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Opening extract from  
**Odd and the Frost Giants**

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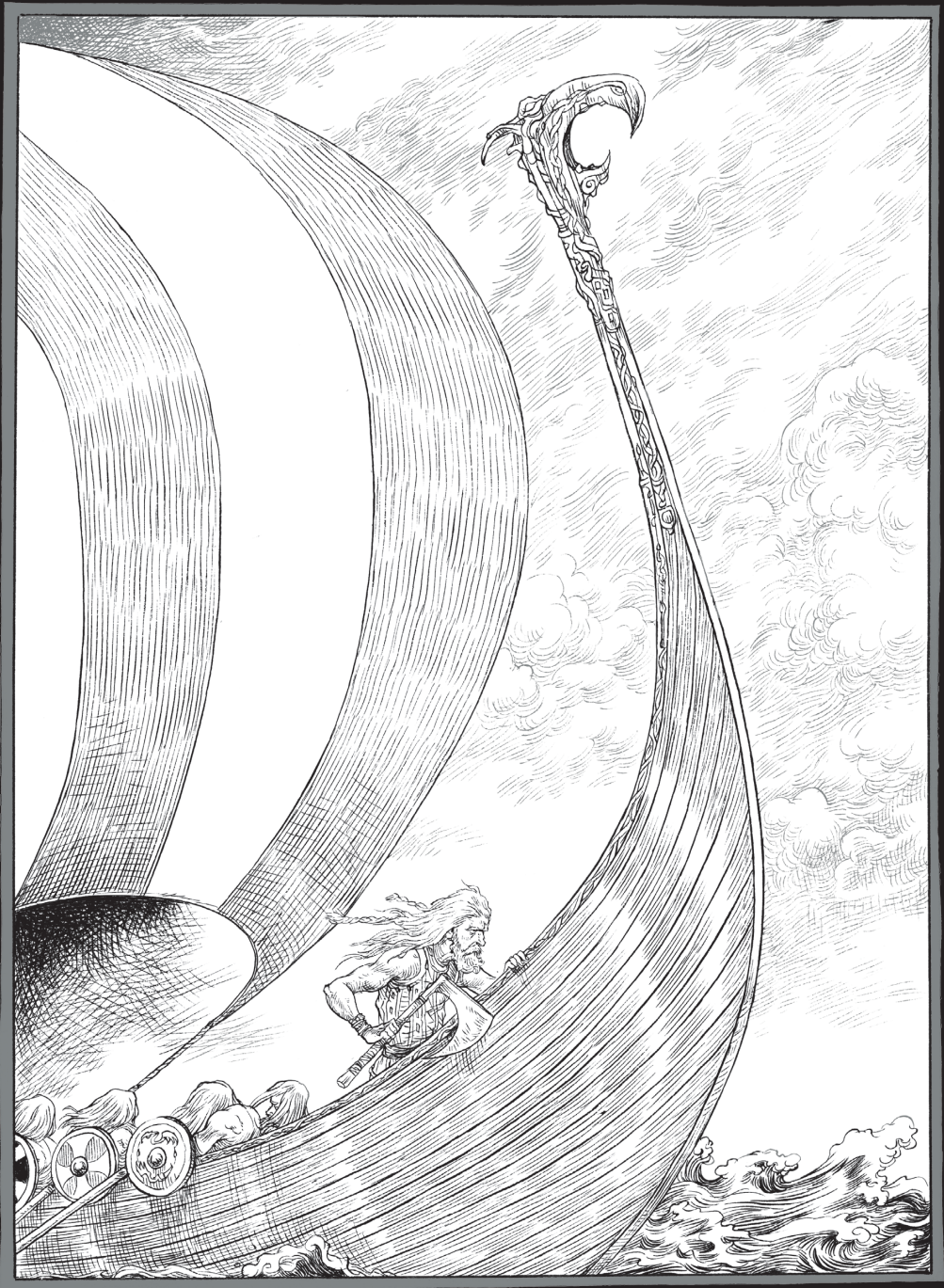
There was a boy called Odd,  
and there was nothing strange or unusual about that, not in that time or place. Odd meant *the tip of a blade*, and it was a lucky name.

He *was* odd though. At least, the other villagers thought so. But if there was one thing that he wasn't, it was lucky.

His father had been killed during a sea-raid, two years before, when Odd was ten. It was not unknown for people to get killed in sea-raids, but his father wasn't killed by a Scotsman, dying in glory in the heat of battle as a Viking should. He had jumped overboard to rescue one of the stocky little ponies that they took with them on their raids as pack animals.

They would load the ponies up with all the gold and valuables and food and weapons that they could find, and the ponies would trudge back to the longship. The ponies were the most valuable and hard-working things on the ship. After Olaf the Tall was killed by a Scotsman, Odd's father had to look after the ponies. Odd's father wasn't very experienced with ponies, being a woodcutter and woodcarver by trade, but he did his best. On the return journey, one of the ponies got loose, during a squall off Orkney, and fell overboard. Odd's father jumped into the grey sea with a rope, pulled the pony back to the ship and, with the other Vikings, hauled it back up on deck.





He died before the next morning, of the cold and the wet and the water in his lungs.

When they returned to Norway, they told Odd's mother, and Odd's mother told Odd. Odd just shrugged. He didn't cry. He didn't say anything.

Nobody knew what Odd was feeling on the inside. Nobody knew what he thought. And, in a village on the banks of a fjord, where everybody knew everybody's business, that was infuriating.

There were no full-time Vikings back then. Everybody had another job. Sea-raiding was something the men did for fun, or to get things they couldn't find in their village. They even got their wives that way. Odd's mother, who was as dark as Odd's father had been fair, had been brought to the fjord on a longship from Scotland. When Odd was small, she would sing him the ballads that she had learned as a girl, back before Odd's father had taken her knife away and thrown her over his shoulder and carried her back to the longboat.

Odd wondered if she missed Scotland, but when he asked her, she said no, not really, she just missed people who spoke her language. She could speak the language of the Norse now, but with an accent.

Odd's father had been a master of the axe. He had a one-roomed cabin that he had built from logs deep in the little forest behind the fjord, and he would go out to the woods and return a week or so later with his handcart piled high with logs, all ready to weather and to split, for they made everything they could out of wood in those parts: wooden nails joined wooden boards to build wooden dwellings or wooden boats. In the winter, when the snows were too deep for travel, Odd's father would sit by the fire and carve, making wood into faces and toys and drinking cups, and bowls, while Odd's mother sewed and cooked and, always, sang.

She had a beautiful voice.



Odd didn't understand the words of the songs she sang, but she would translate them after she had sung them, and his head would roil with fine lords riding out on their great horses, their noble falcons on their wrists, a brave hound always padding by their side, off to get into all manner of trouble, fighting Giants and rescuing maidens and freeing the oppressed from tyranny.

After Odd's father died, his mother sang less and less.

Odd kept smiling, though, and it drove the villagers mad. He even smiled after the accident that crippled his right leg.

It was three weeks after the longship had come back without his father's body. Odd had taken his father's tree-cutting axe, so huge he could hardly lift it, and had hauled it out into the woods, certain that he knew all there was to know about cutting trees and determined to put this knowledge into practice.

He should possibly, he admitted to his mother later, have used the smaller axe, and a smaller tree to practise on.

Still, what he did was remarkable.

After the tree had fallen on his foot, he had used the axe to dig away the earth beneath his leg and he had pulled it out, and he had cut a branch to make himself a crutch to lean on, as the bones in his leg were shattered. And, somehow, he had got himself home, hauling his father's heavy axe with him, for metal was rare in those hills and axes needed to be bartered or stolen, and he could not have left it to rust.

