





## The Legend of the Völsungs and Gjúking

*The Tears of Mardöll* is partly a retelling of certain Norse myths and legends. One of the main legends is the tale of the Völsungs and Gjúking (it is told in *Völsunga saga*). This tells how Sigurðr was tutored by the smith Reginn, who reforged Sigurðr's broken heirloom, the sword Gramr, for him to slay the dragon Fáfnir, who was Reginn's brother and had a huge hoard of treasure, the wergild for the slaying of his brother Ottarr. Sigurðr slew Fáfnir on Gnitaheiðr, but then tasted the dragon's blood, which enabled him to understand the twitterings of birds: they told him Reginn would betray him, so he killed Reginn as well, and took the treasure. The birds also spoke of a maiden protected behind a wall of flame. Sigurðr rode through the fire wall to the princess Brynhildr and wooed her, but then made his way to the court of the Gjúking, where he married Guðrún after being given a magic potion of forgetfulness by Guðrún's mother Grímhildr, who wanted him for her daughter. Brynhildr marries Guðrún's brother, Gunnarr. The truth about what had happened comes out when Brynhildr and Guðrún went swimming together, when Guðrún showed Brynhildr the ring that Sigurðr had given her – the very ring that Brynhildr had given to Sigurðr to plight her troth to him when he first wooed her. Brynhildr was distraught, and she egged on Gunnarr to slay his dear comrade, Sigurðr, which Gunnarr got his brother to do. Brynhildr foretold to Gunnarr his gruesome future, then begged him to set her on a pyre alongside Sigurðr: the two of them were burnt together. Guðrún all but lost her mind at the loss of her husband Sigurðr, and wandered off into the woods. Eventually, her mother Grímhildr forced her into marrying Atli, much against her will: she foresaw the evil that was to come. Atli invited Guðrún's brothers to a feast, and demanded all the treasure that had come from Fáfnir's hoard. They refused, and Atli killed them, setting Gunnarr in a snake pit; by playing his harp, he charmed all the snakes bar one, which bit him to death, but he declared that the secret of where the treasure was would die with him. Guðrún arranged a feast to remember her brothers, and cooked her sons by Atli and served them up to him, telling him what she had done once he had eaten them. She then stabbed him to death in his sleep. Guðrún tried to drown herself, but was swept away and came to King Jónakr, whom she married. Some further cruel scenes follow, involving her children by Jónakr.

## A NOTE

*This story spells the Norse names in an authentic way. In particular, remember that þ and ð (capitals: Þ and Ð) are like English th. There is some more information on spelling, and runes, and the names that come into the story at the back of the book; also a list of strange words, which are marked in the text with °.*

# THE SUMMONS

## THE DRAGON'S BREATH

*Running, running. Careering down slippery slopes, no care for the mud splattering her new white socks, dodging the looming trees, feet not keeping up with straining body, lurching forward, hands grasping at branches for support, she almost topples over, as brambles claw at flesh, and scornful roots poke from the ground, like an ancient earth giant's knobbled knees, lifted up on purpose to trip up anyone trying to escape. Is all nature in league with him, plotting to imprison whatever prey chances to come this way, gripping it like the threads of a spider's web, holding its victim fast? Run! Run! He has seen her, she is sure, from that huge red eye she had glimpsed, hidden in the undergrowth, glaring out maliciously from its scaly socket. Fear drives her on, but the forest seems to hold her in its grasp. Where is the way out? He is coming, he is coming! One whiff of his breath, one lick of his tongue will mean the end! Don't let me perish, like all those farmers hereabouts and their cattle and crops! Oh, where does this wood finish? On she runs, frantic, puffing, gasping, just to get free. There, down there! There is the sunlight shining on a field of corn, and safety. She plunges out of the dimness of the wood into the daylight – but just as the comforting warmth of the sun's rays swathes her face, from behind she feels tongues of hot flame: like the blast from a fiery furnace when its dark door suddenly swings open, the dragon's breath licks at her, searing up her legs, up her back, up her neck, scorching her hair, then curling round in front of her. Panting, breathless, how can she help but taste the bitter fumes? She falls, face forward.*

“**B**ELLA, WHAT'S THE MATTER?” Her father was sitting on the edge of her bed, leaning over her, his concerned face trying to peer into her worries. “You've been tossing and turning and groaning. You woke us up! Are you all right?”

"It's fine. Just a bad dream."

"You were crying out, you know. And you're all in a sweat, like you were running away from something."

"It's silly. I was being chased by a dragon. Ugh! horrid, beady eyes! He was burning me up from behind, and caught me with his fiery breath just as I was about to get free. Then I woke up. Don't worry, it's just a silly dream."

"Ah, it'll be the trip we did today: that story about the dragon and Sir Peter up at Loschy Hill – remember?"

"Oh, yes."

"Nothing to worry about, then! Now, back to sleep with you!"

## THE DREAD KING

*A great hall, higher than eye could see, mighty doors swung open on all sides to welcome in troupes of warriors, slain in battle – a hundred abreast in each rank, to add to the throng inside. All its walls are decked out with shields, and weapons lie ready: choice dwelling of the lord of war. The din of his feasting followers, drunk on endless mead milked from Heiðrún, the ever-bounteous goat, echoes to the unseen rafters: yet a pall of anxiety hangs over everything. Is it enough, all this preparation? He can brook no mistakes, nothing that threatens his mastery, that dread lord, as ragna røk° draws near. Grey-cloaked he sits upon his high seat; his countenance, savage from the strife of ages, half shows from behind a wide-brimmed hat: it shades over where his eye should be, the one he pledged away, questing after wisdom. His ample red beard bristles from his chin, bursting with his bloody wrath. On his shoulders sit the servants of his thought, his two ravens, always ready to seek news of battle, always a heartache to him, lest they should not return. In silent judgement he sits, fixing in his one-eyed gaze a girl – a princess, too, to judge by her fine silk dress and jewels. And here she stands before him: she dare not move, dare hardly breathe, as she stares towards him, her eyes cast down. She knows she has done wrong, in his view at least – she, his trusted shield-maiden, his favourite. Fear now has stilled her agile frame: she waits to hear her fate, knowing there is but one punishment he ever metes out for betrayal.*

*"Brynhildr, my daughter, what have you done? How could you betray me, you, my dearest child, my ever-faithful servant? You have sent me Helmr, a useless warrior, in our time of need, and kept alive*

*the sturdy young Agnarr for yourself, when we crave his strength in our host of warriors. What do you have to say?"*

*"Father, it was just for love of Agnarr, who has hardly seen life, that I did not slay him, not to spite you. Have mercy, I beg you."*

*"You know the punishment!" He grasps his mighty spear, Gungnir. She knows it never fails to find its target. He lifts it, is about to hurl it towards her, when she calls out.*

*"Father! Remember Baldr! A son you have lost, despite all your efforts, and his fate is dragging you too down to Hel: will you lose your daughter too, and by your own hand? It may be that my hands will hold the talisman° of your own survival."*

*"What talisman? What do you know?" he demands, his sharpness betraying his anxiety.*

*"Only time can tell."*

*He stares at her for a moment. Pangs of doubt play on his mind, and trepidation hovers over his heart.*

*"Very well, let time tell. But still you will be punished. I curse you to an endless sleep – endless, at least, until that time comes of which you speak. And then you will awake, pass through the wall of fire, and yield your promised help at the last battle. Now, daughter, sleep!" And with that he leaps suddenly from his throne and strikes her in the arm with a sleep thorn before she can move out of the way. Drowsiness falls upon her, and she collapses into an aeon of oblivion on a stony couch. He casts the thorn aside, and, in a kaleidoscope of ages, from it springs a briar thicket, swathing the hall and the treasure within, until the time should come, when tongues of fire, leaping into bloom, dance lightly over thorns: her phoenix day.*

"Bella, you're in a tangle again!" said her father. "Another bad dream? Was it the dragon again?"

"No, no dragons." Bella was calmer than the last time, more stunned than outright frightened. "It was weird, so ancient and strange. No running away this time. Just a great hall, covered in shields. And a horrid old one-eyed king who wanted to kill me. And he was my father too, in the dream!" He looked rather worried. "Not like you, daddy," she added. "He stabbed me with a thorn and I fell asleep on a hard bed. What does it all mean?"

"It's just dreams, Bella. You're probably worrying about something underneath. Are things all right with your friends? Are you worried about school?"

"It's all fine. I'm not worried about anything, really. But this dream, I felt like it was really happening to me, but a long, long time ago."

"Well, we'd all better get back to sleep, I think."

Bella stayed awake for a while, thinking, after her father had gone. Was she worried about something, after all, as he had suggested? Then she heard her parents talking. Her door was only just ajar, and so she could hardly catch what they were saying, except, from her mother, "Isn't it about time we told her?" and "These dreams are probably connected to it". But what she meant, only time would tell.

## THE RAVENS

*Clear sky, two specks circling, circling: searching, ever searching. Flying in wide arcs, scanning earth and sky, slowly descending, two forms take shape, a black and a white, a mighty god's thoughts, and his longing for rest – birds of battle, gathering news, ever yearning for the answer: how to withstand the wolf, how to dry up the dragon's venom – how to live on. Come no closer, carrion-keen spies, messengers of doom: what can the Dread Lord want with a mere girl? "We seek to know: Why does High's daughter suffer ill dreams? Does it portend the end of ages?"*

A soft thud was what woke Bella from her dream this time: a fluffy, white Persian cat had jumped on her bed.

"Pangur Bán!" she said, "You're naughty, sneaking in here!"

Pangur couldn't take her mind off the dream entirely, however. These ravens knew she was having nightmares – and somehow it was all linked to the end of the world. What on earth was going on? It was almost like she was being summoned into this other world. That would be some adventure, she thought, but then dismissed the idea. "That's just silly," she said out loud to herself, and decided to go back to sleep and forget about it.

She had no more dreams, for the time being.





## AUNT SIBYL'S NECKLACE

IT WAS THE END OF APRIL. At last, spring had broken the fetters of frost and sleet and rain that had tied the land to what seemed an endless winter gloom. It was a bright and sunny day! And it was Victor's birthday.

Victor lived next door. Bella was often round there: for longer than she could remember her parents and his had taken it in turns to look after each others' children when needed. She and Victor were almost like sister and older brother, they were in each other's company so often. And now it was his birthday. She was going to join him and a couple of other friends: it was Saturday, and they were going to the pictures. She was the youngest, and had been allowed to choose the film: *Escape to Witch Mountain*. And she didn't want to be late.

She burst through the front door, a little out of breath, her hair still wet and not combed properly. She rushed into the hall and dumped her things without thinking. The dank smell of swimming-pool chlorine water began to fill the hallway. Then she thought better of this, and quickly turned to unpack the bag. She came into the kitchen to get a drink, and found her mother standing there, looking relaxed, listening to the radio. A song that seemed to have been playing just too much lately was coming to an end. "And that was Eurovision Song Contest winners," enthused the disc jockey, "Abba, with *Waterloo*." Her mother turned off the radio before another song began, but Bella didn't care: she wanted to get moving. She needed to give Victor his birthday present before they set off.

"Have you got Victor's present ready, Bella? What did you get him in the end?"

"He likes strange stories so I got him a book of a poem that I thought was *very* strange. It's called *The Hunting of the Snark*. But I need to get round there!"

"Yes, I can see you're keen to go," said her mother, handing her a glass of water, "but a sort of present has come for you as well today. Actually, it's an heirloom."

Bella was a little annoyed to be held up, even if it meant getting a present of her own. "What's an heirloom?" she asked, rather curtly, expecting it to boil down to meaning the sort of present that someone else thought you ought to want, which you would never choose yourself.

"It's something that's passed down in a family, from one generation to another, when someone dies."

"Has someone died?"

"Yes. Do you remember your great-great aunt Sibyl?"

"No, I don't think so."

"She was my grandmother's maiden sister, never married. Spent her life studying ancient Greek, and lived in a little cottage way up north. You only met her once, and that was a few years ago. She was, well, a bit of a recluse, and didn't much like seeing other people."

"No, I still don't remember her."

"Well, she remembered you, for some strange reason. Anyway, she died a couple of weeks ago, on her hundredth birthday if you can believe it, but she left instructions that you were to be sent a special gift, and should be given it on the auspicious day on which it arrived – don't ask, we don't have the faintest idea what she was on about, but anyway it came today, sent specially by her solicitor, so we want to give it to you before you go off to Victor's. Here it is, but be careful how you open it."

Her mother handed her an old, wooden, flat, oblong box. She lifted the lid. A musty smell hit her nose: but there, lying inside it, was a golden necklace. Bella's mouth dropped open just a little, but a look of puzzlement furrowed her brow at the same time. The necklace looked beautiful, certainly, but strange. Bella couldn't quite make it out. She had seen some of her mother's gold jewellery, but it didn't look like this. The gold was a lot less shiny on this necklace, but at the same time it looked somehow richer, and maybe softer. The necklace looked as though it might easily fall to bits if it was handled roughly, although it was chunkier than anything Bella had seen before. Attached to the chain was a row of deep-coloured stones, in red and yellow, and there were small, diamond-shaped pieces of silver, like stars. Like the gold, the stones too looked different: they were not cut so carefully as the ones on most jewellery. They looked

like they had been taken just as they came from a jewel mine. They were tear-shaped, but the largest, at the bottom of the necklace, must have been round: but the stone was gone. Just its mount was left to show where it had been.

"It's very old, apparently," said her mother. "It looks it, too. The gold's different, and it has great garnets and amber beads on it. I remember Aunt Sibyl wearing it sometimes when I was young. It seems it's been handed down in the family for longer than anyone can trace, and now it's come to you. And it has a nickname: the Gleamers' Necklace, or Gleamer for short. And another strange thing: Aunt Sibyl said that you'd know who to pass the necklace on to when the time came."

"Thanks, mum. It looks beautiful." Bella was being polite. It *was* a beautiful piece of jewellery, in its way, but somehow not remotely the sort of thing Bella would have put on her Christmas or birthday list – perhaps she was right when she guessed what sort of present an heirloom would turn out to be. Still, she was feeling a little guilty at not being completely excited by the gift, and hoping her mother wouldn't notice, or ask her to put it on.

"Are you going to try it on then?" her mother asked.

"But I'm just off to Victor's now. I think it might be best to keep it for later."

"I can tell you're not that thrilled, Bella. Don't worry. I really don't know what Aunt Sibyl was thinking, sending this sort of thing to you at your age. We'll keep it for later for you, whenever you want. Now, let's get you off to Victor's, then!"



## THE BITTER SMITH

A SMITH, DARK-HAIRED, BALDING, seethed at his lonely forge: seethed inside, with age-long anger, as he struck steel on anvil. His fury spoke out, like the sharp peels of pain the anvil screamed out with when it was struck, time and again – but none could hear the smith’s pain but himself: “Why” – clash – “am I reviled?” – clash – “Why” – clash – “do I never” – clash – “get what I am due?” – clash. He paused, while he wiped the sweat from his brow. “When” – clash – “will the gold” – clash – “be mine?” – clash – “When” – clash – “will my inheritance” – clash – “come to me?” He stopped again, too worn out, not in his strong arm muscles, but in his tortured mind.

He rested the head of the hammer on the anvil and clasped the end of its wide wooden shaft in both hands as he leant against it for a moment to recover his breath. He thought back to a life now long gone, when his brother had first seized the treasure from their father, leaving him with nothing. His two sisters were there: fiery Lyngheiðr, and calm Lofnheiðr. “How can I gain my due from that crooked brother?” He was speaking more or less to himself, but the girls answered anyway. “Ha!” said Lyngheiðr. “That’s a man’s job. Sort it out yourself!” But Lofnheiðr looked at him and said “Open your heart, be respectful, be generous, and he will be generous back: he is our father’s son, like you”. Silly girl! A coward’s way. He pushed her away and snarled at her, and had seen his sister no more after that day. But still he was waiting for that treasure.

As he mused on those ancient days, he stared at the embers glowing on his forge in among all the dark charcoal: heat and light hidden among blackness, like hope amidst despair. Suddenly he was there, hovering, risen, it seemed, from the glowing hearth: a figure in black, or not so much *in* black, as simply *black* – black all through, like the coals, but his eyes were ember-red.

The smith started, but only a little. Many years he had worked at his craft, and he knew well that the forge had a mind, a spirit of its own. It was little surprise to see that spirit before him. He would bend him to his will, whatever it was he wanted, just as he had bridled the wayward spirit of the hearth all these years to produce the fine metalwork he was famed for.

"Still you hanker after your lost inheritance, then, Reginn," said the spirit. "I come from Surtr, the master of the darkness and the fire. The gold may be yours, if you really desire."

"What's your price?"

"Just a small trinket that Surtr would treasure. You must go from here, take your smithcraft to the village on the shelf of land north-west of Jörvík. You know the place. They will come, and you will see what to do. Then the gold will be yours."

"And how do I find my heritage? Am I just to take your word for all this?"

"Seek out Fáfnir, your brother. You know he has the hoard. But you will need your Sigurðr again, as you're no hero yourself."

"That is a legend from ancient days, no more."

The spirit laughed, and mocked the smith. "Oh, wise Reginn, suspicious of everything! What do you know of the loops of time? The strings deep down things, all things, sometimes play the same tune twice. You're not merely named after Reginn of old: you *are* that smith, reborn. And you know it: my fiery eyes pierced into your soul just now, and saw what you were musing on."

"Then I'd rather just grump and moan in my smithy. He came to a sorry and baleful end."

"I said the strings may play the same tune twice, but the chords may differ."

"The tune will play to its end, no doubt, nonetheless."

"A risk, yes, to be sure, but one I'll wager you will take: your resentment burns as strong within you as these embers of your forge. I will see you at your new smithy shortly."



## SKELFTÚN

*A warrior – weeping, weeping, weeping. Firm is her frame, fierce her countenance – but her mind is shattered.*

*“Sigurðr! Sigurðr! I have lost my Sigurðr!”*

*She throws her doors open, cries out “Listen to my wailing, all of you! I am betrayed! The man I love has betrayed me! The man I hate has betrayed me!”*

*In strides the warrior, prince of that hall: “Brynhildr, what ails you?”*

*“You ail me, Gunnarr, and Guðrún will mock me, when she hears my misery! Everything is hateful, now Sigurðr is lost. All my joy is gone, and my life too, unless you slay Sigurðr!”*

*“What – my own blood-brother? You are raving, Brynhildr!”*

*“Slay him, or I leave you. You will live in shame for ever!”*

“NO, NO! Not like that! Don’t do it! No!” Bella was tossing and turning, and calling out in her sleep. Arinbjørn touched her gently to wake her. “I think a mare of the night was trampling you with hard hooves, Brynhildr!” he said. “But now it’s time to put the things of night behind us. There are guests visiting the king from a far-off land, and I must welcome them to Skelftún, my farm. We shall all go there today.”

“Oh, good. Is it far?” asked Bella, shaking off the threatening gloom of her dream.

“No, it’s very close – under four miles from here, on from where I found you by the Archway. It’s a blessing to have a farm so very close to the city.”

Bella was not quite as delighted as Arinbjørn seemed to be at the prospect of a “short” walk of four miles. But the exercise would no doubt do her good.

Victor and Bella each put their few things – Egill’s gifts and the clothes from Ragnheiðr – into a leather bag, strung across their

shoulders. They waited outside, while Arinbjörn went to fetch his horse. At that moment, Egill emerged from the house and leant against the door frame, his hair in even more of a tangle than usual, and his cloak all twisted. He had obviously just woken up.

"You youngsters," he called out. "I haven't slept well. And it's because of you. I don't care what Arinbjörn says. You're mixed up in some fate, and I've been dragged into it. It's Óðinn playing tricks, for sure. Those gifts I gave you: you'd better watch out. They're going to drag you along, goodness knows where. While you're at Arinbjörn's farm, you'd better hope you can figure things out better than I can. You'll meet new people, and some of them are going to have a part to play in this, but who knows what? I reckon a lot's going to hang on the choices you make there."

"We can give them back, if you like," said Victor.

"Don't be a fool, boy. I gave them to you. I was meant to, even if I didn't know what I was doing, and that's that. It's up to you, now. I'm just warning you. Now, goodbye!"

"Goodbye, Egill," they said, but Egill had already disappeared back into the house.

They walked together, out of Jórvík the way they had come, and on along the road past the Archway. After a while, it began curving to the right, towards a settlement on slightly higher ground, which was surrounded by a sturdy wooden stockade. They passed through a wide gateway; inside, a scattering of small buildings was gathered round an open square. Arinbjörn had talked of his farm, but this was a small village, or at least a *thorp*<sup>o</sup> or hamlet.

Arinbjörn led his horse towards a young man who was coming towards him. "Greetings, Gunnarr," he said. As Gunnarr took hold of the horse's reins to take it to the stable, the animal started and reared up slightly, pulling the reins from his hand so he had to chase after it to catch hold of it again. Bella smiled at his clumsiness, but then stopped herself so he didn't see: it was cruel to laugh at someone when they were just trying to do their job.

"Well, that is my hall," Arinbjörn said to the children, waving his hand towards a large building at the top of the square, raised up a little above all the other buildings around. It had long walls that bowed out in the middle, and were only a few feet high, made of stone, and crowned with a sloping roof of wooden shingles, like Eiríkr's hall; the gable end of the hall was wooden, and had a large door in it. "But let me take you to another house," he said, "where

you can stay." He led them to a smaller cottage, with a low-sweeping turf roof. They had to bend their heads, even the children, to get through the low doorway. Inside it had a wooden table, a couple of benches, and some simple beds along the side. "Settle down here, and go and explore, if you like. But don't go outside the stockade. We shall eat something before long."

"Thank you, Arinbjörn," said Bella. He was turning away from them to attend to his own business, but she went on, "But what are we actually going to do here? Egill said the gifts he gave us were dangerous, and we had to find out what it's all about, and make the right choices when we were here."

"Egill says a lot of things, usually to upset and worry people. I wouldn't pay too much attention. Just rest here for a while, and help out with some of the work on the farm. We'll see about things when you've settled in."

The children were a little tired from the walk, and lay down on the beds to rest for a while. It wasn't long before Bella grew restless. "I'm going to explore. Are you coming, Sigurðr?" she asked.

"Oh, in a minute. I'm still so worn out after that great long walk. I don't want to go wandering for a bit yet."

"You're not much of a Viking hero, are you?" Bella said, poking fun a little, with a smile on her face. With that, she left Victor behind and went to see what was happening on the farm.



When Bella was gone, Victor took out Kettlingr to take a closer look at it. Fancy owning a pattern-welded sword! It was not just a weapon, but a work of art. Not only was the blade special, the hilt too was finely worked. After admiring it, he made the first of those choices that Egill had warned them about – though it didn't enter his mind that this is what he was doing, now or with the other choices that were to come. His own gift was splendid, but he thought he'd take a look at Bella's gift as well. "I'm sure she won't mind," he mumbled to himself, to excuse himself from what he knew was the truth – that in that case, why not ask her? He fumbled in her bag, and pulled it out, just to see what it was like. It had one or two jewels missing, in particular what must have been the biggest one, right at the bottom. He turned it over, and saw how it formed a snake, which was biting its tail, and the bite formed a clasp that could be undone. Then he noticed something Bella hadn't: there was writing along the snake's



What more could go wrong? Bella, as she moved around, was more like a creaky old wooden puppet with arthritis than a youngster full of energy. Still Arinbjörn didn't come. She couldn't tell anyone else about the necklace; no-one knew about it, anyway, and it was just too embarrassing. She just didn't know what to do. All she could think was to talk to Victor about it, but when she asked where he was, she was told that he'd gone with Gunnarr to work in the woodlands, a good way from the settlement.



Later that day, there was a commotion outside. Bella was miserable, but looked out to see what was happening. A group of people were walking slowly up the road from the south and making their way into Skelftún. The group was led by an elderly woman, and a group of about twelve younger women followed after. They were walking in a solemn fashion, almost as if they were in a procession. Bella leant against the doorway and watched them. Who on earth could they be, and why had they come here?

The leader walked into the centre of the hamlet, carrying a wooden staff with a brass knob on its top and gemstones below the knob. She struck the earth with this and demanded, of no-one in particular, to see the man in charge. "Master Arinbjörn is away today. We'll get young Gunnarr," said someone, and scuttled off to find him. This elderly woman was a sight. She was on the short side, but had a thick-set frame with large bones. Her head seemed to be astonishingly long, and her eyes bulged out, making her look both hideous and comical at the same time, but anyone that happened to catch her glance would see those eyes were sharp and fiery. Her nose was enormously long, and out of proportion to her face, and it turned this way and that in sharp bends, as if it had been broken many times. It was covered in strange pimples of all sorts of lurid colours, red and blue and all mixed up. Bella thought, I'm sure you could read at night by the light it must give off! Her cheeks were a mixture of black and yellow, full of wrinkles, shrivelled up and quite hollow, so that you could easily see two lines like valleys on either side where her teeth should have been – but she seemed to have precious few of those, and the ones she did have stood right out of her mouth, like the tusks of a boar, but wonky. Her neck was distorted in a strange way, so that her right shoulder had to support her head, which was bent down at an angle. Her legs were crooked,

and her toes pointed towards the left on both her feet, so that it was hard to guess which way she would walk, as she didn't look in the direction that she meant to go.

Her clothes were as strange as her body. She had a dark mantle on, which was belted up tight, and it had gemstones all down the opening like buttons. She had a large purse attached to her belt. She was wearing a necklace of glass beads. On her head she had a soft, black leather hood, which was lined with white fur: it looks just like Pangur's fur, thought Bella. Her gloves matched her hood. She had shaggy calfskin boots on, with long, thick laces and large, brass knobs at the ends.

Gunnarr came over to speak to the woman. "I'm Gunnarr, and I'm in charge here today. Who are you, and what's your business?" He was curt, almost rude.

"My name is Þorbjörg," said the woman, her gaze focused somewhere behind Gunnarr's left shoulder. "I expect you can guess our business. We're doing the rounds of farms in the district to bring our blessings."

"I can see what you are, *völur*, fortune-tellers. But it's a little late to be foretelling harvests: we're getting the crop in, and can see how things stand. Winter's the normal time you folk take to wandering."

"Well, there are always fortunes to be told for those that are willing," she said.

"And always fortunes to be made by the tellers, so it seems. Very well, then," said Gunnarr, "I'll not bring *misfortune* down on the farm by turning you away, but I can't promise you that any great fortunes of the kind you'll be looking for will be coming your way. I'll tell people you're here."

Þorbjörg decided to set herself up right in the middle of the courtyard in front of Arinbjörn's hall, almost blocking its entrance. She was very particular about what she wanted, and she sent her girls off to sort things out. Above all, she made a fuss about being up high, and ordered people around to set up a platform for her to stand on, and the girls formed a circle around her. By this time, people in Skelftún had gathered round, as many as could spare a little while from their work.

Þorbjörg spoke. "Is there anyone here who knows the warlock song? None of my girls knows it. We must call the spirits to us with the song."

"I know it," said Guðrún. "My mother taught me it."

"Well, you're wiser than I expected then, a girl so young. Come up onto the platform." Þorbjörg gave her a sprig of heather, and smiled slightly, as far as her awkward face would allow. "Ah, I sense it," she said. "You are fatherless, and have the strength of the blessing on you." Then the ceremony began. Þorbjörg herself looked as if she was going into some sort of trance, while the girls formed a chorus and sang some eerie-sounding music without words. Guðrún, however, took more of a leading role, and sang a strange song. It was impossible to hear the words, but the whole effect was uncanny. Everyone that had gathered round and listened seemed to have been almost hypnotised. After a while, people started going up, one by one, to have their fortunes told by Þorbjörg. When there was no-one else to come, Þorbjörg said "There are some who have not come up." She turned round in her ungainly way, as if looking somewhere over the roof tops, but actually sizing up who was around. Then she saw Bella, who was keeping her distance, but not so far off that she couldn't follow what was going on. The *völva*<sup>o</sup> stared straight at her. "You, girl," she said briskly, pointing towards her with outstretched arm. "You have not been up. You are fatherless too, even though you have three of them," she cackled, pleased at seeing through Bella. "Come on!"

"No, no. You've got the wrong person. My father's at home. And I don't believe in fortune-telling."

"You can believe what you like, leap-day birthday girl, leaping between worlds. But I have something to say, whatever you may think.

*Two are here, the dark and fair,  
and one has the other's due:  
one of them will gain the prize,  
yet neither of the two.  
Two are here, both he and she,  
and both and neither atone:  
under wave they both shall lie  
upon the cold, hard stone.  
Archways lead from world to world,  
but open and close at will:  
fates stand waiting: it's you they call  
their bidding to fulfil.*

That's all I have to say."

The old woman seemed to be completely mad, and was talking gibberish. Bella decided the best thing was to ignore her completely. She just hoped Arinbjörn would come back soon and help sort things out.



Guðrún came up to Bella, bright and smiling. "Come on, Brynhildr. What's up? It's a lovely day – let's go down to the river for a swim."

"I don't want to."

"Oh come on. Cheer up. Let's go. It'll do you good."

Bella didn't feel she had the strength to resist, so along she went with Guðrún down to the river beyond the ings; it was quite a way. Guðrún was as perky as a hare in spring, but Bella just walked sullenly and hardly said a word. The river didn't look very appealing, but Bella yanked off her cloak and jumped straight in, and swam quite far out. She was a good swimmer and was not really that worried. Guðrún hadn't got as far as the water yet. "Why have you gone way out there, Brynhildr?" she asked, quite warmly, not meaning to sound like she was telling Bella off.

"Why can't I be better than you at *something*?" she snapped.

"Don't be like that. I don't know what's the matter with you today. Come here, I have something to show you."

Bella swam back to the shore. With an air of great excitement, Guðrún pulled the Tears of Mardöll out from under her cape. "Look what a gift I've been given! Isn't it wonderful? It's much better than anything Þorvaldr ever gave me."

Bella burst into tears and shot off back to Skelftún.

"Brynhildr, what's wrong?" Guðrún called after her. "I'm sure someone will give you a necklace one day as well. I just thought you'd be pleased for me."



Guðrún followed not far behind Bella as she stormed off. As Bella came through the stockade of the settlement, she stomped past a couple of older women washing some clothes in tubs off to one side. They glanced up, not at Bella, but at Guðrún just behind her. They obviously thought they were out of earshot, but Bella caught what they were saying, and paused to listen a moment.

"Well, that Guðrún's looking proud of herself today."

"And no wonder, either. She was ever one for the pretty jewels, and look at that necklace she's flaunting."

## THE BARROW

VICTOR GAVE UP STRUGGLING: there was no point. The warriors rode quickly westwards, and after a few miles they passed through the gateway in a tall, crumbling wall – the remains of a Roman fort. The hall was just inside, up against the wall. Victor was pulled roughly off the horse and dragged in. The warrior threw him down onto the floor, and addressed the lord, who was sat in the high seat at the head of the table.

“Lord, we caught this spy crossing your lands.”

“A spy? Alone?”

“As far as we saw, lord.”

“You’re a fool, Galgamóðr. Look at him: he’s just a lad, and for sure was not travelling alone. You’ve let the main culprit go, and he’ll be on the loose still.” He turned his gaze on Victor, who was cleaning off the grazes he got on his wrists from the grimy floor as he fell. “You, boy, why are you spying in my lands, and who were you with? Whose service are you in?”

“I’m not spying and I’m not in anyone’s service. And I wasn’t with anyone.” He thought it best to keep quiet about Reginn.

“You’re a liar. Still, it makes little difference. The punishment’s the same. Spies use their eyes and ears to gather information against me, so I slice off their ears, then gouge out their eyes, and I do it myself. Then my axe does its job with their head, and they never even see it coming. Come here, lad!”

Victor’s legs suddenly felt as if they were going to give way, and he couldn’t move. The warrior who had brought him in went to drag him towards the lord. But then a woman’s voice broke in.

“Siggeirr, wait! What use is it to you if you execute any spies before you’ve found out what they know?”

“I’m surprised you want to prolong their agony, Signý, seeing as it means I’ll be torturing it out of them, but still, that will give me even more satisfaction. He can join your brother in the earth-house

for the time being. Men! Throw him in the barrow, but take that sword off him first!"

So Victor lost Kettlingr, the sword Egill had given him as a gift, and he was taken outside. Some distance from the hall, on a rise just outside the Roman walls to the south-east, was a mound of earth, just like the ancient barrows that people were buried in in ages past, but the earth this one was made from was still bare: it could only just have been built. On top was a wooden hatchway, sealed with a beam of wood. The men moved the beam and opened the hatch. It rested on a huge stone lintel inside, and there was a narrow space either side of this stone. Victor was thrown down into the gap on the left, and fell a little way into a dark chamber. The hatch was put back, and he could hear the beam being slid back into place. He was in utter darkness, buried in the earth. He reached out his hands, and they touched upon smooth, damp stone in one direction, and rough wood elsewhere. He couldn't stretch his arms out fully in any direction: there was hardly room to move, except upwards, and that didn't help. There was a heavy wetness on the air, and it was cold, even though it was summer. And pitch dark. As terror took hold, he heard a voice.

"Hello! Do you hear me?"

It was faint, but that was because it was coming from the other side of the great stone wall, not because it was far off.

"Yes, who are you?"

"I'm Sigmundr, in King Eiríkr's service. Who are you?"

"I'm Sigurðr. I have visited King Eiríkr but I'm not in anyone's service. I was captured and thrown in here for no reason."

"Siggeirr doesn't need any reason, though he had enough reason in my case."

"Why was that?"

"Because I came here to save my sister, his wife Signý. Or rather, he invited me here to Gotasalr, then threw me in this hole. He knows I aim to get my sister out of his hands, but he tricked me nonetheless."

"What are you saving your sister from?"

"From Siggeirr, of course. You must have seen what a brute he is for you to have ended up here. Can't you imagine how he treats *her*?"

"But he listened to her. It was awful. He was about to gouge my eyes out, when she spoke up and he agreed to spare me."

"That was only so he could make it worse for you in the long run.



They had no idea how to find Reginn, but the best plan seemed to be to return to Skelftún. At least someone there might have some idea. It was going to be a long journey, however. The king gave them provisions and enough money to last them as long as they needed on the road.

They set off in the same direction they had come from, but there is little to tell of their adventures until one day they were passing through a wilderness among the hills. Sigmundr left Victor behind to make a fire, while he went off to catch something to cook on it. He came back some time later with a hare, which they then had to prepare. They went to sleep under the stars, but Victor was awoken some way into the night by Sigmundr groaning.

"What's the matter with you? I was trying to sleep."

"I have a headache. I *never* get headaches. It's agonising!"

"Was it from the dinner, or what? I can't see how you've got one and I haven't."

"No, but I have a suspicion what might have caused it. I didn't tell you, but when I went out hunting I happened to see this huge rock, and thought it looked like a sort of house. I reckoned it would be good target practice for the sling-shot I was using, especially the front door."

"Of course, what else would you think?"

"Anyway, one of the shots must have hit something, as I heard a little squeal. Maybe a squirrel or something. Well, I didn't think anything of it, but then I was woken up by the most awful dream. There was a dwarf, come out of that very same rock, bashing my head in with a stone hammer! 'You've hurt my baby son, you oaf! How dare you! You'll suffer for this,' and all that kind of thing. That's when you heard me groaning."

"You can be the most stupid idiot sometimes, Sigmundr! That dwarf isn't going to let you alone now, but I don't think it's safe for you to go back there. You'll have to show me where the place is, and I'll try and make up with them first thing in the morning. You'll just have to put up with the headache until then. And stop groaning. I want some sleep."

After the sun rose and there was enough light to see, they traipsed over the stony ground among wind-swept trees for about a quarter of an hour, and saw the rock; it was jutting out of the lower part of

a steep hill rising up behind it. There was a scattering of trees round about, and a stream below it. Sigmundr held back when it came into sight, and Victor went on alone.

As he got near, he realised there was quite a commotion going on. The dwarf was outside the rock, running around frantically and shouting, waving his fists up at something in a tall tree nearby. He was the ugliest creature Victor had ever seen: his mouth went right up to his ears, he had jagged teeth sticking out in all directions, and his huge nose hung over his lips. He was rather shorter than Victor, but looked tough.

"What is it? What's the matter?" Victor called out to him.

"My baby! First some vicious hooligan smashed my poor son's jaw, and now an eagle has swooped down and stolen him from his cot. It's sitting in that tree over there. Please, save my baby!"

All Victor could do was try to get the eagle to let the baby go by throwing stones at it. Better than throwing them at the baby, at least, he thought. He was very lucky: the first stone he threw hit the bird, and the baby fell from the tree. Even more luckily Victor managed to catch it and hand it back to its distraught father.

"Thank you, sir, thank you so much. There aren't many that would help a poor dwarf like that. Most people seem to prefer throwing stones at our houses. And I'm going to pay you for your hard work."

"No, no, not at all. I'm happy to help. It wouldn't be right to be paid for just helping out when needed."

"Most kind of you, really. But I insist at least on giving you a gift. It may come in handy on your quest."

"Well, thank you. But how do you know I'm on a quest?"

"Everyone's on a quest. I can't help you with that: that's your business. But tell me, what's your name?"

"I'm Sigurðr."

"And I'm Dáinn. And this little fellow's Dúrin. Now, that gift." With that, he scuttled off inside his rock house and brought out a leather bag. "Here are four gifts in one. First you'll find the arrows of Gusir. They're tipped with poison, and they have mistletoe wood in their shafts to keep them supple and bend to the shooter's will: they never lose their aim. You showed your skill with the stone you hit the eagle with, and these will be even more useful. Then there's a seal-hame.<sup>o</sup> It might just look like a skin coat, and it'll keep you warm outside, but its real strength will show when you jump in the water. You'll be able to swim without tiring, since you'll become a



seal for as long as you like, even though you're a man inside. Next there's a marble pyramid: one side is red, one white and one yellow. A tiny dagger comes with it, and if you prick the white side, a hail storm and blizzard will descend; the yellow will melt the snow; the red will start a fire with sparks coming from all directions that no-one can withstand."

"That's a strange collection of things, but I'm sure they'll come in useful some time. But did you say *four* gifts, Dáinn? Not that I'm being ungrateful or anything."

"The fourth is the greatest gift of all: my promise to come and protect you when you most need it, if you call upon me."

"Thank you so much. I won't forget. Goodbye, then, Dáinn. I must get back to my companion."

"Until we meet again, then. And your friend will find his headache has gone now."



Holda smiled at her, and patted her gently on the shoulder. "When you came here, Brynhildr, you were as pale as a cold winter moon and stiff as the frame of my loom, like a wooden puppet with no life. It's no wonder: you were terrified, and you were badly wronged. But today it is as if the gleaming sun that shone through the portals this morning sent her spirit down a beam of light, down through your window, and settled on you, and her joy is on your face and her brightness in your hair. Please stay with us. There, that's a queen making petition!"



That night, Bella dreamed that two ravens visited her, a black and a white.

"She thinks we are the same, this foolish girl!"

"But you are black and I am white!"

"And she has seen the dread lord and the dark."

"She sees one where we see two."

"The one we serve, the one we flee."

"And whose is the mission, his or hers?"

"Both, but she sits idle while he presses on."

"To his doom, unless she acts."



Bella was staring at the tapestries, especially the one of Freyja's stolen necklace.

"Holda," she said. "I had a dream. The ravens came to me. They said I was foolish."

"Was it two ravens, a white and a black?"

"Yes, how did you know? They're called Muninn and Huginn."

"It's typical they called you stupid, as you're a girl. They're the ravens of Óðinn, king of the gods."

"Ah. But actually I think they were right, about me being stupid, I mean. It's very confusing. I thought there was only one dark lord, but maybe there are two."

"You're not stupid. From your story I could see there have been people who have deliberately addled your mind for you."

"So should I follow what the ravens want, and help Óðinn?"

"Are you sure Óðinn isn't just as dark as Surtr, the truly dark lord? Surtr for sure would destroy the whole world if he had the power. But Óðinn! He is a murderous thug who put his own daughter – she

was named Brynhildr like you – to sleep for ever until some other murderous hero, so-called, woke her up for his own pleasure. Do you want to serve him? And what is it he wants? Your necklace, I suppose. But Óðinn destroys everything he touches. Not just Brynhildr: what about his own dear son, Baldr? He couldn't manage to save even him from Hel. Let alone all the heroes he's promised fame and fortune to, then decided he wants them in his hall of the slain to make up his numbers for the world's final battle – his *æinhærrjar*, his unique warriors, so he calls them. I have to tell you, Brynhildr: if your friend follows Óðinn, and tries to take the necklace to him, he will perish."

"Then I have to stop him taking the necklace to Óðinn after all?"

"But then what? If he doesn't take it to Óðinn, then Surtr will seize it. For sure, that wicked smith will see to that. And that's probably worse. So, it might look as if we've sorted something out, figuring out that there are really two dark lords, but even if one's darker than the other, it doesn't help us much."

"Oh, everything's impossible! What can I do?"

"Look at the story on the tapestry. Tell me, who did the necklace belong to? Was it Óðinn's?"

"No, it belonged to the goddess Freyja."

"So, if you want to serve anyone with your necklace, it should be Freyja. Or so I think. It's for you to decide. But don't you understand, Brynhildr?"

"Understand what?"

"This mountain and our refuge here is Freyja's sanctuary. If you stay with us, you've given yourself to Freyja, and that's giving more than a necklace."



as they emerged from the trees, Sigmundr and Guðrún held back. "This is as close as we can get: we have to put your armour on now, Sigurðr," said Guðrún. Victor was already wearing a thick leather cuirass,<sup>o</sup> and over this they put his spiky armour. "May the gods bless your adventure, and bring you fame," said Sigmundr. Guðrún just smiled, and gave him a little kiss on the cheek before he put his helmet on. Victor walked forward, carrying his shield and sword, to the dragon's den.

He saw nothing until he rounded a bend in the hill. The first thing that came into view was Reginn, who was facing the hill and speaking. Between him and the hillside, on a bare, stony patch of ground amidst the grassy meadow, lay a huge reptile, a snake with wings, but with protruding eye ridges like a crocodile. It could swallow a person whole without any effort, if it chose, but now it rested, its face towards Reginn.

Why am I here? thought Victor. This is madness, for all Sigmundr's and Guðrún's urging. He looked around. Just behind Reginn was the stump of an old tree, with bits of rope hanging loose from it. A little further off, to the left as Victor looked at it, was a wizened old tree. Something was hanging in its branches, glinting in the sun. Bella's necklace! Now he knew why he had to fight the dragon.

"So, Fáfñir," said Reginn. "You refuse to yield my heritage, my portion of the hoard, even though I've delivered the necklace of the Brísingar to you?"

"You took the wager, brother. You said yourself one of us would cheat the other. Did you really think to outsmart me, Fáfñir, the master of all dragons? Go now, before I lose patience and my sense of family loyalty."

"I wonder what our father would make of your family loyalty, Fáfñir. But of course we know that. I'm not quite ready to leave, though. I will have my hoard, whatever you may think."

"And who's going to take it from me? You? *You?*"

"No. My champion has arrived."

The dragon cast his head slowly from side to side, surveying the landscape before him. "What champion? I see nothing else here but some boy, dressed like a thorn apple. He'll just add a little spice to my next meal – which will be you, Reginn, if you don't move yourself off quickly."

"I will not go at your will. A puny boy, you say? But he bears Gramr. Oh yes. I made sure of that. Does that name mean anything to you,

Fáfnir, from the mists of time? Is your heart already cold with fear, or must I remind you?"

"I remember all things. But he doesn't have the strength to wield it. Still, you may stay and watch our sport, if you wish. The entertainment may be short, however."

"Longer than you would wish." And turning to Victor, he said "Come here! You must face him head-on."

Victor walked round closer to Reginn, and closer to the dragon. As he approached, the stench almost knocked him over: like sewage and rotting corpses. He stared at the dragon. Fáfnir pulled himself round and crept nearer; he slithered over the stony ground, which only made the stench worse, and looked up, straight at Victor.

"Who are you, boy? Why are you here? To do Reginn's bidding? He is a traitor, you know. I've known him since he was a baby: I'm his brother. What has he promised you?"

"Nothing. But my friends have got me armour against you: we've heard of your tricks."

"Armour? Ah, made by Reginn, no doubt. Yes, I can see it is. And you trust him?"

"It doesn't matter."

"That's to be seen. But what's your name?"

"I am Sigurðr."

"And you think to live up to your name, gaining victory over me?"

"Where's Brynhildr? You've stolen her necklace, hanging in the tree there."

"The necklace? So, were you thinking of taking that? But it was payment, made by Reginn. That would hardly be fair, would it?"

"It wasn't Reginn's to give."

"Nor yours, either. But the necklace has a dragon's curse on it: why do you think folk haven't come to take the treasure, like a ripe apple waiting to be plucked? And if *you* take it like a thief, why, then you take its dragon heart too. Did you never see the dragon in it, boy, twirling round, biting its own tail? Yes, Reginn forged deceit into his handicraft, and are you one to make it void? But take it, if you can, and become like me."

"Not for myself. For Brynhildr. It is hers."

"And who gave it to her? Egill. Do you think it was his to give, either? No, he stole it from me. You see, you can't escape the dragon in the necklace."

"It was not yours either. I've heard how Reginn made it: he may not have liked the price he was paid, but he was paid fairly. It was not you that it was made for, though: no, you vaunt your stolen wealth with too much pride."

"Freyja lost her treasure and it came to me, Brynhildr lost her treasure and it came to me. Brynhildr lost her mate, and you have come to me. All things come to me. For I am death. If not now, then later."

"I will slay you, Fáfnir, for all your wickedness and deceit."

"I rejoice. For then you will take the dragon into your heart for ever. Murder is murder, you see. You cannot justify it any more than I could when I killed my own father – that was for treasure, too, just like you. You think that by killing me you will overcome the chaos all around, and within your heart? No, you feed me!"

"You have an imaginative way of pleading for your life, you worm. Even if what you say is true, at least if I kill you then Brynhildr will be free of the dragon's curse, as she'll be innocent, and needn't worry about the dragons in her necklace."

"Ah, Brynhildr, yes. The girl who brought me the necklace."

"What have you done with her?"

"A dragon gets hungry sometimes, you know."

"You mean ... Have you ... *eaten* her?"

"Surely you've heard the stories? Everyone knows a dragon's favourite snack is a juicy young maiden. And she was certainly young and juicy." The dragon flicked out his tongue and ran it across his scaly lips.

This was enough for Victor. He leapt forward and thrust Gramr straight into the dragon's neck. The beast was taken by surprise, and flinched back, flailed his huge bulk in a curve into the air, and came down in a circle, right around Victor. This was what he had been warned about. There was nothing he could do: the dragon drew itself into a coil about him, and squeezed. But Fáfnir moved too quickly: the bladed armour cut into him and he started back, allowing Victor to breathe, and slash with Gramr at the already deep cuts. Chunks of dragon flesh fell to the ground. Fáfnir tried again, and again had to recoil. Again Victor slashed, trying to cut a way out of encircling death. But each time he sliced a piece of the flesh off, it joined itself back again, and after a moment the dragon carried on as if nothing had happened. There was no escape. Only Victor's growing tiredness would see an end to the story, and not a happy one.

have to worry about launching off on this escapade, you're welcome to stay as my guests anyway. And we have the mid-winter feast to look forward to as well. I'll pay Áli a peaceful visit after that."



Bella was taken to Ingibjörg's room a little later. What could she say to her? She seemed such a calm and sensible young woman, and now Bella had to give her the worst news possible. She went gingerly through the doorway, her face cast down, no smile on her face. Ingibjörg was sat on a stool; she turned her face towards Bella and smiled, then got up.

"It's alright. Don't be afraid. You don't have to be so timid. Come on in. My name is Ingibjörg. What's yours?"

"Brynhildr," she said, still barely looking up.

"Sit down, Brynhildr, and tell me your adventures. You've come here with Oddr, haven't you? It's unusual company for a maiden to be keeping."

"They saved me from the giants, but Oddr killed Gløggvi, and he was my friend."

"What were you doing with the giants? It's a strange story you have to tell."

"The eagle stole me and flew away with me from the dragon, and left me there."

"Wait! You mean you're the Brynhildr that was given to the dragon, Fáfnir? We heard that story. Everyone said the dragon had gobbled you up, because there was nothing to be seen when they went back. I'm so glad to see you got away somehow, and now you're here! Did you know a young warrior came and killed the dragon later? Or at least he wounded it so badly that it slunk off back to its lair and it hasn't been seen since, so it's probably dead."

"No, I didn't know."

Bella was still nervous, and hardly looking up.

"Are you all right, Brynhildr? You're not saying much, and you seem very sad. I hope those Vikings didn't treat you badly on the ship."

"No, they were fine. Oddr made sure of that."

Then she broke down. She shot up out of her seat, and gave Ingibjörg a big hug, bursting into tears.

"Brynhildr! What is it?" asked Ingibjörg in consternation.

"It's Hjalmar! He gave me this ring to give to you, and said it was your pledge. Oh, Ingibjörg, he was killed by a horrid berserk maniac

called Hrólfr, and I saw it all. He was so good, and he looked after me. Oh, I'm so sorry!"

Ingibjörg took the ring and stood up, teetering. All the life and smiles had left her face. There were no tears in her eyes, just a silent daze. She rushed from the room and ran outside to the battlements and leant right over, as if to jump, but she stopped short of doing that. She looked out into the darkness for a moment, then turned and walked slowly back to her room.

"It was brave of you to bring me that news, Brynhildr," she said, "especially as it was the worst news that anyone could ever get. Did he say anything else?"

"He said he was doing all that Viking stuff just for you, and would soon stop it once he was a king and could marry you. He said you were his sweetheart. He said I reminded him of you and we would get on. I think he was thinking of you all the time."

"That's something to comfort me, a little at least. But what point is there in living now?"

"Please don't do anything silly, Ingibjörg. Please!" She gave her another hug, but Ingibjörg shook her off.

"I need to be on my own for a bit, Brynhildr. Do you mind? I promise I won't do anything silly." She started to turn away from Bella, but then looked back at her again. "I'm forgetting. We haven't settled you in. You can stay in the room next to mine, Brynhildr. But can you find it yourself? Come back later."

Bella looked up at her as she turned away again. Ingibjörg's eyes were swelling. She doesn't want me to see her crying, thought Bella. She found her room and settled down, but couldn't help fretting and worrying about Ingibjörg. I need to take her mind off it a bit, she thought. What could I possibly do, though? It's not my house, it's hers. After what seemed hours, the worry got the better of her, and she decided to go back to see Ingibjörg. And she had thought of a plan.

"Come in, Brynhildr," said Ingibjörg as Bella poked her head into her room. She was sitting down, and looked calm. Her eyes were red. "It's all right. I've dried up my tears, for now."

"Ingibjörg, did your father say there's a mid-winter feast coming up?"

"Yes, it's tomorrow, actually."

"What sort of feast is it?"

"It's the Yule feast. We do it right at the darkest part of winter, when we look forward to the spring and summer coming back."



## SURTR'S SUNKEN DALES

*Óðinn sank from highest peak, down into Surtr's pit: from light to night, from life to death.*

*"I come to save the mead," he said. "Yield the treasure from your sunken dales."*

*"The mead, that was a man, is mine, and with it all the wisdom that the dwarfs distilled. Ah yes, the wisdom you lack for ragna røk, Óðinn, lies in my dark caves. From death you may take nothing. Go your way!"*

*"The wisdom will be mine, nonetheless."  
A black laugh echoed through the hollow caverns.*

*In Ægir's realm, in ocean depths,  
a feast was called, a feast was held,  
and all the gods and all the elves  
were called to toast their victory.  
In Ægir's realm, the gloomy depths  
were lit by lamps of shining gold,  
and shining gold was liquor bright  
that lapped the mighty cauldron's rim:  
the ocean fire in sunken dales!*

IT WAS DÁINN'S SEAL-SKIN COAT that saved Victor, softening his fall into the lake, and then steadying him so that he did not suffocate immediately. Yet he was pulled down, nonetheless – down and down into the darkness and the cold of a dead world.

He could not tell how long it took: but somehow, he ended up in a cave, void of light save for a pale glimmer from a wall of livid flames: and the light they cast was black. He rested and breathed in the darkness. His shoulder was throbbing: the arrow that Gunnarr had shot at him. Gusir's arrows were tipped with poison, too, and his wound was swelling. Had there been any light, he would have seen a huge, red, shiny area all around the arrow, which was still

stuck there, near his collar bone.

"Where am I?" he asked, out loud, not expecting an answer.

"You are in my sunken dales, and I am Surtr."

"Where are you? I can't see you."

"I am here, and here, and wherever I wish to be," said the voice, darting from one place to another in the cavern.

"*What* are you?"

"I am the darkness, I am the black. But from coal comes fire in these ocean depths." A sudden flash of red and yellow flame shot across in front of Victor.

"The fire of ocean," said Victor. "But it is too late."

"But what is time, and lateness and earliness? A toy to play with."

"I want to go back. How do I get out of here?"

Surtr laughed. "You don't understand. You don't get out of here. You have passed over. Everything is gone now. But look, I can give you something to ease your mind."

Suddenly, Victor was back at Gjúkingasalr, beneath the imp tree with Guðrún. She was smiling at him, and he saw, as never before, just how beautiful she was, her dark tresses falling about her shoulders, her blue eyes shining bright. "You're my hero, Sigurðr, dragon-slayer. Let's stay here together for ever, happy in each other." But then the vision faded, and he was back in the dark cave.

"I can give you that, if you would like it, Sigurðr, and make a heaven out of this hell, but there is something I would like."

"What could I possibly bring you, stuck here in a gloomy cave under a stinking swamp?"

"The necklace of the Brisingar."

"Gunnarr took it as I fell. I cannot get it."

"Things have moved on, Sigurðr, and the necklace has sunk down into my realm."

"Then why not just get it yourself?"

"Ah, then all its power would be lost. No, it must be offered, willingly. You thought to offer it to my foe, Óðinn, and with it maybe all the power of the new world and eternal birth: yes, that's its power. But that time is past, and the choice has gone. But you may offer the necklace to me, if you wish, to keep in darkness everlasting, and you will have your reward. Oh yes, you will have Guðrún for ever. If you look, you will find the necklace nearby."

Victor felt the darkness press upon him. There was no escape. He would wither away here, if the enclosing gloom did not kill his mind

first. He thought of Guðrún and their time in her hall. “I’ll search for it,” he said.



## THE SHIMMERING WAY

**D**OWN, DOWN SHE SANK. All earth became blurred and fell from sight: through all nine shining realms she seemed to pass, in and out of each. She saw the sun, the day-star, sink in blood-stained billows of a stormy sea, and down below groaned the gates of Hel. The sun, the sun, so bright it shone, as down in the sea it sank – never had it looked so fair. A last, longing farewell she bade it as it dived into everlasting night, and terror filled her soul. Yet at that moment she felt the sun shoot up out of her chest, disappearing into the darkness, looking for a new world to light up. But so stiff was her tongue, like a piece of wood, that she could hardly move it to say goodbye. Her limbs were cold, like jangling icicles hanging from her. And no heart beat within her breast. Weary, weary beyond words, she lay down to rest on the stone couch of the Norns, and slept. Stiff she lay there, never moving: nine nights it seemed she rested, the longest of sleeps. Then out shone the pallid moon, a witch moon, malicious, from behind the gloomy clouds. Up from the couch she rose, clad now in a red robe, rent in shreds, her fingernails torn, her hair savaged.

In the pale green light, she followed a narrow path, beset by thorns that tore at her calves, showing no mercy. Wolves howled, and snakes were writhing round about. In the air, scorched birds hovered like clouds of midges. She had nothing, nothing, in this pallid, grey-green world, but weakness.

From her left a figure loomed, bald, almost, but dark-haired on his temples: she had no strength to stop him blocking her way. But then he fell away: from above, the archer in the woods had loosed her shot. Eilíðr! She smiled farewell, and was gone.

From her right a one-eyed giant stepped up: she had no strength to stop him dragging her towards the cauldron. But then he fell away: from the side, the doughty offspring of giants pushed him aside. Gløggvi! He smiled farewell, and was gone.

From ahead a raving berserk, howling, charged at her. She had no strength to move from out of his way. But then he fell away: from behind her came a warrior, skilled and strong. Hjalmar! He smiled farewell, and was gone.

*Each step she took was firmer than the last, and the thorn thickets were adorned now with paper-thin blooms of red roses, too refined, surely, to be the progeny of such harsh parents: and the flowers seemed to smile, and gave way before her to soft grass, and the gentle light grew. Then all beside the path dissolved away, and she saw that the path itself was gossamer-fine, too delicate for any human to walk upon: she trod the spirit path, the Shimmering Way. Up she stepped, "Up, up, my soul, my will," she urged herself. To the left flew a dragon, its eyes deep red, breathing fire, and threatening to break earth from sky: the Northern Lights billowed at her feet. On the right a hart leapt over unseen hills: light were his hooves, and his antlers reached the heavens, casting resplendent beams all about. Ahead, the sons of light soared, drinking from brimming horns the bright mead of wisdom from Mímir's spring.*

*She stepped down from Heaven Mountains upon the wide Eddying Plain.*

*She walked on, to the meeting place of Heaven and Hel, to mighty Yggdrasill, the ailing ash. She looked: an eagle, feathers glistening in dazzling array, crowned the tree; a squirrel darted among its boughs. And there, from the north, facing her, astride a jet-black steed, eight-legged, rode a dark-clad warrior, pale crown upon his head, leading his untold host. Terror returned. He rode up calmly and dismounted. Yggr, the Dread King, had come.*

*"You call me from within your eternal sleep," he said.*

*"I do not call you, but you come," she replied. "You are summoned by something that all your serried hosts can never defeat: your lust for power." A lightning-fork of anger shot across his face, but he said nothing in rejoinder.*

*"Do you have it?" he asked.*

