



A TALE OF THREE SKALDS

- 1 My name is Erik the Tall, grandson of Gudbrand the Skald. I have learnt his songs and stories and told them in my travels through the North. But this is a story that I learnt from my own life, when I was a boy of thirteen summers. It is the story of Arvid Maguire, a Gall Gaidel — the child of a Norseman and an Irish woman. Arvid's people were dying, unable to grow any crops in the winter-locked ground of Ireland. He came to my land, Eikundarsund, seeking a certain man who knew a certain song. The song he sought had no name, but it was said to woo snow with false promises, melting it away to release the fertile soil beneath. Having heard that the world's greatest skald bore the name Gudbrand, he arrived in my village one spring.
- 2 Arvid was a tall, broad-shouldered young man, with the wild red hair of his father's people. His eyes were as green as the hills of Ireland, though soured with sad thoughts, and when he spoke it was a heavily accented mumbling of our own language.
- 3 Strangers were people to be wary of in those days. We held him in the longhouse for a day, asking him many questions about his homeland. Arvid spoke beautifully, describing his home with a skill

for poetry almost as good as my grandfather's. We knew then that he was honest and meant us no harm.

- 4 Eikundarsund was a land filled with mighty oak trees. Gudbrand, loathing the company of most people, had chosen to dwell high above the ground, out in the oaken woods surrounding my village. The only trouble was that no one ever knew exactly which tree was his. Being my grandfather's apprentice, I was sent to guide Arvid, as I was the best chance for anyone to gain favour with the old skald.
- 5 Luckily for us, Gudbrand had nested quite close-by on that particular spring day. We found his mammoth oak after only five hours or so of walking; I knew that it was my grandfather's because I heard him chattering away above us. One of the advantages of living up a tree, he once told me, was that he could trade stories with birds. Birdsongs were a prized commodity in Eikundarsund and Gudbrand knew them all. His secret lay in the mush of berries and seeds that he mixed for his feathered guests.
- 6 Gudbrand was in a mischievous mood, for he refused to let us climb up the tree at first. Any attempt we made caused a cloud of woodpeckers to swarm around us, tapping sharply at our joints until we let go of the oak. Finally, his walnut head appeared amongst the branches above. He called down, telling me that we could not climb up until I sang him the tale about the flying fish.
- 7 Despite Arvid's imploring look, I was unsure what to do — I had never learnt any stories about flying fish. But my grandfather had odd teaching methods. He often said that it was not the stories themselves that had power, but the person who spoke them.
- 8 Hoping that I'd guessed correctly, I closed my eyes and improvised a song. It was the tale of a bird that

desperately wanted to be a fish, so instead of a nest, it made itself a coat of leaves that resembled scales. When the bird found itself a school of fish to live with, it won their trust by keeping watch for fishermen. The bird would sit in the trees then, whenever a human walked by, it plunged into the river and told its friends to flee downstream. Thus, the bird lived its dream of becoming a fish, while still being able to fly.

- 9 I opened my eyes to the sound of applause. Gudbrand stood in front of me, his wood-like hands thumping together while he smiled with toothless admiration. It appeared that I had passed his test. That meant it was now Arvid's turn to win my grandfather's aid.
- 10 Gudbrand listened to Arvid's case, all the while nodding his head like a branch caught in a breeze. When the Gall Gaidel had finished his tale, my grandfather took him by the hand, leading him down towards a nearby stream. Here the waters gurgled over rounded stones, cutting their way through the hills. Gudbrand knelt down beside the stream, running his fingers through its cold flow. Without looking up, he asked Arvid to sing the song that could make water laugh. There was a tense moment before Arvid shook his head; he knew no such song, and asked if he could offer my grandfather something else in exchange. In response, Gudbrand turned to the water and sang.
- 11 He sang about ice and sun, about mountains, fish and an ocean that waved in the distance. My grandfather's voice is beautiful, far older than his limbs and yet much stronger. At first, only silence followed his song, but then — starting with what sounded like a hiccup — the stream began to giggle. Soon, the forest echoed with its chortling, a feat that amazed me and left Arvid humbled by the strange magic my grandfather sang. He begged that Gudbrand teach him, promising to

trade his very freedom for the skills the old skald could impart.

12 My grandfather, with more wisdom than the hairs on his head, whistled in response. He told Arvid, with an occasional glance over at me, that the river had not laughed at all. The only magic that his song held was that it had made both Arvid and me believe that a river could find something funny. This, he told Arvid, was the secret of the skald — to make a song so honest that anyone would believe it.

13 To have learnt such a great lesson that day, overjoyed me. But Arvid, the poor child of Ireland, slumped his broad shoulders with a terrible weight. He had come seeking northern magic in the form of a song that would save his people. But my grandfather was, despite his cheekiness, a kind man, and he recognised the bravery and love that had guided Arvid so far from his home. When we

returned to his oak, Gudbrand presented Arvid with a small pouch filled with shiny, black seeds. These, he told Arvid, would grow into the same berries he fed to his birds. Each seed held within its black heart the will and energy to grow into a plentiful bush, even in the harshest grip of winter.

14 Arvid left Eikundarsund the next day, holding the precious skaldberry seeds to his chest. While I never saw him again, I knew he sailed home with more than just the food to feed his people. He returned to Ireland a whole man, skilled in song, wit and faith, knowing that the ways of this world owed more to the hearts of humans than they did to the mysteries of magic.

That is all I care to remember now, save that I am Erik the Tall, grandson of Gudbrand the Skald and this story has been no lie.

Questions

- This story is told by
 - Erik the Tall.
 - Gudbrand the Skald.
 - Arvid Maguire.
- Why did the villagers believe that Arvid was honest?
 - He was a stranger.
 - He was from Ireland.
 - He spoke beautifully.
- According to Gudbrand, an advantage of living in trees was
 - feeding seeds and berries to birds.
 - trading stories with birds.
 - having woodpeckers attack unwanted visitors.
- Where had Erik learnt the story of the flying fish?
 - Arvid taught him the story.
 - He made it up himself.
 - He had learnt it from Gudbrand.
- What did Arvid take home with him?
 - Gudbrand's skaldberry seeds
 - Gudbrand's magic song
 - the tale of the Laughing Stream
- What is a possible moral of this story?
 - The tales that skalds tell are all lies.
 - Stories and songs can be very powerful if you believe in them.
 - Magic is real, and skalds are very good at using it.

Vocabulary

Find words in the text that match the meanings below. The word is in the section shown in brackets.

- To be underneath or below (1)
- To be watchful or on high alert (3)
- Private information (5)
- To be hesitant or uncertain (7)
- To make something up as you go along (8)

Grammar

The words in **BLUE** appear in the text. Match them by writing the correct antonym shown in **RED**.

E.g. **under** / **above**

- | | |
|--------------------|-----------------|
| 12 release | narrow |
| 13 harm | withhold |
| 14 appeared | vanished |
| 15 broad | protect |

Back To The Text...

- Erik is proud to be Gudbrand's grandson.
 - true
 - false
- Arvid spoke with an accent.
 - true
 - false
- What would be a good sub-heading for section 6?
 - Gudbrand Sings a Song
 - A Bit of Fun

Sequencing

Look back through the card to find what happened first. Choose **a** or **b**.

- Arvid went to the longhouse.
 - Arvid went to the oaken woods.
- Arvid was told the secret of the skald.
 - Arvid was given the skaldberries.
- Gudbrand asked for a song to make the water laugh.
 - Gudbrand asked for a song about the flying fish.

Think About This

- The word *chortling* in section 11 means
 - whispering.
 - howling.
 - giggling.
- What is not true about Gudbrand?
 - He could communicate with the wildlife.
 - He had smooth soft hands.
 - He saved Arvid's people in Ireland.

Challenge Option

Drawing: Sketch and colour an accurate picture of Arvid.

