

The Rise of Skald

by Kris Martin



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Part 1

The kingdom of Volendyr could be found at the base of the frigid Arynkekk mountain range. It was a land hidden by vast, enchanting forests that were trapped within an endless winter. Despite how beautiful the snowcapped woods appeared, they were also home to some of the most ferocious animals known to exist. It was not uncommon for the mutilated remains of a hunter to be discovered if they ventured alone in the wilderness. Whenever the sun sets, the howling wind became so cold that it would freeze a man to death without shelter. Regardless of how harsh the conditions in the north were, the battle-hardened people of Volendyr believed it only made them stronger.

Within Volendyr's stone walls, hunters could be heard trying to peddle furs to people who passed by, as the rest of their kill roasted in fire pits nearby. Whenever the chilly air blew by, it carried the sharp, but sweet aroma of pine combined with the satisfying smell of charred meat along the pathways. Men and

women passed by the shouting merchants with little interest in their wares or goods as many set a brisk pace for the stadium. The stadium was surrounded by numerous houses with thatched roofs; however, many were severely damaged and ready to fall apart. The brisk smell of pine faded as people crowded closer towards the stadium. Outside the stadium gates, the crowd's combined body heat emanated a foul, dank odor of sweat and filth as they waited to take their places in the stands.

In the humid bowels of the stadium, a long haired man prepared himself for his fight ahead as he strapped down a leather chest piece, and covered it with various furs. The man's nose wrinkled as the putrid smell of decay rose from the chambers below where less fortunate challengers were tossed, and left to rot. Another man with short brown hair casually entered the dim room from behind holding a pair of axes, "Have you finished preparations Skald?"

Skald stomped his foot into a leather boot as he turned, "Aye Sigmundyr, have you brought my fa-" Skald was interrupted as Sigmundyr tossed his weapons to him. Skald glared at his friend as he ran his hand across sides of the serrated fang-like blades. Satisfied with the sharpness of their edges, he slipped the twin axes into leather loops on his belt.

"Are you sure you want to go through with this brother?"

"Who would refuse being named Champion, or deny the blessing of the wolf spirits from the High Shaman?"

"Be wary of such lavish gifts, that man is not as he seems. Now come, little Tyria is waiting to talk you out of this as well."

"A moment brother," Skald said as he pulled forth a silver chain from under his armor. He took hold of the end of the necklace which held the shape of a sun rising above the horizon. Skald raised the pendant to his lips and kissed it, "Goddess, guide my blades." Sigmundyr sighed as he watched his friend rub the ferrous taste from his lips, and held open the door for him.

When Skald stepped onto the muddy floor of the dim hallway, a pair of small arms wrapped around his waist. He looked down to see his daughter Tyria, with her braided hair and ribbons, clinging on to him. "Don't go Father, don't fight. Let's return home."

Skald reached down and patted her braided brown hair, "I have to fight little one. You will understand when you are older," turning to this friend, "Please watch over her, friend."

"I will treat her as if she were my own."

"I don't want to lose you like we lost Mother!" Tyria tightened her grip around his waist. She refused to let go of her father until Sigmundyr grabbed her from behind.

"Come little Tyria, we must let your father go. We will wait for your return in my home brother," he said as he hoisted Tyria, whose face was red and sobbing now, onto his shoulder. As he walked away with the little girl, he turned back to Skald, "Skald Twin Fangs, may the spirit of the wolf watch over you, Brynhald will not fall easily."

"You have my thanks. May your ancestors smile upon you brother Sigmundyr." Skald turned and wiped a tear from his rugged face. After a few moments, he continued down the dank, torch lit hallway toward the arena entrance. A haggard guard stood hunched over by the reinforced wooden door, waiting for Skald, and with a nod, the battered arena door creaked open.

Before Skald sat a thick wall of fog, and he was hesitant to enter. However, the guard behind him delivered an abrupt nudge with the end of his spear which forced Skald to stumble inside the arena. As Skald regained his balance, he caught a glimpse of the crowd above who murmured their aversion about the shrouded arena. The door he came out of slammed shut behind him, followed by a scrapping sound as it was barred from inside. He pulled his axes from his belt and poised them as he readied himself. Skald squinted as he attempted to see through the fog; however, it was too thick to see any further than five paces in front of him. Moments later, Skald heard another door slam shut from elsewhere in the arena.

Skald noticed a rancid stench coming from somewhere in the area which nearly caused him to vomit. He heard a few spectators vomit over the ringside as they too noticed the smell. Other than the sounds of the

sickened crowd, he could hear iron chains being slowly dragged across the rocky floor of the arena. Skald could only assume they belonged to his opponent Brynhald. The sound did not last long as it stopped moments later. Then a roar of a horn thundered out across the stadium. As the horn's roar died above, Skald heard a whistling sound accompanied by the chinking of a chain. Instinctively, he raised his axes to defend himself. Not a second later, a hook attached to a chain wrapped itself around one axe. A tremendous force pulled the axe free of his grip, and sent it flying through the murk. A loud clang was heard as the axe smacked into the arena floor. A few men could be heard above shouting about missing the entertainment with the fog in the way. Skald crouched down in an attempt to avoid another ranged assault.

Minutes passed in near silence until another bellow of a horn was sounded. A moment later, Skald heard chains being reeled back until a loud crash of iron slamming against the stone wall rang out. Soon after, several small feet were heard scampering about followed by a starved howl. His tense face drooped into a grimace as he realized what had been released into the arena.

Skald could not keep track of how many bestial shadows had circled him, but he stayed crouched, prepared to counter an attack. From across the thick miasma, a great thump rang out followed immediately by a wailing yelp as he saw an animalistic shadow collide with the ground. With his attention turned, one of the stalking shadows leaped onto Skald, and sent him to the ground. Two large furry paws held his upper body to the ground as saliva dripping jowls desperately tried to reach Skald's throat. He struggled to hold the rabid beast back with one arm as his free arm delivered his axe into the side of its head. The creature fell limp immediately, and Skald pushed it away from him.

As more and more action could be heard from the stands, the crowd became increasingly aggressive. Several onlookers slammed their tankards into wooden seats in frustration since they could not see what was happening below.

Skald returned to his feet and skulked around the arena as he followed the intensifying stench of his opponent. A smirk crossed his face when he saw a hulking silhouette, who had to be Brynhald over a dozen paces in front of him. He snuck up closer behind the behemoth as the putrid stench almost became unbearable. Skald was close enough that he saw that Brynhald's flesh was sickeningly pale and even falling off in places. He heard another wolf leap out from the mist, but this time it went for Brynhald. To Skald's disgust, the fetid brute disgorged a reeking mass of slime from its mouth striking the animal's side. Brynhald's expelled muck planted the large wolf to the arena floor rendering it helpless as it whined and struggled to move. Brynhald lumbered towards the creature and swung with an enormous, grotesque clubbed arm. The blow struck the beast and sent it sailing across the arena; however, there remained a gory mess of torn flesh, and broken bones where the animal had been affixed to the arena floor. Skald gasped after he saw what remained of the pitiful creature.

Brynhald turned abruptly as it heard Skald gasp, and brought down its rotting, clubbed arm down upon Skald. As he cursed himself, Skald dived away only to be snatched up by its other arm with a chain wrapped tightly around it. Brynhald held the smaller man up, by his feet, to its face as if to examine his adversary. Skald gaped as he saw the abomination's face. Brynhald's face had partially fallen off, exposing bits of its skull, and one of its eyelids had been sewn shut. Skald snapped out of his disgusted awe and drove his axe deep into the creature's forearm. Brynhald appeared to be unfazed and gave a casual glance to his stricken arm as clumps of flesh and fetid muscle fell from it.

"Put me down abomination!" Skald roared as he spat into its rotting visage. Speechlessly, the rotting oaf turned its attention back to Skald as its maw opened, and spewed forth another torrent of pale slime. Skald squirmed to the right to avoid the brunt of what had been expelled. The ooze struck him in his left arm and parts of his side which pasted the two together. Two of the remaining wolves leaped into the fray and ripped pieces of flesh from Brynhald's legs. The creature dropped Skald helplessly to the ground as it turned its focus towards the bestial annoyance.

The crowd above continued to lose patience which led to a fight that broke out after one spectator knocked another man's tankard over. The crowd turned their attention away from the obscured arena, and

instead to the fight in the stands. The wind had also picked up around the stadium which stirred the fog inside the arena.

Skald got back up on his feet while Brynhald was distracted. The two wolves bit and tore chunks of putrid skin from its legs which exposed the bones underneath. Skald took hold of his serrated axe, and sliced into the slime that bound his arm to his side. He watched his opponent unravel the chain attached to his arm and swung wildly as the wolves danced around it. Skald had nearly freed himself as he heard a thunderous crash. He looked up to see one of the wolves cleaved in half, falling into a mass crimson. Skald tugged hard once more and his arm ripped free from the slime that held it to his side. The fog within the arena was beginning to dissipate as the wind continued. The spectators began shouting and cheering as they could now see the arena below.

Skald rushed for Brynhald who was crushing the last wolf in its massive hand. Skald leaped onto the creature's midsection; however, his boots sunk into its rotting body, and trapped him partially inside the creature. Enraged, Skald started to hack away at Brynhald's deformed face. The grotesque brute wrapped his fingers around Skald's body and started to squeeze him. He felt his ribs start to shatter, one by one. Despite the excruciating pain, Skald kept up his onslaught on the creature. Each blow he landed tore even more puss ridden skin away from Brynhald's neck. Skald summoned forth the remainder of his strength and delivered one last blow to the creature's neck, "Die!" The serrated blade ripped into Brynhald's flesh, and shattered its spine. Its head fell backwards and the weight of the skull ripped away whatever putrid skin that was still attached. The abomination's grip loosened around Skald as it fell backwards. Skald gasped for air, causing him to cringe as his chest writhed with pain. He stepped out of the abomination, and looked up to the crowd who were chanting various war cries to him. Skald raised his axe to the sky as a sign of victory.

As Skald tried to leave the arena, he was stopped by ten guards clad in steel armor and held spears ready at their sides. Skald dropped his axe and placed his hands to his side. Two guards stepped aside, and revealed an elderly man who gazed at Skald from under a wolf's pelt. Skald fell to one knee, "High Shaman, it is an honor."

The High Shaman stepped forward with a gnarled staff in one hand, and a chalice in the other. The aged man presented the chalice to Skald, "This holds the essence of the wolf spirit. Drink Champion, and claim your reward." Skald took the chalice and gazed into its sloshing black contents.

"Yes High Shaman," and without a second thought, he raised the cup to his lips and drank the strange fluid. Skald felt different as the liquid coursed through him; however, he did not know what exactly he felt. He shivered as the dark liquid coursed down his throat. His midsection started to burn slightly as it settled in his stomach.

"We must prepare you for the blessing immediately. Come Champion."

"But I wish to see my daughter first, High Shaman."

"There is no time, and Tyria has been taken care of already."

Skald's eyebrows narrowed, "How did you know?" Sigmundyr's warning rang within his head as his face grew ghastly pale. He dropped the chalice as panic coursed through his body. Skald shoved two guards aside as he ran past, groaning in pain from his injuries.

"Catch him, we have no time," the High Shaman ordered his personal guard.

Skald ignored the orders barked at him as he weaved around the pathways. He ran down the final pathway to Sigmundyr's home; however, a crowd of townspeople had formed nearby. Skald pushed onlookers aside as he winced in pain whenever his ribs bumped into another person. As he broke through the crowd, he tripped on something lying on the ground. As Skald turned to see what it was, his face drained of all color. Upon the pathway was Sigmundyr face down in a pool of scarlet.

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INSTALLMENT OF THIS MYTHICAL TALE OF OUR WARRIOR
ON SEPTEMBER 10, 2012....**