

THE WOMAN AND THE RAVEN

*The Woman
and
The Raven*

Marlene vor der Hake

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The Storyteller

*Under a grass-roof live I
At the icy end of the sea
Neither young nor old
A smith of swords and songs
Turning moss and stones
I look for long forgotten wisdom
At the roots of trees and mountains
And in the deeps of darkness
Between stars*

A Chance Meeting

A long, long time ago when trolls and elves still roamed the earth there lived a woman at the far end of the sea where snow-capped glaciers and freezing rivers meet the ice floes dancing on the waves. To find her turf-thatched house a wanderer had to follow the eastern fjords inland, wading through rapid rivers in summer or trusting to the treacherous ice in winter; stumbling over slippery stones on muddy tracks, with weary feet, hugging the weather-beaten mountain ranges south of the lake, where an unnamed monster was sleeping in the deeps. Ever upward led the path past pads of wild thyme, over tricky crevices overgrown with dark moss, and high cliffs splattered with bright lichen while chill, wet storms bit into ears and fingers, or frosty fog clung to limbs like shrouds of ghosts. There was no hope of a friendly word or a warm fire along the way. Too rarely would a lost lamb stray that far into the wilderness for a shepherd to risk the journey. Even the elves in those days no longer revealed themselves to mortals and remained concealed in their great fortresses in the mountains of which only rumor and legend spoke. The likeliest chance-meeting the highlands offered to any one brave or naïve enough to venture into the hinterland of the eastern fjords was the last creature one would like

to meet: a troll. It was true; most of the ugly mountain-trolls with their thick, pimply noses and matted hair, lived way up north where cattle and men were more numerous to stuff their ample bellies. Yet, in long, harsh winters, when supplies dried up, some of them galumphed across the frozen passes where the glaciers shook under their weight and chunks of ice broke loose under their giant feet careening down the mountainsides to look for prey nearer the ports. Clumsy they were, but quick on the hunt; and the trolls did not care if a seal or a man was on the menu as long as they got their supper. No, you did not want to meet them. However, most of the time, apart from noisy flocks of geese in summer or a few snow buntings in winter when the highlands were white, the land lay deserted under the ever-changing sky.

The year was coming to an end. Fast-flying clouds of rose and apricot chased the low sun over the western peaks; snowstorms ruffled lonely shrubs; the foxes donned their winter coats; sheep were sheltered; it was getting time for dried fish, smoked lamb and paper-thin bread. The fires never went out.

Smoke also rose from the lonely house in the highlands. A crackling fire filled the room with the scent of birch and herbs, and kept it cozy and warm. Still, had any guest ventured into the house he would have found no place to sit down at the table for a glass of golden wine and a bite of juicy meat. For the table and the chair and all the walls of the house were covered with books, scrolls, and

parchments, some bound in leather, embossed with golden letters, others painted in the colors of snowflakes in sunlight, and some written in languages that no one even then knew any more. More volumes and manuscripts were stacked and strewn on the floor. Even on the pelts before the fireplace lay a loose page covered unevenly in a fleetingly lithe hand that read: "... where brittle bones of ravens and kings arise anew every night."

A heavy, worn wooden basket stood next to the door. Although it was mended and reinforced here and there as it was very old the remarkably intricate pattern of entwined twigs was well crafted and still beautiful in its own way. An odd assortment of handles stuck out of it. One of them belonged to a long staff fashioned out of a rough branch stripped of its bark. Inscriptions of some sort were burnt into the wood, but they had faded long ago and become illegible. Next to it loomed a bushy broomstick; if it had ever served to sweep the floors or clean the grounds, it showed no signs of it; not a stray leaf or a flick of dust had settled in its immaculate brush.

The most wonderful grip in the basket, however, was crafted of ebony whose satin sheen could be glimpsed between inlaid ornaments of silver, forming wonderful blossoms on slender stems under a multitude of glistening stars. It belonged without any doubt to a sword. A silver vyvern twisted its elegant body around the blackened hilt much like the elaborate knot on the ancient church door in Valdjofsstadur, but the smith's workmanship was clearly

not Norse. The blade rested in a plain sheath of thick leather that showed a protective layer of dark resin. It was an ill match in every respect.

The fire was burning down when the door opened. A woman in man's clothes stepped in, axe in hand, bearing wooden kindling, neatly split. She tended the fire, placing her left foot right on the page between the "brittle bones" and the "king", and adjusted her long, pale hair that had come undone. Then, instead of taking the big kettle and starting to cook dinner, as reasonable people did even in those days if they had anything to cook, the woman threw a few dried leaves into the fire, and began to rummage among the books, scrolls, and manuscripts on the table. An intoxicating scent pervaded the room, as she appeared to have found what she was looking for. She settled down on a pile of books on the floor and sat quite still, with closed eyes until the fire in the hearth flickered with a golden gleam, filling the room and everything in it with the light of a sunny summer afternoon. Time stood still. When she opened her eyes there lay power in her glance. She rose and directed her gaze at the broomstick, reciting words in a language that no one now knows any more. As her lips formed the incantation her voice grew lower with every word. An old fear formed in her mind. 'It will not work.' The moment was gone. The sunlight faded until only the faint gloom of the dying fire remained in the house looking over the growing dusk of a winter's evening in the snowy highlands.

The woman exclaimed in anger and exasperation, and upset the pile of books that spilled all over the floor as she threw the tome on the table. “Why can I never get it right?” She broke into tears. Outside, the night was clear, and the stars sparkled, but the woman did not see. For deep shadows of old lived in her soul and doom haunted her dreams.

The next morning, a dark fog fell from frozen branches and hovered over the valley and stream. The slanting sun found a gap between clouds, and cast blue shadows in the footprints of birds and foxes in the snow that trailed like transient poetry into the distance, punctuated by dried stalks of grass and wild thyme. Light’s fickle finger poked into the gray and rusty hillsides, and cast the snowy plains in all imaginable shades of white. A pair of boots ground last night’s snow. It was the woman. Her great stick hit the ground as she climbed toward the crest of the range behind her house. Clad in sheepskins, she was soon lost from view between the snow and the milky sky as if she had drifted into a land of legend.

While she stumbled uphill over uncertain ground, losing foothold every so often, slipping on patches of ice, and getting her feet stuck in narrow gaps between rocks, black wings were gliding effortless through the still air. The raven called once while sailing slowly overhead before it veered toward the hillside where it settled down in the snow, one beady eye at a time on the woman as she

trudged closer. 'The raven ... the raven called ...' While she climbed she began to wander through the nooks and crannies of her mind. 'How did the verse go?' At last she muttered to herself:

*The raven called and I must follow
Beyond the bonds of our world
Where wings stretch to the stars
And life is light*

But how could she be sure that the raven whose shimmering plumage became sprinkled with tiny white crystals as the wind rose behind the glacier was the one the verse spoke of? While she stood pondering the question, the raven scrutinized her unperturbed, one beady eye at a time. Suddenly, the bird took to the air, and allowed the breeze to carry it up high. The woman followed him with her eyes. It did not dive down to play with the snow-dust devils that danced across the plains in the wind. Instead, black wings were covering the darkening sky above with signs. And the woman understood their meaning.

She stood transfixed as the raven returned, slipped past a crack in a cliff, and disappeared, just as the signs had said. The fissure in the rock wall was barely wide enough for the woman to squeeze through and follow him. The staff went in first, clattering on stones on the other side. Then came one leg, and while the woman drew in her breath she twisted and crammed her body through the rocks that scraped and scratched her sheepskins. Once inside she sighed and took a deep breath in the utter darkness of a cold and wet cave, just high and wide enough for her. There was no sign of the raven, or anything else for that matter, as it was pitch-black all around. The woman crouched down and groped for her stick, but it was not there. She stretched her arm, and felt the ground again, but to no avail. So she advanced a little. Still nothing. She moved forward, and then she tumbled thump, thump, thump down the steps of a spiral staircase where she landed on her staff and hurtled down with it, down and down, bumping over step after step until she came to a halt. The woman picked up her stick, and herself, and managed to walk down a few of the narrow steps on two legs, until she hit a moist spot, and tripped again, plummeting down the rest of the very long staircase until she reached the bottom in the deep.

The woman looked around. Algae and moss grew in the cavern where water was dripping down in a dark corner. An invisible underground creek rustled along merrily somewhere in the distance. Further down a hall was

carved out of the mountain. An eerie glow lit thick stalactites glimmering with crystals like chandeliers suspended from a ceiling so high it could not be glimpsed. The hall came to an end in front of three carefully crafted, smooth stone doors. The woman stood up, and found that she had lost no limbs, but gained quite a few bruises. As she began to wonder about the doors, the one to her left opened with a rumble, slowly at first, then gathering speed as if a great force was pushing it outward. The startled woman drew back. A powerful storm rose from the passage behind it, with an angry howl, and hurled countless scrolls, scraps of paper and parchments, books, and manuscripts past the woman. She leaned against the storm with disheveled hair and began to grab for the priceless treasure of ancient knowledge that was fluttering all around her. Yet, whenever she thought she had a firm grasp on a scroll, her hand came back empty. In the end, the storm died down until one last page sailed lazily past. When the door shuddered shut the woman noticed that all the papers and books had vanished from the hall.

Next, the door on the right opened with a groan. It unveiled a dimly lit chamber, forbidding, unadorned, and empty. In its middle, five stern steps led to a throne of stone. Not a soul was in sight but a universe of twinkling stars stretched over the ceiling. Cool night air wafted over the threshold where the memories of knights and kings long fallen still lingered. As the woman approached the door closed in her face, with a moan.

A great blast burst the door in the middle asunder. The woman ducked to seek cover from the hail of fiery debris. Rocks and stones came crashing down and crumbled to rubble. Flames flickered high to the rafter; and fiery claws stretched toward the woman who could not see beyond the roaring blaze. From far away screams of people penetrated the crackling fire. The stench of burnt flesh was almost tangible and images of charred black bones, and bodies etched themselves into the woman's mind. Mesmerized, the woman gazed at the open passage in which the fire did not abate. She understood that all the wisdom in her books and scrolls did not suffice to gain the power that she sought under the starlit sky. One day, her path would lead past the searing threshold into danger and darkness to become who she was meant to be. But not that day. She turned her back, and ran. Fast, faltering footsteps echoed through the stony cavern. Up and up the stairs, on wobbly legs, out of breath, and with a dizzy head, slipping time and again, but struggling ever onward until, at last, she glimpsed the faint light of the moon through the crack in the rocks. Hot and panting, she pushed through the fissure a second time and was almost defeated; with torn skins she staggered down the hillside to the safety of her home.

Behind the Flaming Door

The fire threw shadows over the books, and parchments and scrolls on floor, table, and shelves. A flicker briefly lit golden letters embossed on the back of a heavy tome. Nymphs bathing in a pond of deep lapis lazuli blue under a capital “N” became alive and danced in the light. A flame licked on a loose page. As the woman came in, the door behind her was thrown wide and a great gust of wind hurled all her papers, her tomes, and manuscripts into the flames where they turned to cinders while the woman tried in vain to save her treasures. But lead had settled in her limbs. She cried out.

The woman woke with a jolt, only to find that the glowing embers in her fireplace lit the faint outlines of the books and parchments on the shelves. Relieved, she stretched out again on her pelts, but she did not drift back into slumber. The morning hung like a gray veil of ash over the mountains. Thick layers of clouds hovered above the ridge. Chill had crept through the cracks in the shutters and doors, and the woman shivered. She got up, mended the fire, and heated water in a heavy kettle. When the day

could be guessed across the southern sky, her eye fell on the page of a book she did not remember having opened. The lines read:

*The raven called and I must follow
Beyond the bonds of our world
Where wings stretch to the stars
And life is light*

The very verse she had spoken only the day before! Now it lay on the table! How could that be? Had a gust of wind been playing with the pages when she opened the shutters? She did not remember opening the book at all. She was not even sure that it had been lying on the table. To think that some power had penetrated her home was so uncanny that the drink the woman held in her hand spilled onto the parchment, splaying the ink of the ancient script. She also left a round mark where she put down her goblet to wipe off the stains. Memories and nightmares were mingled in her mind. Nonetheless, the page felt real enough. What on Earth had happened?

She sat down, frowning over a lengthy breakfast, now and then darting off to take books from shelves to pore

painstakingly over forgotten passages. Once or twice she shook her head as she bit into a piece of dried fruit while her eyes were elsewhere. She began to mutter to herself. Something about “summon” and “force” and “failure”. She rose and began to pace if pace you can call it. With all the stacks of books on the floor, it was more like meandering through a maze. “All my life I knew that only fear kept me from reaching the stars.” The woman laughed mirthlessly. “Listen to me! As if I did not flee in fear from that cave! Fear...” She sat down again and looked around. The well-worn volumes, scrolls, parchments, and manuscripts on the shelves, the crackling fire on the hearth, the warm pelts on the floor had never looked so homely as at that moment. “I could continue as I was those many years and be content. The broomstick may still fly. But I no longer trust that hope. Doubt drains the life from me until the living fibers of my soul are turned to fossils, frozen in space and time.”

She got up with sudden resolve, removed a thin volume from her shelf and pulled a small, dark brown leather bag from under a few parchments lying on the table. The bag clattered softly as she moved it. She threw a few herbs into her fire, and standing before it with closed eyes, spoke words in a language that no one now knows any more. She opened her eyes and cast the contents of the bag onto the pelts before the fireplace. Out fell twenty-seven wooden staves painted with ancient runes that lay scattered, some on top of each other, others showing their blank reverse

sides, and a few lying face up on the fur. The woman studied the runes that were revealed at length, consulting her book from time to time. She stooped and carefully removed the topmost stave, without upsetting the position of the others, and turned it around. She took her breath in sharply. The stave was entirely blank. “Death!”

Wide-eyed and pale, but undeterred, the woman replaced the runes and took a large leather bag that hung from a nail in the door, placed a piece of dried fish in it, a flask filled with water, and a small torch, donned her skins, grabbed her stick, and walked out the door. Angrily chirping snow buntings that had been picking at the crumbs the woman had thrown out for them fled flying from her, hiding behind snowy shrubs and in the slender fir tree by the door. The woman stopped to talk to them. The tiny fluff balls answered. She laughed and went her way. Barely had she turned her back that the birds alighted once more on the scarce scraps of bread near the house. The woman had vanished in the gray haze. She could barely see the path under her feet, the same that she had trodden only the day before. It led her up the hillside, but the crack in the stone remained hidden. She searched a long time with her hands in the icy veils between the worlds, fingering frozen rocks and sharp crevices, moving slowly upward as she probed. Black cliffs rose menacingly above her. She had no memory of them. Perhaps she had already missed the gap. She turned to retrace her steps and search further down below. A piece of rock broke loose

under her boot and trundled into a deep hollow, with a clang. That must be it. She broke off thawing icicles that had formed overnight and squeezed through the crevice. She walked down the spiral stairs, one careful, torch-lit step after another. The fire growled below her, its reflections flickered threateningly on the ceiling of the staircase long before she had reached the bottom. Its terror grew, with each hesitant step. She heard again the chilling shrieks of scorched victims and tasted the sickly odor of death. She must be mad. None of her spells and summons had ever worked, or had they? How dared she brave the flames? She began to pace in front of the flaming door, her eyes fixed on the ground, deep in thought. She did not fear death. She feared pain. Perhaps that was what it took ...The woman wiped her hand over her face, shrugged her shoulders, and took a deep breath. Filled with trepidation, she slowly stretched one timid finger toward the scorching heat, withdrawing it almost at once. It was unscathed. She drew another breath, stepped onto the threshold, and was quickly engulfed in flame.

The fire harmed her not; it did not curl a single strand of her hair or so much as singed her sheepskins. Quite comfortable where she was, the woman lingered in the blaze, worried about perils that might or might not lurk in the shadows beyond. But she knew the time had come. She braced herself and stepped into the unknown. Her foot floundered. She plunged into a lake, stick, dried fish, torch, and all. The staff fell out of her hands. Gasping for

air, the woman surfaced again, and struggled to hold her head above water while the weight of her wet, well-belted sheepskins was dragging her down. She continued thrashing about in the lake like a dog to keep afloat. In the utter gloom, the woman saw, or thought she saw, a distant shore of craggy rocks where a figure in a black cloak half turned away from her. She scrambled and splashed toward that place. When she was near enough to get a hold of a rock on the shore, the figure in the black cloak raised his arm. An outward facing palm banned the woman from the land. Worn out and chilled to the bone, she took hold of the rock despite the formidable, unforgiving eyes fixated upon her. A power not of this world was poised against her. But she did not think that she would drown that day, and half-dragged herself, half-crawled ashore, drenched and dripping as she was, and fell upon her knees. She knelt, and waited, for what felt like a long, long time to anyone as tired and clattering with cold as she was.

At last, she felt a gentle touch, and saw a slender hand on her soaked sleeve, intending her to rise. At the same time, she felt dry and warm; her sheepskins appeared as supple and fluffy as if no drop of water had ever seeped through them. She even found her staff in her hand. With wonder, the woman stood looking into eyes the color of decaying leaves permeated with the light of stars. She had a mind to kneel again. The man, if man he was, saw into her soul, and spoke to her, without as much as a word. An immense peace descended upon the woman.

The Ghost of Hengifoss

Bright rosy storm clouds etched into a pale blue sky announced the new day when the woman woke, and found herself on her pelts before the fireplace in her house, the staff standing in the basket next to the sword and the broomstick, the sheepskins and the leather-bag hanging neatly on the nail in the door. Had her adventures of the night before all been a dream? She shook her head. The peace she felt inside herself told her that it was not so, but she had no memory of the return journey; try as she might; yet, somehow, raven wings came to mind.

Another, not altogether pleasant recollection forced itself into her conscience. It was almost too embarrassing to recall! A voice in her head was berating the woman, and the peace she had felt just moments ago, vanished in the blink of an eye. Had she, indeed, refused a gift from the wizard, calling it “useless”? The woman buried her head in her pelts in shame. What had she been thinking of? It was true; it appeared to be the same stone, with markings reminiscent of ancient runes, which she had given away when she began to doubt its protective powers. Surely the

wizard had a purpose that she could not attempt to guess. Perhaps she should have kept the stone and got rid of the broomstick. It was too late for that.

Stricken, the woman decided to face the day after all, and threw off the pelts. The wizard had extracted a promise from her before the unfortunate incident with the gift, and she was determined to keep her word, even if he was never to speak to her again. She meant to be at Hengifoss at dusk to obtain the original scabbard of her sword from a knight who was buried there. First, she copied the design on the hilt of the blade, which she was by no means to take along. Afterwards, she munched a slice of smoked lamb, and crumbled paper-thin bread all over the manuscripts. She burnt some herbs on the fire and a sweet perfume filled the house. She sat down motionless on a pile of books and closed her eyes until only the fire crackled on the hearth and all was quiet. But, as the memory of the encounter with the wizard came and went in her mind, she fidgeted. The ray of sunlight that she had summoned faded quickly. The spell was broken before it had rightly been spoken. When she opened her eyes, her intention was frayed with doubt. Then the voice of the wizard spoke to her.

*We are born star to stars
Eternal powerful and wise
Until our anxious minds
Confine our shrinking souls
Behind fences and walls
Until we doubt
From whence we came
And whither we shall go*

How she wished she could believe those words. ‘If only he were here!’ Nonetheless, the woman pulled her staff out of the basket and held it in her hands while she read out spells from dusty, decrepit manuscripts in a language that no one now knows any more. If it understood her, it did not show. In fact, the staff may have said “humph” once, but when she asked “pardon?” it did not utter another word.

As soon as she was done, she threw herbs, some firewood, and a few scrolls to the dried fish, water flask, and torch that were still in the leather bag, put on her

skins, slipped her axe into her belt, grabbed her stick, and sauntered out the door, only to scuttle back in to pick up the design of the hilt that was still lying where she had put it on the table.

A chill wind was nibbling on ears, nose, and fingers, howling from the northwest across the snowy summits to unleash its full force in the open plains and valleys below. Its prying fingers felt for flesh and bones underneath her skins. Only when the woman gained the shelter of the canyon did the walk become bearable. The walls of the mountain towered above her, shrill screams pierced her ears, when the storm found its way through narrow gaps in the rocks, and dread was sneaking into the woman's heart. What folly had driven her to venture such a quest? She stiffened. There were footsteps on the path following her. She stopped to listen. Perhaps they were just pebbles that her boots had kicked loose and that now tumbled down the slope.

By the time she reached the lower rapids of Hengifoss the sky had turned a deep ink-blue. Swift clouds chased each other high above her head, obscuring the pale moon like somber shrouds. From time to time the cover ripped and released a silver light that hurried across glittering patches of snow under the woman's feet before new veils of frozen ice shot across the land devouring her lengthening shadow and covering snow, rock, and river in blinding bleakness. She continued for a few more paces and stopped dead in her tracks. The storm was whistling

its ghastly lament through clefts in the rocks. She shuddered, and listened, and toiled on warily. There! A black figure sprang out of the cliffs into her path, with a roaring noise, and stretched faint fingers toward her. Shuddering, the woman lit a torch. The shadow fled. The woman breathed more easily. Relieved, she opened her bag, when a human shape appeared behind a tree in the passing moonlight. The torch went out and the bag fell from her hand. The wind howled again. She held her breath. The moon faded in the clouds, taking the shadows with it, as night closed in around the woman. Trembling, she picked up the bag and, hugging the cliff, pulled her provisions out, without so much as a sound. She nibbled on a slice of smoked lamb, held her breath to listen to the wailing of the storm, chewed on a bit of dried fish, paused again, and hastily gulped down some water, which dripped over her skins. Her eyes bore into the night around her: over the icy steps flanking the course of the water, through the shades behind the vertical columns of the cliff, back down the way she had come, and up toward the darkness on the path she still had before her. Something moved behind a barren shrub on the bend, but it was only a twig, stirred by the wind.

Fear did not release her from its glacial clutches. Every thought of some scary sound or sight that her anxious mind fabricated had her start and spin around as she climbed to the icicle-covered fall, lit again for a moment, and bathed in utter darkness the next. The bones of the

dead knight must be buried somewhere nearby. In the ever-changing light it was impossible to tell. The gurgling of the water was suffocated by the frozen surface of the creek. Only from time to time did a piece of ice break loose, dropping down with a “thud”, startling the woman. At the fall, she unburdened herself with shaking hands and numb fingers. At first the fire only smoldered and went out from her harried attempts at kindling it. She took a few deep breaths to steady her hand. Once the wood burnt evenly, the woman felt easier, but kept the axe handy. That was where the instructions of the wizard ended. She could do nothing else but wait.

The storm abated. Thick clouds hid the full moon. Snow began to fall. To keep warm, the woman paced around the fire when a shadow of a doubt moved among the rocks. Something shifted in the dark. The woman felt her hair stand on end. A black shape stirred. The woman grabbed her axe. Yet, the flickering firelight fell on a raven that hopped out of a cave near the fall. She sighed with relief and dropped her axe. The black bird looked at the woman, one beady eye at a time, and flew off. The woman had an idea. Crouching down on wobbly legs, she fumbled for a scroll in her bag, which bore an unmistakable footprint on it. The words read: “... where brittle bones of ravens and kings arise anew every night”.

Hardly had she read the words that sounds were heard from the cave as if a great slab of stone was being pushed aside. The scroll dropped from her hand and drifted into

the fire where it turned to flame and ash. The woman groaned. Although her heart was pounding up to her throat, she picked up the axe with her right hand, grabbed the staff with her left, and stepped forward. From the cave emanated an eerie white light. The salty smell of sea waves wafted out of it. The woman tried to pierce the darkness with her eyes. She took another step forward. Tiny pebbles appeared to be bouncing off the rocks inside the cave.

“Who dares disturb me at the threshold hour?” demanded a booming voice. In the uncertain light, a mighty man, wearing a black hood and cloak appeared at the entrance of the cave. The woman stopped breathing. As he advanced, with clattering steps, toward her, the folds of his cloak opened a little, revealing his bare bones. The woman, glued to the spot, swallowed hard, and raised her axe as skeletal fingers stretched toward her. A sarcastic laughter echoed from the cliffs around them. Infuriated, the woman hewed at the hand, but her axe rebounded from it, flew out of her grip, and fell clanking on to the ground below her somewhere in the cold night.

Dismayed she pointed her staff at the specter and began to mutter a spell under her breath when the ghost reached for it. To her grief, the stick quickly sprouted roots, bark, and twigs on that freezing winter night and became a birch tree as firmly embedded in the rocks of Hengifoss as if it had always been growing there. In fact, it is still growing there this very day.

The ghastly bones grabbed the woman's pelts. In stunned silence her mind worked furiously. There was no use in fleeing or in fighting. She drew herself up tall, seeking the eyes of her adversary as if she was no stranger to quarrelling with specters. Then, as the cloud cover broke, the thinly veiled moonlight fell on a silver circlet concealed under the black hood. The woman felt as if an icy dagger stabbed her from the back. Not only had she foolishly attacked an otherworldly creature of the shadow realm; it also was the wrong ghost! Quavering, she bowed low: "My lord, forgive my intrusion. You are a king and not the knight I was sent here to meet. I crave your pardon." The woman could not see the eyes of the being so addressed. An uncomfortable silence descended upon her while images of painful torture leaving trails of blood behind and broken bones whizzed through her mind.

At last, the ghost's commanding voice roused her: "Sent by whom?" The woman, who, in her mind, had bid goodbye to all that she held dear in the world, started and stuttered: "I, uh, do not rightly know. A wizard, I think, or perhaps, a raven. I know it doesn't make much sense. I am sorry, my lord." The woman blushed. "The Raven. I see. Yes, he is a wizard. The greatest of them all." The woman listened wide-eyed. "What does he want with the knight?" the former king enquired. "I am to retrieve the scabbard of my sword. Here, my lord, let me show you," the woman pulled the scrap of paper with the design of the hilt from her bag, and held it up to the specter. The

skeletal hand clawed at the page so hard that it tore in several places. If it did not belong to a ghost, one might have even said that it trembled. The woman half-opened her mouth to ask something but thought the better of it. “Your sword?” boomed the voice. “That blade was forged by the elves when the world was broken. It was mine.” The woman stood agape. No wonder the wizard had asked her to leave the weapon at home. “Were you not sent by the Raven, you would not leave here alive. How came you by my sword?” The woman sighed. “My lord, that is a strange story.” The hooded prince insisted. “Speak!”

It was last spring. A promising sunray pierced the white clouds hanging low over the Eastfjords. Green shimmered hope on the meadows where furry horses grazed among the last remnants of ice. The first shy blossoms shuddered in the breeze. At night, the stars shone bright again. In the lonely house, provisions ran low after the winter, so the woman had tied together a large bundle of snow-white fox pelts that she had hunted and fastened it to the leather bag bulging with blanket, torch and scraps of food, and set out with the heavy burden on her back toward the coast, sleeping in shelters at night, and nibbling on her last bits of dried fish during the day. She sang when the days were sunny, and the wild beasts and birds stopped to listen.

After seven days of toil with an empty stomach and sore muscles the woman descended from the last mountain

pass toward the white masts of the fishing boats swaying on the waves between the painted wooden houses of the port where large nets and neat lines of silver fish were drying in the sun. Big brown barrels were squirming with live herrings, haddocks, breams, brass, and lobsters. Fishermen, traders and the wives of local farmers were haggling over prices and quarrelling over the quality of the merchandise.

Gunnar's men were rolling five full barrels of fish over the jetty to their ship when the owner saw the woman approaching. They nodded to each other before she unburdened herself. He stroked the pelts with his fingers against the growth of the hair and checked the neat wounds of the snares in the foxes' paws. The furs were unspoiled. Gunnar nodded again, and held out his hand. "Your list." The woman pulled a note out of her pocket. The ruddy trader raised his eyebrows. "A long list!" The woman parried calmly. "Good pelts." Gunnar scratched the white stubbles on his chin and passed the list to one of his men. "Will you be staying at the inn?" asked Gunnar. She nodded. "Right. My men will take the goods there."

A bright fire lit the faces of fishermen and farmers drinking around wooden tables, swapping stories and gossip. Flasks of wine made the rounds. The comforting smell of soup, fried fish, herbs and fresh bread spread through the hall. Rugged men with colored cheeks leaning against the seasoned planks passionately discussed broken down fences and neighbors' daughters while others quietly

puffed on their pipes. A sailor pulled out a deck of cards for a game of Lombaer after the same complex rules the people at the icy end of the sea still play it this very day. “Gunnar!” They shouted over to the corner where the portly trader was talking with an old man, a stranger, wearing a black cloak and a scarf wrapped around head and neck. Gunnar waved his hand dismissively. But he began absentmindedly to rub his knotty hands together and to interrupt his chat with the venerable gentleman from abroad to inquire after the scores of his friends. In the end, both Gunnar and the stranger sat down to try their hands at the game. Hardly had their cards been dealt that the annoyed woman slithered through the noisy crowd toward them. She had come to claim compensation from Gunnar for a shortfall in her order. The irritated trader asked the woman to wait till next morning. At that moment, one of the players got up to leave. Since Lombaer required four players even in the time when trolls and elves still roamed the earth, Gunnar grunted annoyed and looked over the guests in the hall to find another player. The grumbling woman had turned her back and began to disappear in the crowd. Then, Gunnar called her back. He just remembered that she was a reckless gambler and, smiling, invited her to stay.

The stranger rose to greet the woman and doing so revealed the splendid hilt of a sword concealed under his cloak. Instantly, murmurs of admiration and suspicion arose around the table.irate, the owner of the inn

elbowed through the crowd. He was just about to turn the customer out of his house when he met Gunnar's eyes and withdrew with a grunt. The great lord from foreign lands - for what else could he be? - ignored the gasps and exclamations and turned back to the game. Soon, the guests in the inn also forgot the hidden weapon that he bore and boisterously jostled around the table, trying to see who won, who lost, and sharing in the excitement of it all.

The evening was wearing on, wine loosened tongues and purse strings, and the stakes at the gaming table rose high. The stranger had run out of silver coins, or so he claimed, but refusing to cut rounds short offered to wager his magnificent sword "forged by the elves", which both Gunnar and the woman had coveted from the moment they saw it. Their fourth playing partner, a young sheep farmer from a southern fjord, made no objection either; and so the pacified innkeeper received the weapon in trust. Presently, a large group of men assembled around him to discuss the exquisite workmanship of the hilt. Some even urged him to draw the fine blade, which calls he refused.

The excitement at the Lombaer table grew palpable as the stranger dealt the last hand. The scores were close. There were raised eyebrows and murmurs of surprise when the woman made the highest bid. Gunnar was stroking his stubbles. He changed eight cards, which earned him jeers. The stranger passed. Although the trader began the round by throwing the ace of spades upon the table, winning the trick and the next, he was quickly

outdone by the farmer who bagged the one thereafter. Afterwards, the game favored the old lord. But the woman's suit of spades could not be bested, and she won. The old lord inclined his head to salute her; the farmer banged his hand on the table with a "damn!" but the spectators laughed and applauded her. Gunnar's jaw had dropped, but he quickly regained his composure and whispering in the woman's ear made a good offer for the blade. But she shook her head.

When she left to retrieve the weapon the stranger followed her. "This is a magic sword," he said. "It will bring you to harm unless you give me an enchanted token in return." The woman searched his eyes, the likes of which she never saw before. There lay commanding strength in them that she could not quite fathom. Girding the sword despite his warning the woman felt a lump pressing against her thigh. It was then that she remembered the stone in her pocket with markings reminiscent of ancient runes. Long had she doubted its protective powers. She held it out to the old lord. The man looked closely at the woman. "Are you quite sure that you do not wish to keep it?" The woman answered insolently. "Quite".

At Hengifoss the woman opened her eyes. The fire had died down. "The wizard! It must have been the wizard who passed you the sword!" cried the ghost excitedly. "The old lord? Impossible! I did not recognize him at all!" But the skeletal prince shook his head. "No one does

unless he wants them to.” And the woman thought, ‘of course! Those eyes! And the stone, the wizard tried to give me back my stone!’ She answered slowly. “Perhaps you are right, but, then, why did he not come for the scabbard himself?” The ghost looked at the woman in surprise. “Rock, and sand, and all the wild beasts roaming the earth, the waters that run clear, the living green, wind and stars, all do his bidding. He could summon the scabbard whenever it pleases him. Yet, he has appointed this task to you. If he appointed this task to you, he did so for your sake, not his. And you have given your word, have you not? Then, you must make good your promise or despair of ever becoming who you are.” Freezing, the woman brushed the snowflakes out of her hair and skins and wrapped her arms around her body, considering the words of the dead king who continued to gaze into the distance as if he saw the remnants of a life long gone. As she moved the ghost turned toward her. “You are shivering. Come inside.” He led her gently to his cave. “It is getting late. We don’t have much time.”

The woman sat down in the eerie light and the warm sea breeze, resting her back against a sarcophagus with an open lid, but she did not dare to look inside. The king began to pace to and fro in the cave while his bones rattled in the most disconcerting manner. “At midnight, you will meet your knight. Roderick! He has come here every night, seeking the sword, the one he thrust into my heart, a thousand years ago!” The woman drew in her

breath sharply, and put a hand over her mouth.

“Once we were friends in my land at the southern shores of the sea where the sun never wanes, and through many long battles, he stood by my side; and I did not see that he lusted for my realm. He slew me on our journey to this land when my quest failed.” The king sighed. “Falling, I pulled the blade out of my body and flung it into the lake. Together, sword and sheath wield a magic power that can do great harm in the wrong hands.” The king paused. “Roderick never recovered the sword. The monster in the lake pulled him down. Yet, while his crime is not avenged he cannot rest nor will he ever stop to hunger for the sword.” The king fell silent.

“I was entrusted with the sword, and I must haunt this land to seek the elvish weapon even until the ending of the world. Roderick knows this. Every night he comes to wrest it from me if I found it or mock me if I failed. Only the scabbard protects his life – such as it is - from my wrath. How we are to gain it, I cannot imagine!” That was troubling news to the woman who had counted on the dead king to provide the answer, not the question.

When the night had worn on, the clipety-clop of a horse was heard from below the frozen waterfall, and an off-key, brawling song echoed intermittently from the cliffs. The dead king nodded to the woman who climbed into the sarcophagus upon which the specter heaved the heavy lid to close it shut. The king pulled his cloak around him and hid behind the rocks outside the cave.

Roderick and his horse arrived at the fall. As they emerged through the steady snowfall, the woman discovered that both were ghostly enough though not quite in the same manner as the dead king. They were half skeletal and half covered with rotten, maggot-infested flesh, as if they had escaped from an apocalyptic hell. In addition, they smelled strongly like the putrid shark meat that some deem a wholesome delicacy in the north. But, the silver scabbard, which was stuck into a piece of cloth that Roderick has wound around his waist, was a sight to behold. The silken sheen of the ebony it was fashioned of could hardly be discerned under its silver ornaments. Behind a gnarly old pine tree, a fiery dragon spread its wings while it devoured a snarling werewolf with bared fangs that struggled in vain to draw its left hind leg out of the large fire-spewing snout. A group of unicorns at the other side of a silvery lake, filled with water lilies, grazed under stars among spring blossoms while their fillies chased each other under the watchful eyes of a hunting griffin with a fearsome beak, perched high on a rock. On the other side of the mountain, a group of ugly gargoyles pursued a furry mitar that was running right into an ambush of hungry harpies, awaking a dozing chimera in a fantastic tree with teardrop leaves, which was just about to fly to the mitar's aid. And, always in the background, black on silver curled the same vywern that also twisted around the hilt of the woman's sword.

“Hey, you bastard! Found your sword yet?” yelled

Roderick as he dismounted. There was no answer though hidden behind the rocks a snow-covered black cloak quaked as if its owner would have loved to give one. "Hello?" When Roderick still received no reply, he started muttering to himself, "... bizarre..." and "... weird ...". So Roderick, with careful circumspection, slunk into the cave. "What is this! Still asleep?" He shouted when he came to the closed sarcophagus, hammering on the lid. "Wake up! Wake up! Wa ... wait a minute! Maybe he got the sword, and is truly dead! Buried with his sword! Even without the scabbard? Well, who knows?" Excitedly, Roderick started to move the stone slab from the coffin. Then he stood bent over the open sarcophagus and stared at the woman. He froze in shock and dropped its heavy lid, which fell with a thud that shook the ground. Before he could recover his senses the woman had cast a spell on him in a language that no one now knows any more. Roderick was presently immobilized. At that moment, the dead king sprang into the cave and tore the scabbard out of the belt. In an instant all that had remained of Roderick disintegrated into a thousand pieces of bones and maggot-rife flesh that fell upon the woman. Groaning in disgust she jumped out of the coffin and the cave to pick lingering splinters of bone and wriggling maggots from her hair and sheepskins.

When she returned to the cave, the dead king held the silver scabbard in his hand while nothing but a few dried bones and the skull remained of Roderick. The bloodless

prince looked searchingly at the woman, and back at the sheath, and if specters are ever faced with inner turmoil that was one. The woman thought to herself: 'Oh, no, now he will not give it to me!' But whether the dead king remembered the Raven who was a mighty wizard or if he was grateful to the woman for helping him to retrieve the scabbard, in the end he commanded: "Kneel!" Which she did. "Swear that you will return both the sword and the scabbard to me once your task is done." The woman replied: "My lord, you have my word." The king sighed. "Then I, guardian of the treasure, lend to you the weapon to mend a broken world. Arise."

The Bungled Burglary

Tiny snowflakes drifted fast past the lonely house, gray specks in a dark sky. The night had swallowed stream, plain and mountain range. It was not yet dawn when the woman opened her eyes. Had she really spent half a night in the company of ghosts? And what did the dead king mean, "... to mend a broken world"? She was not sure that the world could be mended at all least of all by her. She shook her head.

Suddenly, the woman froze. She held her breath to listen. There it was again! It sounded like the old, rusted lock was being softly tweaked this way and that. In the dim light, she could see the bolt moving. Her thoughts worked at lightning speed whilst she lay still as if paralyzed with fear. The lock grated and clicked. She knew she must not make a noise. When a growing sliver of a shadow proved that the door had left its frame, she cast off her pelts, sprang toward the basket, pulled the sword from the scabbard, yanked the handle of the door out of the intruder's hands, swung it wide, and brandished the blade, stark naked as she was. A black cloak disappeared over

loose pebbles on the path as snowflakes settled on her goose-bummed flesh.

Her pulse began to race, not a second too early. With fluttering arms the woman flung the door shut, secured the bolt, and fumbled the sword back into the scabbard. She threw on clothes and stumbled on shaky legs to the hearth to mend the fire. She had to steady her quivering hands as she poured herself some wine, which she drank, with all fingers cradling the goblet while she leaned against the bookshelf. Putting the drink down with a spill, she drew a deep breath, and grew quieter.

An image began to shape itself before her eyes. She unbolted and opened the door again, and there it was: against the wall stood the axe that had flown out of her hand when she attacked the ghost. She picked it up. Not a notch or a scrape was upon it. What a relief! She had been wondering how she was going to get firewood without it. Someone had taken a lot of pains and a long walk through the night to return it to her in a great act of kindness. That must have been the wizard's doing; or was it the dead king? Then, a more chilling thought crawled out of the dark crevices of her mind. Perhaps the burglar had brought it with him ... She shivered and began to pace up and down in front of her fireplace holding a piece of smoked lamb in her hand from which she took the occasional bite. 'Who was that?' she asked herself. Her heart still beat some place where it should not have. Nobody had ever tried to enter her house, with invitation

or without, never mind robbing her! Whoever it was he must have been after the sword. Yet she had not met a villain in many long years until her encounter with Roderick that night. He had been destroyed and would never again haunt the dreams of the land. What about the dead king? Maybe he had lost faith as the night drew on. "Hmm, there was that sound of pebbles on the path." On the other hand, the specter had seemed honorable enough. There was, of course, one other who knew about the weapon, the one who had sent her on the quest. "Rubbish! The wizard can summon sword and sheath whenever it pleases him." The woman shook her head. But there were many secrets hidden in the darkness of the world when elves and trolls still roamed the earth; and, unbeknownst to men, many furtive creatures great and small wandered in the wild, with errands of their own or doing the bidding of the Shadow Sorcerer of whom the wizard had spoken to her.

What was to be done? She sighed as she warmed herself by the fire. If evil had already found her doorstep, it might come again. She deemed she was no longer safe in her own home as long as sword and sheath remained there. The woman stroke the scabbard gently with her fingers as it lay upon the table and it seemed to her that its silver shone the brighter for her touch. An ancient magic stirred deep in its steel. At that moment, she knew that she was meant to wield the weapon. The wizard, he who could summon sword and sheath whenever it pleased him, had

appointed that task to her for reasons she could not yet understand. But it was clear to her that she had to hunt down the monster in the lake. Only then could she return the weapon to the dead king so that both he and she would henceforth rest in peace.

The Serpent of Lagarfljot

You have no doubt heard all the rumors, legends and fairytales about the monster in the big lake. A number of people claimed to actually have seen the giant snake. On several occasions the local newspaper even reprinted some obscure photographs, in which you may have recognized a serpent, a seal, or uncle Siegfried skinny-dipping, depending on your whim. Poppcock! The true story of the ogre of Lagarfljot was quite different, and ended long before our time in an era when trolls and elves still roamed the earth.

In the early morning hours the fire was burning brightly in the lonely house in the highlands. The woman searched among her many books, scrolls, parchments, and manuscripts before she pulled a decrepit tome whose title was no longer decipherable from a high shelf. She settled down with a goblet of golden wine at her table, pulled a candle close, and opened the volume to a slight shower of dust, and wilted scraps of paper that rained out from between the pages. Browsing through the book, the woman found the chapter heading she was looking for.

“The serpent of Lagarfljot had dwelled in the deepest hollow of the lake since the dawn of days. Older than

Earth itself, it knew no bounds and, despite the kind words of the wise elves and the hissed menaces of the powers of darkness, it answered to no one. In summer the shadow of the great snake could be seen below the milky surface of the glacier lake looking for fish or unwary waterfowl.

Once the prey was spotted, the game was over. It disappeared in the blink of an eye, with a faint gurgle or a suffocated screech. When the birds had flown away south and the fish were scarce, the hungry monster raised its dragon-head full of needle-sharp teeth above the water to clamp jaws and two fearsome talons with a great splutter and splash of slush and water around any stray fox, goose, farmer or fisherman if they ventured too close to the shore.” The woman shuddered, took a sip of wine and a deep breath, and continued to read. “Indeed, the serpent may have been no serpent at all but a vyvern who had flown to Lagarfljot on two bat-like wings.”

There the woman broke off, and began to muse aloud. “Older than Earth itself ... I wonder from whence it came, and what its purpose was at the beginning ...” She shrugged and read on: “When the beast had grown into truly epic dimensions, thanks to its voracious appetite, its wings could no longer support its weight. From that day onward the vyvern had to outlast the remainder of its miserable life in the lake where it turned increasingly vicious.” The woman frowned, pushed the book aside for a moment, went to the fireplace where she found flat bread, and began to munch. “Or maybe ve verpent only became

evil when it defpaired of ever regaining its vreedom...”
At least that was all that could be gathered in between
crunching crispy breadcrumbs.

“Large mountain-trolls, with long noses, pimples, warts
and plenty of unkempt hair, from the other side of the
glacier loved to picnic on the lake during the long days
when the sun hardly set at all. They were a rowdy lot,
joking so boisterously as to set off avalanches in winter,
and not above dealing out a playful knock that may have
felled a cow. The trolls always sat down on the same rocks,
and dangled their feet in the cool water, while gnawing on
large chunks of meat of dubious origin. Occasionally, a
troll would even burst into song, not beautiful, but loud:

*This is the bridge
To the salted fish country
With the salted fish tower
In the salted fish sea
Where you have been
With your salted fish lover
And not with me*

“What a nonsense!” the woman chuckled, and returned her attention to the text. “The bones and knuckles the trolls did not fancy were carelessly cast into the lake where the vyvern chomped them to smithereens in the batting of an eyelash ...” The woman made as if to clear her throat, even though she had not said anything at all. Then she read on “... to the great surprise of the trolls who stared open-mouthed at the monster, and hastily hauled their feet out of the water.

“After a while, the trolls began to point and giggle and lure the serpent with their leftovers as if it were their pet. Perhaps they expected the vyvern to perform some amusing acrobatics for them like a trained seal, but in that they were sorely disappointed. The magnificent beast, however, appeared to appreciate the tasty morsels of meat and the company. A large predator in a – relatively speaking – small pond leads a lonely life. It never as much as nipped at the trolls’ toes when they picked enough pluck to plonk them back into the lake.

“Thus began a rather odd friendship because the mystical creature was clever.” The woman grinned, “... whereas the trolls were as dumb as, well, trolls.” She picked a breadcrumb from the ancient manuscript: “Most likely each fellow recognized in the other the same untamed spirit of the hunter. Still, they never quarreled over meat nor did the vyvern show any interest in the things that glitter, which the trolls hoarded in their caves, until the very end. Indeed, such was the honor among

those thieves and murderers that they never came to blows until into their greedy claws fell the greatest prize of all.

“It was a large blue gem, a magnificent heirloom, which Antariel, an elf lady of legendary powers, had passed to her daughter Narien, when she set out from elvenhome, with most of her kin, to explore the world of men. But whether Antariel had crafted the jewel through her gifts of enchantment as some storytellers claimed, or if she gained the crystal by some other means as the elves implied in the archives kept at Fljotsdalur, was shrouded in the mist of history, for Antariel never left the unbroken world. Although Narien was bearing a child at the time, she braved the perilous journey, and brought the stone to the icy end of the sea.

“Even on Earth, the grace of infinity emanated from the gem and its purity could not be soiled. Its cut sides broke the sunlight into multitudes of sparkling rainbows, which intertwined and swirled into ever-changing shapes. At night the crystal shone with a light of its own, and seduced any mortal with the most wonderful dreams. However, the true power of the treasure lay elsewhere. The stone of Antariel healed the land.

“The air was filled with the song of birds, even in winter. All beasts under the sun were glad and the seas teemed with life. The creeks and rivers rushing down from snowy peaks ran clear. Pink summer flowers filled the green meadows. When streams of lava and avalanches thundered down steep mountainsides and left behind deep

scars in the crust of the world, the stone healed the rifts and breaches quickly. Even men found pleasure in the land and in each other. The shining beings who had brought the ‘elf-stone’ as men came to call it with them were glad of the bliss they had bestowed on the land, and befriended many creatures to share their wisdom. Narien gave birth to a son whom she called Daminor.” The woman looked up in surprise. “Da ... then, that is ... oh, no! What has the wizard drawn me into?” She frowned, and shook her head before she continued reading.

“One day, when Daminor had grown into a man, a raven flew over the battlements into the fortress of the elves high on Fljotsdalur.” The woman interrupted her reading. “There! The Raven! I knew it!” The mighty wizard who was the Raven might have pointed out that the woman had taken the task upon herself willingly. The woman apparently thought so, too, and stopped to listen for an angry “kraah” outside, but since none was heard she buried her nose again in her book. “Facing its main stone portal, carved with delicate blooming flowers and stars, the black bird grew into a man with starlit eyes the color of decaying leaves, and as tall, handsome, and powerful as the elves stepping out to greet him.

The tidings he brought were not gay. On behalf of king Aribdaran, the wizard called the elves for aide against an invasion of fiendish giants of enormous girth and height in his realm far beyond the southern seas. At the time giants had not been seen for a great many years and the

council of elves was greatly perturbed. 'I do not understand how this is possible', said Lady Narien, 'the stone of Antariel should have protected the land'. Daminor, a great lord despite his youth, with dark locks, and clear eyes, shook his head. 'Hell must have spat out the monsters by design of our ancient enemy whom we long have forgotten.' After a stunned silence, many voices spoke that day in the council against Daminor, only the Raven remained silent. Tirvis, oldest and wisest of the elves, weighed the words of each and long searched the thoughts of the wizard before he concluded that the young lord was right. 'For all things that are prospering forever stir the raging envy of our foe.'

"Thus the elves emptied their fortresses to fight the foul brutes. Daminor, clad in a silver armor, led the armies setting out from Fljotsdalur, with fluttering banners of the silver griffin on a white field. At his side rode his son Orad who exclaimed at the sight of the splendid ships that Tirvis had gathered at the eastern shore. Ten thousand elves set sail for a journey of many weeks in rough seas.

When they had finally reached the southern realm, the air reeked of foul fumes. The stench of burning bodies and decaying blood filled their hearts with despair. Through veils of ash that hid the sun, the elves marched over ancient fields of lava whose sharp points cut through boots and hooves. From afar, the elves could hear the clashing of swords. Crazy shrieks of wounded and dying

men, and the raging roars of giants pierced their ears. The earth shook. The land quivered in the growing heat before their eyes. From the last ridge, the captains of the elves caught glimpses in between black clouds of the High Plain of Sa-Imdar, where the great mountain spewed out glowing streams of searing magma while King Aribdaran and his embattled host of men fought fiercely against an overwhelming force that was not of the world. Hideous giants raged with tree-long lances and trunk-thick clubs among the men. Their hatred swept over the plain with boundless force and fury and left a field of fallen warriors in their wake, with broken, and bloodied bodies. The elves shuddered. An ancient nightmare they should never have forgotten had crawled back into the light of day. They had been there before the world was made, when the giants fought their last losing battle. The devastation had shrouded the stars for eternities and hardly an elf had survived.

The dismayed elves saw that Daminor had spoken truly. Their old foe had in secret worked all those long years against them. When the crust of the earth had ruptured and Sa-Imdar was spewing fire and boulders, and great streams of lava were rushing down its slopes, a rain of poisonous ash had shrouded the land from the light of Antariel's stone. In the ensuing darkness, he had slipped hell's creatures back into the world. And, this time, he had taken no chances. There were eyes in the wafting shadows of black smoke, and whoever looked at them, fell under

their evil spell and was driven mad. Orad cried out in horror.

Far away, in the lonely house at the icy end of the sea, the candle began to flicker. The woman mended it grimly. “What business have I with the ancient realm at the southern sea? This is the legend of the Fall of Daminor on the High Plain of Sa-Imdar. Out of the shadow of history comes the sword that I now hold in keeping.” She sighed.

“Before Tirvis could rush to his aid, King Aribdaran fell under the mighty stroke of a giant. His blood splattered over the son who rode at his side and his smashed limbs knocked the prince from his rearing horse. As Tirvis saw Suridin turn upon the giant to avenge his father, his glance fell upon an evil eye, and the great elf-lord succumbed to its curse, and turned in madness upon his own troops and was slain by the elves, who loved him. Elves and men almost despaired. Daminor, however, was undeterred and rallied the allied armies under his command. ‘Fear bids us flee the unnamed terror of this battlefield. Fear casts us down like vermin under giant feet. Fear cripples our spirit until we have nowhere to hide in our shame. But we will not have the living green wither, the waters soiled, and the earth ravaged. We shall fight fear and foe. We shall stand tall, and true until the ending of our days.’

“On his great horse, Daminor led the troops into battle. Beside him fought Aribdaran’s son, Suridin, king of men, with Roderick, his friend. Above them all soared a raven,

and where its shadow fell, the shadowy eyes of evil dissolved into thin air.

And the hearts of the armies were lifted. Even though many elves and men died that day, at nightfall, the allies had prevailed. It was just at the moment of victory when the young lord of the elves reassembled his troops under the banner of the silver griffin that the last blow of the enemy was dealt. A wounded giant, left for dead, hurled a bloodstained lance at Daminor. It pierced his armor from the back and he fell. So, victory was dearly bought and it was Orad who led the armies back to the coast to set sail for home.

Long before the elves reached the icy end of the sea the Raven became restless. He felt a change in the land. When they reached the Eastfjords, the elves saw that the trees had withered, the grass decayed, that sheep and horses were dejected, and, worse still, that men were turning upon each other. The wizard in the black cloak with starlit eyes the color of decaying leaves who stood among them at the bow of their greatest ship vanished in a blink; and a raven took to the air. The bird flew over the wide land, searching for the source of the evil that had taken hold of the world. His heart soon filled with sorrow at what he saw.” The woman sighed.

“The elves’ fortress high on the Fljotsdalur range had been broken into. The great gate lay in shambles. Fell birds of prey were picking on the bones of dead elves in the courtyard, murdered with clubs by trolls it seemed. Lady

Narien, in whose care the stone of Antariel had been left, was nowhere to be found. However, down at Lagarfljot the Raven espied a large left troll foot sticking out of the water before the monstrous vywern wolfed it down with a noisy splatter of milky-green water. On the surface of the lake, trails of black blood oozed from the ogre's body where its wings had been severed by a sword. Narien's notched weapon lay on the shore. Her remains were never recovered; but bluish light could be glimpsed from the deep of the lake where icy sludge entrapped the healing powers of the elf-stone, watched from afar by hellish creatures forever plotting to bring it into their power. Near the weapon, a bloodied bundle of furs was discovered between the stones: the severely mauled body of Sirvin, Narien's trusted shaman teacher, had been thrown against the rocks. When the elves had washed her broken limbs of blood and soil, they found that Sirvin was still alive. They nursed her back to health until she could tell her tale.

"Mo was a mountain-troll who used to picnic, with his friends, on the shore of Lagarfljot in summer. Gaping, he had watched the great host of the elves go to war and hurried home to tell his companions. With bulging eyes and spittle dripping from his uncouth mouth, his brother listened to the news and in surprise dropped the hind leg of a sheep that he was gnawing on around a roaring fire. A troll woman sitting in the snow scratched her matted hair. After many loud words of little meaning it slowly sank into their thick troll skulls that few if any elves were

left to guard the fortress and its treasures. So, they banded together, broke down the gate, and stole great coffers of gold and silver before they discovered the stone of Antariel. Soon, they were quarreling about it. Mo had a firm hold on the jewel when he received a punch that cracked his nose. The troll knew the monster in the lake and threw the gem into the icy waters, shouting for help. He did not have to wait long. Quickly, the ogre reared its ugly head, with bared fangs, and unfurled its wings. All trolls fled from its fury, save the badly bleeding Mo, held in a vice-like grip from behind by his own brother. But Mo still had his wits such as they were. He stamped his two feet against the frozen ground and spun around, pushing his opponent toward the lake where the vyvern promptly sank its sharp talons into his ankles and dragged Mo's screaming brother under water.

"The fair elf lady Narien and Sirvin, the shaman, were at that time searching for herbs along the shore. Alerted by the commotion, they hurried to the spot where the trolls were brawling. The vyvern stopped chewing on Mo's brother and snapped at Narien who drew her sword. The monster slunk away and the elf lady's blow fell on its wing. The growl of pain drowned Sirvin's warning. Mo clubbed her down from behind. The horrid troll threw her body into the lake where the great serpent swallowed it. The shaman cried out in agony. Despite her age and diminutive size, Sirvin took up Narien's sword and severed the vyvern's other wing before she, too, was gripped by sharp

fangs. But whether the ancient shaman proved too cunning for her predator or simply too tough for a tasty morsel, she was flung back out of the water half-dead.” The woman began to quiver. “How am I to do what an elf and a shaman could not?”

“In their grief, the elves hid themselves in the mountains whilst the land fell into further ruin all around them. And they spoke to no one, save the shamans and wizards of the world, greatest of whom was the Raven. He asked the elves to forge an enchanted sword against the ogre in the lake in order to retrieve the stolen stone. Yet any elf, or wizard wielding the weapon would fall under the shadow. Only a mortal could slay the serpent.” The woman halted. “Oh, that is why...” She turned back to the book: “But the ways of men and elves were sundered in the wilting land, and for many summers and winters the elves found no one willing to do their bidding. In the end, they turned to king Suridin, with whom they had fought the war against the giants, but Roderick, the faithless friend, undid their plans.” The woman closed the book, and returned it to its shelf.

The day dawned. She blew out the candle and checked the contents of her leather bag, threw in more kindling, and went outside. Next to her small house was an even tinier turf hut that contained her provisions, such as they were. She took three big chunks of seal meat, wrapped them in oiled skins, and fumbled among her fox snares for a spool of heavy angling line of the kind that would be

used on marlins in warmer climates in a dark corner in which she promptly cut her finger on a sharp fishing hook. Those items went into her bag as well. She donned her skins, girded herself with the magic sword, slipped her axe into her belt, threw her bag on her back, and locked her home before setting out.

It was thawing. A drizzling rain turned snow and ice into a soapy path on which striding feet tottered and staggered. Immediately, the woman who much rued the loss of her staff began to doubt the wisdom of her venture. "I must be out of my mind! Here I am about to slay a mystical creature – or, more likely, be turned into its dinner – when I cannot even make a broomstick fly!"

The drenched mountain ranges with barely a coating of snow looked dismal and gloomy in their shades of gray and ochre. But it was no use. She knew where her path lay whatever she might say in fear and doubt. So she stumbled, slipped, fell, and groaning got up again, until her skins were caked with mud and ice, and she was weary and worn before she even arrived at Hengifoss.

The water rustled noisily over the rapids where some green moss already showed on the banks. Melting icicles as thin as glass still clung to stalks of red reeds and last year's tiny domes of star-like seeds. Patches of pale yellow lichen and rusty leaves had emerged from the snow. The woman undid her boots with a heavy heart to wade through the knee-deep ford. The creek was still near freezing point, and her toes grew numb at once as they fumbled for a

foothold on the treacherous, round stones of the riverbed. She gingerly put one hesitant foot in front of the other. Oh, for her staff! When she reached the other side, and had put her boots back on, and life had returned to her feet, she shook her head. "This cannot be right."

The lake lay before her at last. A grayish silver sheen on its surface betrayed the brittle line of ice breaking away from the frozen shore to the glacial water in its center. Large floes had formed and were vaguely stacked against each other like unstable toy towers of building blocks. The woman could also spot the zigzag path the monster had traced across the half-frozen lake, hunting for a meal. There, the raindrops drew rings on the water that interspersed and faded. She dragged her bruised limbs along a way below Fljotsdalur, following in the footsteps of the mountain-trolls if she had cared to know. But, as tired as she was when the daylight waned, she cared not. She found a solid rock, from where she could guess a hint of a bluish light in the deep, and collapsed onto the craggy wet outcrop.

Shaking with exhaustion the woman tore with trembling hands at her bag, which yielded slowly. She nibbled on a bite of dried fish and downed it with some water. As the night chill gnawed at her fingers she longed to light a fire, but dared not. Instead, she doubled up the coil of angling line and secured it, with great big knots on the rock, tied a loop for the hook at the other end, and fixed the chunks of seal meat on it. She tossed the bait into the lake, pulled

the axe out of her belt, and lay it down beside her. She took off her clothes, and wrapped her sheepskins around her body to keep warm. Then she waited.

The rain stopped. A few stars twinkled between gray clouds, which hid the moon. In the deepening dark something cracked. The woman jumped, but then told herself that it was perhaps only a half-melted piece of ice that fell from the cliff. Yet, images of razor-sharp fangs and a horror of gigantic proportions remained in her mind. Untold terrors began to rend her thoughts. An ancient fear groped for her with bony fingers. A shriek crumbled in her throat like withered lace. Her heart raced, and she sweated in her skins.

A splutter. A black shape was gliding toward the bank. It circled the meat. The woman held her breath. Splash. The short fishing line just below her was pulled taut. Water and ice splattered wide and far, and thundered through the silent night. The monster had taken the bait and swallowed the hook. It chewed noisily on the seal meat. Soon, it would begin to struggle against its iron thorn. The woman slid down from the stone, unsheathed the sword, and picked up the axe with her left hand. She knew she had to be quick as the line was surely going to break under the weight of the enormous vyvern battling the hook.

The woman sneaked toward the water, crawling over the cracking ice, sword in the ready. Suddenly, white fangs snapped for her in the veiled moonlight. She recoiled. Just above the water, a green pair of livid eyes glowered at her

sword. The monster tossed its head, showering the woman with sharp pieces of ice and water. With a groan, the ice began to break under the woman. She had to move, and began to creep toward a rock on her left. Again the furious ogre tossed its head. The woman saw that the fishing line had slipped into place between the teeth and for the moment held. The gums bled where the hook was embedded. More ice cracked under the jerky attempts of the serpent to break free. The size of the mighty jaws almost made the woman's heart stop. The magic blade was barely any longer. The woman shook her head. 'I shall not live to see the dawn', she thought. With freezing feet and fingers, her body was caving in. Still, the woman knew she had to slay the fiend, or die in the attempt.

She put the sword aside, and grabbing the axe with both hands, inched nearer to the vyvern's jaws. She waited for the enraged monster to open them wide again, trying to tear a good bite out of her flesh. She did not have to wait long. The white teeth missed her barely, she could feel the ogre's warm breath on her skin, but only an instant later she had wedged the axe between the fangs while the tool's handle held the jaws that came crashing down on the wood wide open. But not for long. Before she could get hold of her sword, the furiously fighting vyvern had dislodged the handle, which splintered loudly as it was pierced by a fang on one side while the axe's blade clicked into place between two teeth on the other. The jaw was still blocked but the gap between the pointed fangs was far

smaller than the woman could have wished for. The beast kept on tussling, tossing its head about with violent splashes of water and cracking ice, to rid itself of the obstruction in its snout. The woman took the sword in both hands and thrust the blade through the open jaws into the monster's throat. The serpent flung her about in a burst of ice and water, trying to shake loose. Pointed incisors pierced her skin, but the woman held tight. Although her head was brushing against the beast's nostrils and she had to inhale its foul breath, she stretched out her arm and pushed the weapon inch by inch deeper into its spine.

Suddenly, the vywern changed its tactic. It coiled up its enormous body and, pushing against the rocks on shore, drew back; the line broke; and the woman, holding on to her sword, was pulled under water. The shock of diving into the icy lake gripped her chest like a vice. Her limbs were too deadened to feel the ogre's teeth that dragged her toward the bleak deep. She held her breath until her ears began to sing. 'It is as I feared,' she told herself. 'This is the end.' She gave up the useless struggle.

As prey and predator drifted downward another thought took hold of her. 'If I were to die today, I would have known. I must not give up!' She rallied what little remained of her forces and thrust the blade a little further down the vywern's throat. At last, the monster's strength gave way; life left the mystical beast. With one last jerk the woman pulled the blade out of the vywern's spine and

surfaced, gasping for breath. Blood streamed from her arms and hands where sharp teeth had mauled her; fits shook her as she spat out the icy water and she began to tremble uncontrollably while the horrible carcass of the ogre was sinking to the bottom.

The woman huddled herself into her furs, and started a fire to revive her freezing body before she could return into the glacial water to retrieve the elf-stone. The thought alone made her tremble. That loathsome hell of slush and ice might yet become her grave. She looked back at Lagarfljot and sucked in her breath in shock. The blue light was gone. There was a stir in the surface of the lake near the opposite shore. A dark shape scrambling out of the water could be guessed against a bluish sheen. It might have been a seal, but before the woman could be sure, whatever it was had vanished in the mountain range. She stared after it as if she had turned into stone, too shattered to move. The jewel of Antariel had been stolen yet again!

When the woman had regained enough control over her quivering limbs to put her clothes and skins back on, she girded her sword and returned slowly on weary feet the way she came. Where the rapids of Hengifoss cut into her path she waded across only to turn uphill toward the great fall. It was almost midnight, and her heart was heavy. She trudged on.

At last, she reached the cave pervaded with an eerie light and the smell of the sea. The dead king was already

pushing the heavy stone from his sarcophagus aside when she bent over him. "You have come!" he cried with joy. "Forgive me, I have doubted you." The woman undid sword and scabbard and knelt down beside him. "My lord Suridin, may you rest in peace," she said, handing him the sacred weapon. With a word of blessing the specter fell back dead. At that moment, the woman recognized him, for who he was, a mighty king, a handsome man, a fearless warrior in a broken world.

Tears ran down the woman's cheeks as she put sword and scabbard that had fallen from the dying hand back into place. It felt as if she was losing a friend, and into her grief poured all her worries and her toils. With blinded eyes she shoved the tomb's cover back into place. And behold! Instead of the simple stone slab there was now resting on the sarcophagus the likeness of the king carved in stone, holding sword and scabbard.

She remained bent over the sarcophagus for she did not know how long when she started, feeling that she was not alone. A man in a black cloak stood behind her. Through a veil of tears, she recognized a pair of eyes the color of decaying leaves in which the stars shone as brightly as on a clear night of autumn. A slender hand pulled her up and enfolded her in his cloak against a warm and beating heart.

An Unexpected Visitor

The woman did not get up the next day at all. In fact, she slept right through it until, late in the evening, a chill from the fireplace woke her. The last embers had died down some time ago. Her eyes still half-shut, she rose, kindled a new fire, shoved some heavy logs onto the grate, yawned, and returned to her pelts where her mind continued to weave the colorful threads of a dream while one blood-encrusted arm twitched on the fur.

A ravenous hunger woke her the morning after. First, she bathed her many wounds and bruises with herb-infused water that lifted her spirits as the scent perfumed the house. She ate with gusto an entire smoked fish! Afterward, she took the forlorn broomstick out of the ancient wooden basket where it had remained all by itself after the staff had grown into a live birch tree and the sword had been buried with the dead king. Instead of speaking an incantation over it, the woman simply turned it on its head and swept the house with it. Since her adventure at Lagarfljot, she knew that magic did not require any tools at all, neither staff, nor elvish sword or broom. “Sometimes, we need a token to remind us of who we are,” he had said, “but the power to create lies in our minds.” And she sang as she worked.

When she took the rubbish outside, she heard a thud on the ground where a shining new axe had fallen down, which must have rested against her door. She smiled with delight, and shouted “thank you” into the clear, freezing air although no raven could be seen. But something else caught her eye. On the path leading down to the lake a dark spot was moving. The experienced hunter realized quickly that it was no wild beast or even a stray sheep. Apparently, a traveler advanced at an excruciatingly slow pace toward her house. The woman frowned, and closed her door from the inside. Her new axe lay at the fireplace. She had not forgotten the bungled burglary. She turned to her books and scrolls, but found that her mind wandered, so she busied herself around the house, every so often checking on the slow progress of the traveler.

When she heard footsteps on the mushy ice of the half-frozen gravel path, the woman put on her skins and went outside, pulling the door shut behind her. Toward her walked a tiny person wrapped in so many pelts that she resembled a cub of polar bears that hunger drove from Siberia to the icy end of the sea in severe winters. However, the piercing green eyes scrutinizing the woman from among the furs were human and very old. A deep voice greeted her in a language that no one now speaks any more, and when finally bidden inside, and peeled out of the many furs, a wrinkled face emerged with deep lines in the tanned skin much like a shrunken apple. The cheeks still showed a faint hint of a tattoo. Three flecked feathers

were woven into the long, gray hair interspersed with strands of bluish black that fell over the narrow shoulders. The stranger took in the many books and manuscripts in the house, the wounds on the woman's arm, and paused at the broomstick. Asked to be seated the visitor balanced eagerly on a stack of books and took a sip of blue wine from her own flask that she pulled out of a sealskin bag. Then, her knotted short fingers and minuscule hands showing the blue veins and brown freckles of old age shuffled through the scrolls and papers on the table and her green eyes were sparkling with excitement.

The crone took a twig with a few dried leaves out of her skins and lit it on the fire, and she danced with an agility belying her age around the table and the stacks of books, papers, scrolls and manuscripts, so that the fragrant fumes began to waft through the house. As she danced and chanted, some nuts or dry seeds jangled in her pocket. She took a small box carved from walrus tusk out of her bag, which opened to reveal a rust-red dye. She licked on her finger, dipped it into the dye, and smeared lines and patterns onto the woman's face until it resembled a mask of a bird. Then, she sang. The woman was spellbound while the crone continued to sing and move with a rhythmic rattle to each step. She painted her own face with runes and symbols of an age older than all the books in the woman's house.

The visitor took her flask and dabbed a few drops of her blue wine around the woman's temples. Out of her

sealskin bag she pulled a small drum that spoke through
the fumes and the enchantment of the draught to the
woman's heart.

*Bones from the sea I sow
Bleached by salt and sun
Rocks that no man has touched
No wind cut and carved*

*Where no sound
Echoes through the waves
I cast my spell and sing
And withered herbs and wasted tears
I weave into my song*

As the older continued to chant and dance, the younger felt as if she was fading into another world. At last, the crone gave her wine to drink from her flask, which she felt pulsating through her body like fire and ice; and she fell back onto her pelts.

She felt herself lift off the floor. She soared toward the stars! At last! Earth had turned into a distant globe under her mighty wing. Planets in all the colors of sunlit ice crystals whirled past her. Fields of shooting stars in white, pink, and turquoise rose and fell beside her. Strange trees and flowers emerged from nebulous clouds to greet her. Creatures never seen on earth lifted their eyes to her. The universe and everything in it was hers!

Life on Earth no longer lured her. What was it to her if a lone wanderer in the highlands many years hence would find her bones decayed? She looked down at her body. Her body? She could not feel it any longer. Her shape stretched out under her lifeless. Lead seemed to fill the limbs she could not move. It mattered not.

In the midst of the glittering gems of cosmos in the deep of her mind, she saw a pair of starlit eyes the color of decaying leaves. They spoke to her of life on Earth that was light no longer; of a world that had been broken long ago, and of the future that she held in her keeping. Thus she remembered that her path lay still along the twisting crossroads of the stricken world.

With a stifled sigh, the woman bent all her will power toward her body that lay numb below her. In vain. She was

still drifting among pink and violet lights toward oblivion. Yet, she knew that she had to return. Images still haunted the blackness before her eyes as she struggled to feel one with her body once again, until she could so much as wriggle her toes.

She fell into a dreamless sleep for three full days and nights until she woke befuddled and wary to find herself alone, the visitor gone, and not one hair of her possessions taken or a single scroll displaced. It was as if the stranger had never set foot into her house at all.

The Haunted Scriptures

The next morning, a delicate lace of snow covered the frozen mud. Swift high cirrus clouds sped over the gray masses hovering around the highlands with the menace of more. Where the layers were broken, wisps of pink reflected the low sun far away in the southwest. No winds ruffled the shrubs below. It was as if the land held its breath in suspense.

The woman did not set foot outside. That tiny shaman from the other side of the world ... somehow her wrinkled face had seemed familiar. She strained her mind to recall where she had seen her before. But other images forced themselves upon her. All that had happened before the unexpected visitor arrived. The dead king at the waterfall, the slain serpent of Lagarfljot, the stone of Antariel that had slipped through her grasp, and the wizard who had enfolded her in a black cloak a long time ago or so it seemed. When they had stepped out of the cave at Hengifoss that night, the Raven had spoken; the rock walls of the canyon had closed over the sarcophagus of king Suridin as if the eerie cave, which he had haunted for a thousand years, never existed. Although, after elves and trolls were long gone, many treasure hunters scraped

and dug neither the tomb nor the elvish weapon were ever found again. Suddenly, she heard children laugh.

It was a clear, sunny day on the coast. Gunnar's ship was setting sail, with her snow-white pelts. The woman watched over breakfast in the inn. Her newly won sword was resting on the bench beside her. Outside country-folk got ready to cart off crates with new provisions, waving goodbye to friends from distant farms, who hurried off on their long journeys, and chatting with their neighbors. Children were running along the quay, chasing each other, with boisterous squeals of delight. They spotted her at once: a tiny figure in furs, scuttling past the inn, the tattooed crone, with feathers in her hair. The youngsters ran after her, jeering and taunting, one of them brushing a stout farmer in their noisy pursuit, who tore away from a friendly chitchat with his wife's brother, shouting, "stop it!" He grabbed the tallest boy by the ear. "You should be ashamed of yourself, Petur, a boy as old as you are! Do you not know? That woman is a healer. Your godmother would be long dead without her!" The boy blushed. His friends were awed and silenced. Meanwhile, the crone had disappeared. It seemed to the woman munching her bread at the window that the shaman had vanished in the sea. For a moment, she thought, she saw her turn into a seal. She gaped, but, then, she shook her head, and began to attack the fried fish.

In the little house at the icy end of the sea, the woman nodded to herself. 'It all makes sense now', she thought. 'The crone can change into a seal. Perhaps it was she who retrieved the sword from the lake. She must have been meeting the wizard at the port to pass him the weapon. No doubt she came here at his behest, to test my resolve.'

The woman poured herself some wine and began to search her fragmented memory for the instructions the wizard had given her when they last met. She pulled out parchments and books from her shelves, and pored over them, occasionally spilling a splash of golden wine, or dropping crumbs of crisp, fried fjallagroes, and flakes of dried fish on them as she delved deep into an ancient wisdom passed down from an unbroken world.

Still, the message was far from comforting. The indomitable foe of the elves was as ancient as the world and his might as irresistible as the tide of the ocean. Where the fiend dwelled, the elves never said, but Earth could not contain him. It was the Shadow Sorcerer who did his bidding in his dealings with the world. It was he who had unleashed the monsters of hell to wage war upon the elves in the realm at the southern sea when the stone of Antariel was lost one thousand years ago.

Suddenly, the woman gasped. The ornate, half-faded handwriting she was reading tore noisily. The parchment was ripped into four pieces, pierced by a broad black beak. The manuscripts and tomes vanished from her sight, even her bright fireplace disappeared, and she found herself

looking at grim rocks and peaks, tall and towering under a threatening sky, in which a raven spread its powerful pinions toward the mountains, behind which a sliver of daylight was fading. The startling vision vanished as quickly as it had appeared. She was back at her table near the fireplace; and the manuscript in her hand showed no trace of tear.

Quavering, the woman put the scroll aside, took a sip of wine, and opened a book whose binding hung precariously on a few loose threads from its tattered spine. As she handled the book, it disgorged its pages onto the table. Among its multitude of incantations, she searched for the most potent spells of protection. Spells against the Shadow Sorcerer who, unbeknownst to her, had waited in the icy waters of Lagarfljot, protected against the cold and the monster in the lake by a magic so compelling that it was beyond her grasp. Submerged in the freezing deeps, the Shadow Sorcerer bided his time until she arrived at dusk. He had preyed on her every move until the vyvern was slain. At that moment, he had snatched the stone of Antariel out of her grasp, split a fissure into the mountain range at the southern shore of the lake, and vanished from her sight when he closed the gap in the rocks behind him. An enemy hardly less powerful than his otherworldly master. A most unsettling thought.

The woman still had her eyes trained on the ancient word “vamiron” when the letter “o” began to grow. At first, it was just a great big dot that was spreading fast,

covering the page in the blink of an eye. Darkness fell all around her, the gloomy night sky spread overhead where the silhouettes of the snow-covered glaciers could still be guessed. The known lands disappeared speedily from her view as if she were flying through them. Before her, a black shape moved swiftly through the air, but whether it was the Raven or the Shadow Sorcerer she could not tell. At last, she found herself again among familiar mountains in the highlands. There was the entrance to the gleaming blue ice cave of Eyjabakkajökli. The raven in front of her flew straight into it. And the woman stared at the perfectly legible letter “o” of the word “vamiron” in her book that lay on her table.

She studied all day, speaking out loud spells to protect herself from her adversary and committing the charms to her memory, but she found few incantations to banish the overwhelming powers of her foe. He feared no living being and no powers of the shadow realm. It was heart rending. Apparently, he read in the minds of men and fabricated illusions that drove them mad. “Of course!” The woman exclaimed. “He must have known of my plan to salvage the stone.” Apparently he worked his evil in the ice cave of Eyjabakkajökli. “But, what ...”

A rolled-up scroll lifted off the table; it stood itself upright, then toppled over, and turned into a raven. Night had fallen. Yet, even against the gloom around the ridge on which the woman appeared to be standing she could see that its shining black plumage was ruffled. A wound

on its left wing left him flapping helplessly. It opened its beak to sound a muted, tortured “krrh”. Since it had no voice left, it hurled itself again and again against a mighty gate of a great, torch-lit fortress, battlement after battlement proudly dominating Lagarfljot from the heights of Fljotsdalur. The fortress of the elves. The next thing the woman knew was that the scroll dropped back onto her table near the fireplace in her little home.

“Nooooooooo!” The agitated woman rose from her seat, hand against her head, and began pacing around the table, treading every so often on pages and parchments lying haphazardly on the floor. She stepped on and over the priceless manuscripts on the pelts and the stacks of tomes from venerable writers of days long gone. “Is this a threat? Or a fragment of a past? A vision? And if so, who created it? The Raven? Should I go to the fortress of the elves? Or was it the dark wizard? He does create illusions it seems. What shall I do?”

She sat down again, and browsed through the book that lay in shambles on the table. It appeared that the images sprang out of the manuscripts she was reading, all of them relating to the Shadow Sorcerer. The woman got up again, and paced, muttering occasionally: “He knows, he knows! How can I fight him if he can read my thoughts?”

When evening fell the woman grew increasingly restless and began to listen for the sound of feet upon the path. At the slightest sigh of the still nature outside she leaped up to the door which she threw wide open to the frosty

emptiness. As time crept by, one disappointed moment after another, doubt sneaked up on her and began to question her faith in the wizard with starlit eyes the color of decaying leaves. He did not come. Despair settled in her soul.

The Ice Cave at Eyjabakkajökli

Cold fog shrouded the world the next morning. An impenetrable, milky haze hid mountains and valleys. The little house in the highlands floated in the void, utterly forsaken. The panicked woman woke with a groan and rubbed her red, swollen eyes. Her unkempt pelts twisted and flung about spoke of haunting nightmares that had pried apart the fibers of her mind and ripped the woman's courage out of her aching heart. Even as she tried to shake off the horrific madness it assailed her eyes with contorted images of ravens and her own fractured face. Staggering and swaying, she mended the fire, but when she attempted to heat water, her haphazard movements upset the kettle and dowsed the embers. Livid, she threw the kettle across the room, sending sprays of water all over her manuscripts. Another such night would doom her to life in the dim twilight of broken resolve.

So, she stepped into the white nothingness. The freezing cold chased the warped thoughts from her mind. She held her breath as she quickly washed her shirking skin and hair with snow, shuddering. Feelings only returned to her numb, blue arms and legs when she was snuggled up in her pelts next to the fire. In between sips of wine, she yanked the broomstick out of her old basket and began

dismantling it with clumsy fingers to which the blood had not yet fully returned. She carefully laid the twigs aside, and hammered a nail into its tip instead. Out came the leather bag. Into it went wine in a flask, followed by firewood, a torch, a rope, and the threadbare book of spells she had been consulting the day before. She roasted several pieces of smoked lamb on a skewer and carefully wrapped a large portion of it in oilskins tossing it into the bag as well. She feasted on the remainder of the meat, and cared not where fat or wine dripped over the papers and parchments on the table. She rather had a feeling that she would not return. Nonetheless, her mind clung on to her purpose, tooth and claw. Fear could not assail her any longer. She threw a layer of pelts over her sheepskins before she set out. When she did she found that her spirits had improved.

Her stick clicked onto ice and rock under its tip, and her pace became steady while her eyes dwelled on every stalk and every stone before her feet. The mist moved not. The icy shroud wrapped all the world in a dim gloom. It was as if she was wandering through frozen clouds. The only sound far and wide was her footfall until she reached the broad valley of the glacier stream into which many rustling creeks emptied their quarry. The well-known and oft-trodden path was almost level. She walked so rapidly that she nearly stumbled into the first half-frozen ford. Supported by her staff, she jumped from a patch of ice to a pile of floes that had frozen to a stone among the rapids and gained the other bank without getting her feet wet.

When she reached the Eyjabakkar valley, she clambered up the steep southern flanks of Snaefell, skirting the treacherous marshes hidden in the gray haze where the glacier slush seeped into boggy pools. Initially, she advanced quickly, finding foothold on edges of brown rocks, skidding but a little over slippery gravel but as soon as she entered the indomitable winter realm of the mountains, her feet faltered more frequently, and her heavy burden became heavier with every step. Under her pelts she soon became hot and wiped beads of sweat from her face. Night would have fallen before she could reach the ice cave of the Shadow Sorcerer. She trudged on.

Whatever shreds of fear and doubt wafted from the nightmares into her living thoughts she willed away. At dusk, she halted for a bite to eat near the shoulder of the glacier leading up to the cave. The fog still held. She heard the muffled gurgle of a creek spluttering under a sheet of ice.

As the last hints of twilight dissolved into the gloom, the growing cold clung lustily to the moisture underneath her pelts and skins. A chill current emanated from the ice cave, which she guessed to be right ahead in the impenetrable darkness hanging over tall cliff walls that faded into night and mist. She lit her torch and marched on, drawing herself up tall, and shaking her head free of whispers of voices long gone that spoke of defeat and death until at last in the void of her mind remained nothing but the task laid upon her.

Eyjabakkajoekli. The ice cave of our days bears little

resemblance to its awe-inspiring vastness at the time when elves and trolls still roamed the earth. The great hall whose colossal pillars of icicles supported a ceiling over a hundred meters from the ground collapsed long ago. What is left today is but a stunted fraction of a corridor that led deep into the vaults of the mountain where the sorcerer of terrible might ruled to the detriment of all.

The temperature was dropping rapidly. The fiery tongues of her torch lit the sparkling columns of ice left and right of the gaping orifice where her path vanished in a faint bluish gleam. The woman shook her head. There would be no gem waiting for her to be picked up and carried away at the end of that passage. No doubt her enemy had set a trap. However, there was nothing that she could do but follow the path that was laid out at her feet. So, she sighed and entered the cavern, apparently floating above the glassy floor as do people used to watching their steps over snow and ice. Gingerly probing the slippery surface with the pointed tip of her staff, she found her path suddenly blocked. She gasped. A sheet of ice drew a grotesque image in the flitting flame of her torch. Someone tall, but disjointed at the waist, appeared as if he was on the verge of toppling over. He looked faintly familiar. His right leg was twisted at an awkward angle, stiff and stumpy arms appeared to befit a misshapen dwarf, half of an uneven torso protruded out from the glacial surface like a sculpture, the neck was contorted and stretched thin, balancing with apparent difficulty a square

head with a bulging left and an enormous, drooping right eye, and a mouth that cut through the chin. At last, the spooked woman recognized her distorted like.

Barely able to withdraw her gaze from the horrible reflection, the woman forced her steps carefully around the icy mirror to continue her search. But the bluish light was no longer where she had seen it before. Instead, its sheen lured her now toward the left and up. She set out to climb when her staff slipped off the ice underfoot and her torch went out. She slid downward until her stick hit a rock. She was spun around, knocked off her feet and, losing control over her body, careened backward, head first down into the cavern of ice, unable to stop or steer.

As she sped helplessly headlong backward, fissures and cracks in the ice suddenly gaped open, revealing steep, bottomless crevices inching ever nearer into her path. Her staff fell clattering over the edge. Panic gripped her that she would lose her footing and fall into the abyss. Yet, she could do nothing. At the next moment, the ever-shifting gravity of her tumbling world threatened to push her into a free-fall to the ceiling of the ice cathedral there to be pierced by large icicles.

The dizzy woman's head bumped into a rock face. She found herself perched on a slender ledge above a deep chasm at a dead end. She looked around and stifled a scream. She was not alone. Frozen against the side of the cave she discerned the bloodied, broken body of the tiny, ancient, tattooed shaman, staring with dead eyes out of

her skeletal skull in between torn pieces of skin and hair.

As the woman recoiled from the horror, a thought came to her. 'I have seen this before. This same tortured body. It must have been a nightmare. Or, perhaps a vision conjured by the Shadow Sorcerer. Of course! I read about it. After the battle at Sa-Imdar, when the elves returned home and Lady Narien was dead, but her shaman lived, what was her name? Sur ... no ... that was the king ... but similar ... Sar ... no ... Ser ... yes, Sirvin. Could it be her? Now I fear she is truly dead, or is it just another vision? If only the Raven were here ...'

The woman stood still contemplating the terrible corpse when the ice walls around her began to move, forming ever-changing images of a living maze that obliterated any sense of orientation. Icicles grew out of the floor. The glacier's water flowed horizontally along one side of the cave. The blue light emerged from the wall to her left, shone high above, moved to her right, dropped far below, surfaced ahead, and appeared behind. The shaman's tormented corpse began to haunt her. Then, the woman caught glimpses of ravens with lame wings and breaking eyes the color of decaying leaves. Or were they Sirvin's? She groaned. The maddening menaces began to take their toll. The woman's body seemed to be glued to the side of the glacial cathedral. She closed her eyes.

Then it began. A sigh at first, then another. It grew into a low moan. An ominous rumble resonated all around her like the distant thunder of an approaching storm, speedily

drawing near. Behind the woman, the mountain roared, rising from a low base to a painfully high pitch. The whimpering amplified into a haunting scream, chased by the growl of the earth. In torment and agony, the ice shrieked until its cries were drowned in a deep roll. A deafening screech issued from the ceiling as if it was being pierced by an enormous blade. Unbearably shrill sounds grated through the frost all around the woman who held her hands to her tortured ears.

Suddenly, a large block of ice crashed down right next to the woman, sending shudders through the cavern and a small shower of ice crystals across the woman's face as it broke on impact into several large chunks one of which scraped her left arm, sending a searing pain shooting through her limb. Before she had time to move large icicles with sharp points were hurled at her, nearly skewering her right leg. Ever more gigantic pieces of frozen snow and large, glass-clear sheets of ice came pelting down. A frozen volcano had awoken. With a deafening boom the floor ripped open. A terrible explosion sent fiery flashes bouncing off icy surfaces that blasted asunder in a rain of white crystals. Searing squirts of lava, enormous boulders, and smoldering ash were hurling out of the deeps of the earth. The sides of the glacier smashed with a bang into large blocks of ice that crashed down from the height, taking half the mountain with them and reducing a large part of the cavern to rubble. Among the mayhem it seemed that, far away, a

blue light flickered and failed to a piercing shriek of dismay. A deep chasm had opened before the woman. But, the earth still shook. Her leather bag was emptied into the deep, the oil skins were flung down, releasing roasted bits of smoked lamb, kindling tumbled down, the open book scattered its pages, the rope uncoiled, and last came the flask that split open on impact, spluttering golden wine onto the ice. The very ground under the woman began to tilt and she was slapped against sharp, stone-hard edges before she at last fell onto the bottom in a lifeless heap. A cloud of ash shrouded her body. Far away a voice called out. "Sirvin!"

A hush fell over the ice cave of Eyjabakkajoekli. One last glacial pane ambled through the air before it shattered on the floor almost as an afterthought. A great raven had flown deep into the devastation of the icy maze and changed into a wizard in a black cloak. He had spoken a word of command; his starlit eyes the color of decaying leaves sparkled in wrath. Only, the fiend was not that easily overcome. "You are too late!" Out of a fissure in a rock wall that had cloven into two leaked a reeking fume and veiled the wizard. He tried to cast a spell, but could no longer speak. In the brink of time he raised his hand. The poison vanished in the rock. Choking and coughing, he leaned against the stone, gasping for breath, but the toxic vapors had taken their toll. His legs gave way; and he slid down the wall until he collapsed on the floor.

Ash-covered droplets of water began to trickle down

the spoilt sides of the glacier cave leaving erratic trails on the walls. In troughs, many drops met to form small puddles that expanded quickly and spilled into cracks and fissures. Little creeks issued from breaches between stones and rubble and disappeared in dusty crevices. Soon, water surged from the deep of the cave and began to rise swiftly, seeping through clefts and pushing pebbles and debris before it.

Inside the cave, the wizard stirred. Life returned to his limbs. Stars blazed in his eyes. He perceived the conjurer, cloaked in black almost like himself, with ancient eyes in which no stars shone, in a dark chamber of his ruined realm behind barricades of broken rocks and icicles. His enemy who had been thwarted but not yet undone could read his thoughts. A block of ice wedged between the mountainside and a huge crag thrust out of hell quietly became unstuck and thudded to the ground. A spell died in the wizard's throat when it pinned his left arm under it.

Water continued to gurgle and bubble, occasionally hissing into steam when it flowed over the red-hot mass that issued from the deeps of the earth. No longer could the crags and cliffs contain the swelling flood. Chunks of fiery lava and ice burst out of the cavern and broke down the great pillars guarding the entrance. A horrible torrent flooded the valleys below as it carried large ice floes and boulders from far below the surface of the earth to the sea. In the depth of an icy crevice, the woman opened her eyes. Her head throbbed; and she felt cold. A puddle had

formed below her feet. The water lapped at her boots. Soon, the icy slush was skimming her ankles. She had to get out of there! Dazed, she carefully moved her head to look around. A towering jumble of giant crags, sharp splinters of cliffs, and blocks of ice dusted with ash rose all around her. There was no way out as far as the woman could see, except for a small opening high above her to the left. She was trapped! Doomed! Her venture had failed. She felt small and frail, and the wave of despair threatened to drown her. If only she could fly! 'It is quite useless. I know full well that I can't. If there is one thing that I learned in all those years of futile attempts it is that.' The cold took hold of her. She drew a deep breath, and painfully turned to her side. She halted, waiting for her dizziness to subside. Her left arm was swollen, and every movement hurt. But her fuzzy mind threw out a thought, something she might have heard before. She could not yet grasp it clearly. '... born ...', it resounded in her head. She dragged herself closer to the heap of wreckage that remained of her possessions. 'Powerful...' Patiently the woman waited for the words to form, '... wise ...'

There lay the wasted book of spells. The slush began to wash over the loose pages that were strewn about the icy floor. A steady stream of water was rushing noisily toward the woman who could crawl but slowly. At last, she reached the book, now soaking wet, with ink dripping from the ancient script, but the letters were still legible. As if the moment had frozen in the glacial cavern, she turned the

pages, one by one until at last she found the incantation she was looking for. With aching bones she rose up tall and bent her will toward the stars she had strived so long to reach, and issued a resounding summons in a language that no one now knows any more.

*Wind sea and earth
Slay and give birth
Shroud of the dead
Cover my head
Man's bone and flesh
Turn into ash
Ash dust and sand
Rise from the land
Wings claws and beak
Soar shield and speak*

In the blink of an eye sunlight filled the ice cave of Eyjabakkajoekli; a hideous shriek trailed off far away; the woman was gone, but in her stead a scrawny raven nursed a battered left wing. She had done it! “Kraah,” she shouted jubilant, and closed her beak as soon as the sound had left it. If the Shadow Sorcerer heard her triumph might be short-lived.

Flapping and fluttering at first, as pain numbed her limbs, she eventually rose above the chaos of destruction as if in a drunken stupor and flew through the gap she had glimpsed in the barrier of rocks and ice. Since spreading her wings did not come easy to her, she soon needed a place to rest. She attempted to land in a long, low glide on an icy shelf, which pulled her claws from under her. She wailed in agony “kraah”. Too loud she feared. The Shadow Sorcerer might have heard her. No doubt he would be lurking somewhere in the dark unless the forces he unleashed had smote him in the ruin of his dwelling. But that she dared not hope and thought that perhaps the sound of gushing water had muffled her cry; for there was no sign of him.

Looking about her, one beady eye at a time, she spotted high above her a lone icicle that might afford a better view. The raven flew and clawed at the icicle that dangled precariously from the ceiling of the cavern. It swung loose and darted toward the abyss. The startled bird fled. “Kraah!” She landed safely on a rock. It looked familiar. Had she been at that spot before? A bluish gleam

appeared behind a far block of ice. Was that the gray glimpse of dawn that strayed into the cave? The raven shook its head. It could not yet be morning. What was it?

She spread her wings once more, turned the corner, and gasped. “Krrh.” It was the stone of Antariel. Encrusted with a thick coat of ash on one side, it had come to nestle between a chunk of ice and a broken icicle. Or, was she being tricked by yet another illusion? She moved closer. There was no doubt. “Kraah!” How the crystal came to rest among the debris she could only guess. When the black sorcerer had cast his malediction for her doom he must have summoned powers that he had not bargained for and lost the treasure that he had meant to save. If the conjurer himself had survived the destruction, he must be close at hand. She had to be quick. The bird swooped toward the jewel and missed by a large margin. The raven flew a circle and toppled over as it touched the ground, leaving a tiny trail of blood. She let out an annoyed “kraah”. Sitting on the blue gem the fluttering raven watched its claws slipping off its smooth sides. The bird flapped just in time to avoid another tumble. The crystal skidded on the ice. The raven hopped near, measuring the stone, one beady eye at a time. At last, she had a firm grip on the crystal, took to the air, and fled with slow, uneven strokes from the cavern.

In a far corner of Eyjabakkajoekli, the Raven struggled to his feet but found he could not do so while his left arm was pinned to the frozen ground. Weary and wounded, he

was a mighty wizard still, and his retribution swift. He raised his hand and turned the incantations and evil spells meant for his doom against the master who had wrought them. The ground groaned. An avalanche of crags and rocks, lava, dust, stone, and icicles buried the Shadow Sorcerer who, with a scream of hurt and hatred, vanished from the face of the Earth. The wizard caught his breath. An incantation broke the block of ice that entrapped him. It shattered noisily into pieces. The Raven fell to the floor.

The fog had lifted. A blue stone flew on raven wings over the walls of the mountains into the moonless night. The snow of the highlands glistened blue in the light of the jewel. The woman listened for pursuers, but, when she heard none, she dropped down on a small shelf near Laugarfell. Even though, she dared not release the stone from her cramping clutches. Beneath her shimmered Lagarfljot. Impossible! She was still perched on the great flanks of Snaefell. The glacier lake must lie somewhere in the dark distance. Flotsam floated at the foot of the Fljotsdalur range. A black beak opened ... and closed again. The valley was flooded! Her valley! Where was her home? She could not find it. The water must have swept it away! Among ice floes and rubble her sharp raven eyes saw a few wooden beams swimming in the water, and submerging manuscripts! A tear rolled over the black feathers of a bedraggled bird. But, she had no time to grieve and flew off again, flapping, falling, and gliding in the empty night. When she could not bear the pain in her

limbs any longer she landed in a small hollow atop Holl where, with a tortured “kraah”, she let finally go of the stone that rolled into the slight depression. At once, she fell asleep.

The scrawny black bird that was the woman woke with a start. The rock beneath her moved! It actually sneezed: “Ha...ha...hat...chew!” A great rumble shook the mountain range, upsetting the elf-stone that rolled out of the dip and precipitated down the bumpy hillside where a giant hand plucked it lightning-fast out of the air. “Hey! What’s that?” The raven fluttered into safety. Trolls! Of all possible mishaps on her flight through darkness and gloom, that was the worst! They might be no match for a bird, but they would never let go of the jewel. The raven cowered down in despair.

The ground trembled again. The troll rose with a grumpy moan, stretching his mighty limbs, and came face to face, warts, pimples, bloodshot eyes, beard, and all with the raven but the sleepy head had his thick lids half-closed and did not bother to look. The bird dodged deeper into a crack in the stones, trying to blend with the dark rocks. “Tift! Come on! The others are already gone. There will be no meat left for us if we don’t hurry.” Two more sallow, dirty faces with potato-shaped noses the size of pumpkins appeared behind the hillock, lit by a torch that also brushed the miserable raven. Yet that night the trolls were not concerned with birds. Tift grunted in reply and yawned, the elf-stone still in his closed fist. A bluish light

shone out between the calluses of his stubby fingers. “What’s that, Tift? What have you got there?” inquired one of the newcomers. “Huh?” The other troll snorted impatiently. “In your hand, dumbbo!” Tift looked at his hands, opening his fist, and letting the stone drop. “Oh. That thing fell from the sky.” Before his last word was spoken the raven dived after the stone, as did five large hands. The trolls were faster. The raven nipped fiercely at one finger that withdrew suddenly with an angry “ouch”. Another troll pulled two large tail feathers from the bird that fled into the high winds while three hands closed around the gem and each other.

“Let go!” cried one troll. “I found it!” The other groaned: “You’re breaking my bones!” The one with the torch, nursing the wound from the bird’s beak, shouldered in between the two others and brought the torch down on their hands. The furry claws of his friends smoldered in the flame, and they began to shout in torment and rage. Soon a full-blown scuffle broke out, and a nose cracked. Blood began to stream down a troll’s face. The torch fell to the ground. As yet, the stone was still in Tift’s fist. The raven circled lower, biding its time. Fingers closed around Tift’s throat. He in turn smashed the stone onto his adversary’s temple. To no avail. So, he let go of the stone to free himself of the hands that were slowly suffocating him, while the third kicked the other in the back and, stumbling over brawling limbs, lost his balance. That was the moment of the raven! The bird dived, picked up the

treasure, but immediately dropped it again as its cramped claws refused to tighten once more around the crystal. “Kraah! Kraah!” One of the trolls noticed what the bird was up to and hurled himself toward it. As the huge body crashed onto the flanks of the hills, the raven flew off, but the stone of Antariel rolled down the hillside in an avalanche of pebbles and rocks out of the trolls’ reach. The bird flew after the gem in dismay, fearing it might be buried under the stones. Heavy footsteps followed the raven down the mountain, kicking loose more rocks and boulders as the trolls tried to elbow each other out of the way.

The raven discovered the blue stone rolling out from under a shrub toward the deluge. The bird sailed down and, with a tremendous effort, forced its claws to close around the jewel despite the agonizing pain. The trolls were almost upon it. The bird flew toward the valley as a troll’s fist drew back empty-handed. Almost spent the bird swayed dangerously close to the water. Steering was difficult with a mauled tail and ruffled wings. The trolls came trampling down the hillside after her, kicking off more landslides in their wake. Tift already stretched his fingers greedily toward the jewel. He stumbled on the wet crags at the edge of the water and fell with an enormous splash headlong into the icy flood. When he surfaced spluttering blood streamed from a great gash on his forehead and he howled in pain, and anger. The raven had faded into the night; the blue light of the gem cast hardly more than a dim reflection on a murky mirror far away.

The curses of the trolls lost themselves somewhere in the darkness.

The lands were no longer recognizable. Water covered the narrow valleys and stretched from the feet of the northern rim to the one in the south. Drowned was the outcrop on which she had slain the serpent in the lake. Nonetheless, that must be Lagarfljot. The woman sighed with relief. “Krrh.” The end of her journey was almost in sight. She flew higher. Then she saw it. Battlement after proud battlement dominating the immense glacier lake: the fortress of the elves. A light breeze took her over the great gate into the torch-lit courtyard where she dropped the crystal and crashed on the ground.

The Raven's Tale

A gray twilight hovered over Lagarfljot the next morning. When the cloud cover ruptured in the southwest, a bright, blue sky was revealed in which one single, long, white cloud gleamed in a sheen of pink, rose, mauve, orange, and turquoise like a metal glaze on a porcelain vessel.

The woman woke in a large bed under silken covers in tints of the sinking sun. Delicately carved petals and stars wove around the slender columns supporting the canopy that rose above her head. Through the high windows seeped the clear winter day of the Eastfjords. Even though, the walls of the large chamber glowed golden in the sunlight willed into being by the power of the elves.

She smiled and turned to close her eyes once more, when, suddenly, she jerked wide-awake, with a frown. There was something that she must do. The drug-induced visions of the shaman flitted past. 'Like, and not like', she thought. She saw a marine-blue sheen on the flooded valley where her house was no more than a dream, the fiery boulders hurled out of the ice cave, and the flames of the door where the Raven had led her. That was it! The Raven! She had seen him again in her nightmares, a voiceless black bird, with an injured left wing, hurling himself against the great gate. The woman threw off the

bed covers and sat up in as much of a hurry as her dizzy head allowed when she felt herself gently pushed back into the pillows. She had not noticed the shining being, tall and beautiful, that stood by her bed. The elf smiled at her. "He has returned and his hurts are healed. But you must rest a little longer." Reassured, the woman drifted back into a long, and peaceful slumber.

The strange reflections in the sky over the land at the icy end of the sea held that day. When the woman rose, refreshed and healed, she gazed out of the fortress of Fljotsdalur into the still turquoise sky with the pink cloud over the water of Lagarfljot that continued to rise. She slipped into a soft silk robe and swept down a long corridor lit by candlelight reflected in a glittering rainbow of crystals like sunrays trapped in a droplet of melting ice on a bow bending over a rustling creek in the highlands. And, amidst the splendor of the elvish court, she thought of her lonely house that she was never to see again; and her joy became tinged with regret.

The woman came to a double staircase gracefully flowing down to the great hall. Music and light laughter wafted up to her through the fragrant air. A large number of elves in magnificent garments were standing in groups below her. The wizard was among them as tall and luminescent as the elves who turned toward her in greeting as she descended. He met her at the last step; and she looked into starlit eyes the color of decaying leaves. 'He must be one of them'. He smiled, and she felt herself

grow as tall and luminescent as if she had been their kindred all along. “A wizard is whatever he wants to be.” When he took her in his arms and kissed her on the lips, the woman’s heart traveled to the unbroken realms where life is light.

Together they entered the great hall with its high pillars where a banquet table was laid with the most succulent fruits, fresh herbs, yellow cheeses, and creams, crisp white bread, and aromatic honey, roasted fowl, lamb and fish, and ruby-red wines and berries. A fire was crackling brightly in the grand chimney at the far end of the hall. Elves were singing to the sound of harps; and it appeared to the woman that even birds chimed in although it was a bitter winter day outside at the glacier lake of Lagarfljot whose rising waters were muddied. But where was the stone of Antariel? It must be shining brightly when even the sky over the icy end of the sea mirrored its magic. Before she could put the question to the wizard at her side, he took her hand. “Bliss has returned to the land, for a while. Many things that were hidden shall be revealed today. Threads of a long-forgotten past shall be unraveled and the world will never be the same again.”

She stood thunderstruck. Her heart fell into the shifting gravity of the icy maze at Eyjabakkajoecli just when she thought that bliss at last was within her grasp as well. ‘Will I never find peace?’ He smoothed a strand of hair out of her pale face. “Do not be alarmed. Through all your trials you have become who you truly are. You are no longer

bound to the world of men.” Around the startled woman, the elves laughed and sang. The Raven poured some wine into her glass, and she became as gay as the luminescent beings around her. At last, a wizened elf with a gray beard and eyes in which the stars danced – “that is Orad, the son of Daminor. He was only a child - in elvish eyes - when his father fell” – asked the Raven to tell his tale, and a hush fell over the company.

“When I came to Eyjabakkajoecli to protect the woman whom I love,” he said, turning to her, “I feared that I had sent you to your death.” His starlit eyes spoke of the grief that pierced his soul when he saw the lifeless body among the devastation in the cavern. “But, then I found that it was Sirvin’s body, and not yours, that lay in my path.”

Immediately, the wizard was interrupted by shocked whispers around the table. “Sirvin? Dead?” The eldest of them, grave men with white beards, clothed in silvery white, with circlets in their hair, visibly perturbed, knotted their brows. The lord of the elves looked long into eyes the color of decaying leaves. “How came the shaman’s body into the cave?”

The Raven sighed. “My lord, I fear that the truth is far more troubling than even I could have suspected. The key to the riddle lies back in the days of the fall of Lord Daminor on the High Plain of Sa-Imdar. When we returned from the war in the southern realm we found Sirvin barely alive and badly wounded and our hearts went out to her. Her sufferings appeared to prove her

trustworthiness and we did not doubt her then. But as she was healing I began to wonder why the tiny shaman lived whereas Lady Narien did not, and if this was so, why Sirvin should fall prey to simple mountain-trolls. I did not trust her claim that our ancient foe had taught the trolls enchantments that were beyond her skills. I believed that she had fallen under the spell of the Shadow Sorcerer and was forced to do his will.” One of the elders interrupted. “Why have you not spoken of this before?” The Raven turned to him. “What would you have me do, my lord Asteron? It was a mere suspicion that I had and Sirvin still attended our council.

“Then, the countless years went by that we grieved over the loss of the lady whom we loved, without yielding any clue as to the true nature of the shaman’s comings and goings. At last, the trolls returned into these lands, and I watched and listened unbeknownst to them in the sky above their campfires. However, never did I find evidence that they possessed any magic knowledge. So surely, Sirvin did not speak the truth.

“When the stone of Antariel was stolen a second time at Lagarfljot, the seal that did retrieve it from the lake was wounded. I saw the trace of blood that lost itself in the mountain, yet ...” The woman – all astonishment – interrupted him. “You were there?” The Raven looked into her eyes. “Ever since you first attempted to cast a spell I was never far away.” He turned to Orad. “Whether willingly or no, Sirvin in the guise of a seal delivered the

stone of Antariel to the evil sorcerer, and doing so even split the mountain range south of Lagarfljot to escape my pursuit, the same shaman who could not fight a mountain troll to save the Lady Narien.”

The elves murmured in anger, but their lord raised his hand and silence fell.

“Afterwards, Sirvin, compelled to serve the dark side by means best known to her, initiated the woman bound on confronting the Shadow Sorcerer as I had asked her to do. For I still trusted that Sirvin was in her heart on our side. But there I erred. What befalls a traveller on the path of dreams is sacred. No one can force that knowledge from a shaman. However, hardly had Sirvin completed the ritual that the black magician worked spells on the woman’s mind and used his knowledge of her fears against her in the ice cave. This only meant that the shaman did what she was doing of her own free will. Fearing that there were two servants of our ancient foe to fight, I rushed to Eyjabakkajoekli.

“At first I almost was relieved to find Sirvin dead, for she had grown ever more powerful since I saw her last in the spring. My eyes almost deceived me. For what I saw in the ice cave was not a body at all. A spell broke the enchanted vision, and then I searched for her, but found her not. Yet, she betrayed herself when she sneered at me. I recognized her voice. Sirvin had grown powerful, indeed. She and the Shadow Sorcerer were one.”

Gasps were heard in the council. The woman groaned.

Orad looked stricken. “Alas, she has betrayed us all, even the Lady Narien. Sirvin knew all our secret designs against our enemy. She must have been after the stone of Antariel even then.”

“I now believe the war was only a ruse by our ancient foe to capture the jewel. No doubt, Sirvin did not count on Mo, the troll, to cast the gem into the water, even out of her reach. Undeterred, she bided her time. Yet, in the end, when we confronted Sirvin at Eyjabakkajoecli, she made a mistake. In the attempt to wipe us from the face of the Earth she woke the volcano that sleeps at the heart of the glacier, forgetting in her fury the mighty powers that dwell in the deeps of the earth, older than her. All her cruelty and cunning came to naught. She lost the treasure that she sought to protect. Her boundless hate of all things that prosper was turned against her and she was overcome.”

Orad looked grave, nodded, and raised his goblet. “Never have wizards done greater deeds. You will be blessed by all those who may bestow such grace until the ending of all worlds.” Upon these words the elves rose to honor their guests, and lights shone in their eyes.

The woman leaned toward the wizard at her side and whispered, “there is still one thing I should like to know. I saw the shaman once before, the day you let me win the sword. Tell me, was it she who retrieved it for you out of the depth of Lagarfljot?” He smiled, “no, she did not. The sword simply answered to my summons.”

She nodded. “And the burglar – who was he?” The

wizard looked into her eyes. "I do not know. The enemy has many servants and many are the secrets hidden in the night. It may have been no more than an image that the cunning sorceress created in your mind. But her attack failed and, instead of scaring you, it hardened your resolve. Nonetheless, only a servant was she of an evil master who will never die."

The wizard had spoken softly, but it was Orad who replied. "We have earned but a respite." A shadow of sorrow passed over the table. "As long as the stone of Antariel remains here it will forever lure hell's creatures back into these lands. The jewel must return to elvenhome, and so must we, lest in our wish to bless the world we doom it." The woman gasped dismayed. "But ... but ... then all my efforts were in vain."

The Raven shook his head. "That is not so. You saved the treasure from the enemy, averting a great evil, for we do not know to what abominable use he would have converted the gem. Its fate now lies no longer in your hands." The woman sighed. Orad smiled at her. "It is true, the brightest jewel will be gone, but the darkest despair will vanish with it. Yet, man will remember the bliss we wrought, and it is man and man alone who must create his heaven or his hell in the wide world."

At nightfall one by one the shining beings passed out of the great portal. High over Lagarfljot a woman and a wizard with starlit eyes the color of decaying leaves watched the long line of lights disappear in the vastness

between stars and mountains. If she had but known the stars shone brightly in her own eyes. “Men!” she said. “Most likely, they will create hell.”

Sorrow crept like a shadow over the wizard’s face as he glanced into the deepening darkness. “Fear is driving men forever onward to their doom. It lets them forget from whence they came and whither they will go.” He sighed. “But there will always be some who will strive to reach the stars. There will always be wizards. To create heaven.” She looked into his eyes and saw a boundless realm where life was light.

Later that night two great ravens flew through the silent lands and faded in the darkness. Behind them the magnificent fortress turned into a stony bluff looking for all the world as if it had never been anything other but rock as solid as eternal laws. Even today it still weathers the high winds atop the Fljotsdalur range, but neither elves nor trolls were ever again seen on Earth.

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Marlene vor der Hake