

Kirkegrim Saga

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ABSTRACT

In folklore it is common to personify aspects of death as various creatures meant to assist in an understanding of the process. This novella uses three of these folkloric creatures from Norse and Irish folklore to force the point of view characters to confront aspects of how they are relating to death, with the titular character referenced in the novella's title functioning as a launching off point for discussing the other characters. This approach allows for the exploration of themes of regret and resentment that follow one into death, as well as themes of grief relating to an unwillingness to grieve for specific people, with the final chapter functioning as a resolution for the titular character.

Kirkegrim Saga

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CHAPTER 1: BURIAL

The sound dirt makes when it is shoveled and the sound snow makes are only marginally different. Snow makes a sound like pulling in and out a shortsword across the linen and leather of a scabbard. Whereas dirt makes this rougher sound like a longship rolling onto a rocky shore, and the shovel kicks back harder against the shoulder when stabbed in. Not something a person would know unless they were digging in the dark like Thorolf.

Against his better judgment, Thorolf had left his sword back at the church house. Night was dangerous, but he was more concerned about the sword being stolen. Still Otto convinced him to leave the sword since it wouldn't do to have anyone see him walking around with it since it might tip off the town that something was wrong.

When digging a grave in Iceland the first layer is likely going to be snow or ice. Especially in Grofjörður, or Grofur as most would call it, where it's likely to snow at least a little bit year-round. That's opposed to somewhere like Ireland where the dirt would be a lot softer and have less kick on account of the lack of ice, although Icelanders were not the kind to bury bodies when they left them in foreign lands.

Thorolf didn't like working late, as it felt like the only reason to work at night was if a person were ashamed of what they were doing. Thorolf had done a lot of things like that when the sun was still up and didn't need night for doing dishonorable deeds.

He was deep in the hole shoveling out dirt on the right side so he wouldn't get anything on the body. He rubbed his nose, which had lost feeling, making a nice concoction of dirt and snot on the back of his hand. He wasn't averse to hard work as he had done his fair share of that sailing to the Faroe Isles. The work he had gotten once he had returned home to Iceland was just different than he was used to. In comparison to tearing down something, building something was

four parts extra labor for what felt like half the reward. But Thorolf knew that turning down a business venture or two means that people stop asking. Odin said something about “making sure the path between yourself and a friend is well tended lest weeds grow between you and the path become untenable.” Thorolf disliked most of the men he did business with, but at least back then he didn’t have dirt and snow up his nose.

The smell of snow is hard to pinpoint, it’s more like a feeling. Thorolf could feel it as his nose lost control of the mucus built up inside and he started swallowing it down the back of his throat. The smell of dirt depended on the location. In Ireland it’s wet and tinged with leaves, in Norway dirt smells of animal shit, but in Iceland dirt smells like sulfur. Grofur was far from any volcano, but the earth had that tinge to it like something had burned there long ago that had just simmered out.

The body was a dog, a spitz of a breed that had been brought over from Denmark. It had white fur with an undercoat and overcoat, long legs, and wolf-like pointed ears. It also had a divot on the top of its head where Thorolf had struck it with a rock and had a pooled red collar along its neck where Thorolf had drawn a knife once it had stopped moving.

Thorolf picked up the spitz and rolled it back into his arms such that its back was cradled and its nose was pointed towards the sky. The two layers of its inner and outer coat were white and soft, but not like snow, which was cold and misted away at the touch. Though it wasn’t warm (it had been left out in the cold for far too long to be warm) but it had the potential to be so. The fur was smooth in a way that meant Thorolf could still feel the oil on his fingers as it left his hands.

Thorolf tried so hard not to dump the dirt directly on the body. Each shovelful weighed against the blisters forming on his palms, the falling dirt cracked against the half-frozen ground

and the body. When the body was struck, and it had to be because Thorolf's hands hurt far too much for such delicate work, it made a sound like beating leather. This cycle proceeded in turn. The slash into the dirt, the crack of the ground, the beating of the body. Slash, crack, smack. The repeated motion became practiced like a drill when preparing a raid. Slash, crack, smack. The dog disappeared underneath the rubble of sulfurous earth and he kept going. Slash, crack. Until the rot smelling volcanic debris had climbed its way back up to his feet and he laid one last wound into the dirt. Slash.

From that wound something coiled up as the earth was not yet done rising to meet him. It was Thorolf's boot that the spindly thing of black bramble latched onto. Thorolf was familiar with the feeling of being pulled down into the earth and was sure that he was not the only man of war who had hallucinated this feeling while choking on the madman's mead. But where so commonly he had felt the hands of something trying to pull him down, now he felt the infantile grasp of something trying to rise up.

First it was just one thorn and then it was a second growing and molting over itself with each new strand rising out from where the shovel had pierced the grave's final bed layer. Roseless brambles of black thorns dispersed themselves across the top of the grave. Thorolf leapt off the grave as his leg wrappings tore against the grasping vines.

Like a pit of snakes each vine slithered over one another as if each were a serpent, though specifically they did not break the boundary of the grave itself. Once this area had filled in such that Thorolf could no longer make out the dirt underneath it, the mass coalesced and rose at its center. Each vine wrapped itself around into a ball that was lifting itself off the ground.

Thorolf felt a pain in his leg but he was back on his feet and began sprinting toward the new church. He was fast and despite the dark he was still able to navigate the churchyard with

ease. He didn't get caught on any upturned rocks or slippery dirt from when he had cleared this yard throughout the last month. He looked back and saw the brambles taking shape into something with four legs, pointed ears, and cast a long shadow on Thorolf's heart.

He kept up his mad dash until shoulder checking the front door of the church. It wasn't as grand as the stave churches that could be found in Norway, it was only about as good as a dozen or so men could build in a month's time. A little over two stories high with a single spire just above the door. The entranceway and windows had been given a red coat of paint while the building had a white coat with a red roof. Although the roof wasn't necessarily visible as they had employed a turf roof for insulation against the strong winds. The grass turf was flanked by two stacked stone walls that the grass had grown onto thanks to the use of soil in its construction. The result is that the building was nestled into the ground in one continuous patch of grass that merged into the landscape. At least it would, once more of the grass grew back across the property considering all the uprooting that had to be done to clear the land.

Thorolf's arms cracked against the door Bang, Bang, Bang. "Otto! You didn't say it'd come out this quickly!"

Thorolf heard something drop on the floor and the telltale thuds of Otto running to the door and opening it. Otto was a little older than Thorolf, but his blonde hair was better at hiding grays than Thorolf's auburn hair. A lot of men in Iceland had red hair, the Vikings had taken many Celts and forced them to come to Iceland, so the red hair was unavoidable. Otto wore a black tunic with no embroidery but he did have these puffy red pants and bigger black boots that his pants were stuffed in. He was from Denmark but he had friends in Rome, though they didn't help him when he received this ignoble appointment to Grofur. Thus like many people he ended up in Iceland as a matter of course.

“Are you done?” said Otto. “You sound like you’re going to break the door, what’s the matt-”

Thorolf had a moment like this once before when raiding. Well-meaning but stupid questions at a bad time, and that look in his eye like he sees something Thorolf didn’t already know was there. The light from the open door spilled out then tapered off and at the edge of the light was a dog.

The dog had black fur that matted into clumps that curled off its body. It looked like it had never been thoroughly combed or cleaned before in its life and was held together by oil that clinched masses of fur together into lines that stretched out like thorns from its back. Its tail was the only part that was moving, it swept back and forth, each time circling around the whole of its body at an impossible length. The dog’s head was smooth and slick with the exception of the pointed wolf-like ears, which was one of the few spaces on its body that was not covered by fur. Inside the ears Thorolf could see gray skin that was flaking off into dander that intermingled with the dog’s coat. Tracing the falling dander Thorolf could see tufts of fur drawn into a line around its neck.

The eyes were pupilless as if they had rolled back into the head of the creature. In their place was a milky surface with red veins forming a web to where the iris and pupil would be but wasn’t. But there was something there, or maybe it was the absence of something that created the illusion of something being there. Like the eye caught the light in just the right way to create the impression of an iris but it was inverted. The light reflected off the center making the outside look darker, so instead of the pupil acting as the hole of the eye, it was more as though the hole was ringed around the light in the center.

Otto strode from the doorway, the light casting a shadow between him and the dog.

“Kirkegrim. As the first buried it is your responsibility to undertake the protection of this field. For those that come after you will act as a hound of God and protect the dead against such things that would desecrate their bodies and jeopardize their right to rest with the all-powerful God. Now leave this place. Your role is the assuaging of the dead and we have no need of you except for the task for which God has entrusted you.”

Like a dog that had not yet learned its name, the Kirkegrim turned its head while Otto spoke to it, tracing the perimeter of the churchyard. It turned its body away from the light, like the dark folding on itself the Kirkegrim vanished from sight.

Outside, the Kirkegrim measured the innumerable possibilities before it. The dead thing did not know what it was or even what it wasn't because that would require having any frame of reference at all. When the man with hair made of light made noise in its direction, the creature supposed the noise may have had some meaning to it but the Kirkegrim did not understand it. There were a few noises it made, words, ones that seemed familiar to the Kirkegrim or sounded pleasant to it. It had walked toward the light and found itself standing outside the building with the cross. The one that had been swallowed by the earth like a hole in the ground that grass was growing over. The Kirkegrim remembered there being a hole, a grave, something that was important for some reason that it did not understand. The man with light in place of hair held some strange authority that the Kirkegrim felt the need to answer to, but then there was the red-haired man with pudgy cheeks and blood dripping from his ankle. There was something familiar about him too.

The Kirkegrim felt uncomfortable, incorporeal even, assuming it understood that concept. It did not feel as though it was anywhere at all. After the noisy man stopped making his noise, it was as though the Kirkegrim ceased existing for a moment. But then it was back. Somewhere else than it had been. It was nearer to the outskirts of the yard. Then it was like there was something on its periphery, something that had drawn it from the nothing. The Kirkegrim followed the pull and traced across the churchyard, over the upturned earth, past the two men leaving the church, far beyond the one building set just on the boundary of the Grim's yard. Just within his sight but far out of reach there was another light. One far brighter than the one contained in the small church or the lackluster strings of light on the priest's head. One first beautiful and then just as quickly spoiled.

CHAPTER 2: REGRET

The Church house was just off the property itself. One main hall with four beds on lifted platforms along the exterior, a fire pit set on the ground with black metal hooks carrying pots dangling over it from the ceiling, and a storage closet on the back wall for crafts and preserved meats. Thorolf was allowed to live there since he worked for the church. Thorolf was sitting on the bed while Otto looked over his ankle.

“Does it hurt?” Otto asked.

“Just a scratch,” said Thorolf. “Get me my needle and string under the bed there.”

Thorolf had lost a lot of his stuff when he got back to Iceland. He and his father, Sigmundr, got in a fight over money and a sword before Thorolf left. Swords could cost half a mark in gold so they were often passed down as family heirlooms. Sigmundr was a miserly man and did not give out things easily, so Thorolf stole the sword when he left to fight in foreign lands. When he returned Sigmundr was nowhere to be found and the house they had shared for much of Thorolf’s childhood had been emptied. Basically everything left that Thorolf owned was stuffed under that bed.

“For a hound of God I did not expect to be so unnerving,” said Thorolf. “Not like God to be creepy, is it?”

“The Kirkegrim is a lightly heretical tradition we kept around because it was useful,” said Otto. “The church in Rome still holds that transformation or creation is inherently the power of God. It shouldn't exist but since it does it is clearly by God’s will as that is the only thing that could create it. As for why it was unnerving, I’ve never seen one get made and I still haven’t so I couldn’t tell you.”

Thorolf looked up from his needle work. “Guess it was better we got it done now rather than later. Right?”

Otto clapped his hands. “Right. The first body buried in a new graveyard always returns as a Grim so it makes sense to bury something like a dog so it won’t have to be any poor soul that gets shut out of Heaven with our Lord. Protecting the bodies of the departed is just a bonus. One we will happily exploit tomorrow night to deal with the draugr.”

Thorolf knew stories about draugr through skalds and wise women who said that it was someone who came back from the dead to exact revenge for unfinished grudges. Then the Christians came and it all got more confusing because they said that those who are buried outside of Christian burials risk coming back and bringing a plague on their hamlet. These risen dead would prowl at night but rest in the morning in whatever barrow or hole they left their corpse in. Sigmundr told Thorolf that you can tell a body is a draugr because they possess the evil eye capable of bestowing curses and misfortune.

“Of course, preacher, don't start a sermon on my account,” said Thorolf. “But is that thing going to be around forever?” Thorolf stabbed the needle into his skin.

Otto straightened his back and began his speech anyway. “I couldn’t say. You’d have to ask a warlock or some other such madman. The way these things tend to work is that they do exactly what they say they do. All I know that the Kirkegrim does is guard the church grounds, so that’s probably all it does until whatever it does can’t be done any more. By the way, thanks for finding that dog on such short notice.”

“I guess it was lucky that one man back in Denmark couldn’t pay me in silver, huh,” said Thorolf.

“I thought...Oh, I thought you just got some dog from Ulf’s farm. That was your dog, Thorolf?” said Otto.

Thorolf felt something start in his chest then spider its way down to his ankle. He stabbed the needle in to excise the admonishment he had for himself. Pulled it out the other side and laced the chord to tighten his skin over his many regrets. Then he met the gaze of the priest standing over him.

The priest’s hand locked on Thorolf’s shoulder. “I’m glad you came back to Iceland, Thorolf. I think there are many good things left to come for you.” Otto stepped back into the center of the room. “I expect you to be at the morning service tomorrow. Don’t bring your weapons. You can go back and get those later. There are some crafty elders in Grofur who may yet still recognize the signs of a draugr. I don’t want to give them reason to worry when I just got here. We’ll deal with it tomorrow night.”

“Yes, sir,” said Thorolf. Otto waved goodnight and left the church house for his own hovel back on the church grounds. Thorolf wouldn’t like sleeping in the same space as the Kirkegrim but Otto’s pace out of the house was brisk and giddy. He may have even felt better knowing the Kirkegrim was stuck there with him.

Thorolf’s father wasn’t the kind of man to do well alone but he spent much of his life alone all the same. He had tried to secure a wife in dealings that led to him becoming an outlaw from Denmark. The way he tells it, he paid exactly what she was worth, but Thorolf didn’t imagine they were selling. Eventually Sigmundr had to flee to Iceland with only Thorolf in tow.

Sigmundr had a square head which bemoaned the loss of its hair. When Thorolf was a child, he was afraid he was going to inherit those among other things. Berserks were men that grew more like beasts as the sun set and become incredibly violent. When the sun set these

berserks could enter rages that made their skin like iron such that they could not be harmed. They'd get aggravated at the smallest things, like that time Thorolf and a boy were playing late in the evening and the two struck Sigmundr with dirt. Sigmundr took that kid by both his shoulders and tossed him to the ground, took the back of the boy's small head in the palm of his hand, and mashed his face against the rock until he stopped moving.

Thorolf back then wouldn't let that stand, and took a knife to the back of one his father's best men. Thorolf and his father were trapped together in that small hut they called a home, but that didn't mean that they had to talk to one another and they didn't for the rest of that week. Thorolf knew his father couldn't hurt him even in the type of rage where he could split a helmet with a sword. Thorolf couldn't hurt him either, whether for a lack of strength or a lack of willingness.

The day Thorolf left Iceland he told Sigmundr that the next time they would meet Sigmundr would be dead with his evil eye staring straight at the door from his bed. But Thorolf wouldn't let his father's evil eye see him because Thorolf would tear down the walls of the house around his father. That way Thorolf could take Sigmundr out without ever having to meet his father's gaze or worry about the curse of the evil eye.

His father said that Thorolf wouldn't find him in bed when he came back.

There was no getting used to the infinite nothing of the in-between. Each time that thing that resembled spoiled light moved at the edges of the churchyard the Kirkegrim found itself at the nearest edge to it. One moment it was sitting on the top of the church and then next it was observing the priest return to the churchyard. Time clearly passed in the in-between moments

because the priest's movements became jittery, appearing at both times to be walking the path home yet immediately after entering his small hut with no point in between.

The Kirkegrim measured the edges of the yard's boundaries as it was whipped across time and space. It's not that it felt it could not leave these bounds, only that it had no compulsion to do so, here there was purpose that the outside lacked.

At first it assumed that there was some need to patrol and protect its purpose but it quickly realized there was no need. All throughout the night the spoiled light teased at the borders and each time the Kirkegrim was already there before it had even registered the corruption's presence.

It was a tool designed for the sole purpose of protecting these grounds. The light it saw was just the mechanism's way of directing it towards its purpose.

CHAPTER 3: PIOUS

Otto would have made a good skald if he hadn't ended up a priest with the way he commanded the room during church. Thorolf could see him hanging next to the king's high chair, telling him nasty lies in a pleasing tone. Then again, Otto looked like he could be the king, as they always seemed to have blonde hair in Thorolf's experience working with them.

Otto spent that next morning teaching a number of the landowners certain verses or phrases they may need to show off their devotion to the Lord. The inside of the church was bare with benches along each exterior wall allowing the room to gather round while Otto paced in the center. The landowners were all hunched over memorizing a phrase here or there that seemed useful to remember. It wasn't as easy as recalling stories from the skalds since these were written instead of spoken. It was easier when dealing with something like the Valkyries where a person could say there were nine or seven or any such number and get the point across that there were a lot of them. For the Bible more emphasis was placed on the specific wording and location of those words within the text. Thorolf didn't care much for this level of specificity but these men likely cared even less.

Not everyone in Grofur had converted yet so the only people that came to church were those who had business dealing in Norway and thus needed to present themselves as being Christian. Thorolf had converted in much the same way during his dealings in Norway. Since his father had been made an outlaw Thorolf had to convince the king at the time to agree to let Thorolf engage in business within his domain. Converting was the easiest way to accomplish that. Many Icelanders had been held hostage in Norway until their conversions, with many men having gained favor by promising to return to Iceland and convert other landowners.

Thorolf fought in a handful of conflicts for the king and in doing so was allowed to participate in many feasts and eventually make good dealings with famous men. Thorolf was most successful as a mercenary in England where he fought and plundered for a year. The Celts of Ireland suffered the most, as from their houses and their children were extracted much in the way of silver.

But for all of Thorolf's victories in battle he was still not a landowner and could not claim taxes. The king had interest in him returning to Iceland to convert those there, so he would not give Thorolf land that he could use to support himself. So much of his funds had to be used to pay for arms and armor that he could barely afford the one ship capable of ferrying him between battlefields. Thorolf had no interest in returning home but he had made promises to do so once the seasons were right to leave and there were no more wars the king needed fighting. He needed time to make himself integral to the king, or maybe just a few more wars to break out that could fund further ventures. From life could be extracted many things of value, and Thorolf had become excellent at cracking open the shell of life to find its pearls.

Thorolf took every opportunity available to him and gained great renown, but his life never improved. No matter the people or lives he stole from their homes, he never felt any closer to the happiness Vikings promised. Each bloody conflict drew him closer to the realization that harming others was the only skill he had truly developed. In the end he took the king's deal and returned to Iceland, although with no direction and little to his name, Thorolf joined the church under Otto. Thorolf enjoyed Otto's words and the promises his religion made far more once he had nothing left to lose.

At night Thorolf and Otto implemented the plan to deal with the draugr before it threatened the hamlet. The Kirkegrim would be used to take a measure of its general direction.

The dead dog had some type of understanding of where the draugr was even outside the churchyard. The Kirkegrim would follow around the property looking out into the hills of the countryside tracing the draugr. The draugr assuredly would not enter the church's property while knowing the Kirkegrim was there. The plan was to track where the draugr was until morning when it would return to the barrow that was its final resting place. It was far simpler to hunt the draugr while it was asleep rather than fight the draugr considering its monstrous strength.

Thorolf took the first watch. This meant standing at the top of the hill scanning the property for the Kirkegrim's appearance. Once he saw it, he then tracked it for the rest of the night. This was difficult as the dog tended to blend into the surroundings at a distance, so Thorolf often had to jog across the yard to keep track of it. He kept this up until midnight when Otto came to relieve him. In the morning they would track the Draugr to its barrow and kill it for good there.

There was a pattern to the noises that Otto made, which was how the Kirkegrim had discovered his name was Otto. It was also how it discovered its own name, the Kirkegrim. Always two words but the first was always less than the second, and the term they used was *it* not *he* or *him* like they used for each other. He would string them together into long sentences and some of them would sound symmetrical like there was a pattern to them.

It was a long night and the Kirkegrim had nothing to do but wait. The spoiled light was making its way closer but the Kirkegrim had grown complacent. It always knew the light would be there in front of it because it always was. Even if that meant that what was around it shifted. Thus the Kirkegrim thought of the strange noises that Otto used and played at rearranging them, mimicking the sounds in its own head.

CHAPTER 4: RESENTMENT

Slamming the door shut against the uninvited cold, Thorolf kicked over the mats of furs and cloth stuck under the bottom of the door. His sword and his long spear shuddered as the door sealed shut beside them. The spear was ten years too old and fifteen years out of date, but serviceable nonetheless. He had left them by the door in case he needed to come grab them quickly. His eyes were still adjusted enough that he could make it to the hearth and light the pre-prepared logs with his flint before dropping onto the floor in a ball beside it. With each passing minute he tore off an extra layer of his waterlogged coats like peeling the skin off a slaughtered pig.

Thorolf's coats joined the assortment of flayed hides draped across the floor, some precariously close to the fire at the center of the room. Once the heat had started to get uncomfortable enough to start sweating, Thorolf made his way to the storage closet. Though even this was done hunched over and holding one coat over his head since the room was far less insulated than the rest of the house. The walls were so thin that an animal had managed to tear a hole through it once before and had to be patched. Although the lack of insulation helped to preserve some meat but it would be better if the room was dryer. In the closet were the salted strips of pig flank wrapped in sheep hide, which Thorolf took a piece of. It was all packed tightly next to the boxes of sticks, handicrafts for trading, herbs for stew, and a ceramic jar of vinegar pickling a pig's left leg.

Thorolf bit into a piece of flank and dangled it from his teeth as he walked back over to the hearth and balled up next to it. He kicked up the furs on the ground next to him and wrapped himself in them heavily even though some of them were a little wet from the outside snow and

sweat. He let the heat of the fire get encased in the damp furs that he was balled up in and roasted himself warm enough that he couldn't tell if he was too hot or too cold.

It's possible he lost consciousness for a few moments there and only woke up to remember the piece of meat dangling from his mouth. The furs smelled of piss as dead animal parts tend to do, and it's not like the ground was the nicest place to sleep, but Thorolf felt like he could bear it for the night if it meant not getting up again.

The loss of consciousness made the flow of time hard to keep track of. It may have been right after he lay down or it may have been a few hours when Thorolf heard something fall over inside the storage closet. The sound of wood cracking was noticeable but in the right conditions could easily be mistaken for a bad storm outside. The sound of ceramic shattering was an all too specific noise. Thorolf scrambled up from under the mountain of skinned animal flesh to the door and grabbed his sword. He barged through the door despite his suspicions about what was in there, or maybe because of them.

The old hole in the wall was opened up again with an intense chill pouring out and fighting against the heat of the main room. The boxes were tossed to the ground with their contents scattered and crushed into wooden splinters that the creature was standing on. Its mangy feet were cut up by glass shards, mixing its blood with the vinegar on the floor into a soupy mess that Thorolf gagged on before he even opened the door. Its skin was pallid, it was exceptionally tall, but in the dark it was difficult to tell anything was wrong. Not until its mouth, which was hung open and distended while trying to force the pig's foot down its throat.

"Hello, father," said Thorolf from the other end of his sword.

Sigmundr gurgled like he was trying to say something with his hand still shoving a pickled pig part through his teeth.

“I’d recommend not talking with your mouth full,” said Thorolf.

Sigmundr then took a second and through much gurgling forced the pig’s foot down and realigned his jaw. “Boy, do you know how cold it is outside?” said Sigmundr. “When it gets this cold out people start dying. When someone shows up at your door, you offer them hospitality. You know that much. I taught you that much!”

“You didn’t teach me that,” said Thorolf, “the old warlock did when she beat me with that adder stone she was trying to place on our door.”

“Which is how I know you learned your lesson. Now are you going to show me some hospitality or am I going to have to keep taking what I’m owed?”

“I thought you’d like me giving you back the sword.” Thorolf lingered on the last word. His father wasn’t fast to reply. He gave Thorolf that tired look where his jaw slumped to one side and he’d stop blinking. Like an animal getting all the information it can before it leaps and just like he would when they were still living together. The kind that said “give up now or else you know what’s coming.”

Thorolf knew that above all else there was no way he could beat something like him in a fight. Thorolf’s father had never managed to hurt him in any way that mattered, but the same was true the other way around. That was back when he was alive, so Thorolf didn’t know what difference being a draugr made. Best to play along and hope to find his resting place later. Thorolf sheathed the sword and stepped back into the room.

Sigmundr stepped into the light making it clearer that he was little more than a walking corpse. His clothes were simply incapable of keeping anyone warm this time of year and either that or his passing had rendered his skin a bad shade of gray that moved closer to blue. There

was simply a way he moved that looked wrong, as though he was skipping a few of the necessary movements that walking entailed.

The two got situated beside the fire. Once they were away from the broken pickling jar it smelled like the fire pit had started cooking Sigmundr's skin. He still had the dignity of something that was still alive and didn't look like rot had set in, but there was a smell all the same. Thorolf was used to sulfur and its rotten egg smell, but this was like a net full of fish that had been left in the snow to freeze and forgotten about the coming summer. It made Thorolf gag when it struck his palate.

"Were you cooking something?" Sigmundr asked. "I can taste burning fish on the back of my throat."

Thorolf sat across the fire pit from his father with his sword in his lap, though he spied something before he had turned to face his father. The spear over by the door was missing. "I'm sure I have no idea what that could be. I was sleeping from a long day's labor when you broke in. Between the food and the fire, I believe I have settled my debt of hospitality."

"There is still the other debt to settle first. I believe I'm owed a mark of gold."

"No gold here. If you're looking to press me into service you need only tell me what barrow you lie in these days. I'll humbly clean it out for you."

Sigmundr actually belted a laugh at that one, although the expanding and retracting of his dead lungs were hampered by stiffness, "No, no, I don't think I'll do that. Wouldn't want you to muck up the place. I'll think of some way to wring it out of you. We got time."

"When I got back home you weren't there," said Thorolf.

"Told you I wouldn't. But you didn't believe the things I told you. I know how things work, Torky. You should have learned that by now."

“I was right about one thing though, I was right about the wall.” Thorolf gestured at the closet.

His father turned his head. “No! You said you’d be taking me through the wall, not that I’d come through it myself looking for a snack.” While he was turned away Thorolf scanned the room and found what he was looking for. A pile of coats stashed out on the edge of the fire pit and the pair of boots sticking out under them.

“How’d you die anyway?” asked Thorolf.

“Bear. Died fighting a bear.”

“Bullshit! There aren't any bears in Iceland!”

“You calling me a liar! Of course there is!” Sigmundr leaned forward. “The white ones.”

He wasn’t going to give Thorolf any information about where he died. Dodging it twice was enough to get the message. Sigmundr was smart enough to realize that Thorolf would much rather target him in the morning when he was still in the ground.

The only remaining opportunity was to either track him back to wherever he rested or to kill him. He might not allow the former and the latter would be challenging, but Thorolf suspected his father might still be entertaining the thought to kill him.

It was Otto who was hiding under those coats and blankets. He must have caught sight of Sigmundr entering the house and crept in through the front while they were standing in the closet. Otto knew the spear would be beside the door and grabbed it before he hid. The spear was the best weapon they had but signaling Otto to strike would be difficult. If they wanted to get the most use out of the spear then there was one place they could use it.

“Fine,” said Thorolf, “but it is as I said, I don’t have anything that you might want.”

“Don’t rescind an offer you have already made,” said Sigmundr. “I will have my sword back at the very least. We’ll see what else we can scrounge together in a month or two.”

“Why then?”

“You have not been paying attention as usual. Now that I’m back people are going to start getting sick, meanwhile I’ve grown stronger than I’ve been in years. We will just have to search their homes once they have succumbed. That church will be difficult though. I bet the priest has many valuables there but I don’t want to test that dog. You will have to take care of searching there.”

Sigmundr reached over the fire pit, brushing aside the metal chains with his arm while his feted skin cooked and boiled as he took the sword from Thorolf’s lap. Thorolf did not try to hold it back from him. Thorolf was too overwhelmed by the look in his evil eye of misfortune, which proved Thorolf’s prophecy was wrong. The blood vessels had burst and black splodges coated the sclera.

Sigmundr pulled back over the fire. Thorolf’s lips barely parted. “Are you going to leave out the front door?”

Sigmundr returned with new interest. “What did I just say? I know that dog is out front near the fence. It’s been tracking me somehow everywhere I go. I’m not going near it.” It was as Thorolf had thought. His father was disregarding everything he had to say. It was right to point him at the front door.

Sigmundr began to walk back to the closet with the intention to leave back out through the exit he had made. He was a large man, and in death he threw his weight around much more freely. He far outweighed Thorolf. He walked into the closet, which was narrow enough for only

one person to fit in, and with his size especially so. Thorolf got up and kicked Otto on his way to the closet, then blocked Sigmundr's view of the main hall.

Otto made his move and Thorolf brushed aside as the spear pierced into the narrow closet and under Sigmundr's left arm, sliding just between two ribs. Otto tried to pull the spear back to thrust again, but Thorolf caught the spear and pushed forward while Sigmundr tried to retreat. This kept the spear lodged in his torso so Thorolf was able to back Sigmundr up against the wall. Sigmundr swept his arm and crashed through a dozen boxes but wasn't even close to hitting them, only kept at bay by the length of the polearm lodged in his torso. Sigmundr pulled out the sword and cleaved through the boxes and through the wall itself but was still too short to hit Thorolf. Berserks were dangerous and that was before Sigmundr became a draugr so any one hit would likely be the end.

Sigmundr could not bend his arm to reach the spear or swing at it so as to snap the shaft. Sigmundr pushed against the wall and in turn the spear pushed deeper into his chest and shortened the distance between him and Thorolf.

Trying to avoid his reach, Thorolf let his footing slide and allowed himself to be pushed back so as to avoid his father closing the distance between them. Sigmundr attempted again to step back to dislodge the blade, but Thorolf then stepped forward pushing him further in. With no other option, Sigmundr pressed forward into the room while he continued to push Thorolf back. Without Sigmundr being constrained by the narrowness, Sigmundr and Thorolf swayed side to side while fighting for control of the spear until Thorolf lost his grip and let Sigmundr close the distance.

"Torky!" Sigmundr's breath grew vile and sick. "You want to die so bad then step up! I'm the only real Viking here!"

The first swing only missed out of Sigmundr's own desperation and the second wouldn't. Thorolf lifted up the front of the spear with Sigmundr on it. He dangled in the air and dropped the sword while trying to grab and dislodge the spear. Thorolf lifted the spear over his shoulder and drove it and his father into the fire pit. Thorolf lost the spear but his father writhed, shrieked, and tore up all the furs and skins on the floor. Otto was quick to grab the sword and pass it to Thorolf before getting his distance. Sigmundr scrambled and was met with the sword slashing across his back. Sigmundr slipped on himself, bashing the spear (as he was still impaled) against the floor as he screamed the last bit of air from his dead lungs.

Thorolf pressed and kept slashing at his back, whipping him with the sword. Thorolf was reluctant to get close to his father again and wasn't sure if impaling him further would do the trick. This gave Sigmundr the ability to swipe from the floor, which missed but left open the opportunity for him to tackle Thorolf. Then it was Thorolf's turn to drop the sword as he wrestled to remove the stinking corpse before the next hit. Though this was too late as one went straight for his gut.

Then the greatest misfortune befell Thorolf. His skin, like iron, felt nothing. For Thorolf this was the greatest misfortune that could befall him. Far worse than any other curse it could have employed, it played on his own insecurities. For all his hate of his father, Thorolf too was a berserk no matter how he pretended he wasn't.

Thorolf wrapped his arm around his father's leg and head. He lifted the man into the air as his father bludgeoned him with myriad blows. Thorolf manhandled him like a child and charged him to the door, though Thorolf missed the mark just barely and instead crashed out the front of the building's wall.

The two tumbled into the snow and rolled to put out the fire on them. Thorolf was the first to stand as his father's legs had entirely shattered. Even if Sigmundr couldn't feel the pain, his flesh was weak and did not answer his own commands. Thorolf grasped him by the back of his collar and dragged him through the yard. Sigmundr gnashed and whimpered until they reached the fence. Thorolf dislodged the spear with one hand and impaled the spear back through his shoulder until the arm fell limp. Thorolf placed his palm against the back of his father's head and began to push as Sigmundr struggled to keep from crossing the fence line. On the other side of the line was the Kirkegrim snarling its teeth and waiting for Sigmundr to cross.

The closer they got the more the Kirkegrim's teeth grinded against its jaw. It leaned out as far as it could reach, it barely crested Sigmundr's face. Sigmundr let out pitiable grunts of defiance but his lungs would not fill back with air. The distance between his face and the Kirkegrim grew shorter and the Kirkegrim began biting at the air in front of it. Thorolf's knee on his father's back, he pushed the weight of his entire body on the back of Sigmundr's head until his nose breached the churchyard. First the Kirkegrim bit off Sigmundr's nose, then his lips, then his jaw, and then the Kirkegrim grabbed Sigmundr's head by the neck and pulled him over the churchyard fence.

The Kirkegrim's tail split into lashes that fettered the draugr's arms, legs, and throat. The draugr cackled and cried while the thornlike tail lashed into its mouth and tore open its jaw. "I am the Kirkegrim that guards these graves, against curses, and devils, and souls led astray, so woe those who enter foolish and knave, for in one of mine you shall stay."

CHAPTER 5: PROPHECY

Thorolf's head was dizzy and his arms were numb from the cold, but his legs were on fire. The muscles were tearing and repairing themselves so as to grow even stronger still. A process that was small and could not be measured over the exertion of a single night, but he could feel the tightening of knots in calves that turned any movement into excruciating pain. There were processes going on in his body that he didn't understand, but he did not need to understand them to know what they signaled. A berserk grows exhausted once they become a nighttime beast.

Due to Thorolf's exhaustion, Otto had to dig the grave himself while Thorolf watched from the church. The Kirkegrim had not spared the body any sort of dignity and tore it apart like manhandling a child's toy. Thorolf and Otto preferred to have the remains of the body buried before morning since it would then be simple enough to explain that Sigmundr had died, rather than explain the draugr situation.

Once Sigmundr had been torn apart the Kirkegrim dragged the severed limbs into the churchyard. It did so using the strange thorn fetters that leaked out from the lower half of its body. It pulled the head, torso, legs, and arms like an entire pack of sled dogs pulling a musher across the snow. Initially the body leaked brackish red liquid as it was dragged but once it had truly died it showed signs of the body's real age. Sigmundr had been dead for some time and his blood had turned to slush that was indistinguishable from the mud it was mixing into. The damage they dealt to it that night was merely convincing the body of its true disposition.

Thorolf craned his head back against the ragged turf of the church's exterior and felt himself get lost in time as his eyelids closed. The first time he blinked them back open Otto was standing in the hole amassing a mound of dirt along the side. The second time, he saw Otto

dropping his father's head into the hole. It wasn't facing Thorolf when it fell in and the Kirkegrim stood in between it and Thorolf. The third time, the grave was filled and Otto was splayed like a starfish with his fancy clothes covered in sulfurous debris and his golden locks smeared in brackish blood.

The fourth time Thorolf blinked he found Otto sat next to him against the side of the church. "I guess you were wrong about me coming back to Iceland," said Thorolf.

"Why do you say that?" said Otto.

"I don't think anything that's happened since I got here can be counted as good."

"Thorolf, can I ask you a question?" Thorolf didn't think he needed to answer that question. It was self-explanatory and he wasn't much for getting up at the moment so he was at the priest's mercy. "Why did you come back to Iceland? Comparing your faith against those men who memorize my sermons I don't see much difference. There must be better ways of making a living than working here."

"I didn't have anywhere else to go. I couldn't go home," said Thorolf, biting his lip.

"That doesn't answer even half of my questions. Yes, you could have gone home, your father wasn't in that house anymore to forbid you. And you still haven't answered what forced you to return to Iceland."

Thorolf turned his head towards the water which had led him and many others to their fortunes. "I wasn't forced to come back, but I didn't want to either. I didn't enjoy what I was doing there but I didn't see a reason to stop either. People liked me there and I did well enough. But I didn't like them."

"You didn't make friends with them?" Otto scratched the dried blood out of his kingly golden hair.

“The things they liked about me were not the things I enjoyed. They reminded me of my father and pointed out the things in me that reminded me of my father. They pointed them out as things I should be proud of.”

“I’m familiar with being loved in some circles and hated in others. Your father’s penchant for pain made him many of both.” Otto had gotten the ball rolling and now he was simply poking Thorolf to tease out his reactions. Thorolf understood this but it didn’t matter. He had been quiet since he left Norway. Now was the time to talk.

“I didn’t like hurting them, but I found myself maliciously good at it. I don’t think I didn’t like it for any noble reason, just that it seemed like something my father would like. But when I returned after seven years with nothing more than what I left with, I regretted having lived.”

“And so you hoped to bury those regrets in the foundation of our new church?”

Thorolf caught a glimpse of the Kirkegrim still standing over the grave of his father and staring down into it. “I hoped not to die with those regrets.”

“Then I maintain, I think it is a good thing you came back to home.” Otto stood up. “Like the mad god Odin himself, I want to give my prophecy for the future. I think that just as you embody your father’s resentments, I think you will find someone that will embody your regrets. That person will not begrudge you.” Otto ensured Thorolf was okay to make it back to his home and then returned down the path to his own.

The Kirkegrim continued to sit atop the grave of Thorolf’s father. It had stayed in one spot for far longer than Thorolf had seen it do so before. Thorolf found himself moving towards it under the strain of his weakened legs. The grave was unmarked and the ground was still loose, like if a person stood on it then they would sink down into it. The Kirkegrim seemed unbothered

by this and sat on top of the grave like the Kirkegrim weighed nothing. In traditional practices they may have given Sigmundr a coffin, or they may have struck nails into his feet to prevent him from rising up, but that was unnecessary due to the sheer damage that had been done to the body. Maybe one day this would also be something Thorolf would come to regret. He was already wondering whether it was best to have slept through the burying of the body. Perhaps seeing and carrying out the burial would have brought him more solace or at least prevented some far-off future despair.

“I heard you, dog,” said Thorolf. “You understand more than you seem, don’t you.” The Kirkegrim stared back at him with its dead eyes, though Thorolf felt especially in this light that they had started to look more alive than before. “I didn’t know what to do with you. It seemed simpler to do away with you rather than keep hope.” Thorolf turned back to the grave.

“Goodbye, father.”

The Kirkegrim watched as Thorolf walked away and tried to mimic the sound.

“Goodbye, father.”

CHAPTER 6: DEATH

“The old priest Otto may know where grandfather went.” thought Oddleif. Just to be safe, she looked through her grandfather’s belongings and found his old war gear. She took the sword, although she didn’t find the spear when she had looked through his things so she assumed her grandfather took it.

The snow was just starting to pick up at this time of year so Oddleif was keen to finish locking up for the winter but grandfather Thorolf came first. She made her way to the church to see if maybe the old priest had asked him to help lock up the main building. Her grandfather’s home was just a little walk off from where they had built the church so the priest was always pestering him to do extra work. They had built a larger church house for the many servants that worked there and had given the old one to her grandfather as a thank you for his help in founding the church.

Oddleif’s dress dragged behind her in the mushy muck of the sulfurous mud. She would prefer to wear a tunic like her grandfather but the priest always chided her for not wearing women’s clothes. Apparently that could get someone into trouble back in Denmark, but she suspected Otto was mostly trying to maintain appearances. The diocese was taking more of an interest in Grofur as the fishing had improved the size of the hamlet, so they were looking into building a larger church here, but that may not happen within his lifetime. Many of the landowners had started building small churches on their own property so they did not need to leave or send out their servants to pray. Though more people had converted, Otto’s authority had not risen in the same way.

Her grandfather had probably just run off to do some errand for Otto and took the spear to look tough. It did concern her that the old man was ready for a fight. At his age it wouldn’t

matter whether he won the fight or not. The exhaustion that would overtake him would probably kill him all the same. Oddleif took a shortcut through the graveyard.

The black dog was sitting outside the church and it seemed to Oddleif that it took offense at her cutting through the graveyard, as was its lot. Its head followed her so she was able to see its dead eyes. The Kirkegrim was like a scorch mark left behind by a volcanic eruption and the spot where it was sat had been where another dog had been seated.

Once she had reached the door the Kirkegrim broke its gaze and continued staring out at the churchyard. She had seen the Kirkegrim before but never up close. Oddleif knew that it was at one point a normal dog and connected the dots that her grandfather had likely helped make it. She knew it guarded the graveyard and she also knew a rumor that if a person saw it then someone was about to die, or that they already had.

Otto and a handful of servants were prattling about making beaded brooches and other handicrafts. They should have been cleaning up for winter but Oddleif didn't imagine anyone would be staying in the church itself. They probably just needed to check the roof and windows. There were splotches on the floor where dirt from the turf roof had fallen in or water from melted snow had dripped down. Someone would probably have to come keep the snow from piling up too much for the next month to keep the roof from caving in. At this point it was more efficient to work on crafts for selling and trading than it was to try and save the building.

Otto's hair had not survived as well as Thorolf's. It was long and spindly out in every direction like he had not combed it since he had gotten up from bed.

"I'm sorry, miss, but what do-" started Otto, "Ah, Oddleif, what a surprise. Did you come to help clean up, Thorolf hasn't been around so I guess he sent you."

“Actually I was hoping you knew where he had gone off to,” Oddleif said. “I figured he was with you.”

“Well he was going to help us clean up some but... you wouldn’t happen to have seen the dog outside, would you?” Otto said.

“I did.”

“I see. Well then, no worries. We should be able to find him. I’m sure that old mut saw where he was going.” Otto whispered something to a servant, grabbed a large walking stick, and doubled up on layers before heading out. “Let’s see where that old dog went.”

“Do you mean the Kirkegrim or my grandfather?”

“Well I suppose both then don’t I.” Otto knocked the walking stick against the side of the church and whistled the best his frozen lips could muster. “Come on, I need to ask a question of you, come on out.”

The Kirkegrim appeared around the corner of the building marching out as if it had been waiting for its cue.

“Ah, there you are.” Otto leaned over into its face. “You wouldn’t happen to know where Thorolf is would you?”

“Thorolf walked out towards the remainder of the forest.” The Kirkegrim’s mouth animated oddly. It was as though the mouth movements it made did not quite match up to the sounds that were coming out of it.

“Bring us to him then,” Otto said. “You should know how to find him.”

The Kirkegrim spun in place, whipped its tail and marched out to the eastern woods although it stopped just at the fence to the yard. The old priest Otto slipped a thin rope, barely thick enough to hold taut a bag, and wrapped it around the neck of the Kirkegrim. It continued on

after that. It did not act as a hound sniffing out a trail with its face buried in the dirt. It instead walked just within the speed of the old priest's gait while staring forward.

"A little trick I found," said Otto. "It can't leave of its own will, but I can make it leave."

The trio walked like that for some time with Oddleif having to step up every so often to catch Otto when the path got rocky, though the old priest assured her that his walking stick was sufficient a crutch and that he did not need another.

The Kirkegrim did not exhibit any chills from the cold. Oddleif had not expected to go trek far out across the grasslands into the woods and had not dressed for the occasion, yet Otto seemed the worst off with his nose having turned red.

It took an hour before they reached the birch trees. Iceland was covered in grasslands and hills of gray volcanic rock, but the Vikings had thoroughly decimated the forests. For everything from building material to charcoal they had torn up the many trees and passed them down snowmelt rivers to be gathered and cut for all manner of use.

The remaining forest near Grofur was primarily birch trees. The bases were black like coal with patches of scale all the way up to the top, but the majority of the tree was as white as the snow around it. The trees were separated by crisscrossing snowmelt rivers separating them.

"How has Thorolf been recently?" Otto said. "For as long as I've known him, he always hurried home quickly after any yard work I needed help with. Not the best with words, I suppose."

"It depends on who he's talking to," Oddleif said. "We had a lot of long conversations about sagas while I was growing up. Those talks were for me, for everyone else you've already seen how it is."

“I suppose everyone has that kind of way with things. Where they show the world one thing and only let a few others see something else.”

Oddleif’s feet got tripped up for a moment as the Kirkegrim seemed to jerk to the side closer to her. “Uh, well I suppose that is just how it works out, although it isn’t as if we’ve had a lot of those conversations lately. I’ve had to do a lot of heavy lifting to keep everything tidy. We talked the most when he took me in after father died.”

“I wish I had been able to have more of these fabled long conversations with him.” Otto said.

At the bottom of a hill was a mess of disturbed leaves and a small amount of blood that had frozen on top of the pile. It dropped in three spurts and continued past one large tree.

Oddleif unsheathed the sword though it caught in the sheath more than Oddleif had expected it to, which forced her to pull harder but the placement of her left hand resulted in her cutting her palm just below the thumb.

She dug her fingernails into her hand and breathed in sharply before she squeezed out a few drops of blood onto the dead leaves. For a moment overwhelmed, she looked back between the tree and her hand. She commanded these compounding frustrations to cease in her mind and focused her attention on the tree. The old priest Otto walked behind her and the Kirkegrim tugged once on the string that held him. Oddleif moved around the tree and saw a foot protruding from the other side.

Slouched on the ground was her grandfather Thorolf. Dead.

Thorolf had a cut on his leg which was not severe. He must have tripped and cut himself on the spear. The real death mark was the drops of dried blood under his lips. A fall like that must have gotten his heart racing, so his death was far less ostentatious than one might assume.

“There you are, Thorolf,” Father Otto said. “We were wondering where you went. What were you doing all the way out here, my old friend?”

“I don’t suppose he will be answering that question.” Oddleif took the spear from his hands. Her only recourse was to busy herself with the work at hand.

“I suppose not, but that wouldn’t be the most surprising even under different circumstances.” Otto looked down at the Kirkegrim which was in front of Thorolf’s legs staring into his face. It was hard to read the face of a dog, but it seemed to Oddleif that it lingered on Thorolf’s. “Go back to the church now, little scary one.” He removed the rope from around its neck and the Kirkegrim began to turn to a gaseous mix of soot and shadow that burst onto the wind back in the direction of the church.

Otto fought his way onto the ground using his walking stick. He sat down beside Oddleif and pulled her left hand to him in order to wrap it in a cloth. “Your grandfather did not like talking too much about what troubled him, I doubt he would have explained himself much had we the chance to speak with him now.”

“I don’t need him to explain himself.” Oddleif picked at the collar of Thorolf’s coat. “We had a conversation about this once.”

“Ah, I figured it was kindness not to tell you on the way here. Did Thorolf give a hint he was going to be doing something like this?” Otto would have known that seeing the Kirkegrim sitting out there meant someone died. When Oddleif came in asking for her grandfather that only confirmed who it had been.

“Much more than a hint, he is...was more direct than that.” Oddleif caught phlegm in the back of her throat. “He said once that when he got old, which he already was, he would go fight a bear.”

“A bear? There are no bears in Iceland.”

“I believe the conversation was about some saga or something. He said that when he was old, he would go out and fight a bear, because if he got killed by a bear everyone would say, well of course he was killed by a bear, he was an old man and old men don’t win fights against bears. But If he killed the bear, and assuredly died from the implied bear wounds, then they would remark about that strange old man who killed a bear.”

“Well. That bear he killed sure was a big one.” Otto gestured at an imaginary bear. “And look at that, only the one wound on his leg. Why I don’t imagine we will even be able to carry that big old bear back with us, not with this big old bear on our shoulders.” Gesturing to Thorolf.

Oddleif licked her thumb and wiped the blood off of her grandfather’s mouth, “Oh yes, very impressive.”

Otto took that as permission to move Thorolf but Oddleif got her arm underneath the old priest and lifted him up to his feet first before getting back down to pick up her grandfather.

They had to avoid hills or unstable paths along the way. Oddleif put in most of the work but Otto threw in token support as he tried to lift Thorolf’s shoulder. Most of her grandfather’s weight fell on Oddleif along with his long red hair. It hadn’t lost much of its color but it had gone white at the roots, giving him the pattern of a fox fur pelt from the continent. It pressed into her face and she smelled the animal fat, wood chips, and smoky ash that had soaked through it. It reminded her of the household chores that she slowly overtook him at doing as the years passed by.

When they got back to the church there was already a hole freshly dug and sat beside it was the Kirkegrim. The two laid down Thorolf beside the hole and Oddleif searched his person

for anything of remaining value. She thought to take a gold band from around his wrist, but the Kirkegrim rustled in place as she tried.

The old priest placed his hand on Oddleif's shoulder and asked, "Are you ready?" Oddleif nodded and stepped to the side. "Your grandfather was a remarkable man despite his insecurities. He often confided in me his inability to handle the things that he felt weighed down his soul. Unlike those self-righteous men who build churches merely to present themselves as holy men, Thorolf was truly concerned with the matters of his soul. Although I'm sure he would not put it in such grandiose terms and would instead mumble an admonishment of himself. But it is the Lord who will be the one to judge him, and I think Thorolf comes up high in his regards." Otto patted his hand on Oddleif's back, though she shirked away from him she did eventually let the gesture stand. "Thorolf, you were a fine fellow as long as I knew you and as much as I knew you. I'm sure You won't be waiting that long to hear from me again."

Oddleif crouched down next to her grandfather and placed her hand on him for one last time. "Thank you for being around, grandfather."

Out of the hole rose a series of roots that pulled on Thorolf's arms and legs. Like a team of men, these roots grasped and pulled and traded positions as more roots pulled from behind to shift and even out his weight. The Kirkegrim's fur stood on end as the body was slowly lowered into the grave.

Otto said his farewells and left for the church, as his servants would finish filling in the grave later. Wood was growing more expensive so a coffin was outside of the comforts Thorolf could have been offered. It felt redundant to have taken Thorolf all this way only to leave him out in the open, with his face pointed up at the sky.

Oddleif's mind wandered to where she may stay tonight. Grandfather's house was almost ready to wait out winter, but that would be difficult now that she would have to stay there alone. Once the winter started in earnest it would be difficult to seek shelter somewhere else. Her mother's family might offer some hospitality this winter, but it wouldn't be smart to rely on that forever.

"You are not crying over him," said the Kirkegrim. "I have seen many outbursts of emotions from those who bury their relatives here, but you seem unmoved by your grandfather's passing. Did you not care for him?"

Oddleif did not know that the Kirkegrim could ask such questions unprompted. "I loved him very dearly. When my father died, he was the one who took in my mother and I, and when my mother found a man who would marry her again, he paid the bride price."

"But you don't feel like crying for him."

"Just because he was a kind man to me does not mean that he was a kind man to others. I know the worst of what he did. Between that and the work I must now take care of...it does not feel appropriate right now."

"There was a woman who did feel it was appropriate to grieve for him." The Kirkegrim's sentence hung in the air like he was inviting a question.

"A woman?" said Oddleif. "We only just discovered his body. What woman could have been crying over him?"

"It was last night that I appeared to hear her wailing. Then once again this morning when I suspect Thorolf died. Though I did not appear for her as she did not represent a threat to the graveyard. It was when I noticed the light thinning around Thorolf and then once the light had left him," said the Kirkegrim.

Oddleif knew of no women that were of a close relationship with her grandfather. “Why could you hear this wailing. If it did not pertain to you then it must have been monstrously loud.”

The Kirkegrim was preparing something. It got up on all four of its legs and matched Oddleif’s gaze and said, “I became aware of her three months ago, but she never crossed my boundary. Every time I appeared to observe the new body soon to be added to my collection, I heard her wailing. Then when I appeared again to collect, she would continue to cry in a melody. I cannot say I ever truly understand your language, I only mimic it, but the language she sang in was strange to me.”

“I don’t care about her singing!” said Oddleif. “Did you tell the priest about this?”

“Eventually. He and your grandfather had many discussions about it. Called it a Banshee, although one of the servants called it a Bean Sidhe in his Celtic language.”

Now Oddleif definitely felt an outburst of emotion. If this was some death curse from another land then perhaps there were extraordinary circumstances to her grandfather’s death after all. This emotion felt appropriate. It racked between concern and vindication and drove her hand to the sword on her hip.

The Kirkegrim sat back down with the smallest air of smugness in how it craned its neck. It was luring her into the next question. These were matters it could, and had, already discussed with Otto. It wanted something, “I would like to make a bargain with you. I will show you to this Banshee and you will allow me to do as I wish with it.” Her brow scrunched and her bottom lip stuck out as it continued, “It’s not as though you are the only one with complicated feelings about Thorolf. I only exist as a result of his actions, but he also is the reason I exist in this state.”

It was like one of her grandfather’s sins was staring her in the eye and daring her to say she did not care enough to put her own life on the line for his memory. But this was moving too

fast and Oddleif wasn't stupid enough to go into a deal without establishing the rules. Thus she said, "I will fasten a rope around your neck so that you may lead me to this Banshee. When we arrive you will be allowed to deal with her as you wish, but no one may come to harm."

The Kirkegrim's eyes seemed to glow in a way that was like life had returned them, creating the illusion of pupils. "If either I bring you physical harm or if you loose my binding before I have had my say then whoever breaks the deal will suffer the other's misery for as long as they exist. Do we have an accord?"

CHAPTER 7: RETRIBUTION

Oddleif gripped the rope tightly as the Kirkegrim led her out into the countryside. This marked some of the farthest she had been outside of Grofur in years. They avoided the forest to save on time and so they crossed the vast expanse of grasslands that spread out in all directions. The grasslands were only interrupted by the crests of hills, but even beyond those there were yet more grasslands which rolled onto the horizon. The occasional homestead could be seen in the distance with a handful of horses and herds of sheep being tended to by wealthy landowners.

Every so often the Kirkegrim would tug on the rope, having walked too far ahead of her. She thought it was like a child that pulled on her hand to show her a new bug they had found. Its tail even swept to and fro so as to knock aside tall grass and large patches of snow which it navigated easily. If it weren't for the strange way its tail changed size, then from the back Oddleif may have mistaken it for a normal dog.

The two kept up this pace for hours until the sun started to dim. Oddleif's pace slowed as she started tripping more and more. As night set in, the direness of her mission entered the forefront of her mind. Who was to say whether this Banshee would stay in one spot forever. Perhaps it would do as the Kirkegrim did and only appear when called for its wicked task. But even as her motivation continued to grow, her exhaustion mounted until it spilled from her lungs in panted breaths.

The Kirkegrim stopped and said, "We should stop for now. We will go to that small valley there so as to block the wind and rest for a while before we continue." Oddleif did not expect their chances of making progress to grow better as it grew darker, but she was in no place to argue. They found the spot he pointed out and she fell into the grass. "I would ask you not to

let go of the rope even as you rest. I believe it is your permission which allows me to be here, not the rope itself. If you let go then I may just return to the graveyard.”

“Don’t tempt me, dog,” Oddleif tied rope around her hand.

“I would like to ask you another question,” said the Kirkegrim, “Why do you care how your grandfather was perceived by others? You said he was a kind man to you. Does it matter what he was to others?”

“That is a strange thing to say for something that was so deeply affected by him,” said Oddleif. “Whether it was his stories of his own misdeeds or the gossiping of aggrieved loved ones, I knew that even as a child he harmed others. I still love him, but I can’t grieve for him.”

“Allow me to make a comparison then. How do you feel over that sword of Thorolf’s that you have been carrying around?”

There was a trick to this. It was trying to catch her in something. Still it was better to meet it head on rather than to lie and get caught. It’s not as though she could pretend that she hadn’t hugged onto the sword since the afternoon. “It is mine, it is old, and it is valuable.”

“It is also the source of great conflict between your grandfather and your great grandfather. Something that is entirely irrelevant to you. You don’t even know how to use it as evidenced by that cut on your hand earlier. But you cling to it like it is important despite it being the lingering tool of animosity, and the tool your grandfather used for many of those misdeeds you mentioned,” the Kirkegrim said.

“Why do you even care?” asked Oddleif.

“I don’t,” said the Kirkegrim, “you do. I don’t care about the people of Grofur, but I do care about the bodies they leave behind. Things hold value to some people and nothing to others. Thorolf held value to you, so why care that others do not do the same?”

This was Oddleif's counterattack. "The value others hold does affect how one values something. Take the priest for example."

Even in the growing dimness of the night Oddleif could see the Kirkegrim's pointed ears drop as he replied, "Oh. Right. Otto."

"Despite his friendship with Thorolf," Oddleif said, "I do not care for the man. I find him to be pretentious and prone to looking down on me for being a woman. However, he is also the man who helped my grandfather through a difficult time and remained friends with him through his life. I cannot ignore that just because of my misgivings." Oddleif grinned until she realized the mistake she had just made in her argument.

"I would say that you just proved my point," the Kirkegrim said, "as despite your misgivings, Thorolf still held the man in high regard." It laid down in place and hid its face in the grass. "However, I must admit I have complicated feelings about Otto as well. I get the impression he views me as not being alive."

"Is that not the case?" asked Oddleif.

It emerged from its hiding spot with vigor in its voice. "Thorolf believed that I was dead, whereas Otto believed I was never alive. There is a distinction. Although I actually believe Otto to be correct, I still appreciated Thorolf's feelings. Something that was dead could be mourned, something that had not been alive...couldn't...I don't think."

"That was not a very confident answer," said Oddleif. At that moment Oddleif caught the most dog-like response she had seen from the Kirkegrim yet as it twisted its head to the side in confusion.

“Life is filled with contradictory feelings and scenarios.” The Kirkegrim rose from its spot and pronounced, “For example, despite the time we have spent chatting bringing us closer to night, you should now be able to see more clearly.”

Oddleif had not even noticed the northern lights had become visible like fire burning in the sky.

CHAPTER 8: GRIEF

It was still too dark to see the pockmarked rocky hills in front of her, but Oddleif could see the silhouettes of the trees in the distance. Using them for reference she was at least able to conceptualize the progress the pair were making.

The waves of green swayed across the sky in the same direction that they were headed. On the edge of the horizon she could see the waves collide into a mass of white light. It was charitable to think that even the sky was leading her to the Banshee's location, but there was an overwhelming vindication to the thought of having her steps guided by heaven.

Eventually Oddleif could make out the silhouette of a building nestled into the ground ahead. It was little more than a hut with a turf roof that folded the earth over top of it. The Kirkegrim explained that for her grandfather this may have meant something, that his childhood home was where the Banshee haunted. But for Oddleif and the Banshee itself, the building was nothing more than an abandoned hut on the edge of what could possibly be considered Grofur.

The roof was caved in, the wood had rotted to the point that entering it was a hazard in and of itself, and Oddleif could hear it creak against just the wind on its own. She pulled the sword from its sheath, this time making sure not to cut herself. She pressed forward, but the Kirkegrim had stopped in front of her.

The Kirkegrim spoke, "Remember our deal. I am curious and want to know about this woman that sits outside of my boundaries. So we shall talk and you shall listen."

From its first moment the Kirkegrim sought out distinction and pattern. It focused on those things that stood out against others like the church, the graves, the light, and those strange words Otto had first spoken to it. They became its fixations and it studied them and the reactions

they elicited from the Kirkegrim, many of which were outside its ability to control. It was Otto that expressed incredible knowledge about why the Kirkegrim acted the way it did and was often unfazed by its actions, even when the Kirkegrim did not understand those actions itself. In observing Otto the Kirkegrim felt that it understood more about itself, but in observing Thorolf it felt it understood the world better.

Thorolf viewed the Kirkegrim as shameful and tragic. Things it had not ascribed to itself. This divergence of opinion caused the Kirkegrim to become reflective. What was the relationship between the Kirkegrim and Thorolf? His blood was the first thing the Kirkegrim tasted when it awoke. Was he like its father? If so, then why could it not grieve him?

The Banshee did not contain light, putrid or otherwise. There was nothing that drew the Kirkegrim's gaze toward her and in fact she repelled the Kirkegrim's gaze as if she were the opposite of everything the Kirkegrim represented. But, that hole in his vision was what caught his attention in the first place.

She sat on the remains of one of the beds. Her feet were bare and covered in so much caked on mud that they had grown the shade of the Kirkegrim's fur. Her dress was tattered and scorched in some places. She had a mostly transparent shawl that covered her head of red hair. Her face was that of a young woman but it was scarred by trenches of tears that formed lines across her face where gunk and mold had collected on her skin.

The Kirkegrim's mouth moved in a way that mimicked those that it had seen before.
"Who are you?"

Her voice was hoarse from disuse and tinged with an accent like that of those taken from Ireland. "I am the last of my clan."

"There were others like you?" said the Kirkegrim.

“There are still others like me, but I will be last. I thought I was already the last for so long.” Every word the Banshee uttered seemed like she was going to burst into tears again. The Kirkegrim could not relate to such a feeling. It didn’t know how yet.

“You are not referring to other Bean Sidhe, are you?” said the Kirkegrim. Oddleif tugged on the rope slightly. Perhaps it was meant to be a signal to get more information. The Kirkegrim had forgotten that she was there, and that she still did not know what was really going on.

“I have not seen another Bean Sidhe since before I came to this island. My clan were explorers and found this land by accident.” She spoke of how the Irish had first come to this island before the Icelanders though in much smaller numbers and limited success. “I wandered so long without them until I found myself pulled here by their descendants.” This was her version of the light, her fixation that used when observing the outside world.

“Why are you the last? Is it because you will outlive them? If so then I too am the last,” said the Kirkegrim.

The Banshee held the Kirkegrim’s face in her hands. Her nails were long and they scratched under its chin. It had seen this before with real dogs. The Kirkegrim mimicked the motion of wagging its tail and leaned its head forward in an attempt at enjoying it.

“You are more like the first I think,” said the Banshee. “You care for something I don’t. I must be the last because I must be the one to mourn them. Otherwise their souls cannot be assured to pass on.” This was the distinction the Kirkegrim saw. The hole in its vision. She cared for the souls of those in her family. The Kirkegrim only cared for the corpses in its graveyard.

“But why Thorolf?” said the Kirkegrim, “It would seem to me that he did great harm to your family, or at least those ones that you may not have met.”

“Why did you kill him?” said Oddleif.

“It did not matter to me,” said the Banshee, “all those who die deserve to be grieved by someone. I could feel the connection to that man and wept as it was severed by his death. But I don’t understand your question. I didn’t kill anyone.”

Oddleif pointed the sword at the Banshee. “You appeared even before his death. That means something. You appeared and then he died.”

“He was old and had lived a dangerous life. I could tell these things.” The Banshee slid her hand down the rotted wall of the house. “I wish I could have been closer to him and the others. To have truly known them makes the grief more sincere.”

“But you knew and that-” Oddleif was cut off.

“That she was involved was a conclusion I led you to believe,” said the Kirkegrim. “It was easier to get here if you believed that, but you would not have believed it were you not the way you are now.”

Oddleif held the sword over the rope. The Kirkegrim didn’t actually know what would happen regarding their bargain if she cut it, but the Kirkegrim did not think that it wanted to see what would happen to her.

“You scream at grief itself that she is to blame for your grandfather’s passing.” The Kirkegrim shook its head. “You have inverted the concept of grief. You think you are in pain because you are grieving, when you are grieving because you are in pain. But I brought you here for my own sake. What value you may derive from this experience is entirely up to you and is not shaped by me.”

Would she invite more suffering on herself? Would she cut the rope out of spite and then try to kill the Banshee? The Kirkegrim did not feel it was capable of grieving for Thorolf, as it didn’t have the context for what doing so meant. The look on Oddleif’s face was what the

Kirkegrim had wanted to see, it was a half-formed scowl while her nose scrunched up trying to contain the mucus running from it. Her breathing grew faster out of her control. But what it really wanted to see was the blood pumping through her veins and bulging the capillaries in her eyes as tears broke the surface.

The Kirkegrim's dead eyes mimicked the shape of hers.

The day that it happened Oddleif swore she could hear the faint sound of crying, and see the Kirkegrim tending its graves. Otto's servants had fetched her not knowing what they should do. The church's roof had collapsed and the inside was in shambles as snow and soil had tumbled in and crushed everything therein. They had already dragged him out of the building by the time she got there. They made room for her beside him. His white hair was stained red and he was taking vast breaths because he likely knew these were his last. Oddleif cradled Otto in her arms as there was nothing more to do. She kissed him on the side of his head and got his mangled gray hair in her mouth, but she didn't care. Oddleif wept for Otto. She wept for her grandfather too.

CHAPTER 9: EPILOGUE

There were often tourists at the historical site. The Kirkegrim always felt a need to return to the church and check on the yard even if some of the bodies had been exhumed. No bodies had been brought there to rest in centuries. Even after the Kirkegrim started to call itself I and him, it still felt the need to return to the graveyard. The church Otto had built had fallen into disrepair, been rebuilt, and fallen out of use yet again until it was nothing more than a museum dedicated to medieval Icelandic architecture. The Kirkegrim had been bound to this church but to call it a church anymore would be charitable. There was no fence, all the grave markers had been rolled over, and no priest yet remained there. The Kirkegrim did not know which of these acts was what discounted this from being a church, but it was because of this that he took his first steps, unsupervised, out of the church grounds.

Time had never been a concept he fully understood as he never felt the moments between his summoning. Once there was no church, he expected to fade away without even the chance to think about his life, but he didn't disappear. Time flowed differently than he had ever experienced before. There were no hiccups where he was pulled from one moment to the next. His existence was no longer centered in a location; he was centered in time and could move through it instead of being pulled from one task to another. The Banshee was the only one that the Kirkegrim could confide in regarding this shift in perspective he was experiencing.

The elder care center was situated at the top of one of the town of Grofur's many hills. They thought she had some form of early onset dementia. They couldn't conceive of the idea that she was a Banshee, so instead they explained her bouts of wailing as an emotional disorder. She barely spoke to them, which led them to believe she couldn't, just like how their inability to find her relatives convinced them that she had none. They often sat her out on the porch of the care

center, believing that sunlight would be good for her mental state. The Kirkegrim was sure she liked it as much as she was capable. The role of doted-upon grandmother suited her well.

These were the people who started calling the Kirkegrim a him as they believed his ragged coat to be signs that he was just a stray dog. Which wasn't entirely incorrect, but no one had before insisted upon calling the Kirkegrim anything other than it. At first, they shooed him away whenever he approached the Banshee, and he played the role of bashful hound as well as he could. However the staff was not quite paid well enough to watch their charges all day, so he would sneak in to see her whenever possible.

They called her Riona and covered her in blankets and scarves to buffer the cold air while she looked down at the hilly streets of Grofur. The Kirkegrim would place his head on her lap and let her comb her hands through the mangled curls of his fur. She would linger on his head with deep strong brushes that kicked up old hair and dander. After the first year the caregivers eventually gave way to the Kirkegrim's repeated flaunting of their authority. Some even took videos of them on their small rectangular wands they used to communicate with one another over long distances. Assuredly they tried to catch him, bathe him, collar him but they were never successful in this as he always slipped from their grasp no matter how hard they held him. They tried asking the Banshee what his name was, but she would feign confusion.

Her mournful keening was something they just couldn't understand. First they had someone stand next to her and rub her shoulders, assuring her that everything was okay. But after three years of this they grew to understand this was simply something the Banshee was prone to do and no effort on their part could stop this. They did not understand that she was singing a grief-stricken song for the members of the town who were dying far away. Just as they didn't understand that the Kirkegrim would leave to find these bodies and ensure they were found by

those who would bury them. All they saw was a woman far too young to be overcome by such mania, rubbing her hands through the curls on the back of a stray dog that came and went as it pleased.