



*There is a moment of silence in which I realize that everyone is watching me, and I am surprised that it does not bother me now, for I know it means they are all listening to me. A weapon-tale is forming in my mind. A sword-story. The truest tale I have ever told.*

Even though this has been one of the mildest winters in recent memory, the cold weather still makes a good backdrop for reading about...Vikings! When I first picked up [Icefall](#), I thought I was going to read an epic saga about bearded warrior kings going berserk against an unyielding tide of otherworldly powers. Not the most challenging book to be sure, but at least one that could keep a good action pace going. However I was pleasantly surprised to find that [Icefall](#) was both gripping and nuanced; a great novel about the power of storytelling and the hidden strength that comes with its mastery.

When a Viking king is caught in a war over the marriage of his eldest daughter, he sends his three children along with a handful of trusted servants to a hidden fortress tucked away in a mountainous valley. There is Asa, the king's hauntingly beautiful first-born daughter; Harald, the king's youngest and future heir to the throne because he is also the only son; and Solveig, the middle daughter, who because of her gender and place in birth order is largely ignored by the king. It is through Solveig's eyes that we experience the daily drudgery of living in a

sequestered hall, toiling to gather food and eagerly awaiting any news from home about the war's progression. As winter begins to freeze the waters leading into the valley, a ship is seen on the horizon. But rather than bringing good news that the war is over and that they may return home straightaway, the ship carries the king's berserkers, "...Warriors who refuse armor and go to battle wearing animal skins. Men who fight in a rage with the strength of wild boars, feeling neither fire nor blade." They have been ordered to protect Harald, the future heir, in case the king's enemies discover where his children have been hidden. With the berserkers is Alric, the king's storyteller, a man who knows that kings may have the power to wage wars, but only he has the power to make them legends. While the berserkers mock Alric as a coward for leaving the king's side, Alric defends himself by explaining that if he dies, so do the tales that will ensure the king's immortality.

As winter's grip closes and freezes the fjord, the group prepares for a long, harsh winter. During this time, Alric recognizes great potential in Solveig to be a *skald*, a storyteller like himself. Although she is reluctant, she can see no real alternative. As the middle daughter her choices are few, so she agrees to Alric's tutelage and finds that she has a natural talent. She finally feels she has found the means to prove herself more than just the king's forgotten daughter. But not soon after the berserkers arrive and Alric begins teaching Solveig, disaster strikes the steading: someone is sabotaging the group from within. Somehow, the king's enemies have implanted a spy in the group, someone that is killing livestock and poisoning rations. Suspicion runs rampant and hope that they will all survive the winter dwindles. It is up to Solveig to not only help find the traitor, but also to use her newfound power as a *skald* to keep the group from imploding. And in doing so, she finds that she is more brave and strong than she ever could have imagined. (Dan, The Loft)