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TALES OF VALIKA

AN ANTHOLOGY OF DARK FANTASY STORIES

BY RICHARD A. KNAAK



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About the Author

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the passionate roleplayers
of the Ghostfire Gaming community.

Your feedback and
your love of storytelling and monster-slaying
is what drives us to create.

OF THE PACK

Agony wracked Tars Orn's rippling form. Shifting bone and muscle stretched his tender flesh. Lief Sarvif had told Tars that, this being the first time that he went through the transformation, the pain would be tremendous. After that, successive changes would become much easier.

What the accursed Lief had not made clear was that the agony would reach the point where Tars Orn would beg to die before it had finished with him.

Then, at last, it ended...and he felt a surge of strength he could have never believed possible. Strength and a desire to run free through the wild areas.

"You'll want to give in to the new sensations," the deep voice—so bestial and yet calm at the same time—remarked from behind him. "Don't do it, though. Steel yourself for a few moments and the urge will subside."

Tars wanted to ignore the suggestions, but a part of him recalled what Lief had said before. If Tars chose to give in to the desires rushing through his mind and tried to flee into the wilderness, the pack would be forced to tear him apart out of concern for discovery. They could not risk him being captured by the servants of the Prismatic Circle. That would risk everyone else.

Fools...came the thought to Tars as he embraced his change. So...trusting. Soon...I will...betray you all.

All sorts of scents assailed him. Sniffing the air, Tars realized that he could identify most, especially each member of the nearby pack. Other smells originated from much farther away, but even those he recognized.

The urge to howl grew harder to withstand. As Tars fought with himself, a powerful furred hand dropped on his shoulder. “We are far from the ears of the druids and their minions,” the speaker rumbled. “This was why this place was chosen for your initial transformation. That and...it was where *I* also first became a *werewolf*.” The hand left Tars. “Let it out. This is the time. This is the *best* time to release what you now feel.”

Teeth bared, Tars Orn let out a loud, wild howl.

Around him, more than two score lycanthropes joined his howling. An ecstasy filled him. He howled and howled again, savoring the similar cries rising all around.

Tars looked to the side, where an immense figure—even more powerful than he felt—loomed over him. With fur mostly black save for a grey patch running from the head down to nearly the front of the muzzle, Lief Sarvif managed to look even more impressive than he had as a man.

The first time Tars had faced the leader of the shapeshifters, the newcomer had been suitably cowed. That reaction had as much to do with what he could read in Sarvif’s steel-grey eyes: a startling intelligence mixed with a determination that explained the former thrall’s success against the efforts of the Circle’s servants. Small wonder that warlord after warlord had failed to bring his motley band of followers down, even with the might that their abilities gave them. Lief Sarvif truly was the key to the pack’s victories thus far.

Tars subdued the urge to tear out Lief’s throat.

He acknowledged that he would have failed. In both human and werewolf form, the other man not only out-

weighed him, but did so mainly with muscle. The years spent in the wilderness had strengthened, not weakened, Sarvif and his followers. That verified the reports that Tars himself had put together for his masters, countering the claims from the fools and sycophants who wished only to curry favor with the masters of the Circle. Indeed, Tars had been chosen because his reports and suggestions had been based on reality, not wishful thinking and lies.

As a werewolf, Lief Sarvif stood nearly seven feet tall and broad of shoulder. As he turned from Tars and paced among the pack on his hind feet, each move was filled with grace and purpose. Lief Sarvif's very presence commanded. The other werewolves did not now crouch before him because he demanded they do so; they merely honored him with the respect his natural authority brought out in others. Even Tars Orn felt the inclination to crouch. He did so, telling himself that it served his deceptive purposes.

When Tars had stood before his true masters, he emphasized the dangers in undertaking this mission for the glory of the Prismatic Circle. He would be embracing the enemy's most powerful weapon, yes, by placing himself amid the pack itself. Discovery would mean Tars being shredded to bloody gobbets. Yet, if he succeeded in fooling the pack into believing that he was another escaped thrall and then became part of it, he would be able to use his position to betray Sarvif and his followers.

The druids had been in favor of executing everyone, but Tars had convinced them that the pack could be retrained—as harshly as necessary—to serve the Prismatic Circle. He had humbly offered himself as the commander of those new servants since he would be a lycanthrope himself. Tars envisioned a nightmarish force under his mastery that would leave such a trail of carnage that no one would ever again be able to resist the Circle.

He had readily convinced his masters. Great would be the honors bestowed upon Tars Orn when he delivered the lycanthropes to the druids...along with the head of Lief Sarvif.

Sarvif *had* to die.

Sniffing the air as he moved among his people, Lief Sarvif nodded and gestured for the others to rise. For a leader, Sarvif had, at least to Tars Orn's eye, a much too familiar way with those over whom he ruled. He treated them more as comrades or friends rather than followers and, in the admittedly short time since members of the pack had carried the properly bedraggled "escaped thrall" to him, had not once made any display of authority. He should be beating or otherwise punishing someone simply to prove that he could.

This calm, even kind, behavior went against some of the horrific things that the Circle preached about Lief Sarvif. Tars assumed that he would see such brutality from Lief before long...if his own plan did not unfold first, of course.

Sarvif looked back at Tars, who feigned innocence. "The urge to hunt will also be natural," the werewolf leader rumbled. "But I have found it good for the pack to bring all new members on a practice hunt, the better to learn."

The moment Tars heard the suggestion of a hunt, a new thrill coursed through him. Lief Sarvif noticed his reaction, the lead werewolf's ears twitching in a manner the newest member of the pack instinctively recognized as amusement. Indeed, Tars started to recognize individual emotions from others as well, emotions he would have never noted as a human. His senses burned with heightened attunement and anticipation.

"Come, brother," Sarvif offered. "Follow and learn."

With that, the lead werewolf bounded away, the rest of the pack chasing after. Tars Orn found his new form responding as if of its own accord and, within seconds, he

was racing across the harsh landscape. Sometimes he ran on just two legs, other moments Tars loped along on all fours. Either way felt so natural that he might have been born knowing them.

With it being the height of the short summer, an ever-changing array of scents wafted past him. Some intrigued, while others he ignored as inconsequential. What mattered to Tars was that summer meant easier hunting, which made for a potentially large list of prey. He supposed that he would be led to something simple but large...a deer perhaps.

Then, Tars picked up on one scent—or intermingled group of scents—in particular. These had an odd effect on him. They disturbed him to such a point that he wished to both avoid and pursue the sources.

Lief Sarvif, it quickly turned out, desired only the latter.

Tars had to push hard as Sarvif increased his pace. It did not console the new werewolf that many of the others also had trouble keeping pace with their leader. Tars Orn used his frustration to fuel his efforts and soon managed to be one of the few at the front of the hunt.

Without warning, Sarvif came to a halt with a grace that Tars could not match, the new pack member half-stumbling. Crouching as the larger werewolf did, Tars peered at what they had been hunting.

Humans.

Not just any, either. Their fur-trimmed breastplates and drake-crested helmets marked them as part of Clan Völgr, in many ways, the most ardent servants of the Circle. Tars counted some fifty raiders—a major party. The horses and several scared figures in ragged clothing being herded forward indicated a batch of thralls designated for sacrifice who, according to the druids of the Prismatic Circle, would keep the great wyrm Gormadraug asleep and prevent the end of the world.

“Arrogant,” Lief Sarvif murmured. “Going after the small villages up near the lakes. The scum rarely venture so far from the coastline.”

It suddenly occurred to Tars Orn just what—or who—the pack hunted. He silently cursed the Völgr raiders for putting themselves in this situation, even if unknowingly.

Sarvif sniffed the air. “What stench they bring with them. Can you smell the taint of their evil?” He patted Tars on the shoulder. “Come. Let us cleanse the land of it.”

With that, the lead werewolf lunged forward. He moved with such swiftness that he left an astonished Tars watching his agility. Only when other pack members raced by did the false thrall finally do what he knew had to be done.

The raiders continued forward, unaware of the encroaching pack which, despite their speed, moved with uncanny stealth. Tars considered making a clumsy step that might warn the Völgr raiders of the oncoming threat, then once again deemed his ultimate mission of more importance.

Lief Sarvif fell upon the first unsuspecting sentry. With a single slash of his claws, he ripped out the raider’s throat. The weak gurgle did not carry enough for the other raiders to hear. Blood and bits of flesh dripping from his claws, Sarvif waved his followers toward the encampment.

The lycanthropes poured in among the raiders, who, for the most part, could only gape at the converging mass of death. The prisoners huddled together, their expressions fearful at this new, horrific sight.

The rest of the sentries perished first, each in what to the glancing Tars appeared to be different and increasingly macabre ways. One had the head ripped from her body; another first had his sword hand bitten clean through, then his face removed by claws. Two members of the pack literally tore another guard in half.

One raider finally crossed paths with Tars. The new werewolf expected some hesitation on his own part—espe-

cially since these raiders served the same masters—but instead he found it quite easy to seize the human by the shoulders in order to pull her close enough to bite out the throat.

His first taste of blood thrilled him. Although the raider had already died from the awful wound, Tars bit her again, nearly severing the head in the process. However, the second bite did not satisfy him as much as the initial one, and he threw the corpse away in search of a fresh victim.

His gaze fell upon the prisoners. He lunged toward the nearest of them—

“No!” A heavy form collided with Tars Orn, throwing him some distance to the side. He crashed into a tree, but what would have snapped the back of a normal human only left him momentarily stunned.

Recovering his senses sufficiently, Tar snarled and looked for the one who cheated him of his prey. He discovered that to be none other than Lief Sarvif. “We do not hunt the helpless, the innocent,” the lead werewolf declared. “You should recall that from our first talk.”

Tars belatedly remembered being told something to that effect but had not considered it important enough to retain. He pushed down his growing rage and nodded. With an apologetic tone that did not match his feelings, he replied, “I’m sorry. I— The urge was stronger than I thought it would be.”

Sarvif’s anger dissipated. “You are not the first and you will not be the last. You will be able to better control yourself after this.”

As Tars Orn nodded, the lead werewolf turned from him to survey the pack’s efforts. Had Tars been human at the moment, he suspected that he would have retched at the sight of bodies ripped open, limbs and heads scattered far from torsos, and entrails spilled everywhere. Instead, the sight merely stirred his wish for more of the same.

Not so, it appeared, for the others. Several of the pack were now spitting out whatever fragments or blood remained in their mouths—and most did so with what Tars understood was disgust. He had expected the pack to feed on their victims, yet it seemed that the werewolves could not wait to be away.

“We eat them when necessary,” a slightly smaller, crimson-furred figure near Tars said. Although at first glance a human might not have noticed the difference, Tars had no trouble recognizing the other werewolf as a young woman. “Only during the leanest times in winter.” She gave a brief snarl. “When the herds are too far from here.”

“We’re beasts...but not *beasts*,” added a brown-and-black-furred man, one of the werebears, as he joined her. “You’ll learn there’s much difference between legend and truth where we’re concerned.”

“So I am discovering,” Tars returned with absolute honesty. Thus far, the Circle’s knowledge of the pack’s ways was proving both incorrect and scant. Already, what he was learning would rewrite almost everything and add volumes besides. He vowed to pay better attention to even the littlest things, certain that they would, in the long run, enable him to fully master these creatures that would serve the Circle...and himself.

The prisoners continued to cower, obviously fearing they would suffer a monstrous fate despite Sarvif’s declaration they were safe. He gestured at them, and several followers closed on the ragged group. Some prisoners whimpered, and one man fainted. Many looked confused when, rather than tearing them apart, the werewolves merely slashed through their bonds.

“Rise and be among friends,” Lief Sarvif said to the freed prisoners. “Do not fear us...unless you serve Thrull and the accursed druids.”

Some of the former prisoners began to relax. A few of the werewolves, including the young woman who had spoken

to Tars, brought forth water and food salvaged from the raiders. They eagerly consumed the food and drink they were given. Tars guessed they'd been given only enough nourishment to guarantee they'd reach their destination.

"If you wish to be returned to your villages, there are those among us who can guide you back safely," Sarvif went on. "However, we hope some of you will join us and help to fight the Prismatic Circle. We need to end its foul ways in we're to ever be safe. If you join us...", the huge werewolf paused and indicated himself, "you will become like us. You see what we are and what we can do. For some of you, such a path may prove too much to accept. That is fair. We want only those of you willing to choose as we did."

For a moment, the prisoners just stood there. Then, one older man stepped forward. "I will join, if I am acceptable," he said.

Lief Sarvif nodded. Two more prisoners—a middle-aged woman with recent scars across her face and a young male barely old enough to be considered adult—joined him.

When no one else came forward, Sarvif gave another nod. "So it is. Be aware, you three, that there are laws among us. We are not the raiders nor their masters, but you will abide by those rules once they are explained. None of us are perfect, but we do not abide evil."

None of the three stepped back. However, another woman—this one younger—added herself. Sarvif waved the four toward the pack. He then signaled the female werewolf from earlier and two other males from the pack to tend to the rest of the refugees.

"These able warriors will guide you back. They will provide for you through hunting once the supplies we've gathered from the raiders run out. Listen to them and you will be home soon. Safe travels all."

With many of them still silent with disbelief, the former prisoners went off with their guides. No one questioned

heading away despite it being night. The sooner they were well north, the better.

“Come with me,” Lief Sarvif ordered the four volunteers.

Tars knew what would follow. Only the lead werewolf turned new members. True, others could, but Lief Sarvif chose that responsibility for himself. Tars wondered if that gave him more control over his followers. It was something he had not yet learned but intended to emulate. There could be only one alpha in the pack that would serve the Prismatic Circle, and that would be Tars Orn.

He assumed the pack would follow to witness the transformations as they had with him, but instead, an older woman took hold of his arm. “No. You’ll be part of the cleanup with us.”

Sure enough, most of the pack worked on clearing away the carnage. Tars wondered why they bothered but received no explanation from the elder. All she did was point at a mangled corpse and tell him to bring it to where the rest of the bodies were being placed. Only when all the dead—as well as their loose parts—had been piled together did the female finally speak with him again.

“Lief Sarvif doesn’t like the raiders and other refuse from Thrull disturbing the forest. Sometimes we leave a slaughter as it is to make a point, but for the most part he prefers to put them where they infect the land least.”

There was undisguised disgust in her voice directed at Thrull and the druids. Tars wanted to slap her for her disrespect to his masters but, of course, had to hold back.

One of the other lycanthropes pulled something from a sealed vest pocket. With expert aim, he tossed it atop the pile of dead.

There was the cracking of glass...and then silver flame burst atop the dead. It spread rapidly, to the eyes of Tars devouring the raiders—armor and all—in mere seconds.

The flames died out as they consumed the last bits of

the raiders. Tars marveled at what he believed was some powerful incendiary mix which Sarvif had invented.

“Not all members of the pack were simple villagers like us,” the woman remarked.

Yet another critical fact that the Circle knew next to nothing about, Tars realized. His masters generally assumed that the pack consisted of escaped thralls, foolish peasants, and the like.

He would change all that.

Although the bodies had been destroyed, the pack did salvage other equipment, including weapons. Tars noticed some of the werewolves approaching the horses. Already in a constant state of panic since the attack began, the animals struggled in desperation to escape.

“I always loved horses,” the woman said. “I wanted to ride like the wind, especially in summer. It was so nice to be able to enjoy the brief warmth before fall set in.”

She bared her teeth and moved to join the others converging on the mounts. Only then did Tars understand how the horses would serve the pack.

“If we set them loose,” the female werewolf went on, “they’ll just return to Thrull and serve its raiders again. They’ve been trained that way.” She bared her teeth and Tars Orn, now following, did the same.

It came to him that they could have given some of the animals to the villagers. However, the gnawing hunger rising in Tars made him recall what Lief Sarvif had told him prior to his transformation. Both becoming—and acting—as a lycanthrope demanded far more energy than being human. That meant the pack needed to eat more.

And Sarvif did not want them dining on human flesh any more than necessary.

With his heightened senses, Tars felt the rest of the pack closing on the unfortunate horses. Lief Sarvif himself stepped up beside Tars just before they reached the prey.

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The pack lunged...and Tars Orn thought of nothing beyond feeding.

* * *

He woke to find himself fully human once more. Around him slept most of the pack—they, too, human. Tars studied the faces, recognizing the young woman especially. She was pretty, not that being so would save her when the time came. Nearby were a couple of older males who had been among the party that had discovered him—the “escaped thrall”—in the first place. Those faces, and many more, he came to know in the two days he was among them. Tars already knew their strengths and weaknesses, necessary knowledge for when he betrayed the pack to his true masters.

A handful he would pick out as potentially salvageable. They were born followers, which meant proper thralls. He would have them trained to serve the Circle and become the core of the pack that he would lead.

Rubbing the scraggly beard that he’d grown for his role, Tars felt disappointment at being human. All that power now seemed like from a dream. He considered pushing himself back into his other form, but Sarvif preferred that the pack conserve itself when possible. A few members would remain transformed to keep the pack safe, but the rest would resort to dealing with matters in the bodies they’d worn since birth.

Some of the others stirred. All wore loose clothing that could serve even when transformed. Tars felt unkempt but hid his distaste.

A hulking form strode among them, and Tars was surprised to see Lief Sarvif had chosen to be one of those remaining in werewolf form. The pack leader sniffed the air, and Tars could not help thinking that something in it

disturbed Sarvif. Tars longed to smell those odors again.

The imposing werewolf looked his way. Ears twitching, Sarvif ordered, "Come with me. I'll need you for this."

As Tars rose, he prepared to transform. However, the pack leader shook his head. "No. I need you human."

Disappointed at having to stay as he was but interested in the trust that Lief Sarvif showed in him, Tars relaxed. The tingling he'd felt just before his initial transformation faded.

As a man, Tars stood another half a foot shorter than the foot he already lacked against Sarvif as a werewolf. His sleek, muscular form had returned to a wiry one, not nearly so strong. Tars would have liked to have kept the fur that had sprouted on what was, at that moment, a balding head with a fringe of hair ringing all but the front.

Right there and then, Tars swore that he would remain in his new form—his *true* one, in his mind—as much as possible. Even *always*, if that could be done. He had so much to learn from Lief Sarvif before betraying him.

Tars trailed behind Sarvif for some distance beyond where the pack had chosen to rest after feeding. The lycanthropes never slept where they ate, instead moving some distance away. Tars had yet to understand why but assumed he would know before long. What interested him more was what the pack leader wanted of him.

They came across two more werewolves, one the elder woman with a fondness for horses—even when they were not food. The pair stood near a growth of what Tars took for saxifrage, although these particular flowers had an interesting light blue tinge instead of the familiar white and rose.

"Summer Soul saxifrage," Lief Sarvif remarked with a wistfulness that Tars had never heard him express thus far. "Very rare. Said to be magical."

"Is it?"

The lead werewolf nodded. "It is why I needed someone still in human form. If touched by one of us as we are

now, it has a lethal effect.” When Tars recoiled, Lief Sarvif chuckled. “You’re safe. If you could, please.”

“You want me to gather it?”

“A small handful, no more. It has other properties that, when distilled, can heal. A flower of perplexing contrasts.”

Nodding, Tars did as he was asked. All the while, though, he considered the implications of this rare flower. Handled delicately, it had the potential to give him a weapon he could use to bring down Sarvif and bend the pack to his control.

His control. For the first time, Tars Orn wondered just why, with the power nearly in his grasp, he needed to serve the Circle. Sarvif had proven the pack’s effectiveness against Thrull. A more ambitious leader could magnify that effectiveness—

“That’s enough,” Lief Sarvif remarked. To the other werewolves, he commanded, “Destroy the rest. We can’t afford any chances. Come, Tars.”

It was the first time since their initial encounter that the pack leader had called him by name. Tars had used his own for this mission; no one here would have heard of him, saving Tars from having to remember a false one. He took it as another positive sign of the growing trust Lief Sarvif had in him.

When they returned to the rest of the pack, most of the others had transformed or were in the process of doing so. The young woman who Tars had been eyeing was one of the last, her questioning glance at him causing him to frown.

Someone had started a small campfire. Sarvif pointed at it. “Toss the saxifrage into the flames.”

Confused, Tars obeyed. A brief bit of scented smoke rose as the flowers burned away.

The moment that the flowers were no more, several of the pack loped away. Tars looked at Sarvif, who shook his head but said nothing. Soon, there remained only the lead werewolf and four others Tars Orn could not identify.

“To be one of the pack requires change on more than just the physical level,” Lief Sarvif announced. “It requires an alteration of thought, of priorities...of what life is.”

Tars dutifully nodded. This was not the first time he heard the pack leader give such a speech. Tars found them dull but always pretended rapt attention.

“One must also be able to understand the world as their heightened senses now reveal it. You’ve had glimpses of how much richer the world is than we, as humans, believe it to be.”

Again, Tars nodded, hoping that Sarvif would finish soon.

“Given time, one can smell the minutest scents, scents that can reveal things about others almost to the point of seeming clairvoyant.” The pack leader chuckled.

For the first time, Tars Orn paid more attention. Yet another secret that would serve him well when he took control. “Truly?”

“Very true.” Lief Sarvif indicated one of the four in front of them. “I can smell on him his tremendous concern and, with my experience, know that it deals with his family. That’s why he joined. To help protect them from raiders, even if it means never seeing them again.” He gestured at the others. “I could tell you so very much about each of them, even though they have just joined the pack. Their general movements, their smallest reactions, and even their glances all tell me so much...but how they smell says far more to me than anything.”

“Amazing!” Tars could not wait to hone his feral senses to such a degree. The power he would wield!

Sarvif’s ears stiffened. “And you’ve never been able to remove the stench of the Circle from you.”

Tars froze. “What do you—”

The huge werewolf bared his teeth, but when he spoke, there was clear sadness in his tone. “From the start, you smelled of the butchery of the Circle. It per-

meates your essence. I knew you to be an agent of theirs, but I chose to watch...to give you a chance. If anything, though, the stench has only grown regardless of events. Regardless of my lessons. Regardless of the mercy we've shown you."

Tars started to back away, but a single glare by the towering figure before him made the human pause. He saw only one hope: transformation.

However, despite his urgent desire, the change would not come.

"I lied a bit about the flowers. They don't do much... except stave off the transformation for a while if held long enough. Still dangerous to us, but useful this once. We keep track of the flower beds, but I won't destroy them. That would be...monstrous. It'll take you a little less than a quarter hour before you can change. That gives you more of a chance than those whom your masters sacrifice."

"A chance?" Tars did not want to look at the four but could not help himself.

"The first hunt is always important. You give our newest members a unique opportunity."

Tars vehemently shook his head. "I swear that I—"

"I would start running if I were you. You'll get a hundred paces."

Swallowing, Tars Orn ran in what he knew to be the direction of Thrull. He took the longest strides he could, fairly leaping. He surveyed the land ahead, looking for anything that would give him a chance to stall until he could transform.

Snarls arose behind him, followed by a howl. Tars heard nothing after that, but knew, from his own experience, that the four newest members of the pack pursued. He suspected that Lief Sarvif ran with them, at least to guide their efforts. Tars doubted that the pack leader would be in on the kill.

OF THE PACK

He made out a rocky ridge just a short distance away. There were enough nooks and crannies in it to give someone a place to secret themselves, at least for a short time. Hope rising, Tars pushed harder.

He traveled only a few more steps when the first claws tore through his calf. As he dropped to his knees screaming, the newest members of the pack fell upon him and commenced with their first kill.

HUNTERS

The snow had at last melted. Spring had finally arrived in Skarsheim.

Well, to be fair, Erik Thorson corrected himself, there was still snow on some of the hilltops and in the places where the shade greatly dominated. That snow would likely stay around for another week or so since, even in spring, the temperatures only grudgingly rose for the first month. Still, the hardy trees and other plant life had already begun bursting with new growth.

The shift from the dread winter to the hopeful new season could also be seen in the people. The village and the surrounding area bustled with activity as many went about beginning duties not touched since late autumn. There were those who already spoke about an increase in fishing, although another month would see a true boon.

Those who farmed had already begun planting barley, oats, and rye, while Erik himself had started herding his livestock to wilder pastures with more fresh growth. The cattle eagerly headed on, no doubt looking forward to what, for them, would be a grand feast in comparison to the past several months.

From a distance, he saw young Helga Dalgaard wave his way from the entrance of her family's longhouse. She, her husband, and their two children were his closest neighbors and some of the few people with whom he had almost daily contact since his own Gertrud had passed from illness three years ago. Erik and his wife had only had one child, who had died shortly after birth, so he was fond of the Dalgaard young—a girl of eight years and a boy of five. However, overall, Erik preferred his privacy, something that only Gertrud had ever truly appreciated.

The short trek into the village to trade for a few items that he needed had been enough of a visit to last him a week or two. It was not that he did not enjoy himself there, but herding the cattle to their spring pasture relaxed him. While Rolf—Helga's husband—could not offer much help what with his own farm needs—he and his wife were among those who had more than once suggested that Erik find someone to assist. Erik, though, had thus far handled everything by himself and had all intention of continuing to do so for as long as possible.

Erik reminded himself that he would have to visit the Dalgaard family tomorrow. Helga had promised him cheese for which his own cows had provided the milk. She had learned from her father and was known around the region for the quality of her cheeses. Helga always saved some of the best for him, and not simply because he provided so much milk for her. Erik knew that she saw him as something of an uncle, since her father had passed shortly after she had wed Rolf.

His thoughts having drifted to the cheese, he did not at first notice that one of the cows had strayed away from the rest. That reminded Erik again that he should have accepted Rolf's offer of one of their dog's latest pups in order to raise it to help herd the cattle, but that was a matter that could not help him now. He glanced at the rest of

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the herd and saw that they were dutifully following the lead animal, who had already sighted the familiar pasture. Cursing under his breath, Erik decided to hurry after the lone wandering beast.

The cow stepped down into a depression and vanished behind a tangle of trees that had yet to get their full spring finery. As Erik pursued, he noticed the area become perceptibly colder. The grass and other ground plant life had begun to sprout, but looked weeks behind his farm and the nearby pasture.

Erik paused as he discovered something even stranger. A bit ahead, an odd pattern of shapes that, to him, resembled footsteps marked part of the terrain ahead. That, however, did not disturb him as much as the fact that, wherever he saw them, the grass, or whatever other plants that had been growing there, had withered and died. Every spot, it was the same.

A startled grunt that he recognized as coming from the cow brought him back to the task at hand. Pushing aside vague concerns about the dead vegetation, the farmer pressed on.

The tangled trees proved an impediment for a short time, but, at last, he got through the worst of them. Erik wondered how the animal had managed so much better than him. Of course, the grunt that he had heard gave every indication that the cow's fortunes had finally run out. Now, all Erik had to worry about was getting the beast back through and up to the pasture.

At last, he spotted the cow. The animal kept trying to back up, but acted as if something held it in check. Only as he neared the creature did Erik see that someone had bound a rope around its neck and secured the other end to one of the strongest trees in the vicinity.

Armed with only a knife and the long stick that he had been using to prod the cattle along, Erik hesitated. He was not a small man and still in good health. Over his life, he

had participated on many raids and proven his skill in battle. Yet, Erik was not foolhardy. It seemed likely to him that the person who had tied the cow up had a sword or some other weapon far deadlier than the farmer's meager tools. In addition, the very fact that the animal had been tethered the way that it had made Erik feel that the intruder planned to use the cow as bait of some sort.

He had to assume that *he* was the quarry, although for what reason, Erik could not fathom.

Nevertheless, rather than attempt to untie the cow, Erik stepped back. If it came to it, he could afford the loss of one animal, especially in exchange for his own life. However, he still hoped to depart the area, then return home for help. Erik doubted that there had been many involved in snaring the beast. This looked like the work of one, perhaps two. It would not take long for him to gather more than enough able assistance to deal with them, whoever they—

A savage growl filled his ears. Erik spun around and found himself facing a frostbite fox...or, at least, some nightmarish version of one.

It stood nearly as large as him and certainly broader at the shoulder. The head was somewhat misshapen, with the jaws wider and full of sharp yellowed teeth. What most marked it as a frostbite fox for Erik was its fur, which still had traces of the icy white color mixed into the far more dominant brown that would soon entirely cover it before spring progressed much farther.

Erik had never before heard of any fox growing to such dimensions and could not imagine it to happen often or else most other creatures would have been decimated by such monstrosities long ago. None of that helped as he desperately struggled to come up with some way to avoid being torn to shreds by it.

That the beast had not already ripped him apart had only been due to the trees. The same ones that had caused

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Erik so much trouble to reach his cow now prevented the horrific fox from either biting his throat out or mangling him with its oversized claws. This infuriated the vulpine horror, who snarled and started forcing the offending trees to bend in such extreme angles that the farmer knew most were mere seconds from cracking apart and leaving him open to the monster.

The fox continued to press at the trees and only then did Erik see that the animal did not stand as one of its normal brethren did. Although it hunched in the process, the gargantuan creature finally stood on its hind legs as if used to doing so.

Any lingering thoughts that this was some natural aberration faded from Erik's mind as the eyes took on a sudden dark green glow. Some sort of sorcery had brought this fiend into being and, for Erik, that meant that his chances of surviving had gone from very little to none at all. Still, he had not been brought up to die without fighting, no matter how futile it might be.

By this time, the monster's nearby presence had been sensed by the trapped cow. As it sounded its fear and amplified its struggles, the farmer wondered if there was a chance if only he succeeded in slipping near the frightened animal. Surely, Erik desperately thought, the fox would find the cow a much more appealing meal...

A figure clad in dark garments too warm for the current weather suddenly leapt into the fray. Erik had a glimpse of a woman's face under thick greying hair bound behind, but otherwise could not identify anything about her. She moved with an unnatural swiftness, making no sound whatsoever as she brought up a wicked-looking handaxe that, to Erik, looked as if it glowed a faint green.

The axe came within an inch of slashing the monstrous fox in the chest, but the monster nimbly evaded the attack and countered with one heavy paw. The woman held up a

small round shield in her left hand just in time. The claws raked across the shield, making an awful scratching sound in the process.

Erik's rescuer swung again. This time, the handaxe caught the forearm as the beast withdrew it. The fox howled as the blade sank deep.

The woman raised the weapon for another blow, but the monster withdrew. Growling, it bounded away on its three good paws.

"Many...many thanks," the farmer uttered as he struggled to his feet. "I thought that my end had—"

He gaped in renewed fear as he truly beheld her face for the first time. There were small ceremonial tattoos on her chin and near her eyes, but those were not what so unnerved Erik. It was the face itself. The features that marked her as still a handsome woman did not at all help to soften the horrible truth of the hints of rotting flesh and the eyes that matched the glow of her axe. The absolute paleness of her skin should have been his initial warning, he realized, but her timely interference with the beast had made him not think about what that, along with her other troubling features, meant.

Undead.

She peered at Erik as if seeing him for the first time. The farmer could see the incredible intelligence behind those eyes. There was only one sort of undead that he knew of—although he would have been the first to admit his overall ignorance of such things—that moved so much like the living and thought with quick wit. A lich.

There had been old tales of liches in these parts, but Erik could not recall any of the details. He knew that he had heard some of those tales when young, but never having met anyone who had encountered such horrors, he had let those stories slip from his memories. Now, the farmer regretted that.

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Lowering her weapon, she moved toward him. In trying not to look her in the eye, Erik glanced down and saw that, with each step, the grass blackened and died. That, despite the fact that she wore lined leather boots. He swallowed, certain that, if she touched him, he would suffer a similarly grisly fate. However, Erik also understood too well that, if he ran, that axe would end up in his back before he managed any sort of distance.

Although most of her clothing was dark, durable, and very much one would have expected even his own people to wear during the height of winter, there were archaic touches here and there that showed Erik that this undead had existed for some centuries. The one contrasting piece was a large white fur wrapped around her shoulders and hiding her throat. The paws and skull had been retained as part of the fur, but he could not identify the animal with certainty, there being traces of both wolf and fox in what he saw.

“Your animal,” she said in a toneless voice that sent shivers through him.

Erik realized that the lich meant his cow. He nodded.

“You are owed for that. It drew him close for the first time. I have now marked him. The hunt is closing.”

With that, the undead turned away. Despite suddenly being aware that he had been given a reprieve, Erik could not help risking himself by blurting out, “Thank you!”

As he feared, that made her look over her shoulder. She visibly appraised him, which only served to make the farmer curse himself for speaking. To his mounting dismay, the lich returned to him.

“Your name.” It did not come as a question, but rather a quiet demand.

“Erik. Erik Thorson.”

“I am...Runa Banasár.” She said the last as if not having thought of the name for a long time. “You are owed, Erik Thorson.”

“Thank—thank you.”

Her gaze shifted to the side. She stood there in silence for a time, Erik fearful of making a move of his own even despite being told that he was “owed.”

The gaze returned to him. “There is a village nearby.”
“Yes.”

Another pause, then, “Is Wolf Redhair still headman?” When he could only look at her in puzzlement, Runa shook her head. “No. Of course not. That was so very long ago.” She hefted her handaxe. “I remember his death now.”

At that moment, Erik heard a distant sound. He was not quite certain just what it was, but Runa looked where he did and her eyes flashed that same unsettling green again.

“The village is that way?” she asked.

“Yes. Is it—you think—”

The lich headed off toward the sound, leaving in her tracks more dead vegetation. Erik no longer felt disturbed by that, only concerned about his fellow villagers. While he had little enough interaction with most, these were his people, and a monster headed toward them.

Without meaning to at first, Erik followed after the lich. As the undead’s incredible strides took her farther ahead, he remained determined to keep after her. Despite what she was, Erik saw her as the best hope against the furred monster.

“What is that thing?” the farmer finally dared ask. “It looks like—I mean—it resembles a frostbite fox—”

“It was.” Runa kept silent for a few seconds more, then added, “I made it into something more. For hunting.”

He stopped dead. “You made it?”

She continued moving. Her back still to him, she said, “For hunting. He served well for a while...then decided he wanted to hunt only for himself. He thought I would be his first prey. He was wrong.”

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The revelation unnerved Erik, yet he still renewed pacing her. “Why did that thing come here?”

“It was born here. So was I. The spell that wrought me, and the one that wrought him, pull us back here every so often. It was time. That was how I knew that he would be close by, but I needed bait. Your cow came as if offering itself.”

Only then did Erik think about the fact that she had asked about some long-dead headman. He could only imagine that Runa Banasár’s village had existed well before his own ever had. That did not entirely surprise the farmer. The area had much potential.

He found himself wondering just what had happened to her people, but that swiftly gave way to his overall fear for his own village. He worked harder to catch up to the lich, his dread of her only a shadow compared to that of the horrific creature ahead.

They neared his farm, but the lich abruptly veered away from it, instead heading in a direction that made Erik shake his head and pray that he was wrong.

The Dalgaard farm’s animals lay scattered in grisly fashion. They found the family—what remained of them—only moments later. The creature had been very thorough. From what Erik could see, the only blessing to the ghastly spectacle had to have been the brief suffering of each. The children appeared to have each been slain with one blow to the back. Their mother had not been so lucky; her throat had been bitten out. As for her husband...Erik guessed that he had faced the same fate as his wife. It was hard to tell because the head itself was nowhere to be seen and Erik had no desire to look for it.

All the blood made even he, who had shed his fair share during raids, sick to his stomach. Runa, on the other hand, eyed everything with detachment, only finally saying, “Such a waste. He forgets what must be done.”

The comment made no sense to Erik, but the undead chose that moment to turn to the west and head off. That renewed his worries, for the village lay in that direction.

“You have to stop him!” he demanded of her. “That thing will kill them all!”

“I cannot permit that,” Runa replied, saying no more.

Still, her comment gave Erik the first true bit of hope since this had begun. Who better than her to stop the beast? She had fashioned him. That meant that she knew all his weaknesses.

“Can I—can I help in any way?”

Without pausing, she looked back at him. “Only as bait.”

Erik steeled himself. “If it will help keep him from the village...I will.”

Runa cocked her head. She nodded. “Give me your hand.”

He held it out. With one smooth movement, the lich hooked her axe to her side. She then removed a dagger from her belt. Dropping her shield by her side, Runa reached with her other hand for his.

Recalling what had happened to the vegetation, Erik could not help but recoil. The undead looked up into his eyes. Only then did he realize that she never blinked.

“You will not be taken. I have promised you that.”

Swallowing, he let her touch his hand. Her fingers were very cold, but that was the only effect of the contact between them. As the farmer watched, Runa brought the dagger to his palm. Gritting his teeth, he waited while she drew a small symbol created by the blood from the shallow cuts she made.

When Runa was finished, she leaned forward and breathed on the symbol. The blood vanished, replaced by a brief green glow. At the same time, her eyes flashed that color again.

“It is done.”

“What?”

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“He will be drawn by your life force now, touched as it is by the same power that first animated him.” For the first time, the semblance of a smile ever so briefly formed on her lips. It was not a sight that Erik wanted to see repeated. “He will be *driven* to hunt you.”

“What—what now?”

She returned the dagger to her belt, then took up her handaxe and shield. “I would suggest that you run.” The undead pointed with the weapon to the southwest of where the village was located. “That way. Very hard. I will follow along after a time.”

A question occurred to him. “If you could draw him so, why haven’t you done it before this?”

“The spell needs a willing living soul for the power to enter. You are the first one to offer yourself.”

Erik had the feeling that there was more to it than that, but knew that he would receive no more answer. He looked at his palm, where the symbol, now just a hexagonal scar, had started to itch.

“It will bother you more and more if you continue to hesitate.”

He ran.

The idyllic spring landscape seemed to mock Erik as he tore through the growing grass and around the blossoming trees. How this day could also have become such a nightmare still astounded him. He only prayed that Runa would come to slay the beast before it tore him to shreds or, even worse, chose to attack the village.

Fit as he yet was, Erik still finally had to pause for breath. He estimated that he had run well past the vicinity of the village, yet, there remained no hint of the monster. He began to have doubts that what the lich had done to him would actually attract the horrific fox. That made him peer back toward the unseen village. If the creature instead focused on the inhabitants...

A movement from near a number of spruces made him spin around toward the trees. Taking a step closer, Erik squinted.

Something darted away. He grimaced. It was a frostbite fox, but a normal one.

His breathing better, Erik started on again.

From deeper in the wooded region, a huge and fearsome shape burst out toward him.

Having already seen the horrific beast up close earlier did nothing to make this second encounter any less terrifying. Worse, the wound that it had received just a short time earlier appeared to have magically healed, meaning that what confronted him was at full strength. Erik turned from the creature and ran as hard as he could. He saw no sign of Runa and felt certain that he was only seconds from being mauled to death. Despite that belief, he continued to push himself, hoping that some miracle would yet save him.

The monster's breathing resounded in his ears. He imagined its breath—as cold as hers—on the back of his neck.

Then, another shape jumped up from seemingly nowhere and collided with the beast. The creature snarled and growled as it and its attacker rolled on.

Erik dared look back and saw, as he had hoped, that it was the lich. She and the horrific fox tumbled on for a few yards more, then broke away from one another. Large gaps of suddenly-dead vegetation marked where Runa had each time landed. The beast did not affect the ground in the same manner, but Erik would have sacrificed the entire vicinity if it meant the monster's destruction.

As agile as Runa had proven a lich could be, this time the fox gained its footing first. Erik had heard her call the thing a "he," but with such a twisted, vicious form, the farmer could only continue to imagine the massive creature as an "it."

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The monster howled as Erik had heard no fox howl, and lunged for Runa. It came within inches of biting into her throat, the pale woman dropping below it at the last moment. As the creature's momentum kept it soaring on, she slammed the edge of her shield into its stomach.

With a pained snarl, the fox crashed into the ground. Runa whirled, her axe already poised for use.

The fox twisted around, evading the blade. It crouched, reminding Erik that, while in so many ways a beast, it still thought with a mind more complex.

As the lich and her rebellious creation faced one another, Erik tried desperately to think of something that he could do to shift the balance. Yet, as Runa had pointed out, he had served best by being bait. Other than that, he could be of no use.

Erik considered fleeing to the village to warn them just in case, but found himself unwilling to leave Runa despite his inability to be any aid. He stood there, helpless, as the lich and the monster charged one another.

This time, the fox did not attempt to fall upon her. It met her straight on, the huge paws slashing. However, Runa appeared to have planned for that, the undead fighter holding her shield so that the paws struck it instead of her. As she did that, she also chopped with her axe.

The sharp blade caught the monster on the arm, slicing off both fur and flesh from the left limb. Erik wondered how swiftly the wound would heal. He gathered that Runa needed to deal with the beast in short order, but wondered just how brief that opening might be. If the fox retained the ability to continually heal itself, the battle would rage on and on...until perhaps it was the lich that made the final mistake.

That would leave Erik and the village defenseless.

Erik stared into his empty hands, wishing that he would have at least had a weapon like Runa's axe. With some

magic to aid him, he would have been willing to dive into the struggle, even if it meant his life.

His attention fixed on the scar left from the lich's spellwork. Erik looked from it to the beast, who, now fully standing on both hind legs, loomed over Runa.

Teeth bared, he ran directly toward the monster's back. He had no weapon, not even a stick. Despite that, Erik did not falter.

As he neared, the creature jerked its head toward him. The farmer prayed that the reaction would be enough.

Runa leapt forward. The fox quickly looked back to her, but not soon enough. The lich's axe carved a deep, gory ravine in the unprotected throat.

A pained gurgle escaped the beast. It stumbled back, one paw moving to the gaping wound, while the other slashed at the undead warrior. Runa easily evaded the wild effort, then closed in for the kill. As the monster weaved back and forth, she shifted her handaxe and brought it down, cutting a long, wicked line down the center of the torso.

The creature whirled around in an uncontrolled manner. Erik saw too late the one paw swinging toward him. It struck the farmer hard in the head, sending him sprawling on his back and struggling to maintain consciousness.

Through blurry vision, Erik caught sight of the monster dropping to all fours. Its life fluids spilled below it, and its breath came in more and more ragged bursts.

An indistinct figure that he assumed had to be Runa stepped in front of the struggling creature. She raised her arm—and the handaxe, he supposed—then let it drop.

The fox's misshapen head bounced on the ground and rolled some distance away. The body shook for a moment, then collapsed in a heap.

Erik had hoped that time would enable him to recover, but, if anything, he felt worse. The world began to

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swim. However, he noticed that he was no longer alone. Crouched next to him was what he finally saw to be Runa. The lich eyed him with an impassive expression, almost as if she studied a rock or some other insignificant item.

At last, in a voice matching her expression, she remarked, "An excellent judgment. You realized that the same spell that drove him to you would be strong enough to attract his attention at that moment. Even for a few scant seconds...which was all that I needed."

He tried to answer, but could not. To his horror, though, he saw her reach a hand to his face.

Erik must have revealed his concern, for the lich shook her head once. "I marked you when you served me once. You served me again. You remain marked. I have enough to feed on to restore my strength." Runa's cold fingers touched his forehead. "You rest in the meantime."

He immediately lost consciousness.

* * *

When he woke, it was night. Erik pushed himself to his feet. He was still exhausted, but otherwise well, and wondered if the lich was in some way responsible for his recovery.

The beast's huge corpse lay untouched despite the hours, perhaps a gruesome meal that even the normal scavengers did not want to touch. Erik stumbled past it, intent only on reaching the village. Although he could walk, he doubted that he could make it all the way home. Besides, someone needed to be told about the Dalgaard family and everything else that had happened.

Skarsheim was dark and quiet, not at all surprising this late into the night. Still, Erik saw no sign of the village watch. Generally, there were anywhere from six to a dozen men on duty in case of raids.

His vision still half-blurred, he missed seeing the obstacle in his path. As Erik fell to one knee atop it, his hands felt leather and a familiar shape.

Looking down, he stared into the gaping face of an elderly man.

Swallowing hard, Erik scurried away from the body...only to spot another nearby with the same vacant expression.

A renewed sense of horror swelling within him, Erik ran as best he could through Skarsheim. Everywhere he went, he found bodies in the same condition. There were no wounds. All looked as if merely drained of life.

I have enough to feed on to restore my strength, she had said. For the first time, he understood for just what purpose that she had created the beast. To hunt for food, but not in the normal sense. As a lich, Runa needed the life forces of others to continue her existence.

He had helped save the village, yes...but only for her feeding.

Erik glanced down at the scarred palm and, in the dark, could have sworn that it briefly glowed green.

You are marked, the lich had also said. *You served me*.

Following some twisted sense of honor, she had apparently rewarded him rather than taken him like the rest. As he stood among the dead, Erik Thorson prayed that it had ended there. From what he had seen, Runa Banasár did not forget those who crossed her path. In most cases, he suspected that she hunted them down.

But for someone who, in her mind, had *served* her well...Erik feared that, in the future, the lich would call upon him to serve again.

And he doubted that he would have any choice.

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RAIDING PARTY

The raid on the coastal settlements near Erlefurt was such a success that Haakon Snowbeard—jarl and commander of the fifteen longships—proclaimed the raiders could have conquered Altenheim if they'd so desired.

Of course, that was before they ran afoul of a caprathorn.

From where it had emerged, none could say. The raiders had driven off the surviving inhabitants of the hamlet and were in the midst of clearing out everything of value when the scream warned them of the threat.

Anders Rolfson was the first to reach the scream's origin, just in time to see Olaf Olafson, whom he'd known since childhood, clutching at his throat and chest. Large thorns stuck out from his large frame. Olaf spun as he fell, revealing three more large thorns in his face, including the one piercing his ruined right eye.

Olaf collapsed in a lifeless heap, and the horror of what had happened to him was burned into Anders's mind, especially as the huge, grotesque creature a short distance behind the corpse moved into the raider's view.

Anders had heard tales of such horrors around the family fires, but he never thought he'd see such a monster. He stood there, stunned, and likely would have died next

if other raiders hadn't come to investigate, including his cousin, Joran.

A pair of foolhardy raiders rushed the lanky creature, holding shields as defense against the many thorns covering its almost spidery body. However, the caprathorn bent low and charged into the nearest, one of its four twisted horns driving right through the shield and into the man. With a simple lift of its head, the caprathorn tossed ruined shield and lifeless man aside.

Although it appeared to have more than four limbs, it continued almost as a man would, making its appearance even more unsettling. In the waning light of day, Anders could just make out arcane sigils all over its horns, further evidence of the caprathorn's supernatural origins.

Anders's fixation on the arcane nature of their attacker vanished when, far in the distance, a blood-chilling cry briefly arose. He heard someone mutter about "the Beast," and he knew exactly what they meant.

Just as Anders wondered how they could possibly stand against such fiendish magical creatures, a commanding voice shouted, "Set a line of fire against that thing! Block it off and retreat to the ships!"

Men brought torches, but they were too late to save the other raider who, having seen his companion die, tripped while trying to flee. Unfortunately, the caprathorn leaned back and brought one wide foot down on the man's back. The crunch of his spine and other bones breaking disturbed Anders more than the brief shriek.

"Here!" Joran handed him a torch. "The last houses we took! He wants us to burn them!"

Given something constructive to do made Anders feel more in control. His fear faded. As he put the torch to the thatch-roof house that he had just cleared out of valuables and goods, he saw the caprathorn pause. Flames rose between it and its prey. Taking heart, Anders set fire to

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everything that he could, then tossed the torch into the inferno for good measure.

Joran, a sack over his shoulder, came up and patted Anders on the back. "Hurry up and gather what you've got!"

Anders picked up the goods that he had gathered. The cousins rushed back alongside other comrades to where the longships awaited them.

Haakon Snowbeard—heavyset in a muscular way, with a pure white beard more than thick and long enough to make up for the lack of any hair atop his head—waved the raiding party back to their vessels. Anders and Joran had the honor of sailing with the jarl himself, which meant they'd share in his triumph upon arrival home. Each member of Snowbeard's crew was personally chosen by the jarl, the cousins included. Their fathers had sailed with Snowbeard when he'd been younger, and the families were favored by him.

"Get aboard, you two!" Snowbeard roared with a slap on the back of Anders's head. Despite the solid blow the jarl landed, Anders nodded back gratefully at his commander. Snowbeard never held back, even with such physical acts of congratulations, and Anders, who received his share of such hard slaps growing up, always understood how they were meant.

Roughly fifty raiders, give or take a couple, manned Snowbeard's longship. The caprathorn's abrupt appearance aside, only a few raiders were killed—a risk that everyone accepted—and those men would be mourned by everyone back home at the proper time with a fitting ceremony. Looking over his comrades, Anders saw no one missing whom he knew well other than the late, lamented Olaf. However, only when all the ships emptied on their return would it be possible to see if a friend or relation was left behind.

A horn sounding in the distance proved that, as always, Snowbeard timed everything precisely. Anders marveled

at the jarl's cunning. Under Haakon Snowbeard, Anders's people profited...even, it seemed, when dark horrors faced them.

"Now there's convenience, eh?" Snowbeard roared in a purposely-jovial tone. "We'll let them deal with our spiny friend...and the Beast itself, if it decides to show up! Ha!"

As the others took up his enthusiasm, the jarl ordered the ships underway. By the time any of the naval forces of the Bürach Empire arrived, the raiders would be too far away to catch. The nearest imperial vessels were more than a day away from the vicinity as well; more knowledge Snowbeard gathered from his many years of successful summer raids.

As Anders watched the shore dwindle into the distance, Joran took a bite from a loaf of bread he found during the raid. When Joran was not fighting or working hard, he was eating. Anders often wondered which Joran was better at. His cousin excelled at everything, including how much he could devour and still look strong and fit.

"All right!" Snowbeard rumbled to those aboard. "If you're not doing something to help keep the ship afloat, get yourself some rest! You've all earned it!" His strongly-cheerful voice indicated that there would be no more talk about the caprathorn or the cry in the distance. Those were to be forgotten, the concerns now of the empire and not theirs.

That brought raucous agreement from those aboard. Snowbeard's command also meant—although he hadn't actually said so—drinks would be passed around before the raiders settled down to sleep. Anders and his cousin drank their share of ale, with Joran having an extra share or two besides. By the time they finished, the night was well underway. Both men were soon snoring alongside the rest.

The waves rocked the ships gently that night, which was why Anders found it somewhat annoying to wake from a

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deep slumber to find little time had passed. He blamed the generous amount of ale he'd swallowed, which now demanded that he go relieve himself. The raider moved to the port side and eyed the rippling water while he took care of matters.

Some distance away, something broke the surface momentarily but, with only stars to light the darkness, remained unidentifiable. Finishing, Anders peered out onto the black sea. However, when nothing else broke the waters, he returned to his slumber.

He woke again when a combination of sunlight and chattering voices forced him to stir. Joran was already up, devouring some of the food that he'd taken during the previous day's raid. He nodded agreeably to his cousin but didn't slow his chewing. Anders started on some morsels secured from the same source. The ship still had a good stock of rations stored aboard her, but since the purloined food would spoil first, it made sense to enjoy the foreign fare immediately.

The weather held well until evening, when fog developed along the waterline. The fog was not unexpected—their current location prone to it—but it meant most of the ships would lose sight of one another if the fog thickened too much. Snowbeard shouted for a lantern to be lit and, all around them, those aboard other vessels did the same. No one wanted any of the ships to ram one another before they could adjust their courses.

With the last vestiges of day gone, the fog grew so thick that even the light from the other ships faded away. Despite the calm winds, the water grew choppy, Snowbeard's vessel bouncing up and down as the water slapped it.

"Feels like we keep hitting rocks," muttered Joran, his usual good nature tried by their circumstances. "This keeps up, it'll be hard to get any sleep!"

"You can sleep through anything."

Anders's cousin shrugged. "Not comfortably."

A short while later, Joran, who had settled down soon after the comment, had already dozed off. Anders, forced to listen to his snoring, wondered which was noisier: Joran asleep or a barking seal. Anders planted his own head so that one ear lay flat against the sack upon which it rested, while his arm covered the other. In this way, he succeeded in finally joining his cousin in slumber.

Anders's rest was soon disturbed by the continued bumping of the ship. Somewhat disgruntled, he pushed himself up and stalked over to where Knut, a grizzled old man who'd seen more raids than years Anders had been alive, kept watch on the portside.

"What're you doin' up, boy?" Knut asked.

"Do we keep running aground on something?"

The older man grinned, revealing several gaps in his teeth. "Out here? Course not!"

"Then why does the ship keep bouncing in calm waters?"

"Different waters in different times do different things," the elder raider replied unhelpfully. "This is nothin', boy. I remember a raid far south of Erlefurt when I was about your age, where the ship bounced up and down pretty much the whole journey there and back."

Anders peered over the side but saw nothing but modest waves. He leaned back.

"You've been on enough of these raids already," Knut went on. "You should understand how the waters are fickle."

Anders, already feeling foolish because of his initial question, felt even more so. He nodded. "You're right, I suppose—"

A splash sounded from the other side of the longship. The two men looked there but saw nothing amiss. Knut sniffed and turned back to Anders, only to pause and glance back again.

"Where's Ragnar got off to?" he muttered as he straightened. "He's got watch with me."

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“I don’t see him.” Anders also straightened. “Maybe he went to—”

“Fill himself with drink is what’s likely,” interrupted Knut. “The jarl’s not gonna like that. We celebrated pretty good, just like Snowbeard always let us, but he wants us good and clear-headed until we get home.” He rubbed his bristled chin. “Be a good lad and find him. If I leave my post, the jarl’ll have my head.”

“I’ll do it.”

Knut slapped him on the arm in gratitude, then returned to his duties. Anders, eyeing the thick fog, could not help thinking that Ragnar simply tired of staring at nothing. The younger raider wondered if the missing look-out had instead started nodding off and merely decided, in his half-awake state, to just find a place to sleep. While that meant that, either way, Ragnar would be in trouble with Snowbeard, falling asleep might seem less of a failure to their leader than wandering off to get drunk.

Doing his best not to wake anyone, Anders wended his way to Ragnar’s post. Exhausted by the raid and their celebrations, the other men near the area in question slept soundly as the young raider passed. Anders bent down to look in curiosity at Ragnar’s abandoned post.

The area was soaked in water. While some could be expected, where Ragnar had been posted looked drenched. Some parts of the edge still dripped and a fair-sized puddle had gathered on the deck.

With growing wariness, Anders peeked over the side. He could make out nothing in the dark waters. Still, the young raider feared that, if he continued his search for Ragnar on the ship, he wouldn’t find the man anywhere... and that unnerved Anders.

He turned back to tell Knut his concerns, only to see the older man was not at his post. Anders rushed back, almost stepping on a couple of sleepers. When he finally reached

Knut's post, it was empty.

No, Anders corrected himself. A small puddle of sea water rippled where there had been dry wood before.

Biting back an oath, Anders looked toward the bow, where Snowbeard liked to stay. Not wanting to cause any chaos, Anders quietly but quickly maneuvered to where the jarl slept. He hesitated after reaching the raid leader, concerned what might happen if he delayed, but also fearing Snowbeard's wrath at being woken for no good reason. Anders slowly bent down and shook Snowbeard's shoulder.

The jarl snorted and visibly tried to stay asleep, but Anders would not relent. The elder raider finally opened his eyes and peered up. "Anders Rolfson," Snowbeard grumbled. "It must be important to wake me."

"Two watch are missing, including Knut."

Snowbeard blinked away the vestiges of sleep. "Two missing? You sure?"

"Yes. I was with Knut when he noticed that Ragnar wasn't at his post. I went to check. When I realized Ragnar was gone, I turned to go back to Knut, but he was gone as well!" Anders realized an edge of panic was amplifying his voice.

"Keep your voice low," the jarl muttered. He stood up and surveyed the ship. "All looks well. You certain?"

"Yes!"

Looking around, Snowbeard tapped a lanky man on his right. When the raider started swearing, the jarl covered the other man's mouth and whispered, "Trouble. Wake Stenna and follow."

The man nodded and turned toward a stout raider snoring nearby. Snowbeard ordered Anders to lead him down the length of the longship. With the other two following, the group arrived at Ragnar's post.

Bending down, Snowbeard studied the spot. He ran a finger through the puddle, then looked up at Anders. "Knut's place like this?"

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“Yes. He was just there, too!”

Gesturing at the two raiders with him, the jarl whispered an order. “See if you find anything he missed.” As they started off, he abruptly added, “Don’t look over the side.”

Anders leaned close to Snowbeard. “Why did you say that? About looking over?”

The elder raider hesitated. “An old tale. Shouldn’t have bothered saying anything.”

Despite the answer, Anders saw the concern in Snowbeard’s tone. He supposed the chief was just jumpy because of the missing raiders. Still, he took an extra step away from the side.

Finishing his inspection, Snowbeard scratched his chin. “I wonder—”

Someone screamed from the opposite side of the ship. As Anders and Snowbeard spun toward the others, they saw Stenna scrambling away from Knut’s spot...with no sign of the other raider sent by the jarl.

The scream stirred many aboard. Raiders jumped to their feet, making it difficult for Snowbeard and Anders to reach Stenna to find out what had happened.

“Move aside!” the jarl commanded. “Out of my way!”

They finally reached Stenna, who, although a hardened fighter with several journeys under her belt, stood ashen and muttering to herself. Snowbeard seized the woman and spun her so the two faced one another.

“What’s happened? Spit it out!”

At first, Stenna, eyes wide with horror, just stared. Snowbeard grew impatient and slapped Stenna hard on the cheek. That finally stirred the shocked raider back to her senses.

“Hands!” she blurted. “Horrible hands like I’d never seen! Skin like fish, webbed, and with sharp claws! I didn’t see ‘em until they’d already grabbed his arm and pulled him over! He screamed—and then he was gone!”

“You’re drunk!” argued one man near Stenna.

“No!” Snowbeard yelled, silencing the rest with his roaring voice. “Get your weapons and steer clear of the sides! Think, you fools! This is like those tales we’ve all heard, the ones about the lost clan that consorted with daemons!”

Most of those gathered around looked blankly at him, but Anders recalled something. A name from a story that his grandfather told to scare him into obedience when he was young. At that time, Anders had enjoyed the scare, as children often did with such fanciful tales. “*Keppmir...*”

Joran, who had shoved his way near, scoffed. “That was just our old one liking to give us grandchildren a thrill!”

“It’s no children’s story!” the jarl corrected Joran. “Some of you who’ve been with me longest have seen one, dead though it was! Recall that?”

“I remember that monstrous carcass we fished out of the water,” said one raider older than Snowbeard. He looked thoughtful. “Like some twisted thing: part man and part fish!”

“You know the legend! They made a pact with a god, but it was a daemon instead! They wanted food and warmth with no work, and they even bartered their children away! That daemon broke their bodies and remade them into horrors forever swimming the seas, hunting anything, including their own!”

The older man nodded. “But that was when we dared head nearer to Thrull, where they say it began! We’re far south of there!”

Snowbeard turned. “And so are they if I’m right! Do as I say, all of you!”

Raiders moved nervously about, sometimes getting argumentative as they sought their weapons. Swords, axes, bows...it did not matter the weapon, only that one was armed. The mutters Anders heard as he joined his cousin in seizing their own weapons indicated that few believed the story. However, something had now happened to three

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raiders strong enough to defend themselves against any mortal enemy.

Anders, had seen enough to respect Snowbeard's suggestion. He recalled more of what his grandfather had told Joran, him, and the other children. The keppmir—the name supposedly that of the Valikan clan from which they had originated—were indeed like fish and, while they could hold their breath, could not breathe air like humans. That gave those aboard some hope...at least, so long as the creatures—if it was them—did not sink the ship.

Thinking of their vessel made Anders ponder something else. Straightening, he listened carefully.

Joran noticed his odd posture. "What're you doing?"

"You hear anything strange?"

"No. Should I?"

Anders squinted, but the fog obscured anything beyond a couple of feet from the ship. He listened again. "You'd think we'd hear something from some of the other ships."

His cousin stood next to him and squinted, concentrating. "Yeah, we should. You don't think that they're all...taken?"

"That many ships? There'd be some shouting." Another notion occurred to Anders. "All that bumping in the water..." As realization struck him, he clutched his sword tighter. "I've got to warn Snowbeard!"

"Wait! What do you know?"

Anders had no time to answer. He shoved through the gathering raiders until he located the jarl. "They've separated us from the rest!"

Snowbeard turned at his shouting. The older man stepped close. "What's that?"

"We've been split away from the rest of the ships! Listen! You won't hear anything from another vessel! That bumpiness we felt was keppmir pulling our ship away!"

"Everyone be quiet!" the jarl ordered. He put a hand to

his ear, then, after a short time, grunted. “No sound. Ulf! Blow the horn!”

The raider in question obeyed, sending out a blaring note. Snowbeard waved him to stop and everyone waited for a response.

At last, Joran voiced what they were all thinking. “No answer. We’re alone.”

“The wind’s dying,” Snowbeard commented with a look at the sail. “Let’s get those oars going!” They hadn’t needed the oars since departing the last raid, but the jarl always had his men keep them ready. “I want all the oars manned with guards near each rower keeping an eye on the water...but not too close, damn it!”

It took little time to obey, but all the while, Anders wondered why the keppmir hadn’t renewed their attacks.

As it turned out, he didn’t have to wait much longer. The oars helped push the ship along at a much faster rate...for perhaps a minute. Then some of the rowers struggled with their task, the oars stuck under the water. As they strained, Snowbeard ordered every spear to the sides.

“Jab near the paddle! Doesn’t matter if you hit anything! Get the oars free!” he told them.

On both sides, men thrust into the water. Some oars came free but others didn’t, making it difficult to use them in rhythm.

Anders, who stood with his sword ready to protect Joran, currently wielding a spear, heard a cracking from nearer the bow. He saw a rower tumble back with what remained of the oar. The paddle had broken off in the water.

More cracking sounded in various spots among the rowers on either side.

Joran swore and thrust past the oars. “I got something!”

When his cousin withdrew the spear, Anders saw the tip was dark with something obviously not water.

Joran bent farther, looking for his target.

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A scaly silhouette with four curled horns atop its head lunged from below the surface and seized the spear shaft. Taken by surprise, Joran maintained his grip. The sinister shape dropped back out of sight, pulling both the spear and Joran into the water.

“No!” Anders grabbed at his cousin but didn’t move quickly enough. Joran dropped into the sea with a splash, releasing the spear in the process. He spun in the waters, attempting to return to the ship.

One set of clawed hands seized his arm, while another grabbed his opposing shoulder and the top of his head. The hand on his head tugged back hard, snapping Joran’s head in an awful manner. Anders’s cousin went limp, disappearing below as the hands drew his corpse down.

Shrieks arose from elsewhere, followed by splash after splash. As Anders looked over his shoulder, he saw more pieces of oars everywhere. Some who’d been manning the oars scrambled away, leaving behind broken handles.

“Watch the water, damn you!” Snowbeard roared. He moved back and forth along the center of the ship, shouting orders to individual fighters. “Try to get some of the oars in action! We need to keep going!”

Despite that command, Anders saw little activity with the oars. The only progress could be credited to the wind in the sail...and that appeared to be lessening.

Anders heard another splash near him. He knew Joran was dead, but he glanced that way in the desperate hope that his cousin had miraculously survived.

It was not Joran, however. Instead, an abomination of a face that had just enough traces of human in it to magnify its nightmarishness thrust above the surface. The mouth extended into a beak filled with sharp teeth. The crimson head sported gills on each side of the throat, and the glaring eyes never blinked as they took in the stunned human.

One clawed hand grasped the boat's side, while the other wielded a spear with a needlelike point and three hooked ends facing the rear. The monster thrust the spear at Anders, who managed to dodge it at the last second.

Although Anders succeeded in saving himself, a man to his left did not. The cry alerted Anders in time to see the victim impaled for a moment before the keppmir tugged the body forward. As the corpse toppled into the water, the second creature dove, dragging the remains with him.

Only then did something else—something even more dreadful—come to Anders's mind. The keppmir could have simply shaken the body free and left it lying in the ship. At the very least, the fiendish creature could have abandoned the corpse once it landed in the water. To Anders, the actions of the monster—and the actions of those previous—made him understand that the keppmir had a use for the dead.

Anders could only think of one grisly reason...the dead were food.

Another creature pulled itself up over the side, its horrible sentient gaze affixed on Anders. The raider acted desperately, somehow managing to lunge forward and strike his attacker in the throat. With a horrific gurgling sound that Anders recognized as fury, the keppmir dropped back down below the surface.

While grateful for the reprieve, he knew that it would be a short one. More screams reminded him of the urgency of the situation. He saw two more raiders dragged overboard, one of them still flailing as she went under. Blood soaked the area near him. Anders could not say how many of his comrades had fallen prey to the keppmir, but the many empty spaces among the survivors was clue enough.

Snowbeard remained the one hopeful constant, giving command after command as he worked to rally those aboard.

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Anders kept eyeing the water, but the fiend who attempted to gut him had not returned. Others were not so fortunate. Even the raiders who stayed several feet from the ship railing perished as the keppmir displayed other methods by which to reach their prey. A long rope that Anders thought looked as if fashioned from seaweed and ending in a noose landed over one man facing in the opposite direction. As Anders rushed to help, the noose tightened, choking the victim. Even as he struggled, he was suddenly dragged backward at an alarming rate, screaming as he went headfirst on his back overboard. Anders, who had come within inches of grabbing a hand, could only watch.

A blood-chilling hiss behind him made Anders whirl. One of the keppmir had pushed itself up waist high and now leaned on the boat in order to allow it to fire what looked like a strange little bow. Anders also noted, for the first time, that *chains* encircled the monster's torso and continued down the length of the body. What purpose they served, he could not say, but they added another unsettling element to the keppmir's hideous appearance.

Before the creature could fire its bow—which had an odd-looking arrow with a line attached by the nock—Snowbeard lunged toward the aquatic attacker. In one hand he held an axe and the other a lit torch. The jarl thrust the torch at the keppmir, who hissed and dropped back out of sight.

Snowbeard caught sight of Anders. "We may have no choice! We might have to set—"

Snowbeard stiffened, and a gurgle ended whatever he sought to tell Anders. The jarl dropped his weapon and the torch as he grasped at the point of an arrow protruding from his throat.

The next second, Snowbeard went flying backward, vanishing overboard as Anders stood where he was, shaking.

Another keppmir pulled itself up near where the previous one had been. It was joined by another. One had the odd bow, the other a spear. Frantic shouts warned Anders that the creatures were rising all around.

The flicker of fire distracted Anders from the invading monsters. Snowbeard's torch had started a small fire. Anders lunged for the torch to prevent the flames from spreading, stomping at the fire. However, it defied his desperate attempts and spread quickly.

No longer certain what to do, Anders looked for someone to guide him. Instead, he saw only a handful of men still struggling against the attack. Most were cut off from one another, which made them easy victims for the aquatic fiends.

The hiss in his ear saved Anders from another keppmir. The human thrust the torch in the creature's face. With a horrific cry that sounded too much like that of a terrified man, the keppmir grabbed at its scorched eyes and fled into the safety of the deep. Unfortunately, in the process, Anders dropped the torch near where some drake fire had broken open during the struggle. Fire swiftly spread over the area, forcing Anders to the bow.

With nowhere else to go, he pressed himself against the bow and held his sword in front of him. The flames rose, making him wonder whether fire or the sea devils would kill him first. Beyond the fire, he beheld the last of his comrades being taken by the keppmir. Then, the fire burned high enough that Anders could only see it. Dropping his sword, he covered his head and waited to die.

* * *

The sound of excited human voices made Anders stir. He tried to speak, but his throat was so dry that nothing came out but a gasp. Someone lifted his head and provided him with water. After that, Anders fell unconscious again.

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When he woke next, his mind a bit more stable, he saw he was aboard one of the other ships. Someone brought him food, commenting on just how amazing it was that he survived on the half-sunken, burnt fragment of the jarl's ship with injuries—mostly burns—that, despite covering much of his body, would heal enough to let him live. In addition, there was mention of Snowbeard and the rest having no doubt perished in the conflagration, which meant to Anders that no one knew the terrible truth. He still could not speak. He could not tell anyone the truth of what happened. Of the keppmir.

He eventually discovered that six other ships failed to return from that foggy stretch. Their fates were a mystery to those who searched for their comrades once the weather permitted. Somehow, what was left of the jarl's ship had flowed with the current toward home.

Anders would have laughed at that irony if he had been able. Meanwhile, the stories surrounding Snowbeard's apparent glorious death aboard a burning ship had already spread from one vessel to another. When Anders's rescuers at last reached home, he wondered if he would even be believed.

Despite the losses, many proclaimed the last voyage of Snowbeard the peak of a successful season of raiding. Honors for the late jarl and those who died with him were already being discussed.

As he lay there, wracked with physical pain like nothing he'd felt in his short but eventful life, Anders found himself agreeing with that one part...it *had* been a successful season of raiding.

Successful, that is, for the keppmir.

AUTUMN CHILL

The autumn harvest was one of the most plentiful in Ivar's twenty-plus years...although he had to rely on his older brother Magnus for memories of the earliest of those years. Magnus cheerfully informed him that only the year of Ivar's birth could match this autumn. The weather was generally sunny and warm this summer, and the rain proved just right for a healthy crop. Plenty of dry hay was set aside for the coming winter.

Fishing, of course, remained a mainstay of the people, as it did for most who lived in the northlands. That, too, was proving bountiful this autumn, and the mood among the villagers and their nearest neighbors fostered tremendous hope. Even with autumn having thus far given them a few exceptionally cold days among the more tranquil ones, they still spoke in hushed, superstitious tones of a quiet, uneventful winter.

"Ivar!" Magnus called from the river. "Get the horses and help me with this buck!"

Ivar grabbed the reins of both fjord horses and led them to his taller, flame-haired brother. Ivar was not short, just topping six feet, but Magnus stood well above that. Mag-

nus had broad shoulders and a barrel chest. Ivar had the broad shoulders—albeit not so much as his sibling—but his chest was more in a normal range. Still, the brothers were known and respected in the village for their stamina and fighting prowess.

Magnus had cared for his sibling since their father perished participating in a raid more than a decade back, during two years of poor weather and poorer food stock. Their mother had already passed from illness when Ivar was three. That left only Magnus to watch over Ivar. Still young himself when their father fell, he took to the task of raising his brother with the same strong will that he used to tackle all of life's problems. While Ivar missed his parents, he did not feel he lacked for much in his youth.

Once they secured the buck, the brothers headed back to the village. The sturdy fjord horses plodded along, seemingly unconcerned about anything. Ivar wanted to race back just to enjoy a thrill, but Magnus liked to keep a steady if, in the estimation of his younger brother, slow pace. Still, they made it back to tiny Stjarnheim well before nightfall.

"This will be one of the best winters that our village has had," Magnus remarked as they neared their home. "Everyone's got a full larder, and those with a bit more can share if there're problems."

"Won't we have to watch out for late raiders from Thrull?" asked his brother. "Not everyone may have been as lucky."

"We're strong. They'd need a huge crew. That's risky this late in the season. Don't worry yourself. Now's the time to think of better things. Of future things."

That made Ivar smirk. "You mean thinking about Estrid."

At mention of the name, Magnus glanced around. "For me, Estrid. For you...anyone who might put up with you. Of course, that might take years, not just one season."

Before Ivar could retort, a young woman with long braided red hair and freckles dotting her face waved to Magnus

from the doorway of a building. The older brother's demeanor shifted. He straightened and puffed out his chest.

"It's not far," Magnus muttered to Ivar. "You head on and take care of everything. I'll be there shortly."

Ivar snorted. "Not likely." When his sibling gave him a short warning glance, Ivar grinned and veered off. He did not fault his brother for wanting to spend time with Estrid, certainly one of the prettiest women in Stjarnheim or any neighboring village. Ivar had a crush on her himself, but she saw only Magnus. The two would likely wed in the spring. Her family wanted that. Everyone liked and respected Magnus.

Normally, the marriage would have been arranged, but with both of Magnus's parents dead for some time and the brothers having no close relations, exceptions would be made. With winter looking to be a time of respite for a change, Ivar knew that formal discussions and activities would start soon.

True to Ivar's expectations, Magnus arrived home several hours later. By then, the animals were cared for, and Ivar set some food up for both of them. Well aware of how things were when Magnus was with Estrid, Ivar only finished arranging supper as his brother arrived.

"Old Bjorn wants to talk with me day after next," Magnus said as he sat down. With a spreading grin, he added, "It's going to happen."

"She's going to regret it," Ivar jested.

"Only in her choice of brothers-in-law." The elder sibling tore a piece of bread and ate it with some meat. "We'll finish with the buck tonight. Early in the morning, I want to head out to Baglaðr Valley. There should be good game there. I want to make a present of a buck to him. Show the family I can provide."

"They know that already. You've always been a top hunter, and you fish better than most."

Magnus shrugged. “Estrid said this would please her father. We want everything to be perfect.”

Ivar knew better than to argue on such a matter. With a sigh, he asked, “How soon in the morning do we leave?”

* * *

Unfortunately for Ivar, “morning” to his brother meant well before dawn. Magnus was determined to find just the right prize to present to his future father-in-law. The journey to the small, crooked valley took more than two hours, and only then because the pair knew the best paths. Though game aplenty could generally be found there, few from their village made the journey. The going was tough, and it was easy to get turned around. The valley also provided plenty of cover for the wildlife, which, for many, was just not worth the effort.

Magnus loved Baglaðr Valley and, because of that, so did Ivar. The elder sibling seemed to come more alive whenever they rode out there. Ivar suspected that, if Estrid had told Magnus that she wanted to live in Baglaðr, he would already be building them a home there.

As for Ivar, he appreciated the untouched areas within. He also enjoyed the challenge of hunting there. One had to be clever to bring down prey. Even then, Ivar always looked forward to the journey home. A tension tinged the forest air whenever he stalked beneath the branches. He was a hunter then, but he also could never shake the feeling of being hunted as well.

Spruce and alder trees greeted them as they reached the forest deep within the valley. A few pines also dotted the nearby vicinity. Many were incredibly old, as trees went. The valley acted as a protection to its interior. The wooded regions near Stjarnheim showed the evidence of generations of village life in the fact that most of the trees were clearly newer growth in comparison to those within Baglaðr Valley.

Although the temperatures had not dropped terribly yet this autumn, they were expected to do so soon. In contrast, their current location was a bit warmer and would stay that way. The Baglaðr Valley was shaped such that heat often got trapped within it. That made Ivar ponder even more just why no one from the village sought to make a home there.

He shrugged off minor thoughts as movement in the trees caught his attention. An owl fluttered off a moment later. Ivar lost interest, as he and his brother sought more substantial quarry.

Had it been other hunting trips, the pair would have set traps too, but the insistence of Magnus that they bring back something in time for his meeting with Estrid's father meant that, rather than wait for something to come to them, they had to pursue any hint of prey they found. Fortunately, Magnus was an excellent tracker as well, capable of spotting the slightest trace of an animal's recent passing.

The older sibling led them to a stream where they'd paused on previous journeys. More often than not, tracks from creatures drinking there dotted the ground. Sure enough, even before they dismounted, Magnus pointed at several prints close to the trickling water.

"Those look pretty fresh," he murmured. Turning back, he eyed the path they'd just ridden. "They look like they head out of the valley. We must've just missed the beast. Too bad."

Ivar studied the tracks as well. "Looks like it took a drink, then ran off fast."

"Probably frightened by another animal." Magnus peered deeper into the valley. "It's quiet. I wonder why. Hope there's no sudden weather headed our way."

"Sky looks clear—what's that?"

Ivar's brother squinted to make out whatever the younger sibling spotted above. After a moment they watched as a bird—far too high to be identified—fluttered madly about.

“I don’t see anything attacking it,” Magnus pointed out. “But it flies like something is.”

“Maybe it escaped from a bigger bird but was already wounded?”

“Maybe. It’s heading north now.”

The stricken avian headed away from them. Just before it left their sight, the bird abruptly spiraled toward the ground. It vanished among the distant trees, its ultimate fate unknown.

Ivar studied the sky but saw no hint of the predator that had wounded the bird. He wondered why, if it had hurt its prey so badly, it hadn’t pursued.

Unlike Ivar, Magnus lost interest in either the avian’s fate or the cause of it. “Come on. We’ll need every bit of daylight to find something worth bringing back.”

The pair mounted and rode on. A short time later, they approached a rabbit that bounded away the moment it noticed them. Despite the small animal hardly being what they’d come for, Magnus took it as a good sign.

“See that? We’re finally reaching a possible hunting spot. Keep an eye out for tracks.”

Magnus’s chatter was unusual. He sounded slightly anxious to Ivar, and the younger brother wondered if there was a growing concern that they *could* return empty-handed. The older brother wanted very much to prove that he could be an excellent provider.

They finally found some larger tracks, but the direction in which those led, and the lengthy spread of them, made the duo once more pause to ponder the situation.

“It was running as fast as possible,” Ivar murmured. “So was this other, smaller one with it. Strange direction. The slope gets really steep that way. See that?”

“Well, when you’ve got a cat, or something like that, on your tail, even the steepest hill looks a lot more inviting.” Magnus grunted. “Quit trying to find trouble.”

“All I want to know is if we follow these tracks.”

The other brother shook his head. “That gets too steep up higher. We’d have to lead our mounts up. They’d have trouble keeping balanced enough to hunt. Why bother for all that trouble?”

Bowing to Magnus’s common sense, Ivar pointed to the southwest. “What about heading that way? We’ve had good hunting there before. They don’t like heading out to that rocky stretch on the other side of the valley. There’s nothing much to eat beyond the forest there, but the area right at the edge has always been lush because of the other stream.”

The elder sibling considered. “That’s an idea. Let’s do that.”

They continued through the valley forest. However, while they heard the occasional bird cry, and even a couple sounds indicating other wildlife, those noises were distant and further north. In fact, Ivar believed that every animal sound appeared to originate behind them.

Magnus rode in silence, clearly not paying attention to those facts. The more Ivar glanced at his brother, the more he understood that Magnus was lost in thoughts of Estrid.

The terrified cries of several birds ahead made both men pull hard on the reins. The mounts gave no argument. Ivar’s horse started to turn about as if ready to go home, but he steered the beast back to their current direction.

“What was that?” Ivar muttered.

Before Magnus could reply, a flock of birds darted skyward. Although they headed in the general direction of Stjarnheim, they did so in an utterly chaotic way. Several collided with one another, and a couple dropped like stones.

Magnus stood in the saddle as he tried to get a better view. However, the avians were still too high up for any detail to be made out.

Ivar stared toward where the flock had risen from. “I don’t like this.”

Rubbing his chin, the other sibling replied, “Let’s just go see about the nearest part of that stream. If we

see anything wrong, we'll head back. Could be nothing. A small predator might've surprised those birds while they were drinking. Could've easily injured several before the flock got its wits and flew away." Magnus urged his mount on, the horse seeming, at least to Ivar's eye, not at all pleased to keep going. "That's probably all. Nothing to worry about."

It was evident to Ivar that Magnus's suggestion had limited merit to it, but the elder brother obviously still hoped to have a successful hunt. Magnus's mind was on offering a good trophy to Estrid's father, and nothing was going to change that notion.

Ivar, on the other hand, would have already been well on his way home.

As they neared the vicinity of the stream, a faint sound crackled. Ivar's brow furrowed. Even Magnus looked perturbed, although he made no suggestion about stopping.

They managed only a few more yards before their mounts came to a determined, simultaneous halt. Despite the riders' urging, the horses refused to proceed any further and, in fact, attempted to back up.

"Stop it! What're you doing?" Magnus demanded of his animal. He pointed toward the unseen stream. "That way!"

Ivar had no better luck with his steed, but he'd not resorted to fruitless shouting. Instead, he finally calmed his horse with soft patting and whispered words. Once his mount settled, Ivar dismounted.

Magnus did not look happy as he watched his brother proceed to tie the reins to a nearby tree. "You're not going to leave him there, are you? We've still got further to go, and I don't want us having to march back and forth."

"They don't want to go on. Either we keep fighting them and wasting time, or we take our weapons and go on foot...and maybe see why they don't want to move. Could be the same beast that panicked that flock."

The elder sibling mulled over Ivar's words. Grumbling, he also dismounted and tied his horse near the other one. The brothers readied their yew bows for use and, with caution, crept toward the stream.

The curious crackling amplified the closer they got, but the rising and falling landscape, plus the thick forest, made it impossible to see the source.

Something to the side caught Ivar's attention. He signaled Magnus that he intended to check it out. His brother nodded and continued ahead.

As Ivar approached the other area, he saw a sight that bothered him. The undergrowth had a peculiar pale look to it. A pale *blue* look, to be exact. Brow furrowed, he kept his arrow nocked even though he had no evidence of any danger ahead.

Then he saw it. A deer. But the beast glowed with an ice-blue color almost identical to the plant growth upon which it lay. Ivar wondered what sort of magical animal this was. It lay on its side, the head raised away from him as if the deer stared intently at something in the distance. At the moment, Ivar did not care one bit about what interested the beast, only that the deer itself existed.

An audible crack arose from under his boot. He swore and pulled the bowstring tight in expectation of the deer bolting.

Instead, the creature laid still.

Cocking his head, he studied his prize. The absolute motionlessness of the deer finally registered with him. The animal *had* to be dead.

Lowering his bow and releasing his hold on the string, Ivar moved forward and stretched a hand toward the still form. As he did, he also glanced at the ground between him and the body.

"Ivar!" A hand seized his shoulder and yanked him back. As he landed on the ground, Ivar looked into the

horrified face of Magnus. “You almost touched it!”

“What is it? What—”

Magnus dragged his brother to his feet and pulled him in the direction of the horses. “*Coldfire!* There’s coldfire spreading all over from the other side of the stream! It looks like it was moving slowly over there because there’s not much to touch, but it’s spreading over the stream and starting to cover the nearby bank!”

Ivar struggled to comprehend the word: “coldfire.” He knew he’d heard the word but had never paid much attention. Stories told by those from far north of Stjarnheim, where every sinister tale appeared to originate. To hear those things, Ivar—even when young—had always wondered why anyone would settle there.

He started to recall parts of the stories about coldfire. It burned almost anything but spread especially fast when touching organic material, such as plants...and animals. When it did, those things were not reduced to ash, but rather turned into pure *ice*.

Ice...

“Magnus! That deer I was looking at—”

“Must’ve been drinking at the stream just before we arrived! The coldfire caught it there, but it probably only got a touch of it before bolting. That would explain how it made it to where it did before it settled down already half ice.” The elder sibling craned his neck. “We should be able to see the horses by now! Where are they?”

Caught up in the thought of just how near he’d been to touching one of the areas overtaken by the coldfire, Ivar did not pay much mind to what his brother had just said. *Coldfire!* A dread such as he had never experienced swept through him.

Ivar suddenly remembered something else. “That bird... and the flock! They must’ve been at the stream, too!”

“Probably some of them landed right in the stream or, at least, right next to it. I saw several of them! Completely

turned to ice! Most looked as if they hadn't even realized what was happening. When enough of that touches a living thing, it spreads in the blink of an eye—The horses! They've run off!”

The younger sibling followed Magnus's gaze. Sure enough, both mounts were nowhere to be seen. The animals, apparently sensing the threat, had tugged on their reins until they freed themselves.

No. Not tugged. As the pair reached the location, they saw that the reins were still tied to the trees...but only the tattered remnants. It was clear to Ivar, at least, that the horses had both *chewed* them until they had freed themselves. There were even drops of blood on the ground from the frantic efforts. Ivar had never heard of a horse doing such a thing, but could see how panic could have led to the action.

His focus on the reins was disturbed by a rising sound—the same crackling that he and Magnus heard as they arrived. Ivar looked back.

The forest near the stream was on fire. *Coldfire*.

The blue flames raced up and over the undergrowth, then climbed the trees, spreading so rapidly that Ivar saw one medium-sized alder engulfed in little more than a breath. As coldfire covered the last of it, all color faded away from the tree. It now glistened in the light of day, glistened like crystal...or, to be accurate, like the ice from which it was now formed.

“Run!” urged Magnus, standing a few steps ahead of him.

The younger brother realized that his sibling only stood still because Ivar himself had stopped without noticing, so caught up by the awful vision. Ivar started running again, which prompted Magnus to also move.

They scrambled over the uneven landscape. Both stumbled more than once, Ivar slipping so badly that he slid several yards back. That gave him a much-too-near glimpse of the coldfire's horrific progress.

Magnus gave him a hand, and the two pushed on. They arrived at the edge of the valley, where the forest ended and the rocky ground ahead offered little, if anything, for the coldfire to catch on.

At that point, both took a deep breath. Behind them, the crackling continued, but at a much fainter level. The two stared.

“It’ll slow from here on,” Magnus murmured. “It’s as the stories say. Living stuff. Life...that fuels it.”

“How did something like that ever come to exist?”

Ivar’s brother shrugged. “Magic. Demons. Something left behind by some god? Who really cares? There’s supposed to be a way to fend it off. Really hot fire, I think, but the elders will know. We can seal it off if we act quickly enough.” He turned in the direction of home. “Come on. We’ve got a long way to go.”

They pressed on, images of the coldfire spurring them forward as their lungs burned with the effort. Darkness fell. With the sky dimming, a new reminder of the terror that they had fled remained with them. Any glance back at the valley revealed the distant flickering blue glow of coldfire. Ivar could not help thinking that, if he had not known what caused the blue illumination there, it would have been beautiful. Instead, it chilled him in a way that made the cool weather of autumn actually feel quite warm.

Being on foot had forced the duo to take a somewhat different route home. With the horses, they’d taken hillier trails, but neither had the will to attempt those on foot after the arduous trek. Therefore, they went around the hills, which meant a longer, but simpler, path home.

Despite everything happening, they paused for breath several times before reaching Stjarnheim. Magnus squinted as he sought to make out any lights from the town.

“Let it get just a little darker before you worry,” Ivar

urged. "You know that from this direction you won't see much."

"I just want to—wait! There's some lights. Good."

Glad that his brother was satisfied for the moment, Ivar straightened. "Let's finish, then. I'm cold, hungry, and thirsty."

"And I'm not?"

With home so near, they found renewed strength. Their pace picked up. The flickering lights of Stjarnheim beckoned them.

The last vestiges of daylight slipped away. As they did, Ivar grew troubled. The torchlight looked a little different now. It gave a different cast to Stjarnheim than he recalled.

Next to him, Magnus let out a gasp and ran toward the village. Ivar kept up as best he could, the same terrifying realization dawning on him.

The flickering flames from Stjarnheim had a blue tint to them.

Ivar's legs screamed for him to slow down, but the sight of his brother forging ahead kept him going. He knew why Magnus ran as he did; he feared for Estrid.

As they reached the outskirts, it became clear that one side of the village had suffered greater damage than the other. Ivar's hopes rose; Estrid and her family lived in the part barely touched thus far.

Magnus ran straight for her home. He seemed to Ivar to be focused on nothing else. Ivar, meanwhile, could not help glancing this way and that as the full horror of what happened displayed itself.

The eastern half of Stjarnheim looked aglow as coldfire blossomed from everything. Some buildings had already become fully engulfed, their organic parts proving a ready meal for the incessant flames. Once again, Ivar marveled how everything he saw—now turned to actual ice—glittered in a monstrously beautiful way.

Then his eyes fixed on something large lying flat near one of the buildings. Ivar took a step toward it...only to recoil when he saw that it was a man. A man who was now made entirely of ice.

He belatedly noticed another, tinier form not far from the man. In the light of the flames, Ivar finally identified it as a *bird*. In fact, what he could see of it made it appear similar in size to those of the frantic flock that passed overhead in the forest.

A new shiver ran through him: the stricken birds flew in the general direction of Stjarnheim. A few of them survived long enough to succumb to the coldfire over his village...and, in doing so, had brought coldfire to his people.

Even as he pondered the horror, the insidious flames shot closer, feeding on even what bits of organic matter that they could find on the soil. That urged Ivar to go on after Magnus.

He did not have to go far. While the western half of the village had appeared to be far less endangered, that had only hidden the terrible truth. Before the brothers lay—or even in a couple of cases *stood*—several victims forever frozen as ice. Ivar recognized most...friends or, at least, faces he knew well, even if only in passing.

Magnus stared down at a sprawled figure. Ivar feared that he knew who it was even before joining his sibling. However, to his surprise, it was *not* Estrid.

“They must’ve been running,” Magnus murmured. “She has to be here somewhere. She would’ve been with him...with her father.”

Indeed, it was Estrid’s father laying before them, his expression of horror caught fully in death. With the center of evening activity in Stjarnheim situated mainly in the eastern part of the village, it made sense to Ivar that many, such as Estrid’s father, would have been there when danger had struck. The younger brother could only assume

that he and others had accidentally touched something already tainted by coldfire...likely the building in which they had gathered. Ivar supposed that, in panic, they'd raced toward the "safer" part of Stjarnheim.

"We haven't seen many bodies," Ivar reminded Magnus as the younger man stepped past his brother. "I bet most fled west and kept going. If we travel that way, we might catch up. They can't be that far ahead!"

"Yes," Magnus exhaled. "We need food, though. These homes here haven't been touched. Take the one on the left and I'll take the one on the right. Any food that you can carry, bring it. Estrid and the others might need it too."

With a nod, Ivar departed for the nearest building. He was glad that his sibling could concentrate on his beloved. Finding Estrid would keep Magnus focused on the journey from Stjarnheim.

As the elder brother suggested, Ivar found abandoned food. He collected what would last best, plus found a water pouch that they could fill at a river west of the village. Ivar took a quick look for anything that could start a very hot fire but found nothing.

He returned to the street to discover Magnus already back. His brother had his arms wrapped around himself and stared at Ivar as the latter approached.

"I found a fair amount. Nothing on your side?"

"I found something." Magnus stared off into the night sky.

"Good...where is it?"

Ivar's brother swallowed. "In the house. With two others. She...she must've crawled in there with them trying to find a way to warm themselves enough, although that wouldn't have worked."

"What are you talking about?"

Magnus kept his arms as they were. He looked into his brother's eyes. "Estrid. She looked so frightened. Almost like a child. I wanted to hold her."

“You *found* her? You mean that she—”

“She must’ve only had a flicker of coldfire on her when she fled with the rest. It spreads so quickly. She had a fur blanket in one hand. Wrapping herself in it.” Magnus turned back to Ivar. “I just wanted to comfort her.”

Ivar glanced east and noticed that the coldfire approached faster than before. Afraid Magnus might be too distraught to live, the younger brother approached. “We’ll mourn her. And the rest. We just need to—”

Magnus retreated from him. He shook his head. “I told you...I just wanted to comfort her.”

He unwrapped his arms and revealed the faint but distinct blue flicker of coldfire at his waist. Even as Ivar stared aghast, it slowly, but relentlessly, spread in every direction.

“I pulled back at the last moment,” the elder sibling went on, his voice starting to develop a raspy quality. “I touched *something*. I must have.”

“Magnus!” Ivar stretched a hand to him.

The larger man dropped to one knee. “Run. I’m sorry. Run. Don’t look back.”

The fire had already covered his chest and hips as well now. Magnus groaned as his legs buckled. Ivar gaped and, despite aware of the fate he would suffer if he touched his brother, still had to fight the urge to do so.

Gritting his teeth as the flames reached his shoulders and encroached on his throat, Magnus yelled, “Go!”

Ivar ran, dropping the supplies he’d found. He heard Magnus moan...and then the moan simply cut off.

Despite not wanting to do so, Ivar glanced over his shoulder. There, he beheld Stjarnheim, now a monstrously beautiful vision in blue flames.

And there was his brother, outlined by the flames. A glistening figure in ice. Then he saw the form move. But not like it was alive. But that the blue flames were moving it.

Ivar ran. He ran, no longer concerned whether he

AUTUMN CHILL

would find other survivors of Stjarnheim. He ran, the nightmarish image of his brother and his home seared into his mind.

He ran, wondering if there was any true point to running at all.

COLD TO THE TOUCH

Even their worst enemies could not truthfully claim that any of the Valikan clans could be considered cowardly. The summer raids to the south—mainly targeting areas of the Bürach Empire—ever included acts of daring and courage. The Valikan did not shirk from battle.

Yet, as winter closed over the northlands, their villages sealed themselves off, even from one another. Winter was not just considered the dark time due to little daylight for those months...but for what *lurked* in that darkness.

What *hungered* in that darkness.

The past couple of winters proved that sinister forces were on the rise. While tales in the south spoke of the Beast and the evils it left in its wake, in the northlands there were supernatural fiends against which the hardy Valikans were forced to ward their homes. Some lived more in legend than in fact, such as the undead dragon, Gegazol, but other evils treaded the lands and left very real legacies of blood and worse in their wake.

Thus, it was that the village of Helmskeld did as it always had in times past. The villagers built a perimeter of protection, ever guarded by wary fighters and marked by various runes and wards said to keep away everything short of Gegazol itself. Whether that was true, no one could honestly say, but most felt better at least claiming it.

The first month of winter had already passed, marked by nothing out of the ordinary. However, the jarl—Vidar Geirsen—knew this was about the time sentries would start to grow lax in their duties, even if only for a few moments. Therefore, he made a point of visiting the guards more often, checking with each and reminding them that the scary stories they'd heard as children were very often based in fact.

At a little over forty summers, he knew the younger warriors already considered him one of the elders...a term, in this instance, that meant too old to truly be listened to. They obeyed orders, of course, but despite not having experienced nearly as much as the lanky Vidar, they nonetheless felt they knew far more about the world as it now was than *he* did.

Still, his abrupt appearance had the effect he desired; that is, stirring the sentries to alertness.

One of the last guards Vidar checked, fire-haired Svend Olafssen, faced the direction of the next nearest village, Karlsbekkr. Svend had blood kin in Karlsbekkr—including a grandmother on his mother's side, Vidar believed—and volunteered to take that guard spot. Svend would visit his kin each spring, even sporting a long mustache like the people there instead of the full beard that Vidar and most of the adult men of his own village did. The jarl did not care the reason anyone wanted this post or that, so long as they remained alert. If someone like Svend had a personal reason that might keep him more alert, then the village leader saw no reason to deny the request.

COLD TO THE TOUCH

“All well, lad?” Vidar asked Svend. The younger fighter leaned on his spear, but the jarl noted no weariness or distraction.

“Yes, jarl,” the sentry replied, straightening as he spoke. “Same as every other night.”

“It only takes one night. Pray that it never comes.”

Svend looked properly chastened. “Sorry, jarl. I was thinking of my grandmother. She wasn’t well when I visited. Wish it didn’t have to be spring before I could go see her again. Karlsbekkr isn’t that far. I could be there and back before nightfall, if I left at first light...but I know not to try, if you’re wondering.”

“There’s hardly enough day this time of year for the sun to even show itself. You’d risk yourself just to reach Karlsbekkr.” Vidar shook his head. “My order stands. I told Thorin Helvig the same yesterday. Twice. I trust I won’t have to repeat myself to you, lad.”

While Svend wanted to see kin, hefty Thorin Helvig had a more monetary reason. Winter meant a complete stop to his trading. Never more than an average warrior, Thorin knew instead how to get the best deal in a trade. During the other seasons, he traveled to nearby villages, not only getting items for himself, but procuring things which he knew people back home needed. As jarl, Vidar had the most wealth, but the trader was a close second. Even the village leader knew better than to bargain with the man.

Thorin hated the winter. Two years prior, he’d snuck out to do some trading with Karlsbekkr. He returned safely but faced Vidar’s wrath. Thorin procured items of value to both the jarl and Helmskeld, which is the only reason he escaped punishment. Still, Vidar warned him that another such attempt would be met with severe penalties, and the trader behaved the following winter. This year, though, it was obvious that Thorin wanted to repeat his escapade.

Thinking of the man, the jarl frowned. The more he thought about it, the more he could not recall seeing Thorin in this day. That could mean nothing, but Vidar grew concerned. "Svend, have you seen anything of Thorin lately?"

The young guard shrugged. "Not since yesterday myself. I don't usually look for him though."

Vidar nodded. Unless someone needed something from him, most in the village spent little time with the trader. "Well, keep a sharp eye out and stay awake, all right?"

"I will."

Patting Svend on the shoulder, the jarl headed into the village. Although he was certain he had nothing to be concerned about, Vidar still wanted to make certain about Thorin.

Other villagers greeted their jarl as he hurried along, but the only one with whom he stopped for conversation was the towering Olaf, who often served as the jarl's right hand. The huge Valikan clearly saw that something troubled Vidar.

When told it involved Thorin, Olaf grunted. "Of course. You want me to check?"

"I want to see for myself. You come along, though, in case he needs to be reminded."

With Olaf a respectful step behind, the jarl made his way to the trader's dwelling. The structure was dark. Not a good sign.

"Check for horses," Vidar ordered. "I'll look inside."

The other Valikan did as ordered while Vidar entered and studied the interior. There was no hint that Thorin had been home for some time. The leader stepped out just in time to see Olaf returning.

"Both horses gone. Damned fool's ridden off. Probably one horse is packed with goods."

Vidar pondered. "Must've left just before dawn."

"A guard should've seen him, my jarl."

"Thorin's cunning. He probably knew who'd be easiest

to distract. Or bribe. But the sentries tend to be watching outside, not inside.” After a moment, the jarl added, “Probably went for Karlsbekkr. Closest and safest trek. I should have his head for this.”

Olaf gave him a grim smile. “You want I should drag him to you when he returns?”

“We’ll have to handle it delicately. He’ll likely have necessary goods. There’s no arguing he does well at his work. Still, I’ll think up a good punishment for him.”

“I wouldn’t entirely put aside the notion of removing his head,” the huge Valikan remarked, his tone and expression indicating he was half-serious.

Before Vidar could reply, a horn sounded near Svend’s post. The jarl and Olaf rushed there, several other armed men along with them.

They found Svend standing beyond the village’s boundaries, his weapon gripped tightly while he peered into the night. The horn he’d sounded lay a few steps behind him.

“What is it? What did you see?” the jarl demanded.

Confronted by his leader, Svend looked sheepish. “I thought I saw...I probably imagined it. A light.”

“A light?” Vidar repeated as he glanced past.

“A...flickering *blue* light. It was there for a moment... and then it wasn’t.”

“Never heard of such a thing,” Olaf commented, eyeing the guard dubiously.

The description reminded Vidar of something, but he did not mention it. If it had been that thing, it hardly could have appeared and then disappeared, even taking into account the winding, wooded landscape surrounding Helmskeld. Rather than start a panic over something he believed it was not, the jarl chose to question Svend further.

“You were a bit distracted when I was here before, lad. You sure you didn’t nod off for just a second and dream something was there?”

As expected, Svend could not deny the suggestion. “No...my jarl. I...I can’t be sure.”

Vidar did not want to shame the young warrior any more. “It’s all right. Consider this the lesson you needed to learn to stay alert.” He looked at the others. “And don’t any of you deny that you’ve been in a similar position. What matters is we learn to do better. Isn’t that right, Svend?”

Trying to look as alert as possible, the guard snapped, “Yes, my jarl!”

“Good.” To the rest, he ordered, “Return to your homes. You other sentries, best get back to your *own* posts.”

As everyone obeyed, Vidar focused on Svend one last time. “You’ve learned now, right?”

“Yes, my jarl.”

“Good. I—” Vidar hesitated as something out in the night caught his eye. It was there...and then, it was not.

It *looked* to him like a flickering blue light.

In a low voice he asked, “Svend, was what you saw over in that direction?”

Puzzled, the guard stared where his leader had pointed. “No.” He gestured a different direction. “Over that way, like I said earlier.”

Olaf joined the jarl. “You saw the same thing?”

“I thought I...it was probably nothing. I’ve been up for a long while myself—”

He stiffened as he saw the light again. This time, however, it appeared in an area that did not match either of the previous sightings.

Olaf gripped his forearm, muttering, “I saw that, too!”

Svend studied the place in question, although he evidently had not seen what the two had.

Considering how the land lay on this side of the village, Vidar remarked, “There’s a lot of places where the land dips down for some distance. If someone was traveling

through there and had a light with them, they'd vanish from view for a while."

"But those spots where the light's been seen are pretty far apart," the big man countered.

"Could be more than one."

"One *what*?"

The jarl shrugged. "That's the question. The light...I didn't want to say such in front of the rest—and you'd better keep quiet about what I'm about to say, Svend—but it reminded me of what I've heard about *coldfire*."

"I've heard some of those tales too." Olaf rubbed his chin. "Still, that stuff is supposed to be like actual fire. It wouldn't keep appearing and disappearing like that. This is more what you just said...that someone or some party is moving toward us."

A startled scream made the three of them whirl toward the village interior.

"Stay here, but be wary and keep that horn by you!" Vidar commanded to Svend. As the guard nodded, the jarl and Olaf rushed toward the cry's origin.

Others gathered near one of the longhouses on the northern edge of the village. They stared down at something that even Olaf could not see yet.

"Make way for the jarl!" the towering Valikan roared. He shoved a few slow-moving villagers to the side. "Make way!"

The path at last opened. Vidar got a good look at what so unsettled his people.

The corpse of a woman—very likely the same woman who had been screaming a few moments before—lay sprawled facedown. Vidar believed she was Gertrud, wife of the smith. The woman had the general look of Gertrud from behind, and Vidar thought her clothes matched some he'd seen the smith's spouse wear.

But the knowledge of the dead woman's identity paled beside what had slain her. Vidar shook as he, along with

the rest, beheld the gruesome blue flames completing their envelopment of her body,

Coldfire.

All the rumors had placed the threat further north and east. Actual reports of coldfire in the vicinity never appeared here. Yet, the jarl understood that this was definitely what, not just Svend, but both older men witnessed.

Gertrud's form flickered icy blue. Fortunately for everyone else, no hints of the coldfire's spread could be seen. Indeed, she had fallen in a fortunate spot, as far as the jarl was concerned, for the area was barren of anything flammable. The coldfire had nowhere to infect.

Still, the jarl had two immediate concerns. He eyed a pair of men holding torches. "You! Both of you! A strong fire can take care of this. See if your torches are enough."

Together they touched the coldfire-shrouded body with the torches. While there seemed to be some effect, Vidar realized they needed a more intense heat.

Olaf leaned toward him, whispering, "Have the two guard the body so no fool touches it. I've got some ideas how to make things burn hotter."

Trusting Olaf's wisdom, the jarl gave the command, ordering everyone else away. "Until we know how this coldfire got here, I want people inside." He pointed at three guards. "You lot. Search the northern areas for any sign of this stuff. Don't approach it if you see signs. I'll take a look myself beyond this longhouse. Go!"

With everyone save for the two torchbearers departing, Vidar headed to the longhouse. The dead woman's position indicated she'd come from there, and the jarl did not want to demand from anyone what he was unwilling to demand of himself.

As he rounded the building, Vidar wondered where the smith could be. Had the man not missed his wife?

COLD TO THE TOUCH

Someone else was missing, he discovered a moment later. The man set to guard this particular area was out of sight. The jarl suspected this might be where the coldfire entered Helmskeld, but how it traveled without first setting ablaze the landscape puzzled him.

More screams arose from within the village. Vidar's mind went blank as he rushed back toward the noises.

To his horror, the cries came from the two men left to guard the body. One man stood doubled over. The other fell to his knees.

Coldfire enveloped both of them.

Their torches lay next to them, guttering weakly. Vidar seized one and pressed it against the nearest man. Better some burns from true fire than a fate that awaited them otherwise. However, as before, the torch proved insufficient. Though the coldfire slowed where the torch burned the guard, it did not recede.

Olaf and others returned, the large Valikan carrying a small bucket. Hefting it, he tossed the contents at the man whom the jarl sought to save.

The inky contents—pitch, Vidar supposed—splattered the victim. The flames from the torch fed on them...but too late. As Vidar and the rest watched helplessly, the man stiffened and literally froze, his entire body turning to blue ice. His companion had already succumbed, both men now monstrous memorials to the fiendish power of the coldfire.

“What happened?” demanded the jarl. “Did anyone see?”

“Must've touched the body,” Olaf suggested.

Mention of the corpse stirred a shocking realization in the village leader. He looked around. “Where is the body?”

There was no trace of the smith's wife. The only two witnesses would never be able to tell anyone what had taken place.

Olaf knelt near the spot. “There're footprints...but... I'm mistaken.”

“What?”

The other man rose. “Looks like they started right where she lay.” He pointed to the west. “Then they steer toward those buildings. The ground’s too hard to tell much after a few steps though.”

“No one could have carried her away,” Vidar muttered. “That would have meant a swift and terrible death.” He surveyed the area once more. “Where could the corpse be?”

With a grunt, Olaf grabbed the bucket. “I’d better see about getting a good strong fire going.” He looked over his shoulder at the assembled crowd. “Whoever knows their families best, go tell them what’s happened.”

Deciding that Olaf had things in hand, the jarl pointed at four armed men. “You lot come with me.” He thought for a second, then pointed in the direction Olaf indicated. “We’ll check that way.”

As he led the party, Vidar pondered all he’d heard about coldfire. Nothing in his recollections included the bodies reaching any stage where someone could carry them. The scene made no sense...just as the arrival of the coldfire itself in the vicinity of Helmskeld did not.

From within the longhouse ahead came a faint blue flicker.

Vidar immediately signaled a halt. If coldfire lurked within, they’d need to be very careful. That it appeared to not be spreading with abandon perplexed the jarl, but he was not about to be ungrateful. Still, with his followers in tow, he cautiously approached the building.

The flicker disappeared immediately after being spotted. Vidar opened the front door a crack and peered inside. Nothing seemed out of place. Scanning again, he noticed a back entrance standing ajar. That did not explain the vanishing coldfire. He summoned two of the guards and ordered them to circle from opposite sides and meet with him and the others by the rear opening.

COLD TO THE TOUCH

The jarl entered. There was no livestock in this longhouse, but the area to his left was designed to hold such. He had one man look there while he and the remaining guard searched the opposite end.

Shouts and commotion came from outside. Silently swearing to himself, he vowed to reach the spot in question before the truth had a chance to flit away. Vidar barged past the guard with him and leapt out the back entrance.

A part of him wished he hadn't. A short distance from the jarl stood a horrific image that Vidar did not want to accept as possible, even though he couldn't deny his eyes.

The smith's wife, her body crackling with ice-blue coldfire, stood with hands stretched toward the understandably frightened warrior sent around the building by their leader. The guard had her sword stretched forward as far as her arm would permit, doing her best to keep the slack-jawed corpse at a distance.

Unfortunately, neither she nor the jarl noticed the *second* animated corpse until it emerged from a smaller building just beyond the longhouse.

"Beware!" Vidar shouted.

The guard turned...and the blank-eyed figure seized her arm. The coldfire spread from the grasping fingers to the fighter's wrist. She tried to struggle free, but, in focusing on the threat, she had opened herself to attack by the smith's wife. She grasped her with both hands, which caused coldfire to instantly spread.

Horns blared elsewhere. Someone screamed. Vidar took one last glance at the hapless sentry and saw there was no hope for her. In addition, the jarl also noticed that the *second* undead was none other than the missing smith. The two had evidently been together after all. Even in death.

More horns sounded and further shouts warned him that something threatened the whole village. Vidar waved for the remaining guards to join him as he raced to find out just what.

He returned to the site where the woman's body had been discovered. Olaf furiously worked to fashion a blazing campfire in the middle of Helmskeld. The two frozen sentries remained as they were, which both pleased and confused Vidar. Why did these two stay as statues while the smith and his wife had risen to become some awful undead, the likes of which the jarl had never heard?

Other villagers scurried around as if caught between staying and fleeing into the night. In the height of winter, rushing into the night without a plan did not offer much chance of survival, even for a hardy Valikan. That did not appear to be a consideration for those he witnessed running.

One horn blared over and over. Vidar at last recognized it as coming from where he'd left Svend.

Olaf looked up from his task. Vidar joined him, breathlessly informing the large man of the hideous discoveries. Olaf took the news in his usual stoic manner, then replied, "I'll build up the fire. We can use it to stave off the coldfire and take care of those two...things."

Vidar doubted it would be so simple, but he knew that the fire was of the utmost importance. He gestured to one of the guards watching the chaos around them. "Help him, and watch out for those undead. Burn them if they come near."

With that order given, the jarl led the way to Svend's position. It bothered him that he no longer heard the horn—or *any* horn—and tried not to think what that might mean.

Before he could reach the spot, an elderly woman wearing a horrified expression rushed to him from his right. She seized his arm. "My son! Help my Erik! It came from nowhere! I swear! It touched him."

Although the jarl knew the woman's son, he also understood he could give only one answer. Moving the woman aside, Vidar firmly told her, "I can do nothing for him. Head to the center, where the fire is being built. Do it!"

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He pushed past her, regretting his harsh words...but also knowing that they were true. What mattered now was Helmskeld as a whole. Everyone was in danger.

As Vidar neared the edge of the village, he saw more people fleeing in panic. Several carried bundles containing treasured belongings. Some rode mounts, a foolish act at this time of the night, with the winter-spawned monsters prowling the darkness.

“Get back here!” the jarl shouted. “It’s certain death to rush out into the night!”

They did not listen. Vidar gritted his teeth.

And then, stepping beyond the last buildings, he beheld the crouched, icy body of Svend, who had one arm raised as if seeking to ward off an attacker from his side. The sight shook Vidar.

But not as much as the vision of at least *twoscore* shambling figures—their bodies ablaze in ice-blue fire—converging on Helmskeld from the direction of Karlsbekkr. The zombies trudged along in straight lines. Vidar understood that their numbers had been hidden for so long by the sloping landscape. However, behind them blazed areas he could see had been affected by coldfire...no doubt spread by the undead. He could also appreciate why so many of the villagers chose flight. Enough of them would have recognized the threat of an undead engulfed in coldfire to wonder how they could be stopped.

They were still a short distance from the actual village. The jarl stepped past the unfortunate Svend and eyed the ground. If Olaf had done his work, there still existed a chance to stop the zombies. A line of intense fire—

A startled yelp from one of the nearby warriors caused Vidar to spin in time to see the horrible image of Svend, his face with the same blank unblinking eyes and slack mouth, gripping the unfortunate guard’s shoulder. The coldfire spread from the shoulder and, not only down the arm, but

up the throat and to the head. The man's body twitched wildly, even as his head—his nightmarish expression seared into the jarl's mind—turned entirely to ice.

Vidar drew his sword and quickly thrust through the victim's midsection, hoping that, by doing so, he somehow gave the man some relief. And to stop the unfortunate transformation into undeath. However, the blow also served to turn Svend's interest toward him.

"Back into Helmskeld!" he shouted to the remaining guards.

They fled between the buildings, with Vidar certain of only one thing...he needed Olaf to be ready or else escape into the dread night would be all that remained for everyone.

"Look out!" cried a warrior with him.

The warning saved the jarl, but not the woman who had given it. Even though she attempted to twist out of reach, she did not do so sufficiently. The grasping undead—young Erik, Vidar saw—managed to get a hold on the nearest arm. The zombie pulled the Valikan to him, embracing the victim.

Coldfire coursed over the guard's torso. With not even a torch—useless as the jarl knew it would have been—Vidar could only act as he had previously. He stabbed the guard through the back, making certain that it went deep enough to be mortal.

Withdrawing the blade, Vidar wasted no time seeing what would happen next. He assumed that, as with Svend, the animated corpse of the woman's son would follow.

Another victim lay just ahead. As Vidar steered around the body, he noted no signs that it might be about to rise. Even as he glanced back at it, the corpse continued to lay still. What, he wondered, caused some of the victims to rise as these fiery zombies while others did not?

For the first time, the jarl noticed coldfire spreading on some of the buildings. Most affected spots seemed at waist level or a little higher, and he could not help thinking that,

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perhaps, each had been started by an undead touching the wood with a hand.

A man and a woman astride a single horse raced past him, the outright fear in their expressions indicating why they nearly ran him down without noticing. He started to yell at them to come back when another undead—the smith's wife—stepped into the path.

The horse shrieked and reared, tossing its riders. They hit the ground hard, the woman not moving afterward and the man trying hard to push himself up but failing.

Their mount rushed on without them, one leg burning with coldfire. The zombie moved on, touching the man.

Vidar took a step to help, but a second undead appeared...the smith himself. He seized hold of the unconscious woman.

The jarl cursed. He could help neither and could not even get near enough to slay them. Instead, with a heavy heart, Vidar pushed ahead and tried not to register the brief screams.

To his relief, he saw that the fire rose high. Through the furious flames, he made out the crouching silhouette of Olaf.

Then, from the longhouse nearest the big warrior, the jarl beheld another undead relentlessly approaching the larger Valikan. Although at first glance, it resembled the others, something about its movements made Vidar feel as if it walked with more purpose...more actual intent.

Even as that point played in his thoughts, Vidar rushed to meet the fiendish creature. At the same time, he shouted a warning to Olaf, who, intent on his task, did not notice the danger.

The undead, however, certainly noticed the newcomer closing on it and turned with a hand outstretched toward Vidar. Although the mouth hung like those of the zombies the jarl had already faced, and the eyes were blank, the

Valikan yet could not help feeling that this shambling horror sensed him differently than the rest. Vidar suspected that he'd found the cause of the corpses that had risen. Somehow, this fiend—this *ghoul*—differed. The coldfire had stirred something darker within the animated body.

Up close, there was also something familiar about this undead. A side of the face had been ripped away—possibly just before death—but, at last, Vidar recognized who this had once been.

“Thorin, you bastard,” the jarl growled. “You probably steered them here in the process of dying.” Whether that was the actual case, he had no way of knowing, but Vidar’s anger at the trader momentarily passed beyond sense. He wanted to blame someone for all that so quickly happened to Helmskeld. Thorin made a very good target.

Not even screams from elsewhere distracted Vidar’s rage. He could not concern himself with them. He thrust at the undead. The beast grasped at the coming blade. Vidar struck a weak blow and pulled the blade back. Futile slashes would do nothing. Only fire would save him.

“Olaf!” Vidar shouted. “I need fire now!”

No response. A chill coursed through him that had nothing to do with winter. Vidar slashed again at the moving corpse, then shifted position to get closer to Olaf and the fire.

There was the large warrior...crouched, but not at work on the blazing bonfire. The blaze he'd built had prevented Vidar from seeing the truth: that Olaf now blazed himself, with flames of icy blue. There was no sign of the sentry that had been ordered to help. The jarl assumed the man had fled, likely to find his family. Whatever the reason, Olaf had clearly been taken by surprise. He crouched, but his frozen features indicated pure agony.

A further fury engulfed Vidar. He glanced down at a piece of wood emerging from Olaf’s fire. A ready torch. Olaf had

planned the need to quickly use the hot fire. Now, the jarl hoped that the other's sacrifice would prove worth something.

What had once been Thorin closed on him as he lunged for the torch. Vidar felt certain the ghoul moved more swiftly than the other undead. A flaming hand reached for him, but Vidar batted it away with the sword while grasping the torch. He grunted from the heat but retained his grip.

With the undead looming over him, the jarl thrust the fiery torch at its awful face. Vidar noticed a black, sticky substance on the other end of the torch. Dragon's fire! Olaf coated the wood to make the flames burn hotter and more quickly.

An awful hiss rose as the torch *melted* Thorin's distorted face. The arms swung wildly, managing to knock the wood from Vidar's hand. The Valikan quickly stepped back, his sword at the ready.

The undead, its head nearly gone, stumbled. Vidar used the moment to shove the fiend into the main fire.

As it fell into the blaze, the body sizzled and crackled. It seeped into a liquid mass that doused a good portion of Olaf's work. Still, more than enough of the blaze remained to destroy the creature.

Vidar bent over, gasping for breath. He had a plan. Helmskeld might fall for a time, but he could still rally the survivors. Olaf's blaze proved that the Valikan people had a strong weapon to face the coldfire fiends. Once they were cleared out, his people could rebuild again. There was nothing that a Valikan clan could not do when determined enough...as Olaf had proven, even in death.

"I honor you, my friend," the jarl muttered as he straightened. "Would that you could stand beside me now and see us retake our home." He turned to raise his sword in salute to the fallen warrior.

A cold hand seized the back of his neck. Vidar's jumbled thoughts registered that Olaf's remains were no longer where they'd been.

TALES OF VALIKA

Screaming from the chilling agony spreading over his neck, Vidar threw himself forward. As he fought to keep standing, he looked back.

Mouth hanging and eyes unseeing, Olaf, his icy body still aflame with coldfire, trudged toward him. Vidar staggered away, easily outdistancing the zombie, but unable to escape the horrific cold flowing through his own body. It grew harder to think. A part of Vidar focused on the blaze and the memory that it would be hot enough to destroy the coldfire. That it would burn flesh as well was not a consideration.

He fell face down a couple of feet from the flames. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Olaf move on, no longer interested in someone so close to death. Now there would be only endless walking for the other Valikan, the walking and the finding of other victims.

As his mind froze over, Vidar prayed for one thing. To die, as painful as that was. To only die...and not begin the endless walk himself.

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TALES OF VALIKA

AN ANTHOLOGY OF DARK FANTASY STORIES

BY RICHARD A. KNAAK

Dead & Forgotten

Legacy. Every Valikan dreams of what theirs may be. But the merciless homeland of the Valikan Clans rarely gives folk what they desire. Coldfire spreads and consumes like an inferno; its victims are only remembered as the withered ghouls they've turned into. Glory and fame in the summer raids are much sought prizes. Yet the journey over frigid seas and through forbidding forests is more perilous than plundering a village itself. Many who sail south never return or have their name ever whispered again.

Collected here are four tales which otherwise may never have been told. These pages are a warning to those who wish to adventure in Valika and a source of inspiration for anyone eager to weave those stories.

These are the Tales of Valika, whose legacy is left to those brave enough to endure its dangers.



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