

POUL ANDERSON



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[AFTERWORD](#)

There was a man called Orm the Strong, a son of Ketil Asmundsson who was a great landsman in the north of Jutland. The folk of Ketil had dwelt in Himmerland as long as men remembered, and were mighty landowners. The wife of Ketil was Asgerd, who was a leman-child of Ragnar Hairybreeks. Thus Orm came of good stock, but as he was the fifth living son of his father there could be no large inheritance for him.

Orm was a great sea-farer and spent most of his summers in viking. When he was in his twentieth winter, he went to his oldest brother Asmund and said, 'Now you have been sitting in Himmerland and having the use of the farm for some years, and your brothers grow restless for a share. But it is plain that if we divide it five ways our family will sink from great landsmen to smallholders, and so will be lost and forgotten.'

'That is true,' replied Asmund, 'and if you will not yield the inheritance it were best we steered it together.'

'I will not be fifth man at the rudder,' said Orm, 'and so I will make you this offer: give me three ships, and outfit them, and supply arms to all who will follow me, and I will find my own land and quit all claim on our father's.'

Asmund was well pleased with this, the more so since two more of the brothers said they would go with Orm, and ere spring he had bought longships and all their outfit and found many of the younger and poorer men of the neighborhood who would be glad to fare westward. On the first clear day of spring, when the seas still ran high, Orm took his ships out of the bay, and that was the last Asmund ever saw of him.

The dragons turned their tails to the low gray moors and the high cloudy sky of Himmerland. With wind piping in their riggings and sea-gulls screaming about the mastheads and the strakes foaming, they pointed their heads westward. Orm made a verse:

*White-maned horses
(hear their neighing!),
gray and gaunt-flanked,
gallop westward.
Wild with winter
winds, they snort and
buck when bearing
burdens for me.*

By starting thus early, Orm reached the western islands ahead of most other vikings and had a good plundering. With this he bought more ships and gathered a following while he lay in Ireland over the winter.

Now for some time Orm harried the western lands and had a great booty. But he wished for land of his own, and so one summer joined his fleet to the great one of Guttorm, or Guthrum as the English called him. For some time he was with Guthrum ashore as well as at sea, and when peace was made with Alfred, Orm went into the Danelaw to seek land.

He found a green and fair tract beside a little bay where he could keep his ships. An Englander

already dwelt there, but Orm ringed his house with men one night and burned it. The man, his brothers, and most of his household perished then. Some say that the man's mother, who was a witch escaped the fire – for the burners let all women and children and thralls that wished leave first – and laid the curse on Orm that his eldest son should be fostered beyond the world of men, while Orm should in turn foster a wolf that would one day rend him.

Now Orm built a great house and other buildings on his newly gained land, and with the wealth and fame he had he was accounted a mighty chief in the Danelaw. When he had sat there a year, he felt it were well if he had a wife. He rode with a great following to the English ealdorman Athelstane and asked for his daughter Aelfrida, who was said to be the fairest maiden in England.

Athelstane dared not refuse, but Aelfrida said to Orm's face: 'Never will I wed a heathen dog, nor indeed can I. And while it is true you can take me by force, you will have little joy of me – that I swear.'

She was small and slender, with soft ruddy-brown hair and flashing gray eyes, while Orm was a huge bulky man with face burned red and hair nearly white from years of sun and sea. But he felt she was somehow the stronger, so after thinking for a while he said: 'Now that I am in a land where folk worship the White Christ, it might be well if I made peace with him as well as his followers. Indeed, most of the Danes have already done so. I will be baptized if you will wed me, Aelfrida.'

'That is no reason,' she cried.

'But think,' said Orm slyly, 'if you do not wed me I will not be christened, and then, if we may trust the priests, my soul is lost. And you will have to answer heavily to your God for losing a human soul.' He whispered to Athelstane, 'Also, I will burn down this house and throw you off the sea-cliffs.'

'Aye, daughter, we dare not lose a human soul,' said Athelstane very quickly.

Aelfrida did not hold out much longer, for indeed Orm was a not ill-looking man, and he was known to be rich and powerful. So Orm was christened, and the next day he wed Aelfrida and bore her home to the Danelaw. They lived together contentedly enough, if not always peacefully.

There were no churches near, so at Aelfrida's wish Orm kept a priest on the land, and for atonement of his sins he paid the priest well. But being a careful man with no wish to offend any of the Powers, Orm continued to sacrifice to Thor in midwinter and to Freyr in spring for peace and good harvests, as well as to Odin and Aesir for luck before each sea-voyage.

All that winter he and the priest quarreled about this, and in spring, not long before Aelfrida's child was born, Orm lost his temper and kicked the priest out the door and bade him begone. Aelfrida reproached him greatly for this, until he cried that he could stand no more of that woman-chatter and now would have to flee it. A few days later, earlier than he had planned, he left with his ships and spent the summer harrying in Ireland and Scotland.

Scarce were his ships out of sight when Aelfrida was brought to her bed and gave birth to a child. It was a fine big boy who after Orm's wish she called Valgard, a name old in that family. But now there was no priest to christen the child, and the nearest church lay a good two or three days' journey away. She sent a thrall there at once.

Meanwhile she was proud and glad of her son, and often she sang to him as her mother had to her

*Lullaby, my little bird,
of all birds the very best!
Hear the gently lowing herd.
Now the sun is in the west*

and 'tis time that you should rest.

*Lullaby, my little love,
nodding sleepy on my breast.
See the evening star above
rising from the hill's green crest.
Now 'tis time that you should rest.*

*Lullaby, my little one.
You and I alike are blest.
God and Mary and their Son
guard you, who are but their guest.
Now 'tis time that you should rest.*

Imric the elf-earl rode out one night to see what had happened in the lands of men. It was a cool spring dark with the moon nearly full, rime glittering on the grass and the stars still hard and bright as in winter. The night was very quiet save for the sighing of wind in budding branches, and the world was all sliding shadows and cold white light. The hoofs of Imric's horse were shod with an alloy of silver and there was a high clear ringing in the gloom as they struck the hard ground.

The elf-earl rode into a darkling forest. Night lay heavy here, but from afar he saw a ruddy glimmer of fire. When he came there he saw it shone through cracks in a little hut of mud and wattle huddled under a great gnarly oak from whose boughs Imric remembered the Druids cutting mistletoe. He could sense that a witch lived here, so he dismounted and rapped on the door.

A woman who seemed old and bent as the tree opened it and saw him standing there, the broken moonlight sheening off his helm and byrnie and his horse shimmering-white and mysterious, cropping the frosty grass behind him.

'Good evening, mother,' quoth Imric.

'Let none of you elf-folk call me mother, who have borne tall sons to a man,' grumbled the witch, but she let him in and hastened to pour him a horn of ale. Imric had to stoop inside the tiny hovel and clear away a litter of bones and other trash ere he could sit.

He looked at her with the strange slant eyes of the elf-folk, all cloudy-blue without pupil or white. There were little moon-flecks drifting in Imric's eyes, and shadows of ancient wisdom, for Imric had dwelt long in the land when the first men came. But he was ever youthful, with the broad forehead and high cheekbones, the narrow jaw and the straight thin-chiseled nose of the elf lords. His hair floated silvery-gold, finer than spider silk, from under his horned helmet down to his wide red-caped shoulders.

' 'Tis long since the elves have been abroad among men,' said the witch.

'Aye, we have been too busy in the war with the trolls,' answered Imric in his voice that was like wind blowing through ancient trees far away. 'But now there is truce, and I am curious to find what has happened in the last hundred years.'

'Much, and little of it good,' said the witch. 'The Danes have come from the east, burning and plundering and breaking English lords. They are nigh to overrunning all the western islands.'

'That is not bad.' Imric stroked his long mustache. 'Before them the Saxons came with fire and death, and before them the Picts and Scots, and before them the Romans, and before them the Brythons and Goidels, and before them – but the tale is long and long, nor will it end with the Danes. And I, who have watched it almost since the land was made, see naught of evil in it, for it helps pass the time. I were fain to see these new folk.'

'Then you need not ride far,' said the witch, 'for Orm the Strong has taken land here and his hall is but the ride of a night or less to the east on a mortal horse.'

'A short trip for my windy-maned stallion. I will go.'

'Hold – hold, elf!' For a moment the witch sat muttering, and only her eyes had life, gleaming red out of the firelight's monster shadows. Then of a sudden she cackled in glee and screamed, 'Aye, ride, ride, elf, to Orm's house by the sea. He is gone a-roving, but his wife will guest you gladly. She has but newly brought forth a son, and he is not yet christened.'

At these words Imric cocked his long pointed ears forward and his ivory-white face tautened.

‘Speak you sooth, witch?’ he asked then, low and toneless like wind blowing through unpeopled heather.

‘Aye, by Sathanas I swear it.’ The old woman rocked to and fro, squatting in her rags before the dim coals that spattered her face with red. The shadows flowed out of corners and chased each other across the walls, huge and misshapen and noiseless. ‘Go see for yourself.’

‘I would not venture to take a Dane-chief’s child. He might be under the Aesir’s ward.’

‘Nay, elf, nay. Orm is a Christian, but an indifferent one, and his son has yet been hallowed to no gods at all.’

‘Ill is it to lie to me,’ said Imric thinly.

‘I have naught to lose,’ answered the witch. ‘Orm burned my sons in their house, and my blood dies with me. I do not fear gods or devils, elves or men. But ’tis truth I speak.’

‘I will go see,’ said Imric, and stood up. The scales of his byrnie rang together like little silver bells. He swept his great red cloak around him and went out and swung onto the moon-white stallion.

Like a rush of wind and a fleeting blur of moonlight he was out of the forest and across the fields. Far and wide the land stretched, shadowy trees and silent hills and rime-whitened meadows asleep under the moon. Here and there stood a lonely croft, dark now, huddled beneath the great star-crusted sky. There were presences moving in the night, but they were not men – he sensed a distant wolf-howl, the green gleam of a crouched wildcat’s eyes, the scurry of furtive feet under the mighty oak-roots. They were aware of the elf-earl’s passage and shrank deeper into the shadows.

Erelong Imric rode up to Orm’s garth. Here the barns and sheds and houses were big, of rough-hewn timbers. The great hall stood with its carven dragon heads like a hill-ridge against the shining star clouds, but after Imric had overleaped the fence it was to a lesser dwelling that he rode. The dogs smelled him and snarled, hair a-bristle, but ere they could bark he had turned his terrible blind-seeming gaze on them, and they crawled off whimpering in fear.

He rode like a wandering night-wind up to the house and looked in a window. Moonlight shafted in over the bed, limning Aelfrida’s lovely slumbrous face in soft silver and a cloudiness of unbound silken hair. But it was on the babe beside her that Imric gazed.

The elf-earl laughed within the locked mask of his cold beautiful face, and rode north again. Aelfrida moved in her sleep, woke, and looked at the little one beside her. Her eyes were still clouded with uneasy dreams.

In those days the elves and other folk of faerie still dwelt upon the earth, but even then a strangeness hung over their holdings, as if these wavered halfway between this world and another; and there were places which might at one time be a simple lonely hill or lake or forest and then at another gleam for in all the ancient splendor of the true dwellers. Now and again the gaunt bare crags of the northern highlands known as the elf-hills might be seen by men as halls and castles, and thus they were shunned.

Imric rode to the grim form of Elfheugh, which he saw as a castle tall and slender-spined, having gates of bronze and floors of marble, hung with the fairest shifty-patterned tapestries of magic weave and crusted with great blazing gems. In the moonlight the faerie folk were dancing on the green before the castle, but Imric rode by into the courtyard. His horse's hoof-beats echoed hollowly from the massive outer walls, and the dwarf thralls hurried forth to attend him. He swung to the ground and hastened into the keep.

The clear unwavering light of the tapers was broken into a shifting, tricky dazzle of many colors by the gems and the gold in the walls. Music breathed through the vaulted rooms, rippling harps and keening viols and the voices of flutes like mountain brooks under darkling pines. The patterns on the rugs and tapestries moved slowly, like live figures. The very walls and floors, and the groined ceiling in its dim blue twilight of height, had a fluid quicksilver instability, they were never the same and yet one could not say just how they changed.

Imric went down a staircase, his byrnie chiming in the stillness. Of a sudden it grew dark about him, save for the occasional bloody light of a guttering torch, and the cold dark air of the inner earth filled his lungs. Now and again a clash of metal or a shuddering wail echoed down the rough-hewn water-dripping corridors, but Imric paid no heed. Like all elves, he had a rippling liquid cat-grace in his movements, he went swift and silent and easy as a questing wind down into the dungeons.

Finally he paused before a great door of brass-barred oak. It was green with moss and dark with age and cold with the dew of the inner earth, and only Imric had the keys to the three mighty locks. These he opened, muttering certain words, and swung the ponderous door back. It groaned, for three hundred years had passed since last he had opened it.

A woman of the troll race sat within the little cell. She wore only the bronze chain, heavy enough to anchor a ship, which fastened her by the neck to the wall. Light from a torch ensconced outside the door fell dimly on her huge squat mighty-muscl'd form. She had no hair, and the green skin moved over her bones. As she turned her great hideous head to Imric, her wolf-toothed mouth snarled. But her eyes were empty, two deep pools of utter blackness in which a soul could drown, sinking down forever into nothingness. For nine hundred years she had been Imric's captive, and she was mad.

The elf-earl looked down at her, but not into her eyes. He said softly, 'We are to make a changeling again, Gora.'

The troll-woman's voice rumbled like thunder out of the earth's inmost deeps. 'Oho, oho,' she said, 'he is here again. Be welcome, you, whoever you are, out of night and unending chaos. Ha, will none wipe the sneer off the face of the cosmos?'

'Hurry,' said Imric. 'I must make the change ere dawn.'

'Hurry and hurry, autumn leaves hurrying on the rainy wind, snow hurrying out of the sky, life hurrying to death, gods hurrying to oblivion.' The troll-woman's crazy voice boomed hollow down the

corridors. 'All ashes, dust, blown on a senseless screaming wind, and only the mad can gibber the music of the spheres. Ha, the red cock on the dunghill!'

Imric took a whip from the wall and lashed her. She cowered and lay down, and quickly, because he liked not the slippery clammy cold of her flesh, Imric did what was needful. Thereafter he walked nine times widdershins about her where she squatted, singing a song no human throat could have formed, a song which certain beings had sung once, shambling around a strangely carved monolith, to bring forth the fruits of a quaking steamy world. As he sang, the troll-woman shook and swelled and moaned in pain, and when he had gone the ninth time around she screamed so that it pierced his ears and rang in his skull, and she brought forth a man-child.

It could not by the human eye be told from Orm Dane-chief's son, save that it howled fiercely and bit at its mother. Imric cut its cord and took it in his arms, where it lay quiet.

'The world is flesh dissolving off a dead skull,' mumbled the troll-woman. She clanked her chain and lay back, shuddering. 'Birth is but the breeding of maggots in the crumbling flesh. Already the skull's teeth leer forth, and black crows have left its eye-sockets empty. Soon a barren wind will blow through its bare white bones.' She howled as Imric closed the door. 'He is waiting for me, he is waiting on the hill where the mist blows ragged on the wind, for nine hundred years has he waited. The black cock crows—'

Imric locked the door anew and hastened up the stairs. He had no liking for making changelings, but the chance of getting a human baby was too rare to lose.

When he came out into the courtyard he saw that a storm was brewing. A rising wind drove a wrack of clouds across the heavens, great flying black monsters from which the moon fled wildly over the sky. Like mountains in the east, the lightning-veined storm clouds boiled darkly over the horizon. The wind hooted and howled.

Imric sprang to the saddle and spurred his horse south. Over the crags and hills they went, across dales and between trees that writhed in the gale. The fleeing moon cast fitful white gleams over the world, and Imric was like such a wind-swift flitting phantom.

Swiftly, swiftly he raced, with his cloak blowing like bat-wings and the moonlight glittering briefly on his mail and his eldritch eyes. He rode along the eastern sea-cliffs with the surf roaring and snarling at his feet and spindrift blowing cold on his cheeks. Now and again a lurid lightning flash showed the waste of running waters and the storm marching out of the east. Thunder bawled ever louder in the darkness that followed the boom and bang of great wheels across the sky. Imric spurred his horse to yet wilder flight – he had no wish to meet Thor, out here in the storming dark with naught but loneliness around for many miles.

Into Orm's garth he leaped and up to Aelfrida's window. She was awake, holding her child to her breast and whispering comfort to him. Her hair blew around her face, almost blinding her.

There came a sudden glare of lightning like white fire. She could not see in that terrible flare, and the thunder that went with it was like a hammer-blow. But she felt the baby fall from her arms, she snatched for him, and then she felt the dear weight again as if it had been laid there.

Imric laughed aloud as he rushed back through the storm. But of a sudden he heard his laughter echoed, a howl in the raving darkness, and he reined in with his breast gone cold. Through a last break in the clouds came a shafting icy-white moonbeam, limning the figure which galloped with the east wind across Imric's path. A brief glimpse he had, seated on his plunging horse, of the mighty cloaked form that outran the wind, the huge eight-legged horse and its rider with the long gray beard and the shadowing hat. The moonbeam gleamed on the head of his spear and on his single eye.

Hoo, halloo, there he went through the sky with his troop of dead warriors and the fire-eyed hound

barking like thunderclaps. His horn screamed in the storm, the hoofbeats were like a rush of hail drumming on the roof; and then the whole pack was gone and the rain came raving over the world.

Imric snarled, for the Wild Hunt boded no good to those who saw it and the laughter of the one-eyed huntsman had been mockery. But – he had to get home now, lightning was cracking all around him and Thor might take a fancy to throw his hammer at an elf. Imric held Orm's son in his cloak and struck spurs into his stallion.

Aelfrida could see again, and she clutched the yelling boy in her arms. He should be fed now, if only to quiet him. He suckled her, but bit until it hurt.

Skafloc, Imric named the stolen child, and gave him to his sister Leea to nurse. She was as beautiful as her brother, with thinly graven ivory features, unbound silvery-gold tresses floating in the air under a jeweled coronet, and the same moon-flecked twilight-blue eyes as he. Tenuous spider-silk garments drifted about the slender white wonder of her body, and when she danced in the moonlight it was as a ripple of light and madness to those who watched. She smiled on Skafloc with pale full lips, and her milk was sweet fire in his mouth and veins.

Many great lords of Alfheim came to the naming of the child, and they brought goodly gifts: cunningly wrought goblets and rings, dwarf-forged swords and axes, byrnies and helms and shields, garments of silk and satin and cloth-of-gold, charms and talismans. Since elves, like gods and giants and trolls and others of that sort, know not old age, they had few children, perhaps centuries apart, and the birth of one was a great event; still more portentous to elves was the fostering of a human.

As the feast was in progress, there came a tremendous clatter of hoofs outside Elfheugh, until the walls trembled and the brazen gates sang an answer. Sentries on the moonlit towers winded their clear-throated horns, but none wished to contest the way of that rider and Imric himself met him at the portals, bowing low.

It was a great fair figure in flashing byrnie and eagle-winged helm, with a blaze in his eyes like lightning, and the earth trembled under his horse's hoofs. 'Greeting, Skirnir,' said Imric. 'We are honored by your visit.'

The messenger of the Aesir rode across the moon-white flagstones. At his side, jumping restlessly in the scabbard and glaring like fire of the sun itself, was Freyr's mighty sword, given him for his journey to Jötunheim after Gerth. He bore another sword in his hands, a huge rusted one still black with the earth in which it had long lain, and broken in two.

'I bear a naming-gift for your foster-son, Imric,' he said. 'Guard well this glaive, and when he is old enough to swing it tell him the giant Bölverk who forged it can make it whole again. The day will come when Skafloc stands in sore need of a good blade, and this is the Aesir's gift against that time.'

He threw the broken sword clashing on the ground, whirled his horse about, and in a roar of hoofbeats was lost in the night. The elf-folk stood very still, for they knew the Aesir had some purpose of their own in this, yet Imric could not but obey.

None of the elves could touch iron, but Imric shouted for his dwarf thralls and had them pick up the old weapon. Under his direction they bore it down to the inmost dungeons and walled it into a niche near Gora's lonely cell. Imric warded the spot with rune signs, and then left it and avoided the place for a long time.

Now some years went by and naught was heard from the gods.

Skafloc grew apace, and a bonny boy he was, big and gay, with great blue eyes and hair like spun gold in the sunshine. He was noisier than the few elf children, and grew so much swifter that he was a man when they were still unchanged. It was not the way of the elves to show over-much fondness for their young, but Leea often made much of Skafloc, singing him to sleep with the wild ancient lays that were voices of sea and wind and sighing forest. She taught him the courtly manners of the elf lords, and also their corybantic dances when they were out in the night, barefoot in the dew and drunk with streaming moonlight. Much of what wizard knowledge he had came from her, songs which could blind

and dazzle and enchant, songs which the rocks and trees sang back in shivering echoes, songs without voice to which the auroras danced on winter nights.

While yet a child, Skafloc had a merry time, at play with the elf young and with their strange fellows. Many were the presences haunting the hills and glens of that wild land; it was a place of sorcery and the men and beasts who wandered into it rarely returned. Not all the dwellers were safe or friendly, but Imric always had some warrior of his guard following Skafloc about.

There were sprites dancing and whirling in the rainbowed mists about cataracts tumbling into the dells, with their voices shouting and booming back from the cliffs. Skafloc could dimly see them, a cloudy glimpse of white, graceful, water-gleaming bodies leaping in the foam and spray, haloed with rainbows. Of moonlit nights, drawn like other denizens of faerie by the cold mystic beams, they would sometimes come out and sit on the mossy banks, white and naked and streaming water, with weeds twisted into their long hair and garlands of cool pale water lilies; and elf children could then talk to them. Much could the sprites tell, of flowing rivers and the quick silvery gleam of fish in them, of the frog and the otter and the kingfisher and what those had to say to each other, of sunlit pebbly bottoms and of secret places where the water was still and green and alive with presences – and then the wild rush over cliff edges in a roar and a rainbow, shooting down to dance in the whirlpools!

Other watery places there were from which Skafloc was warned away, certain quaking bogs and silent dark tarns, for the dwellers there were not good.

Often he would be out in the forest to speak with the little old folk who lived there, the humble gnomes and brownies, with their gray and brown homespun clothes and their long stocking caps and the men's beards down to their knees. They lived under trees, with a gnarly comfort to their simple abodes, and were glad to see the elf children. But they feared the grown elves, and thought it well that they were so small none of these could get into their dwellings. Unless of course he had shrunk to their size, which none of the haughty elf lords cared to do.

There were a few goblins about. Once they had been powerful in the land, but Imric had entered with fire and sword, and those who were not slain or driven out had been broken of their might. They were furtive cave dwellers now, but Skafloc managed to befriend one and from him got much curious goblin lore.

Once the boy heard a piping far off in the forest, and he thrilled to its eerie enchantment and hastened through the twilight trees to the glen from which it came. So softly had he learned to move, like a flitting shadow, that he stood before the creature ere it was aware of him. It was a strange being, man-like but with the legs and ears and horns of a goat. It blew a melancholy air on its reed pipe, and its eyes were great and sad and liquid.

'Who are you?' asked Skafloc wonderingly.

The being lowered his pipe, seeming for a moment ready to flee, then he relaxed and sat down on a log. His accent was odd as he said, 'I am a faun.'

'I have heard of no such beings.' Skafloc sat down cross-legged in the grass before him.

The faun smiled sorrowfully in the twilight. The evening star blinked forth above his head. 'There are none save me hereabouts,' he said. 'I am an exile.'

'Whence came you hither, faun?'

'I came from the lands of the south, after great Pan was dead and the new god whose name I cannot speak was come to Hellas. There was no more place for the old gods and the old beings who haunted the land. The priests cut down the sacred grove and built a church – Oh, I remember the dryads' screams, quivering voicelessly on the still, hot air and seeming to hang there forever. They ring yet in my ears, they always will.' The faun shook his horned head. 'I fled north,' he said, 'but I wonder if

those of my ancient comrades who stayed and fought and were slain with exorcisms were not wiser. Long and long has it been, elf-boy, and lonelier than it was long.' Tears glistened in the faun's eyes. 'The nymphs and the fauns and the very gods are dead, dust blowing on desolate winds. The temples stand empty, white under the sky, and slowly they topple to ruin. And I – I wander alone in a foreign land, scorned by its gods and shunned by its people. It is a land of mist and rain and soul-freezing iron winters, angry gray seas and pale sunlight spearing through hurrying clouds. No more of blue sky and sapphire ocean, creamy-white in its gentle swells, no more of little rocky islands and the dear warm groves where the white nymphs waited for us, no more of grapes hanging from ancient vines and fig trees heavy with fruit, no more of the stately gods on high Olympus—'

Of a sudden the faun ceased his crooning, stiffened, cocked his ears forward, and then turned and fled into the bushes. Skafloc looked around and saw the elf-guard approaching to take him home.

Skafloc, who could stand the daylight which the elves hated, was much more at home in the hills and dales than the other children, and came to know the land far better than a man who had lived there for a lifetime might.

Of the wild beasts, the fox and the otter were most friendly to elves, it being held that there was some kind of kinship, and insofar as these had a language the elves knew it. From the fox Skafloc learned the secret ways of the forest, the hidden trails through sun-spattered shadow and the myriad tiny signs which told a story to one who knew the full use of his senses. From the otter, he learned of the world about lake and river, he learned to swim like a living arrow and to sneak through cover which would scarce hide half his body.

But he grew friendly with nigh all the other animals, even the most timid of birds would come sit on his finger when he whistled in its own tongue, even the grim old bear would grunt a welcome when he came to its cave. Deer and elk and rabbit and other game became wary of him as he took up hunting, but with some special ones he made friends. And the story of all his farings among the beasts would be a long one.

And the years swung by, and he was borne on their resistless current. He was out in the first shy green of spring, when the forests woke after their sleep and grew clamorous with returning birds, when the rivers brawled with melting ice and a few little white flowers in the chill moss were like remnant snowflakes. The summer knew him, a naked brown form with flying sun-bleached hair, chasing butterflies up the windy hills toward the sky, rolling over in the long grasses with sheer joy of life; out in the light nights which were like a dreamy ghost of day, stars overhead and chirring crickets and dew glittering under the moon. The cold thunderous rains of autumn washed him, or he wore a crown of flame-colored leaves and stood in the breathless sharp air listening to skies gone clangorous with the calls of departing birds. Even in winter he was about, flitting through the dance of snowflakes, crouched under a windfall while the storm roared like a mad bull through the groaning forests; sometimes of nights when it grew so numbingly cold that trees broke open like thunderclaps far away he would be standing on the moon-white snowfields, listening under the hard brilliance of the stars to a voice of winter, the deep vibrant tone of ice-bound waters shivering in the cold with thunders that rolled between the hills.

When Skafloc's limbs began to lengthen Imric took him in charge, only a little at first, but more and more with time until he was being raised wholly as a warrior of Alfheim. Being short-lived, humans could learn more quickly than the folk of faerie, and Skafloc's knowledge grew even faster than his body.

He learned to ride the horses of Alfheim, white and black stallions and mares of an eerie quicksilver grace, swift and tireless as the wind, and ere long his moonlight gallops were taking him from Caithness to Land's End with the cloven air singing in his ears. He learned the use of sword and spear and bow and the slender long-shafted ax which rang like a great bell on splitting skulls. He was less quick and supple than the elves, but grew to be far stronger and could bear helm and hauberk as many days on end as needful; and any other human was like a clumsy clod beside his weird flitting movements.

He hunted far and wide over land, alone or in company with Imric and his warriors. His bow twanged death to many a tall-antlered stag or mighty wild boar, he could put an arrow whither he would at any distance it could reach. There was other and trickier game, hunted crazily through the forests and across the crags swifter than stormwinds, the unicorns and griffins which Imric had brought from the edge of the world for his pleasure.

Skafloc learned also the manners of the elves, their courtly grace and their guileful intriguing and their subtle speech. He could dance in the drenching moonlight to the wild harps and pipes, naked and drunken and abandoned as any of them. He could himself play, and sing the strange lilting lays older than man. He learned the skaldic arts so well that he spoke in verses as easily as in ordinary speech. He could discriminate between the rare and subtle viands of the elves, and drink the liquid fire which smoldered in dusty spider-shrouded bottles below the castle, but for all that his taste for the hunter's black bread and salt meat, or the rainy sunny earthy savor of berries, or the clear cool springs in distant woodlands, was not spoiled.

As he grew up, he had much attention from the supernally lovely elf women. Without gods, and with few children, the elves know not marriage, but their nature was such that their women had more wish of love and their men less than among humans. Thus Skafloc found himself in great favor, and many a good time did he have in the light nights of summer.

But the most difficult and perilous part of his training was in magic. Imric had him wholly in hand for this, and, while he was not able to learn as much as his foster-father, both because of his human nature and his short life, he came to be as adept as most elf chieftains. He learned first how to shun and sidestep the iron no elf, troll, or goblin could endure; even when he became aware of his nature and his ability to touch the metal without harm, he left it alone out of habit. Then he learned the rune for healing wounds and illness, warding off bad luck, or wishing evil on foemen. He learned the song which could raise or lay storms, bring good or bad harvests, and move rock and wood and metal. He learned the use of the cloak of darkness, and of the skins he could don to take the form of a beast. Near the end of his training he learned the mighty runes and songs and charms which could raise the dead and read the future and compel the gods; but save in time of direst need no one cared to be shaken to his inmost being by these and risk the utter destruction they could wreak on him.

Skafloc was often down by the sea, he could sit hour upon hour looking out over its restless waste to the cloudy line where the water met the sky, he never wearied of its deep voice or its thousand

moods or its clean sharp tang of salty depths and windy distances. He came of a seafaring breed, and the running tides were in his blood. He often spoke to the seals in their barking, grunting tongue, and the wheeling gulls brought him news from the earth's ends. Sometimes when he was in company with other warriors, the white sea maidens would rise from the foam, wringing out their long green hair as they came up on the beach, and then there would be a gay time. They were cool and wet to the touch and they smelled of the sea; afterward Skafloc would have a faint fishy taste on his lips, but he liked them well.

When he was fifteen he stood nearly as tall as Imric, broad of shoulder and taut of sinew, with his long hair bleached almost white against his brown skin. He had a straight, blunt, strong-boned face, a wide merry mouth, and large eyes set far apart and blue as the summer sea. A mystery hung about him, veiling itself behind his eyes which had looked on more than mortals saw, revealing itself in his cat-lithe movements.

Imric said to him: 'Now you are big enough to have your own weapons rather than old ones of mine, and also I have been summoned by the Erlking. We will fare overseas.'

At this Skafloc whooped for joy, cartwheeled out into the fields, and galloped his horse madly through the lands of men, making magic out of sheer need to do something. He caused pots to dance on the hearth and bells to ring and axes to cut wood of their own accord, he sang cows up onto the peasant's roof and a wind into being which scattered his hay over the shire and a rain of gold out of the sky into his yard. With the Tarnkappe about his shoulders, he kissed the girls working at twilight in the fields and rumbled their hair and tossed their men into a ditch. For many days thereafter, masses were sung to exorcise the spate of witchcraft, but by that time Skafloc was on the sea.

Imric's black longship sped over moonlit waves with her sail taut under a wind he had raised. There was a picked company of elf warriors along, for the chance of meeting trolls or sea monsters was not to be ignored. Skafloc stood by the dragon prow peering eagerly forward – he could see by night as well as by day, given witch-sight. He spied the leaping porpoises, silver-gray under the moon and hailed an old bull seal he knew. Once a whale broached, water roaring off his mighty flanks. Things which mortal sailors only glimpsed or dreamed were plain to the cloudy slant elf-eyes and to Skafloc: the sea maidens tumbling in the foam and singing, the drowned towers of Ys far below the moon-rippling billows, a brief gleam of white and gold and a hawk-scream of challenge overhead – Valkyrs rushing to some battle in the east.

Wind sang in the ship's rigging and the sea roared at the strakes. Ere dawn the vessel had reached the other shore, been drawn up on the beach, and lay hidden by spells.

The elves took shelter in a cave, but Skafloc was about during much of the day. He climbed a tall tree and looked in wonder at the strange land rolling southward. He spied the gaunt gray hall of some baron, and thought briefly and pityingly of the narrow human lives that flickered in its gloom. He would not trade.

When night came, the elves mounted their horses and rode inland swift as a winging storm. Ere midnight they were in rough wild mountain country where the moonlight cast its thin-etched silver and crouching shadows on bleak pinnacles, swooping cliffs, and the far green shimmer of glaciers. The elves rode easily along a narrow treacherous trail, harnesses chiming, lances high, plumes and capes streaming. Hoofbeats rang on the stones and echoed back through gulfs of night.

A horn sounded hoarsely from above, another from below. The elves heard a clank of metal and a tramping of feet, and when they came to the end of the trail they saw a dwarf host guarding a cave mouth.

The little bandy-legged men scarce came up to Skafloc's waist, but they were immensely broad of

shoulder and long of arm. Their dark bearded faces were angry, their little eyes smoldered red and bitter under tangled brows. They held swords and axes and shields, but their power of handling iron was of little use against the elves' arrows and long spears.

'What will you?' asked their leader, his voice cavernously deep in his hairy breast. 'Have the elves and trolls not wrought us enough ill, harrying our lands and bearing our folk off as thralls? This time our force is larger than yours, and if you come nearer we will slay you.'

'We come in peace now, Motsognir,' replied Imric softly. 'We wish only to buy of your wares.'

'I know your trickery, Imric the guileful,' said Motsognir harshly. 'You would make peace only to put us off our guard.'

'I will give hostages,' offered Imric, and this the dwarf king grudgingly accepted. Leaving several elves disarmed and surrounded, Motsognir led the others down into his caverns.

Here glowed red coals, lighting the rocky walls with bloody shadow-beset dimness, and over their forges the dwarfs labored unceasingly. Their hammers rang and echoed and boomed down the dark dank corridors until Skafloc's head seemed to ring in answer. Here were made the most tricky works of all the world, rare goblets and beakers ablaze with gems, rings and necklaces of ruddy gold cunningly fashioned; weapons were beaten out of metals torn from the mountain's heart, weapons fit for gods – and indeed the dwarfs had done much work for the gods – and other weapons cursed with evil. Mighty were the runes and charms the dwarfs could grave, and strange were the arts they had mastered.

'I would have you make an outfit for my foster-son here,' said Imric.

Motsognir's little red mole-eyes searched Skafloc's tall form in the wavering light. His voice rumbled through the hammer-clashing: 'So you have been up to your old changeling tricks again, Imric? Someday you will overreach yourself. But since this is a human, I suppose he will want arms steel.'

Skafloc hesitated. The elves used brass, copper, bronze, gold, silver, and certain metals which men did not yet know but which gave alloys as hard and tough as steel itself. But such weapons had not quite the weight demanded by Skafloc's growing strength.

'Aye, steel,' he said firmly.

' 'Tis well, 'tis well,' growled Motsognir, and turned to his forge. 'Let me tell you, boy, that you humans, weak and short-lived and ignorant, are yet stronger than elves and trolls, aye, than giants and gods. And that you can touch cold iron is only one reason. Ho!' he called. 'Ho, Sindri, Dyrin, Dvalin, come to help!'

Now the forging went apace, sparks flying and metal shouting so that it was a marvel, and ere long Skafloc wore winged helm and shining byrnie, shield on back and sword at side and ax in hand, all of wondrous hard, blue-gleaming steel. He yelled, fierce with exultation, and swung high his weapons and shrilled the screaming war-cry of the elves.

'Ha!' he cried, clashing the sword back into its sheath. 'Now let trolls or goblins, aye, giants dare approach Alfheim, we shall smite them like the lightning and carry fire into their own lands!' And he made the verses:

*Swiftly goes the sword-play
singing in the mountains.
Clash of steel is calling,
clanging up to heaven: –
arrows flying angry;*

*axes lifting skyward,
banging down on byrnies,
breaking shields and helmets.*

*Swiftly goes the sword-play:
Spears on hosts are raining;
men run forth in madness,
mowing ranks of foemen;
battle tumult bellows;
blood is red on ax-heads;
greedily the gray wolf
gorges with the raven.*

‘Well spoke,’ said Imric coolly, ‘but remember not to touch elves with those new arms of yours. Now let us begone.’ He gave Motsognir a sack of gold. ‘Here is payment for the work.’

‘Rather had I been paid by the freeing of your thralls of our race,’ said the dwarf.

‘They are too useful,’ declared Imric, and left.

Again at dawn his troop sheltered in a cave, and then the next night rode on into the mysterious great forest in which was the Erlking’s castle.

Here was a weaving of witchery which Skafloc did not yet know how to unravel. He was dimly aware of high slender towers against the moon, of a deep blue twilight in which many stars wavered and danced, of a music which seemed to sing through flesh and bone to thrill in the very soul, but it was not until they were in the throne room that he could see again.

The elf lords stood tall and silent in the blue dusk, their beautiful pale faces closed and secret, the strange eyes seeming blind and yet looking deeper than mortal. In a throne of shadow sat the Erlking. Golden were his crown and scepter, and his robes of a purple that blent with the spacious gloaming. His long hair and beard were white, and he alone of the elves showed any sign of age, in that his high noble forehead and his cheeks were lined. His face was as if carved in marble, but eldritch fires smoldered in his eyes.

Imric the elf-earl bowed, and the warriors in his train bent the knee to the king. When the ruler spoke it was like a wind rushing through far-off trees: ‘Greeting, Imric, earl of Britain’s elves.’

‘Greeting, lord,’ answered the chieftain, and he met the Erlking’s terrible gaze.

‘We have summoned the elf-earls to council,’ quoth the king, ‘since word has reached us that the trolls make ready to go to war again. It cannot be doubted that ’tis us they arm against, and we may look for the truce to end in the next few years.’

‘That is well, lord. Our swords were moldering in the scabbards.’

‘It may not be so well, Imric. Last time the elves drove back the trolls and would have entered the lands had not peace been made. Illrede Troll-King is no fool, and he would not attempt war if he did not think he was stronger than formerly.’

‘I will ready my lauds, lord, and try to send spies and raiders to their lands.’

‘That is well.’ Now the Erlking turned his eyes on Skafloc, who grew cold about the heart but met that blind fire-flickering stare readily enough. ‘We have heard tell of your changeling, Imric,’ he murmured, soft and chill and deadly. ‘You should have asked us.’

‘There was no time, lord,’ defended the elf-earl. ‘The babe would be baptized ere I could come here and back. Hard is it to steal a child these days.’

‘And risky too, Imric.’

‘Aye, lord, but worth it. Humans may do much which is barred to elves and trolls and other beings – they may use all metals, they may touch holy water and the cross and speak the name of that new god who is our greatest foe – aye, the old gods themselves must flee some things which humans use. We elves need such a one.’

‘The changeling you left in his place could do all that.’

‘Indeed, lord. But you know the wild and evil nature of such half-breed beings, they are surely not to be trusted with magic such as this human knows. Were it not that men must never be sore their children are stolen, so that they would call their gods to avenge it, elves would make no changelings at all.’

‘Can this human be trusted? Let him but turn Christian and he is beyond our reach – already he grows strong—’

‘No, lord!’ Skafloc stood forth in all that proud assembly and looked directly into the Erlking’s face. ‘I am but thankful to Imric for rescuing me from the dull blind round of a human life. I am elf in all but blood, it was elf breasts I suckled as a babe and elf tongue I speak and elf girls I sleep beside.’ He lifted his tawny head, almost arrogantly. ‘Give me leave, lord, and I will be the best of your household – but if a dog be driven out, he will become a wolf and feed on his master’s flocks.’

Some of the elves were aghast at this boldness, but the king nodded, and smiled a grim smile. ‘We believe you,’ he said, ‘and indeed earlier men adopted into Alfheim proved good warriors. What worries us about you is the story of the Aesir’s naming-gift. They have a hand in this somewhere, and their purpose is not like to be our own.’

A shudder ran around the gathering and some made rune signs in the air. But Imric said: ‘What the Norns have ordered, not even the gods may alter. And I would count it shame to lose the most promising of men because of a dim fear of the future.’

‘Indeed it would be,’ quoth the Erlking, and there the council ended.

A great and lavish feast was held ere the meeting of the earls dissolved. Skafloc’s head swam with the magnificence of the Erlking’s court. When finally he came home, his contempt and pity for humans were so great that he had naught to do with them at all.

Now some half-dozen years went by. The elves showed no change, but Skafloc grew until his outfit had to be altered by Imric’s dwarf thralls. He stood even taller and broader than the elf-earl, and was the strongest man in the realm. He wrestled bears and wild bulls, and often ran down a stag on foot. No other in Alfheim could bend his bow, or could have swung his ax even had it not been of iron.

He grew leaner of face, and let a mustache the wheaten color of his long hair grow on his lip. But he became, if anything, merrier and more unruly than before, a lover of madcap pranks and breakneck stunts, a mischievous warlock who would raise a whirlwind just to lift a girl’s skirt, a mighty drinker and brawler. Restless with his own strength, he prowled the land, hunting the most dangerous game he could find. Monsters of the Wood of Grendel he sought out and slew in their desolate fens, sometime suffering frightful wounds which only Imric’s runes could heal, but ever ready for another bout. Then again he might lie idle for weeks on end, staring dreamily into clouds high above, scarce stirring himself. Or in some beast shape, with senses strange to man, he would seek forests and waters, to gambol as an otter or hunt as a wolf or wing in fierce lonely pride as an eagle.

‘Three things have I never known,’ he boasted once. ‘Fear, and defeat, and love-sickness.’

Imric looked at him strangely. ‘Young are you,’ he murmured, ‘not to have known the three ultimates of human life.’

‘I am more elf than human, foster-father.’

‘So you are – now.’

One year Imric outfitted a dozen longships and went a-roving. The fleet crossed the eastern sea, and harried goblins dwelling along the rocky coasts. Then the warriors rode inland and made a raid on a troll town, burning it after they had slain its folk and taken their treasure. Sailing north and then east through a weird white land of mist and cold and drifting icebergs, Imric and Skafloc and their men at last rounded the cape and went south. Here they fought dragons, and harried among the demons of the land. They followed the continent westward again, until it turned south, and then north anew. Their hardest fight was on a desert shore with a troop of exiled gods, grown thin and shrunken and mad in their loneliness but still wielding fearsome powers. Three elf ships were burned after the fight, there being none left to man them, but Imric was the victor.

They saw somewhat of humans, but paid no great heed, the more so since their warring was with beings of faerie; and the humans never saw them at all, or only in frightened glimpses. Only four ships returned of that fleet, three years after it set out, but they had a huge booty of wealth and captives. It had been a glorious voyage, of which great report went about in Alfheim and the neighboring lands, and the fame of Imric and Skafloc was high.

The witch dwelt alone in the forest with only her memories for company, and over the years these fed on her soul and left their castings of hate and vengeance-lust. She began to increase her powers, raising spirits out of the earth and speaking with demons of the upper air. To the Black Sabbath on the Brocken she rode, high through the sky on a broomstick with her rags streaming in the wind. A monster feasting it was, with ancient hideous shapes chanting about the dark altar, with steaming kettles of blood from which they drank deep, but perhaps the most frightful of all were the fair white young women who joined in the rites and in the fearful matings.

Wiser the witch returned, with a rat for familiar who suckled blood out of her withered breasts with his sharp little teeth and at night crouched on her pillow and chattered in her ear as she slept. And so at last she was given strength to raise the Dark One by herself.

Thunder and lightning rolled about her hovel, with blue phosphorescent glare and the stink of Hell's pits. But the vast shadowy presence before which she groveled was beautiful in its inhuman way, for all evil is luring and this was the fount of it.

'O thou of the many names, Prince of Darkness, Evil Companion,' cried the witch, 'I would thou did my wish, and for that I will pay thy ancient price.'

The one for whom all men in all lands had names, but whom she called Sathanas, spoke, and his voice was slow and deep and endlessly patient: 'Already you have gone far down my road, but not yet are you mine. The mercy of God is infinite, and only if you yourself reject it can you be lost.'

'What care I for mercy?' asked the witch bitterly. 'It will not avenge me. I stand ready to give my soul unto you if you will deliver my enemies into my hands.'

'That I may not do,' quoth the Dark One, 'but I may give you the means to entrap them yourself if your cunning be greater than theirs.'

'That will be enough, Lord.'

'But think you now, have you not had revenge on Orm already? 'Tis your doing that he has a changeling for eldest son, and the ill that being will wreak on him can scarce be averted.'

' 'Tis not enough. Orm's true son prospers in Alfheim, and his other children grow apace. I would wipe out his accursed seed altogether, as he wiped out mine. The Aesir will not answer me, therefore you, Black Majesty, must be my friend.'

The Devil's strange deep eyes, in which were little flickering flames colder than winter itself, brooded long on her. 'The Aesir are not out of this matter,' he said slowly. 'Odin, who knows the future, has some purpose of his own . . . I knew him of old, in my incarnation of Loki, and I liked it not . . . But you shall have my help. Power and knowledge and strength will I give you, until you become a mighty witch. Also I will tell you the only way to strike, and that way is certain unless your enemies are wiser than you think.'

'There are three Powers in the world which not gods nor demons nor men can stay, against which no magic shall prevail and no might shall stand, and they are the White Christ, Time, and Love.'

'From the first, and mightiest, you may wait only enmity, and you must be careful that this Power in no way enters the struggle. The second, which has many names – Fate, Destiny, Law, Wyrd, the Norns, Necessity, Brahm, and others beyond counting – is scarce to be appealed to, for it is not to be swerved in its way. But the third is a two-edged sword which may bring harm as well as help, and this you must use.'

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