



## **1. Introduction**

*Odin rubbed his beard thoughtfully. The humans in Styrbjorn's village in southern Norway were sending conflicting offerings to the Gods. It wasn't easy to make sense of what they really wanted. So Odin sent for his two ravens, Hugin and Munin. He bade them keep a proper lookout in Styrbjorn's village.*

*The ravens then flew close to the roofs. They rested in the trees or dived for cover amid the cliffs above the village. All the while, they listened and watched.*

*When they finally returned to Odin, they reported about life in the small village:*

*The humans now lived peacefully, and most of them had almost forgotten the gruesome raid on their village seven years ago. Back then, when the chieftain Styrbjorn and so many others were killed. But now Styrbjorn's brother, Sven, controls the village with an iron fist. In summertime many*

*of the men now travels to foreign coasts, and return with many a good tale and traded goods; all to the delight of everyone in the village.*

*“Is that all?” Odin asked grumpily. “It sounds as if everything is as it should be. Then why are they sending me these strange offerings?”*

*The ravens looked at each other, and stared at the ground abashed. They weren’t quite sure. But here and there strange talk was heard at night in Styrbjorn’s village: Whispered, secretive words; Hard to hear, hard to grasp.*

*“You must have heard something!” Odin exclaimed angrily, his patience nearly worn out.*

*“Revenge-talk, we heard! Revenge whispered, revenge spoken!” The ravens cawed in unison and shaking their wings.*

*“Ahaa! I see, I see,” Odin exclaimed. “That’s how it is! Well! About time, isn’t it?”*

*After pondering lengthily he asked how Styrbjorn’s son, young Hauge was faring.*

*And Hugin and Munin told him that Hauge was now a grown man. Nineteen summers. Strong and good at many tasks. Wooed and chased by the girls, too, and envied by the men.*

*“Hunted? And a hunter! A real hunter, Hauge is,” Odin mumbled to himself. “Let’s see what he can hunt...”*





## **2. The Game**

Hauge draws his bow and aims at the big moose. The ice cold air makes his breath come out like clouds. This beast may better not escape! At last they are going to have some proper meat. Even at the recent Yule sacrifice they'd had nothing to offer the Gods but a goat. Their winter supplies had run out much too soon. But then there hadn't been a great deal of order at the slaughter this last fall, either.

Hauge aims at the animal's shoulder; holds his breath – and releases the arrow. But just then the scared animal jumps off, the arrow stuck in a hind leg.

“He's hit! Get him!” Hauge yells at the others.

The wounded moose sprints through the trees, followed by a tail of hunters and dogs. Tracing its tracks in the deep, soft snow is easy.

Hauge stops. There's something familiar about this place. The tall trees – the uneven, steep cliffs, and the way the yells of the hunting men is thrown back and forth between them.

He's been here before. But when? It must have been a long time ago.

The men's yells fade away into the thicket. Then, another sound catches his attention: a strange, moaning grunt. As if it comes from a wounded animal. But it can't be the moose! It ran the other way.

Carefully he follows the sound, and suddenly finds himself in a long, narrow ravine, running deep into the mountain.

The ravine! Someone humming...

This was where he'd found his mother back then. That time – seven years ago, when his father was killed fighting Haakon. Right after it she wasn't herself. But, luckily she soon recovered; thanks to Hannibal – and his herbs.

### **3. Aasa**

It's been four years since he last saw Hannibal. When, disguised as a trader, he had left the village on one of the foreign ships. Otherwise Sven would have killed him. After all, he'd been convinced that Hannibal had betrayed them, although it was the other monk, Peter, who'd revealed their plan to Haakon. Hauge smiles at the thought of how Haakon had chopped Peter's head off. He would have liked to have done it himself! But then his own worst enemy had taken care of that for him!

And shortly after this his mother had married Sven. She needed a husband, people said.

About a month after the big wedding party, Hauge experienced something weird. He had gone up to Lauge Longsight at his watch. From up there he saw his mother walk up to the burial mound. She was on her own. Not even accompanied by a thrall-girl. Hauge went down to talk to her. But she didn't see him. She was sitting, bent over Styrbjorn's grave.



Hauge couldn't avoid hearing what she was saying.

"We had a good life together, Styrbjorn. You were a good chieftain, and a good father to Hauge. I'm sure you would have trained him to follow in your footsteps if Haakon hadn't killed you." Aasa drew in her breath heavily. Then she continued: "I hope you understand that I had to marry your brother. Sven has been a great help. Especially in the rebuild of the village, and it was natural that he became Chieftain after you, since Hauge was so young. Sven is a good trader, they say, and a good navigator, who can find his way across the sea. But he's a hard master, and not very good at managing things at home."

Aasa straightened herself a bit, looked at the mound, then back at the great memorial stone with the runes. The runes Lauge had burned, and which meant: "Hauge set this stone for Styrbjorn his father."

Aasa continued in a low tone: "I have learned a lot from you, Styrbjorn. That's why I might be able to help Sven turn into a great Chieftain; which is why I married him. Now you know, Styrbjorn."

She placed both her hands on the burial mound, and then whispered something. Hauge was very surprised when she turned and looked at him directly. Then she said: "Now you know it too, Hauge!" Then she turned around and walked away.

#### **4. Sounds in the Mountain**

Everything is very quiet now. The moans and grunts have stopped. Maybe he was imagining things? Hauge doesn't want to go any further into the dark ravine, why he turns around to walk back in search of the other hunters.

Right then he hears something anew. Not a moan, nor a grunt, but someone who is breathing, slowly and exhausted. It doesn't sound like an animal.

"Who's there?" he asks into the darkness. But no one answers. He then approaches, slowly, clutching his knife, just in case...

In the darkness a pair of wide open, terrified eyes stare at him.

"Astrid!" he exclaims surprised, when he recognises the mute thrall-girl. "What are you doing out here?" Then he sees the tiny, lifeless body next to the girl.

## **5. Secret Birth**



“What have you done, Astrid?”

He hasn't seen her for a while. It's been so long, apparently, that he had no idea she was with child. And now she's given birth to a baby. In secret! And then killed it! The thralls do that quite often, he knows, especially, if the father is a free married man. Then the child has very little chance of surviving, anyway, and none at all, if it's a girl.

But Astrid just stares at him in a strange way, shaking from the cold.

“Did you kill the child?” He now sees that she’s had a boy.

Astrid shakes her head. Then she shows him with her hands, how she gave birth to him, and tried to make him breathe. But he had just been there, stillborn, between her legs.

“Come!” Hauge says, lifting the tiny, limp body into his arms. “We need to bury the child in the burial place. Then you can go home to Sigrid and recover.”

But Astrid struggles back up on her feet, clearly in pain, and takes the dead child from him. She shakes her head anxiously.

“You don’t want him buried in the burial place – with all the others?”

She points out between the trees, trying to explain to him that they simply need to bury the boy, somewhere in the forest.

Hauge looks at her searchingly. So, nobody needs to know she gave birth to that child. It has to disappear. Apparently, that seems to be her wish.

Without further ado he helps her out of there, and together they find a place where the child can lie in peace; with no one else knowing of it.

Just as they have covered the tiny grave with stones, they hear a group of noisy men approaching. It’s the hunters on their way back. They sound happy and excited. They must have caught the wounded animal then.

“Come Astrid! We have to get out of here!” Hauge says, as he pulls the exhausted girl away.



## **6. The Spirits**

After they have avoided the noisy hunters Astrid suddenly freezes. Straight ahead is the big burial mound, Styrbjorn's grave, which is formed like the ship he has sailed to Valhalla in. And, high above the mound, Lauge and Torleif are sitting on the ledge. Lauge is teaching his brother how to become a lookout.

"Hey Hauge!" Torleif yells down at him. "Good hunt, huh?"

Hauge just waves at them, and then looks for Astrid. But she has dragged herself back behind the trees. Hopefully they haven't seen her.

"I have to go help the others with the animal," he yells, and hurries away from the burial mound.



Astrid is so weak that she has collapsed in the snow beneath some bushes.

“Why were you so scared back there?” he asks, squatting next to her.

She makes some curious movements with her arms. Floating, ghost-like – then points to the burial mound.

“Are there – spirits?” he asks hesitantly.

She nods; points towards the mound again, then at him.

“Does it have something to do with me?”

She nods again.

“Is it something with my father – Styrbjorn? Is he the spirit?”

She nods, frightened.

Hauge has heard some whispering about strange noises around the mound at night. But he hasn't paid much attention. His father has left the burial mound a long time ago. Now he is well entertained sitting amongst the Aesir Gods in Valhalla; where the brave warriors tell mighty tales of their heroics to each other, and, to the Gods.

Why would Styrbjorn return? The dead only haunt you if they're unsatisfied with something, or if they haven't been buried properly. True enough, they hadn't been able to give him as many burial gifts as they ought to. He was buried like a Chieftain should be, though.

Unsatisfied? What is he supposed to be unsatisfied about? If it had something to do with him, his son – then, surely, Styrbjorn himself would have given him a sign?

Apparently, the mute thrall-girl knows more, why he keeps asking her, until he finally grasps what she means.

Hearsay has it that Styrbjorn is unhappy with the way Sven rules. He lends too much ear to Vagn. And he's too harsh on the peasants. That's why there's unrest around the burial mound at night.

“Is he angry with my mother because she has married Sven, too?”

Astrid shakes her head. Styrbjorn isn't angry with that. She looks at him thoughtfully. As if she's considering something. Then she points at herself, at her stomach.

“What does that have to do with this?” he asks, wondering.

Once more she points at her stomach, looking pointedly at him again. Then she pretends to cuddle a small baby in her arms, tears running down her cheeks, and Hauge suddenly understands what she's trying to tell him.

“Is... ? Is Sven the father of your dead child?”

She nods!

## **7. Meeting with the Spirits**

Feeling someone touching him, Hauge wakes up in the middle of the night. He reaches for his knife, which is always by his side. But then his wrists are held down by a pair of strong arms. He can't move!



“Hauge, dammit! It’s me!” a voice whispers in the darkness. When he stops resisting, the grip is loosened. And the voice continues: “Grab your fur coat and warm boots, and then follow me!”

Then Hauge recognises the voice. It’s Lauge.

“You’re living life dangerously, Lauge Longsight,” Hauge whispers once they’re outside. “I could have killed you!”

“Oh, you could, could you? You’re wielding a knife with your toes?” Lauge laughs quietly and starts walking. “But I had to do it this way, you see. We wouldn’t want to wake up the wrong people, would we?”

“What do you mean? Why?” Hauge asks confused.

“Someone wants to talk to you!” Lauge says and wanders through the snow drifts towards the mountain.

Hauge stops at the big burial mound. Behind the snow-covered hill there’s a strange, eerie glow. And low mumbling voices! So, it was right – what Astrid had said. And now it seems Styrbjorn has sent Lauge for him. He follows Lauge, hesitantly, to the other side of the mound.

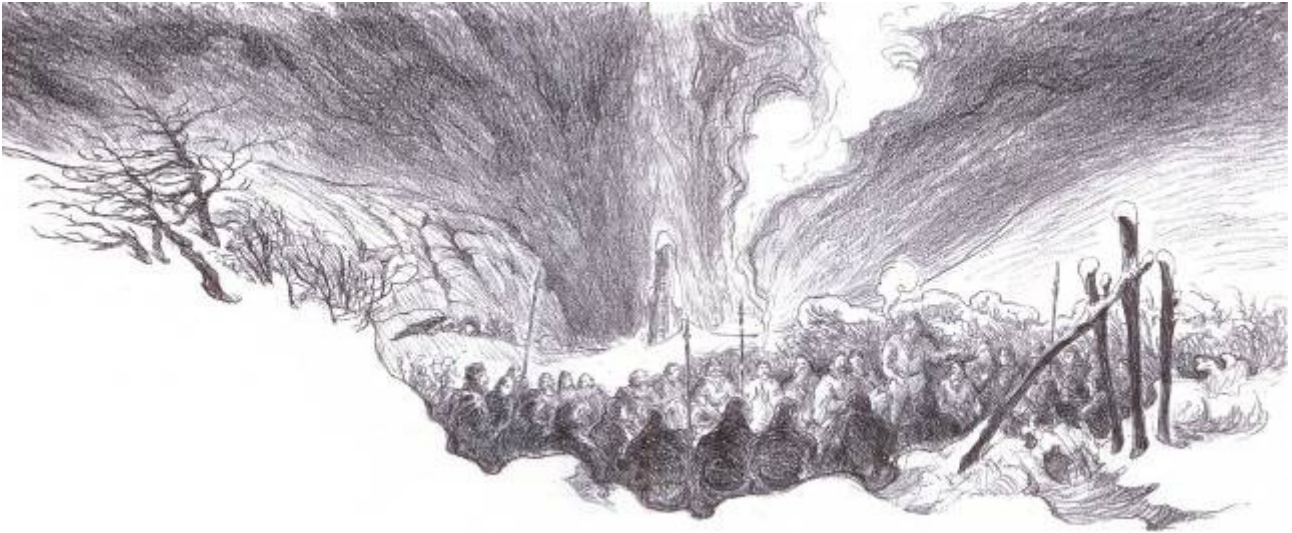
But Lauge continues past the mound – and into the bushes behind it, the snow crackling beneath their boots. A little later, in the dim glow of a very small fire, he recognises the 'spirits'! They are some of the village’s men, sitting around the fire.

Once Hauge is seated in the circle – next to Lauge, one of the men speaks up. It’s Erik, the most respected of the peasants.

“We have summoned you, Hauge, because we want to discuss something with you. As you know, we were very satisfied with your father as our Chieftain. But when your uncle took over, it took a wrong turn. Not to begin with, of course, while we were busy rebuilding. He’s good at organising things like that. And so is Vagn. They’re both skilled when at sea, too, and when there’s trading to be done. This is probably why we have endured them this long. However, we don’t find Sven a good Chieftain when it comes to running the village. For one thing, it’s his fault that we don’t have enough food this winter. He didn’t make sure that enough animals were slaughtered in the fall. He thought they would manage during the winter. But now a lot of them have perished in the cold. And he hasn’t even realised that we need more farm land because of our growing numbers. We should have cleared more land in time. Then we would be able to cultivate it in the spring.”

Erik pauses, looking around in the circle. There is an approving mumble from the gathered men.

Then he continues: “we don’t understand why Sven isn’t doing anything about Haakon. Apparently, he’s more into mead drinking – with Vagn. Well – we wanted to tell it to you straight out: We want you as our Chieftain instead of Sven.”



Silence falls around the fire. All eyes rest expectantly on Hauge. Lauge jabs him with his elbow and chuckles.

Finally Hauge says: “Uhm... Well I’m happy for your support, of course. And I want you to know that if you hadn’t asked me, I would have acted on it myself, too. For the exact same reasons you have given me. And I agree with you. It is time to do something about Haakon. I’ve said as much to both Sven and Vagn. But they don’t think we are ready and have equipment enough for it yet.” He looks at the men and continues: “Still, I need some time to think of how best to act. After all, my mother is married to him!”

The men seem somewhat dissatisfied. Apparently they want something to be done now. But Hauge knows them well enough to know what it takes: Something has to happen. Why he says: “But we are short of all kinds of food. I suggest that we gather all the skins and whetstones we have left. We might even be able to find some soapstone bowls. And then we’ll go to the winter market in Skiringssal.”

## **8. The Journey to Skiringssal**

They have camped by the river. That way, both men and horses can get something to eat, drink, and have a rest, before they continue along the snow-covered riverbank. The sleds are heavily loaded. So, even though the horses are newly shod, with spiked shoes to help them keep their balance, they have to work hard to make their way. In many places the snow is piled high, in huge, deep heaps, which are hard to get through, especially with the heavy wagon.

“Come, come, quick now!” Sven yells to the men. “We’d better come a good while further ahead before darkness falls.”

Hauge is looking forward to be back in Skiringssal – in a couple of days. It’s been more than a year since he has been there. Then the great marketplace had been a lively place to visit.

Sven insisted on heading the journey, even though Aasa had wanted him to stay at home taking care of the daily work. However, this she could easily be in charge of, according to Sven. Besides, they wouldn’t be gone for long. So that is how it was settled.

Hauge would rather have been without Sven. He knows from earlier travels that Sven is easily roused and gets into trouble. Besides, on several occasions he and Vagn has gambled and, in just one night, lost all their profits.

On the other hand, Sven is probably the best when it comes to negotiate the best price for their goods. He is a tough trader, and is especially skilled at making good money on thralls. And, since they don’t have a lot to sell, otherwise, they’ve brought five young, strong thralls along.



“Move on!” Sven yells, and soon the caravan of horses, sleds, wagons, and skiing men moves slowly along the riverbed. The sun is low in the sky and it won’t be long before it disappears behind the mountains. Then it will grow very, very cold.

The river winds its way through the valley in broad, soft curves. At some point the group takes a shortcut through the bushes. As they approach the river again, Sven signals them to stop.

“Why do we stop here?” Hauge asks, confused. It’s a bit early to make camp, But Sven hushes him – and points ahead. Through the branches and bushes Hauge catches sight of movements. He can hear talking, too. One has to be careful in a wild, unfamiliar landscape. There might be both woodland creatures and lawless men wandering about.

Sven sends Lauge ahead to see who it is. He is not away for long.

“It is some other travellers who are camping by the river,” he says. “I would think they’d like some company by their fire.”