shook its wings, shaking sea-drops over them both in a salty baptism.

Without words, the cormorant told Skarfr’s mother that he would make sagas. She accepted this fate on his behalf along with a bone shard that the bird pushed towards her to seal their compact. Then she climbed down carefully, clutching him in her arms, watched by beady eyes as green as the moss. The cormorant stayed by its chicks and let her leave.

His mother, Kristin, bore the scar until the day she died. She said she deserved it. She told his father that the gods had returned their son to make sagas and had named him Skarfr but that he could follow whatever Christian naming rites he wished. And he could beat her for disobedience. But the baby was staying.

His father told her to hush. Whether he had no stomach for a fourth trudge to the beach or whether he accepted the gods’ intervention, he kept both the baby and the bone, saying nothing was ever so bad that something good couldn’t come of it.

The family lurched from one meagre meal to the next until Skarfr was seven years old. No further babies were born, or if they were, no cormorant intervened in their fate.

Desperate for plunder to trade for livestock, the father accompanied his lordship the Jarl on a raiding trip and was axed in the head as blood payment for some grievance against that same lord. The father’s name became a byword for loyalty. The longships returned and the father’s promise of riches was kept despite the inconvenience of his death. The Jarl paid generous compensation and the mother was now a wealthy widow. The family was allocated a longhouse, a cow, some sheep, chickens, and even a pony.

‘The price of a man’s murder,’ his mother said, as she inspected the cold hearth at the centre of cosy living quarters. Stone walls were caulked with peat and only one weakness in the patchwork roof allowed Orkney’s bitter wind to knife through, cutting smoke into choking backdraughts.

When the hearth was aglow and the fish smoking above it, the shades of a man, his wife and his son formed in the grey wisps and vanished into the sky. Or so it seemed.

‘Your father would have been happy here,’ she said, watching the smoke, her face so lined with poverty that grief left no trace.

She died of an ague within a year of his father’s death. Her last words were, ‘Always remember how your father was rewarded for his loyalty to the Jarl of Orkneyjar.’ Presumably she meant the longhouse. Skarfr was left rich and alone, too young to be either.

As was the custom, foster-parents were sought and their suitability debated at the Thing, their local council. Usually, an orphan would have many foster-homes, with perhaps a year in each to spread the burden, but in his case volunteers were torn between greed and fear. Skarfr’s wealth meant he would need one foster-father until he came of age but the rumours of how he got his name made good Christians cross themselves and many men fingered the hammer amulets beneath their jerkins.

‘Unnatural, touched by the gods,’ they whispered when they thought he couldn’t hear.

As always, the ruling jarl spoke for peace and found a solution that nobody could find fault with. Except Skarfr. And what did an eight-year-old know? A lot, as it turned out.

Botolf Begla, a skald newly arrived from the Old Country, was lodging with a family who needed more space and – so Botolf said – who dried up his inspiration with their ceaseless tattle. A skald as famous as Botolf for his poetry and sagas merited better.

Killing two birds with one stone, the Thing chose Botolf as foster-father so he formally adopted a boy now called Skarfr

Botolffson. In silence, the boy refused the name. He was Skarfr Kristinsson, for the two mothers who'd nurtured him.

Botolf moved into the longhouse that would not be Skarfr's for eight years, if his foster-father judged him ready, or for up to thirteen years, should such a judgement be withheld. Botolf began training him as a skald. And beating him when he forgot to feed the chickens or milk the cow, or when he let the fire go out. Or when he could only think of *eagle-feeder* as a poetic term for warrior and forgot all the others he'd been taught. His master was a peerless skald but a poor teacher. Even so, despite lashings from tongue and whip, Skarfr learned.

When Botolf acquired a male thrall to do the heavy work, and a female one to tend to the house and cook, Skarfr's duties lessened and his training as skald intensified. At first, the thralls made overtures of kindness to him but when he opened his mouth to reply to their soft-spoken questions, he saw Botolf's body freeze, from face through clenched fists to his boots that seemed part of the tamped earth floor. That rigidity was prequel to the whip so Skarfr wiped the smile off his face, turned away, pretended he didn't know their names. The ones Botolf never used. Fergus and Brigid.

The sea taught him to swim, cradling him afloat in cold salt, tempting him to dive for shells on the rare occasions the waves unveiled the seabed. Water called to him, cormorant that he was, and he soon discovered that lochs reflected fluffy clouds but hid depths and eddies more dangerous than those of the sea. Such risks meant nothing to him in the joy of weightless twists and turns, less alone among the otters and bobbing eider ducks than in that longhouse where smoked walls made dreary what was once his home.

Botolf was afraid of the sea, which made Skarfr love it even more. The skald never set foot in their faering, a two-man rowboat, but he sent Fergus out fishing and the boy slunk out with him.

Limiting their words to *net*, *line* and *kreel*, they let the current flow around them and knew smiles over a silvery catch. The boat was offshore, outside Botolf's law.

In the house, Skarfr behaved as if Fergus and Brigid were invisible, and Botolf relaxed, not realising he'd taught his ward to hold in the precious words a skald needs to say aloud, to play with. So it was that Skarfr learned the craft of poetry but not the art. If he had any, it was buried with his grief for his mother and his bitterness over his father's death. Not even his cormorant could gift him golden speech. Botolf had beaten a fatal flaw into his masterwork and was doomed to as much disappointment as Skarfr's parents would have felt.

He was not to make sagas after all, neither to be the story nor tell it. He believed what men said of him, reported with glee by Botolf. Skarfr was 'unnatural, touched by the gods,' and a disappointment, condemned to live with a cold genius of a man.

Until Skarfr was fourteen, when he met Hlif on a beach and they fled the storm of swords that came from the whale's way.

CHAPTER TWO



Botolf was out on his rounds, harvesting scandal from his neighbours and gleaning the details which would enrich his verse and make his listeners hungry for more. As was Skarfr's habit on such occasions, he sneaked out to the beach, revelling in solitude. Free to roll sand over his feet, then wriggle his toes, leaving tracks like sea-serpents. Free to inspect shells and marine skeletons caught in the curves of sea wrack patterning the beach. Free to talk to the cormorant.

Today was promising. Shimmering from the receding tide, the sand was rippled in the sea's pattern. Waves everywhere. A confusion of glitter as reflected clouds flitted across the wet sand: Týr, the sky god, was whirling his nebulous cloak and Aegir, the sea god, danced with him until the land became a dazzle of watery heavens.

Skarfr picked up a stick, charcoal black from its time in the sea but not yet too fragile to use for drawing. He drew a zigzag in the wet sand. The sun rune Sólf, his name-letter. In defiance of the dancing wave-curves, his straight lines said, 'Skarfr carved these runes.' He was here.

His runes were those Botolf taught him, their Old Country

shapes different from his homeland short twig letters but he could read and write both. Botolf said the best skalds and sagas came from the Old Country, also known as Island or Snaeland, so Skarfr must become a Snaelandman in his ways. He must learn by heart the tales of gods, giants and heroes that would make him welcome at any lord's hearth and earn him good coin. Maybe one day the Jarl would break his ring and give a silver piece to Skarfr for his work. If he was second-rate as a skald, he could always be first-rate as a praise-singer. That was often a more remunerative occupation.

Botolf said Skarfr was crippled as a poet by what his homeland lacked. No mountains, no forests, no rivers, no wolves. How could such an impoverished land create poets?

From wide skies and water, burns and heath, cormorants and sea-eagles, Skarfr did not say. He had learned the hard way to rein back his words unless told to speak.

'You must travel to the Old Country when you come of age; leave this primitive outpost of posturing peasants,' was Botolf's constant refrain. The long tuft of grey hair, lonely on his otherwise bald head, would swing as he ranted, his mouth ugly.

Why don't you go back there if you love it so much? Skarfr did not ask.

Instead, he communed with the cormorant, which was sometimes one oiled black body and sometimes another. Skarfr was not naive enough to think a mere bird had saved his life. He knew of shapeshifters and spirit guides from the verses Botolf made him learn. There were usually several cormorants fishing together in the bay but Skarfr always knew which cormorant held his spirit guide at any moment by the way one looked at him, wise beyond bird nature. Goddess or Valkyrie, he cared not, as long as she watched over him and listened, while he poured out his lonely heart.

Crouching, lost in contemplation of the trickle of seawater

outlining his name-rune, Skarfr was unaware that he was no longer alone, so he jumped at the sound of a girl's voice.

'What are you doing?'

Skarfr looked up and blinked. Bright-haired against the sunshine, a girl screwed her face up in puzzlement, making her eyes so small he could barely distinguish their colour. Stormy grey. Even against the sun, her skin was curdled milk, speckled as Botolf's roan pony with so many freckles they joined into blotches. He'd never seen a girl so ugly but then he hadn't seen many girls at all. Brigid's, face scored with suffering and fatigue, occasionally bore traces of the raven-haired beauty she must once have been.

'Nothing,' he replied. At which stupid reply, the girl opened her eyes fully, the better to bestow contempt on him.

'You shouldn't talk to me. Or even be seen with me,' she informed him with hauteur. 'I'm going to skim stones.'

While Skarfr still sought appropriate words and found none, she selected pebbles carefully, for flatness and size, and walked into the waves. She was barefoot like himself but her girl's apparel was less convenient for paddling. Although she'd rearranged her wool belt to hitch up both her pinafore overdress and her longer undergown, the hems of both must be getting wet.

She didn't seem to care about anything but her success in beating her own numbers.

'Not a good start,' she muttered, as a marbled grey pebble skipped three times and sank.

When she achieved seven skips, she gave a humph of satisfaction. 'I'll stop there.'

She jiggled her remaining stones.

Then hurled one straight at a diving cormorant.

'No!' shouted Skarfr, suddenly freed from his paralysis. He rushed her from behind, made her stumble and lose the rest of her pebbles. Her clothes dipped full into an oncoming wave, that broke

around them in a froth of laughter, mimicking the girl. She pushed past him to get out of the water.

‘What’s the matter with you?’

‘Nothing,’ he replied, flushing. He couldn’t help glancing out to sea. Spear-straight, his cormorant dived again. In the time it took a stone to skip seven times, she surged up, far from where she’d entered the water, silver wriggling in her mouth before she contorted her long throat and swallowed the fish. She was fine.

The girl was staring at him. He felt like a fish wriggling.

‘Do you always spoil the fun?’ she demanded, her face as red as her hair, her clothes dripping.

‘No,’ he said.

He considered his answer then, ‘Yes,’ he said.

Then, ‘That’s none of your business.’

He liked that answer best because he could repeat it to any other question she asked.

His second impression of her was that she was rude as well as ugly. Although there had been a moment, when she was skipping stones, that she resembled a sea sprite, fire dancing in the water with her blaze of long curls and her russet dress.

‘I’m Hlif,’ she said, and waited.

And waited, apparently disappointed at his lack of reaction.

‘My father murdered Jarl Magnus, who’s a saint now,’ she told him and stuck her chin out. ‘So I’m cursed. And you touched me so now you’re cursed too.’

Skarfr surprised himself by speaking the truth. ‘It won’t make any difference,’ he said. ‘Things couldn’t be worse. You can call me...’ he hesitated, ‘Long-throat.’

‘Well then, *Long-throat*, as it’s too late for you to run away and you owe me compensation for my wet clothes and spoiled game, you can keep me company while I dry out. I shall tell you my story and you shall tell me yours.’

Skarfr should have gone home but the word ‘story’ held a

fascination for him. He was trained to be a skald after all and if *wanting* to compose great verse were enough, he would be the best. But a man can recognise what's great without achieving it.

What a story Hlif must have. Everyone knew that Orkneyjar must be ruled by two jarls, because *'One jarl is for himself and rules by fear but two must heed their people.'*

She picked her way over the sands like a gull, holding her skirts bunched in each hand as if she would curtsy at any moment. Skarfr stumbled in her wake, his feet sinking further as he reached dry sand, which shod his wet feet in abrasive grains. His body seemed dense, his footsteps a struggle, whereas Hlif was still an airy sprite, despite her sodden hemline.

She didn't look back once as she headed up the beach, away from the ebbing waves towards the tussocks in the dunes. She chose a sandy dip, sheltered from view by golden oat's ears, cushioned by marram grass, and she threw herself to the ground, her flame hair spread around her matted grass pillow and her skirt shaken to its fullest so it could dry out.

Cautiously, Skarfr lay down beside her, enjoying the light breeze and sun playing on his face. He shut his eyes and instantly relaxed.

This is how stories should be heard, he thought. In the dark, so the mind can make its own pictures.

'So, Long-throat. What have you been told about how Saint Magnus died?' Dissociated from red hair and mocking face, the voice already had a storytelling cadence, slower and more dramatic than speech. Unexpected in a child unless of course the child had trained with Botolf. But this was no moment to dwell on his inadequacy. Skarfr tried to match Hlif's tone, to show the skills beaten into him as he retold the story he'd heard so often from Botolf. When Magnus was jarl, his yokemate as ruler had been Hakon, whose jealousy and greed led him to murder his popular

rival. Jarl Magnus died with a martyr's courage, blessing and forgiving his executioner.

Then, so the tale was told, a blinding light appeared above Magnus' burial-place. Incurables were healed and certain doom averted for those who prayed to this new saint.

Such events were mere rumours during the life of Jarl Hakon, from respect – or fear. But Magnus' miracles were acknowledged after his death and his sanctity confirmed by Bishop William.

And now, in nearby Kirkjuvágur, their own jarl, Magnus' nephew and successor, was erecting a cathedral to his saintly uncle. A cathedral that would dazzle men with the splendour of the One God, splendour that would also bathe Bishop William in its radiance – and bring considerable income. Their jarl had promised the cathedral to the Orkneymen to win their support for his accession to the jarldom and they were paying heavily for their saint's resting-place.

This is what everybody knew. But what if Hlif's tale was different?

Skarfr finished the story of Saint Magnus, in grand style.

'Shriven and in prayer when Hakon caught up with him, Magnus made three offers.

To go for a pilgrim and never return.

"No," said Hakon.

To go to Skotland and be a prisoner there with the two men who still kept him company.

"No," said Hakon.

To be maimed and blinded, thrown into the deepest dungeon, sparing Hakon the sin of murder.

"Yes," said Hakon.

"No," said his chiefs. "Enough of this rivalry. One of you must die this day."

Then Magnus accepted his doom and knelt to receive his deathblow.

Hakon ordered his standard-bearer to do the deed but the man refused in great anger.

Then Hakon forced his cook Hlifolf to take an axe to Magnus. Hlifolf shook with sobs and Magnus calmed him.

“Be quick,” he said. “There is no dishonour to you but only to him who commands such a task.” He took off his rich tunic and gave it to Hlifolf in token of forgiveness.

After prayer and confession, Magnus said, “Stand before me and cut the tree of my head with all your strength, a noble death for one of noble birth. God will forgive you as I will intercede on your behalf.”

Then he made the sign of the cross, the axe fell and his soul ascended to heaven. Greensward replaced the moss and stones where his body had lain, the first of many miracles. And Hakon became sole ruler of Orkneyjar.’

In the silence, Skarfr heard only seabirds squabbling and the melody of a skylark distracting strangers from her nest. He was pleased with himself. This was the first time he’d *enjoyed* narrating a story, lost himself in the telling. He almost expected his audience to shout their praise. Then he remembered who his audience was. He sneaked a glance and quickly shut his eyes again. Was she asleep?

‘No dishonour,’ Hlif said slowly. ‘If I believed one word of that then I’d hate *Saint* Magnus for lying.’

Shocked by her blasphemy, Skarfr waited.

‘Do you believe it?’ she challenged him.

He stuttered, ‘Everybody says—’

He tried again. ‘Sagas need to lift us, be bigger than life – but that doesn’t mean they’re not true, in their own way. And this is Magnus’ story.’

He followed a difficult train of thought, important but only half-grasped. ‘Maybe Hakon’s story would be different. Everyone says he ruled well and there was peace with only one jarl, despite

the proverb. And he did go for a pilgrim so maybe he was forgiven.' He wasn't sure how Christian forgiveness worked.

'Well,' said Hlif, 'it's all lies. My father told me his story, Hlifolf's story. Not a heroic saga, skald-boy—'

How did she know who he was? Skarfr flushed, wondering what stories were told about the remarkable skald Botolf and his charity towards an orphan.

'No, this is the truth, the reason I'm cursed. Hlifolf's daughter lives a half-life in a jarl's hall because of her father's crime. Forgiven? No. Never. He's lucky to have left this world and I must keep paying for what he did.'

None of this made any sense to Skarfr but he half-listened. He saw no point in stories of ordinary men. No inspiration, no passion, no heroism.

His attention was jolted back to Hlif when she asked him, 'How do you think Hlifolf was forced to be a murderer when the standard-bearer said no and yet lived? And how does a man find time for so much prayer, confession and forgiveness, even a mass? While his enemy patiently holds the axe over his head, waiting till he's finished before smiting the deadly blow? Your arm would drop off from wielding an axe so long. My father told me what really happened.'

Eyes shut, Skarfr pillowed the back of his head on his hands and let the disembodied voice carry him on choppy waters to Egilsey. That day of betrayal and dishonour – but whose? His eyelids felt shade and light as clouds hid, then uncovered the sun, nature's way of dramatising the tale.

'Hakon's men shamed Ofeig the standard-bearer, for his cowardice.' Hlif's tone was low with doom and Skarfr shivered. 'When Jarl Magnus pleaded for his life, the tortures he suggested in lieu of death might well come to his mind for he saw them enacted. Who could deny Hakon's right to obedience from his men? 'Riddle me this, young skald-boy.'

Skarfr frowned at both the insult and the interruption to the story but he was intrigued and listened.

‘Two jarls met that day to make peace. Both wanted peace in our land. Which one achieved what they both wanted?’

Skarfr understood her well enough but disliked being led to an answer like a pony to a trough. He refused to drink. For once he could follow his own reasoning without a beating to teach him the required response.

‘Both did,’ he declared, as much to show off his cleverness and annoy the girl as because it was what he believed. ‘One brought peace on earth and one brings us peace in heaven. By Saint Magnus’ martyrdom and grace, Hakon ruled well in his earthly domain – and died.’

‘So you think Saint Magnus is the story,’ she continued, unperturbed. ‘Maybe you are right and maybe you are wrong.’

Her voice deepened again, ominous. ‘Betrayed by his standard-bearer, Hakon turned to his loyal cook Hlifolf and asked formally whether he was a man of honour.

‘My father had served Hakon with oar and axe, never failing him and he welcomed the name offered to him by his lord, to pass on honour to his lineage.

‘I wasn’t born then and my father still hoped for sons,’ she interrupted the story in her natural tone, then carried on, “Men will call you Gall-Cleaver, Cancre-Cutter, Peace-Carver,” said Hakon to Hlifolf.

‘Jarl Magnus stopped pleading and cast a bane instead. “My killer shall pale from the murder that haunts his sleep and his touch will spread corruption from him to his children and to their children.”

‘He was in mid-curse, shouting at Jarl Hakon, when my father rushed him from behind and swung his great axe, carving in Magnus’ head the simple rune used for his name, Hlifolf. Magnus dropped to his knees, fell sideways and my father swiped again,

unable to hew a clean blow, dragging his axe in a ragged line along the other side of Magnus' head, like the slash of a sword but deeper.

'Then Magnus' ragged breaths ended but his curse still lived and found its aim. My father felt it lodge in his heart and Hakon's words confirmed his fears.

"There is no honour in dealing such a messy death," said Hakon. "Let us go to our homes and bring the peace to this land that has had such a foul beginning." He would not look at my father nor ever did again.

'Hlifolf gazed long at the blood pooling on earth and pebbles while his comrades headed back to their ships, sombre, bearing Magnus' corpse.

'The two companions who had stayed with Magnus had been left unharmed and would tell their story of sainthood across the isles from that time on. One of them, Holbodi, spoke to my father. "You have murdered a saint and will die a miserable death."' "

Matter-of-fact again, Hlif concluded, 'My father endured the years left to him and the comfort he took with his wife was his undoing for it created me, the continuation of Magnus' curse. And in recompense to his sainted uncle for the manner of his death, our Jarl Rognvald brought me to his Bu, his home in Orphir, as his ward and his prisoner. I am to be his housekeeper and never marry. The only child and last of the cursed line of Saint Magnus' murderer.'

Stunned into silence, Skarfr wondered what to make of this girl. *Unnatural and touched by the gods?* He sat up and opened his eyes. As if they were two dolls on one string, she had lain back and shut her eyes, her face a red and cream version of the dappled marram grass and sand. Smoothed out now, unwrinkled, her tale told.

Cursed girl, thought Skarfr. But he wasn't worried about her

infectious corruption. His life *couldn't* get much worse. And he was curious.

'Why did you tell me?' he asked.

'I tell everybody who'll listen.' Her eyes flashed open, reflected clouds scudding across the grey gaze. 'I know you're the skald-boy so I thought you might. But mostly people don't. Or they laugh. But they stay away from me, which is good.'

Skarfr picked a long spike of grass and chewed on it absently, pondering truth as the splash of cormorants and a whisper of a breeze played a background to his thoughts, which were as blasphemous as Hlif's story.

'Do you believe in Magnus' saintliness?' He held his breath.

'Of course I do,' she retorted. 'But when did he become a saint? When he lived? Or when he died?'

Skarfr shook his head and turned to more practical matters. 'How are you going to get the curse lifted?' he asked. He wondered whether he was now cursed too, so the answer was important.

'I need to get Saint Magnus to pardon me. He's the one who cursed my family in the first place.'

That made sense. Skarfr dropped to his stomach in the long grass, the better to concentrate on *how* they would get Saint Magnus to lift the curse. He was too intrigued to miss out on the next part of the story.

That's when he realised that the sea noises had changed. There was a regular splash and creak, men's voices coming nearer. He peeked through the grass and thought Hlif's story was coming to life: they would be chased to a church, hacked to death. But there weren't eight longships coming towards the beach. There were three and the pennants above the sails were not Hakon's. Eight leather-clad men jumped into the shallows and hauled the first boat till its keel stuck.