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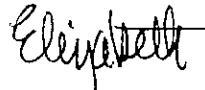
Andre Norton
1600 Spruce Avenue
Winter Park, FL 32789

Dear Andre:

Thank you for the copy of FOUR FROM THE WITCH WORLD--it is really thrilling to see a story of mine in hard cover, at last!

The zodiac story is enclosed--I took the option for creating numerous avocational clans, instead of an entire world with similar characteristics. I had trouble conceiving an entire society based upon typical Libran attributes--they seem incomplete without the appropriate parter. Maybe it's my own personal prejudice, but I have come to realize that diversity is essential and probably unavoidable when it comes to the evolution of the human species. So my story is about diverse people of different personalities and avocations. If you think this isn't going to work well in your anthology, please let me know and I'll do something in a different vein. This is a very interesting theme, and volumes could be written on it.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth H. Boyer

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10,000 words

The Gifting Fair

by

Elizabeth H. Boyer

When Havarr Thorfastrsson did anything, it was after a long period of careful consideration of all the possible consequences and alternatives. He came from clan Sanngjarn, reknown for their reconcilliation of lawsuits, feuds, and all manner of disputes between men. At Arinn-fell he had learned to do nothing hastily, always to attempt to see every issue from as many viewpoints as possible, and to attempt to please everyone concerned. There must be balance and harmony in all things, his kinsmen admonished him.

After nearly ten years of consideration, he still did not quite know what had brought him to the Hvalvatn gifting fair so precipitately. He had saved a considerable bride-price as a result of his years of weighing his decision to bring home a wife to Arinn-fell. As befit his status as a

future judge for his young chieftain Digfus, he must select a wife from one of the better-off clans, a woman of justice and mercy and wisdom. His entire clan expected him to find an adaptable woman who would fit in well with their ways.

On the other hand, Havarr secretly deplored the necessity of a marriage strictly of convenience. Sometimes he dreamed of a genuine love-match, but he never mentioned it to his parents or anyone to whom such information might be a source of astonishment and worry. They might even consider him unbalanced.

His only confidant was Gils, his thrall, who had grown up alongside him from infancy. In many ways, Gils was even closer to Havarr than Havarr's own younger brothers and sisters. Gils was fiercely loyal; no word breathed to him in confidence would ever leave his lips. He had never had occasion to be suspicious of Gils, until this wretched business of the gifting fair. Somehow Digfus had gotten wind of Havarr thinking of going to barter for a bride, so nothing would do except that Havarr must also bring back a wife for Digfus. Gils, he suspected darkly, must have hinted that his master was thinking about wedding.

Digfus was much too busy to go himself and trudge patiently from booth to booth with his genealogy scroll and birth star chart, looking for a suitable match among the maidens of the clans represented. Digfus was sensibly employed with a viking raid upon a settlement down the coast

with whom he had discovered differences of opinion. Only recently had Digfus ascended to the chieftain's seat over the region called Gladlegur, which included the clans of Sanngjarn, Hestur, Songur, and several other small families. Lamentably, they were all rather peaceable people, so he had to carry his quarrels abroad to find satisfaction for his adventurous disposition. Perhaps it was through a desire to appear slightly more respectable that he wanted a wife at home, or possibly he had hopes of red-haired progeny that would continue his boistrous reign over the district.

Havarr, of course, could not refuse the wishes of his chieftain. So it was he traveled to Hvalvatn, donned his best clothes and approached the tents of the matchmakers for the first time, and came away feeling like the hare fleeing before the hounds. The wrath of Digfus could in no way compare to the scourging of the matchmakers. He had never dreamed it was so difficult to negotiate for a wife of high breeding. The woman herself, of course, was kept well away from the matchmaker's tents, and a glimpse of her was not permitted until a certain degree of compatibility was ascertained by the genealogists' scrutiny of the scrolls. Then the astrologers would compare charts and mumble and mutter about stars and planets rising or setting, all under the watchful eye of the clan matchmaker, who was sizing up the applicant and trying to guess how large a bride-price to demand without discouraging the prospect. If all went

reasonably well to that point, the future husband was asked to attend a meal at the woman's tent for her final approval. When the first meeting had reached a satisfactory conclusion, the bride's dowry was displayed and the bride-price was negotiated with a vengeance. Once paid, the gifting was considered complete, and the new couple would take up residence with the bride's family, in the case of younger sons. The requisite feasting and dancing and celebrating was generally held in the fall after the autumn harvesting and slaughtering and salting were finished. At this time, the bride's brothers ascertained if their sister were happy or not, and depending upon their opinion of the bridegroom, they might thrash him soundly and take their sister home again. In certain cases the gifting was negotiated to bring peace to two feuding clans, the repossession of a peace-bride meant the resumption of warfare.

There had been no peace-brides in Gladlegur since the days of Digfus' grandfather. Havarr, however, had a strong feeling that warfare of another sort might be eminent if he brought Digfus an unsatisfactory wife. True, he had Digfus' scrolls with him, but he knew well enough that similarity in the scrolls and true marital accord could be miles apart.

"Like is happier with like," Gils assured him. "Digfus will admire some spirit and fire in a woman."

"But not too much," Havarr hastened to add. "A woman exactly similar to Digfus would be a termagent. If I brought him an arrogant and head-strong woman, what do you think he'd do?"

"He'll probably kill you," said Gils promptly. "After he shouts and bellows and tramples your ribs under his feet, like barrel staves. But you can't take him a meek and gentle little dove, or she won't stand up to him."

"It's more likely the bride and her brothers will come after me, when they see what a bargain Digfus is," said Havarr.

Digfus, at least, was chieftain over Gladlegur, and there were plenty of match-makers who were eager to nail down a chieftain for a daughter of their clan. Havarr himself was no mean catch, what with assuming his father's seat one day as High Judge of Gladlegur, but Havarr, as usual, was in no hurry to make a decision of any kind without having considered the strong and weak points of every clan's avocation.

"This is what I want you to look at," said Gils, halting before a booth. "Radskona."

Havarr kept a wary distance between himself and the withered old matchmaker sitting at a table with her boxes of bride-scrolls. His mother and grandmother had both come from Radskona to marry elder sons of Arinn-fell--a fairly recent innovation for his clan. Before, the elder sons had married

sensible soil-tilling Bondi, or Smalamadur, or other useful, skilled women, who wove or fished or tanned hides. With the rise in status of his father's house had come a rise in the status of new wives, chosen for alliances with wealthy, prestigious clans.

"Hah, Sanngjarn!" The withered little matchmaker fixed her eyes upon him, like an eagle who has spied a rabbit. "I know you better than you know yourself. You're the young judge of Gladlegur. It was I who arranged your father's marriage to a Radskona woman. From the look of you, I did a wonderful job, didn't I? How fitting that you return to me for your bride! You certainly took your time, didn't you?"

She rattled on smartly, while the clan genealogist examined his scrolls and Digfus', her long yellowed fingernail running up and down the lists of names of ancestors, back as near to the beginning of time as possible. Radskona and Sanngjarn were brother and sister clans, with the same favorable and unfavorable stars shining upon them. Both Sanngjarn and Radskona treasured harmony and order, seeking reconciliation and equilibrium among mankind, and craving beautiful things of all natures. Both clans were people of exceptional tact and understanding, which made them trusted peacemakers. Quarrels of the great and small were brought to the Sanngjarn or the Radskona for settlement. A marriage between the two clans could not fail

to be blissfully compatible, since both sides were always anxious to be accomodating and sympathetic.

"What you really want," concluded the matchmaker with a significant tap of her finger, "is a wife as much like yourself as humanly possible. Radskona will be perfect."

That sounded reasonable to Havarr, even though he knew it was the matchmaker's job to say such things. The astrologer, another incredibly ancient little stick of a woman, next looked over the chart of his stars.

"This is the best match I have seen for Brynhild yet," she pronounced. "This is her third year of looking. She's very particular about her marriage. But this one---" She poked Digfus' star chart as if she disdained to touch it. "I foresee nothing but disaster if these two should marry. Complete opposition in all regards."

The matchmaker rolled up all the scrolls with a snap and handed them back to Havarr. "Supper begins just before sunset. I shall tell Brynhild a suitor is joining them."

The rest of the day was an apprehensive blur for Havarr. He and Gils did peruse a few booths for a bride for Digfus, but he remembered none of it. When it came near the time for him to attend at Brynhild's tent, he arrayed himself as carefully as he could in his very finest clothing. If Brynhild were truly similar to himself in every taste, he knew she would critically examine his attire, with the knowledge that the exterior appearance

reflected the interior man. He came away wearing a full-sleeved white shirt of embroidered silk, tight-fitting gray breeches of softest glove leather tucked into knee-high boots of embroidered troll skin with the hair removed and the snouts forming the most stylish upturned toes. Around his waist he cinched a wide belt ornamented with silver medallions, then a sword-belt, rather plain, but the eagle-claw pommel of his sword compensated for it without its magnificence being diminished by a flashy belt and scabbard. He experimented with his cloak, a new one of black silk lined with blue and trimmed with ermine-tails, tossing it casually over one shoulder like a horseman would, or fastened over both shoulders, or fastened at the hip with his glittering gold broach and pin, done like a coiled serpent with ruby eyes. An elaborate embroidered hood designated his tribal and clan heritage, worn casually hanging down the back, with the long silky tassel nearly at his heels. Over one shoulder he looped his leather belt-pouch, designed for special occasions and embellished with gold bosses. As a final appurtenance to all this glory, he combed his fair hair down to his shoulders and donned an elegant fur-trimmed hat, with its tall peak in red cloth, folded down with the weight of silver lace ornaments to hang near his ear. It had been bought off a merchant ship from the far and mysterious East, at no small price.

His horse and its gear were also bedizened with borrowed glory from the merchant ships; an elaborate bridle with an ornamented bit, a decorated saddle tall in the cantle and pommel, with innovative stirrups not found on local saddles. Havarr felt a stir of satisfaction at the admiration he attracted, riding through the fair toward the tent of Brynhild's mother. On a stout brown pony, Gils rode behind him soberly attired and armed to the teeth as befitted a thrall protecting his master's bride-money and horse while the feasting went on.

All was going very well for Havarr until they reached the creek which divided the booths of the brides and matchmakers from the tents of the prospective bride-grooms. A noisy group of drunken carters staggered along the embankment, singing and shouting jibes across the way. A young woman on the far side was struggling with an unruly white colt. Her hair came loose from its combs and scarves, escaping like a crackling bonfire, red-gold hair that caught the red light of the setting sun until it shone like a torch. The carters whooped and roared at the sight, which frightened the colt so it suddenly broke away and plunged down the bank into the willows by the creek, dragging its owner after it. Her clothing was much too fine for such a pursuit, but she refused to let go of the rope until she had been dragged through the mud and willows. She got up and braced her fists on her hips, glaring at the carters.

The carters guffawed and slapped each others' backs, scarcely able to stand up.

"You swine!" shouted the girl, almost as red in the face as her hair. "You're an insult to swine! Pigs are decent and clean animals, compared to your kind!"

The carters roared with mirth and hurled back some unkind remarks about her hair. Suddenly Havarr's usually-placid equanimity flared into blazing fury at such unjust treatment of a defenseless woman. He unsheathed his sword and turned his horse toward the carters.

"Gils," said Havarr levelly, "go after the girl's horse. I'm going to teach these swine not to attack a helpless girl."

By now he had their full attention, all seven of them. They grinned and cooed in a malicious and dangerous fashion and turned their drunken insults upon Havarr and his habliment, his horse, and his ancestry.

Havarr made a gesture with his sword, directing the carters to disperse. They produced a nasty array of gnarled clubs and short axes, growling and glaring and feinting here and there as if they truly meant it. Meanwhile, the red-haired girl picked up a rock and hurled it with deadly aim, landing it in the middle of a carter's back with a solid thud. He fell forward with an agonized curse, and the other six made a short rush at Havarr, yelling and swinging their clubs. He cut the air to ribbons before their eyes,

assuring them of a similar unpleasant and bloodier fate, while more rocks pelted down among them, raising some great lumps and plenty more curses.

"Get away, you stupid troll-heads and witches' behinds!" came the furious shout of the red-haired woman. "Some fighters you are! Seven to one! My old grandmother could beat the best of you, and she's got red-hair too!"

"I'm sure there's no need for a fight," suggested Havarr into the bared teeth of a huge black-bearded carter, whose arms were thick enough to serve as ox-yokes. "If you'd apologize to the lady and go your own way, we shall all get back to our own business. No one wants unpleasantness at the gifting fair."

"Shut your trap, you dandy-bird!" snarled the carter, hoisting aloft a huge club studded with shards of metal. "I'll show you what you get for poking your nose in where it isn't wanted!"

He made a rush at Havarr, club upraised, teeth glinting like a row of battle-shields on a longboat. Havarr raised his sword and spurred his horse forward. At that moment, Gils came charging around the side of a wagon at full gallop, helmed and armed and roaring a challenge. Also, the red-haired woman flung another rock, which connected by accident with the pit of Havarr's stomach instead of the skull of a carter. It carried him right off his horse, gasping for air, and he rolled down the creek bank and half

into the water, all unnoticed by anyone except the red-haired woman. Gils had captured the full attention of the carters as he harried them from the field.

The red-haired woman uttered a piercing shriek and floundered across the water to Havarr, heedless of her gown and shoes. She threw herself down in the mud beside him and cradled his head in her arms.

"Are you dead? Are you bleeding? I didn't see him touch you. What happened? Can you speak?" She flooded him with so many questions he could manage nothing but a croak in response, so he struggled to sit upright, thereby assuring her that he wasn't half dead. He of course made no mention that it was a rock in the stomach that had unhorsed him and precipitated such an undignified tumble down the creek bank.

"You're alright? Oh, I'm so glad!" she continued. "It was so bold of you to chase off those carters! If my brothers had been here, they would have made dogs' meat out of them! It was entirely my fault. I'm very sorry. My red hair gets me into trouble all the time!"

"It so happens," said Havarr manfully, wincing as he stirred to bring himself into a more dignified position, "that I like red hair. I think it's my favorite. Anyone who teases you about such lovely hair ought to be flogged at a cart's tail."

"Oh! Do you think so?" She gave her disheveled hair a poke with one muddy hand, fixing him with a rapturous stare

from a pair of large green eyes. A pleasant pink glow suffused her skin, once blotchy with mingled rage and fright, and a delighted smile parted her lips, showing a perfect set of dainty white teeth. She was a fine and handsome woman, with a strong white neck rising like a column from firm, square shoulders. The hand which she offered him to help him onto his feet with a strong, quick pull was freckled on the back side and callused on the inside, probably from handling unruly horses such as the one who had pulled her into the creek.

"Clan Hestur, I'll warrant," said Havarr aloud, and the girl threw back her head and laughed aloud, a jolly, infectious sound that made Havarr grin.

"Yes, indeed, you're right," she said. "My name is Katla, and my life is my horses. Now let me see if I can guess where you're from." She ran her eye over his muddy, dusty, torn clothing and the ridiculous hat with a growing expression of dismay. "Why, you're all a mess! I can see you once looked very fine, before I came along and started a fight for you." Havarr attempted to quickly reassure her with some male bluster that it was quite alright and he had rather enjoyed it, but she went on, unconsolable.

"No, no, don't try to lie and be polite," she said in great distress, with a tear sliding down her cheek. "I have an amazing way of cobbling things up for anybody who comes near me. Not to mention myself. Here I was, all dressed

for supper tonight, not that I had any suitors coming, but my sister Asbera does, as usual, and if one of them is too cheap to bargain for Asbera, perhaps he can take me, so I won't end up an old spinster handmaid to her daughters. She's got five men coming tonight; she's had her pick of the gifting fair for three years now, and this is my second year without so much as a nibble. And now look at what I've done to my gown. I sold my favorite yearling colt to buy it. Asbera was right. I'll never find a husband if I don't stop being so foolish and headlong!"

To Havarr's dismay, she burst into tears and buried her face in the front of his silk shirt, settling the dust on it with a furious bath of salt water.

"There now! You needn't cry," he said awkwardly, patting her back gently, as if she were one of his young nephews who had just suffered some immeasurable disaster. "You're a fine and generous person, not to think always of yourself first. What a splendid attack you made on those carters! You landed some very telling blows, I can tell you." He could still feel one of them in the pit of his stomach, and he winced again.

Katla blew her nose into a generous handkerchief and shook her head. "Thank you for being so kind," she said in a wistful tone. "I'm sorry I've made such a mess of your clothing. Disasters follow me wherever I go."

"You're a courageous and honest soul," said Havarr, with a dazzling idea suddenly occurring to him. She would make a perfect wife for Digfus; fiery, beautiful, but also with a woman's compassionate feelings. "Truly you mean well, in spite of your accidents."

"Stubborn is what my mother says," said Katla, but her eyes were beginning to sparkle with energy and whimsy again, "and my aunts say I'm in too much of a hurry to think. But life is so short, and there's so many things I want to do, so I just do them at the first opportunity. Sometimes it doesn't turn out well, but I always get out of my messes somehow. You must allow me to clean you up or I shall never forgive myself. Come to my mother's tent and we'll wring some of the water out of you and get the mud off and set you on your way."

She made some clumsy dabs at the mud on his shirt and succeeded in smearing it around to an even greater extent. Nor would she listen to his protests. She looped her arm commandingly through his and towed him across the creek once more and up the far bank. Havarr looked back once at Gils waiting on the other side. He made a faint helpless gesture and Gils answered with a puzzled wave of one hand.

The cleaning up was not successful, so Katla's mother and aunts and sisters whisked away his soggy boots and mud-streaked clothing and gave him the clothing of a Hestur horseman to wear. A rough, squarish shirt with an open

neck, ballooning trousers shoved into tall boots, and a short wool cloak worn long in the front, so it wouldn't be sat upon in a saddle, and he looked like any of the other Hestur-men gathering for Asbera's gifting feast. Somehow, it was assumed that Havarr would stay. After one look at Katla's eight hulking brothers, Havarr decided it would be imprudent to attempt to leave.

The feast was more like a disorderly revel than a dignified banquet. The women sat on a dais, probably to protect them from harm, and the rest of the family and the guests sat below at two long tables. Eight of Katla and Asbera's red-haired brothers had arrived to oversee the matchmaking, with the primary intent of intimidating Asbera's suitors with their quarrelsome challenges to drinking and wrestling and wagering contests over any matter, great or small. When one of the more timorous suitors attempted to sneak away, they caught him and tossed him aloft on a horse-hide until they tired of that amusement and went about orgainizing a horse-fight. When that was finished, all manner of dangerous and daring horseman ship was demonstrated. Vaulting from side to side of a horse and hanging by one stirrup and dragging were all made to look perfectly easy and natural. Katla could stand up on her saddle on a horse galloping full speed ahead and snare a ring on the end of a pole with a lance.

The Hestur female thralls served the food and drink at irregular intervals, threw the bones on the ground for the dogs to chew, and entertained the guests with ribald songs and outlandish dances. As near as Havarr could tell, the object of the evening seemed to be determining who could summon forth the most outrageous behavior for the amusement of the party. It was like nothing Havarr had ever seen at Arinn-fell. He found himself singing as lustily as all the others, and he even went so far as to leap into the middle of the dance floor with the intent of showing them the incomparable style of Halendi dancing. Katla cheered him on, and it was by far the best dancing of the evening.

When it was all over, Havarr crept homeward much the worse for wear, shocked at his own excesses and feeling rather guilty at the pleasure he had derived therefrom. It was nearly dawn, and all but two of Asbera's suitors had shamefully collapsed in corners, along with half the guests of the evening. When he thought of the dinner he had missed at the Radkona tent, he winced with embarrassment, but he was in no condition to do anything about it just yet. His clothing was completely unpresentable and his belly was seething with a mixture of unfamiliar food and drink.

With a groan, he fell onto his bed and slept until midday, when he was awakened by a great racket of singing and shouting and the trampling of horses outside his tent. It sounded as if the previous evening's festivities had come

in search of him. Desperately he considered crawling out the back of the tent, but while he was considering it, Katla's eight brothers blundered into his tent, their broad red faces wreathed in glad smiles as they swatted him on the back and shook his hand and cuffed his ears in brotherly affection. The brothers bore him bodily outside the tent and set him on a white horse.

"A gift," said the eldest brother, Nogur, grinning with the strong white teeth possessed by all Hestur clansmen. "It's not every day our sister Katla gets spoken for. It's a day to celebrate!"

The next thing he knew, the brothers of Katla had galloped him away and hauled him up before a tent, and three old crones were going over his scrolls intently, the Hestur matchmaker, the genealogist, and the astrologer. Their bristly brows were knit in ferocious concentration over beaky noses and jutting chins.

"Silence," said the astrologer, bending a glare upon the unruly brothers and freezing them instantly into respectful silence. Not shoulder high to any of them, she was a wizened scrap of a woman, with a crown of frizzly white hair and a fierce eye. "Now then," she rasped, "you ruffains, be still or I'll throw the lot of you out of here. And you," she suddenly turned upon Havarr and crooked one skinny finger. "Come here and sit down."

Havarr sat down, his heart fluttering with the wings of destiny beating over his head, invisible and inexorable.

"Young man," continued the matchmaker after a long cold look at him, "you are about to make the most important decision of your life. Your choice today will either make you or destroy you."

Havarr glanced sidelong at Katla's brothers. He had no doubt from whence the destruction might come if he managed to offend them in the slightest way.

"This woman Katla," said the astrologer, holding up her gnarled finger and shaking it warningly, "is your direct opposite in all ways worth considering. She will either be the worst enemy you will ever make in your lifetime, or she will be your most cherished heart-mate, more dear to you than life itself. I warn you now, you are standing at the crossroads. Go back now and you will be safe and comfortable. Go forward, and who knows what will happen to you. The power of two opposites cannot be resisted, or you will be torn from limb to limb."

"Are you saying," Havarr said, his mouth dry, "that I shouldn't marry Katla?"

"I would answer yes, to almost anyone else with a chart such as yours," said the astrologer, "but you are a Sannjarn, a wise and just man--when you finally make your mind up. Do you have the courage to marry Katla? She can make whole the places where you are lacking and put your

spirit into harmonious balance. If you value her, she can lead you into ventures you never dreamed of. Katla needs someone such as you to temper her excesses, and you need her quick impulses. Only a Sanngjarn could be at once the best and worst match for this particular Hestur woman."

Havarr ran his eye nervously over Katla's brothers, standing behind him like a red-bearded, burly-armed stockade. For the first time, he felt hopeful.

"I shall treasure this advice," he said gravely, "and I shall take it into consideration. I shall think about it deeply and come back with a decision. As it happens, I'm at the gifting fair to find two brides, one for myself and one for the son of my chieftain. I'm sure Katla would not be disappointed to be the bride of a future chieftain."

"No indeed, a chieftain!" rumbled the brothers, nodding their heads thoughtfully. "Think of it, our Katla married to a chieftain!"

"But," said Nogur, rubbing his chin and not looking so pleased, "our Katla has got her heart set upon Havarr here. She's taken quite a fancy to him."

"Digfus is young, handsome, and very much like Katla herself," said Havarr with a sudden burst of sincerity. "She would be a perfect match for him. He has a Hestur grandmother, as a matter of fact. When Katla sets her eyes upon Digfus, she'll likely forget about me."

"When a Hestur woman sets her heart upon something," said Nogur, "she never changes her mind. I don't imagine you'll tempt Katla with any chieftain's son."

"I wager five marks in silver she'll take the chieftain," said one of the other brothers swiftly.

"My five marks says she'll stick to Havarr," said Nogur, giving his brother's palm a slap, "but you'll have to give me seven if she takes Digfus." Immediately a flurry of bets were placed, with Havarr assuming the position of a dubious longshot.

A bride-price was next negotiated with the matchmaker, and Havarr came off rather better than he had expected. Everyone slapped palms all around, and Katla's brothers promised to visit Arinn-fell in the fall to celebrate the wedding after the autumn horse-fair. The rest of the afternoon was spent in an ale booth celebrating, boasting, and placing more bets upon Digfus and Havarr.

When he could conveniently escape, Havarr made his exit, with the sole idea of getting back to his tent to think about what had befallen him.

"Digfus is my only hope," he said fervently to Gils. "She must take Digfus."

His evening with the Radskona clan was a far different thing than the past evening. Everything was quiet and orderly. Instead of wooden trenchers that everyone shared in roisterous camaraderie, each person ate from fine pottery

on a table with a fine white cloth. No dogs lurked under the table, licking greasy fingers and snatching unprotected bits off the trenchers. No one got drunk, and no one sang ribald songs. Havarr felt so much at home that he almost wept with relief.

Bryhild, of course, was beautiful and graceful. She played the lute and sang, and her three brothers were respectable middle-aged men, who didn't threaten or place bets on dogs fighting over bones. The entire evening passed without one frightening or revolting incident.

"A perfect match," pronounced the Radkona matchmaker, with the astrologer and genealogist beaming with utmost satisfaction. "They are so perfectly similar that a cross word will never pass between them. Each will know the thoughts of the other before they are even spoken."

With gratitude and a sense of being rescued, Havarr paid the bride-price they asked, without any prevaricating and haggling, as the Hestur clan had practically demanded. Life, to the Radkona clan, was orderly and peaceful, not a series of outlandish contests. Their gift to him was a jeweled daggar to be worn on his belt for the finest of occasions.

Word had somehow spread throughout the fair of the man who had bargained for two wives. In the morning, when Havarr was ready to set out for Arinn-fell, quite a crowd

had gathered to take a look at the two brides, no doubt for the purpose of making bets.

Katla and her brothers arrived first, in a cloud of dust and flying manes and tails. Her sole dowry was a small herd of fine horses, twelve silvery mares and the fiery black stallion which she rode. Her personal possessions fitted into a pair of saddle-bags lashed behind her cantle.

"So," she greeted him haughtily, "you think you're going to palm me off on some chieftain. I don't care if he owns all of the South Quarter, you're the one I'm going to have, Havarr Thorfastrsson!"

"Don't be so hasty," said Havarr soothingly. "You haven't seen Digfus yet. It's only fair that he gets his chance to win your heart too."

"My mind is made up," said Katla with a toss of her magnificent hair. "I have seen your chart, and there's no one who can make you happier than I can."

Havarr was forced to admire her certainty and her confidence. "Perhaps you are right," he said.

At that moment, Brynhild arrived, riding a small white horse sidesaddle, in the approved lady-like fashion. She was swathed from head to toe in scarves and a long blue cloak to keep off the rain and mosquitoes and flies. A string of eight stocky pack-ponies carried her dowry, two chests lashed to a horse. It was all fine linens and the weaving she had done from the time she was old enough to

stand up to a loom, cloth and clothing enough to last her and her husband and children for many years, if not a lifetime. There were also newly-forged cooking pots of six different sizes and hooks and ladles and knives and chains, and a trunk full of fine pottery dishes.

"Good morning, my lord," Brynhild greeted Havarr first, unswathing her face to speak. "It looks to be a fair day for traveling."

Then she turned to Katla, who was simmering and glaring and making dissatisfied punches at her crackling hair. "And to you, my sister, I bid you greetings. When they told me of this peculiar arrangement, I did not dream that you would be such a beauty and such an accomplished rider. Were there not a chieftain's son also in question, I would bow out now and let you have your choice. But it might well be that neither of us will like either of the choices that much, and we'll meet here again next year and laugh over this ridiculous situation. I'm not ashamed to say this isn't my first gifting fair, and I wouldn't be at all surprized it weren't my last."

Katla's lips twitched in spite of herself, then she laughed. Havarr also smiled anxiously, hoping it was a good sign for the rest of a journey that might be very uncomfortable for a man in his position.

Havarr had imagined an easy journey back to Arinn-fell, done in five easy stages from one settlement to the next.

He and his family were well-known at each settlement, and the pack animals would be fed and rested and the two ladies would be allowed to recover from the rigors of travel.

Katla fumed all day at the slow pace and the lack of interesting surroundings. Sheep and fields did not please her. Her eyes were upon Austerfell rising skyward, swathed in clouds and crested with glaciers.

"It seems to me," she said, commandeering Havarr's map, which he never did get possession of again, "that we could go over Austerfull. Look here, a road has been marked." She held up the map and pointed, but kept it out of his reach.

To Havarr's surprize, Brynhild sided with Katla. "The coastal route is probably the safest," she said, "but if the pace is too slow to suit Katla, why not hire someone to along the coast with the dowries while we go over the mountains?"

"It will be an adventure!" declared Katla.

Ever anxious to be reasonable, Havarr assented to the scheme, although privately he had reservations. All his life he had heard worriesome tales about Austerfull which involved trolls, brigands, and rogue wizards who changed unwary travelers into the walking dead. With Gils accompanying them, he felt somewhat safer, and Katla rode along jauntily singing bits of songs and reciting outlandish skalds until they all were laughing in fine holiday spirits.

It was all going far better than he had expected possible, considering the circumstances. Katla and Brynhild had struck up an amazing friendship, riding side by side and talking and laughing. Brynhild was so agreeable and sympathetic that she could win over the heart of a mountain troll. A perfect Radskona, she always listened carefully to what anyone said to her, her speech was always measured and tactful, and she took care that no one felt neglected or quarrelsome. When Havarr and Katla disagreed, usually quite hotly and very frequently, Brynhild skillfully smoothed it over for them. Considered a lowly thrall by some, Gils was brought into her conversations as an equal participant. She was so very similar to himself in every way that Havarr was certain she was going to make him the most perfect wife, and theirs would be the most exemplary marriage the clan had ever seen.

Their journey, however, was anything but exemplary. They were soaked crossing streams, the scattered houses they passed looked forbidding or vacant, and worst of all, Katla lost the map somehow. The road, however, was plain before them and Brynhild soothed everyone's ruffled feelings and they continued until almost twilight.

They stopped for the night to beg shelter at a gloomy little settlement where all the dogs came barking out at them as if they were horse-thieves. A craggy old hill farmer made them a grudging welcome and let them spend the

night in the company of six dour thralls a skinny cow and calf. Very early the next day there were treated to a breakfast of watery gruel and hard bread and set upon their way with a skimpy gift of even harder black bread and a lump of petrified cheese. Havarr sputtered indignantly at such inhospitable treatment, but Katla only laughed.

Late that day Katla passed up the last occupied farmstead with a shudder and a twitch of her shoulders. Red-haired people, she explained, were sensitive to the unseen realm, and that place had an air about it she didn't like, so they made an open camp that night in the ruins of a shepherd's hut. Havarr muttered around uneasily, and Gils kept a watch for trolls or whatever might come out of those dark mountains. They heaped up all the wood they could find and lit a fire. It was the only thing that would discourage the trolls, which they had heard grumbling and grunting in the high cliffs. In high spirits Katla stalked around in a comical parody of the watchful Gils, armed with a short sword and a bludgeon. Brynhild tended the fire and made a presentable meal of what provisions they had. Before it got too dark, Havarr killed a hare, which they roasted on a spit. The meat was burnt black on the outside, the wind was icy, and although they could have been very miserable, they sat and chatted with the light-hearted ease of old friends.

Gils stood the first watch. Near midnight, loud voices suddenly came booming out from the ravine behind their

encampment. Everyone awakened immediately, staring wide-eyed in disbelief as a pony train suddenly materialized before their eyes. Ten horses and two riders came out of the ravine, cold and misty shapes that swirled with ribbons of mist and frost. The two draugar dismounted from their horses and fell to quarreling in faint, windy voices, shouting and threatening each other with their hand-axes. One of them suddenly lunged forward and buried his axe in the other's skull, killing him instantly. After rolling the body into the nearby ravine, the murderer began unloading the packs on the horses, dumping out bags of jewels, gold chains, gold ornaments, shields, dishes, platters, arm-bands, boxes, swords, knives with jeweled hilts, until a great heap of treasure lay displayed in the cold light of the full moon. The remaining ghost played in the treasure with gleeful abandon. As they watched, the creature lost its human shape and turned into a troll-like beast. Then another figure materialized in the mist, a traveler, and the creature dragged him off his horse and killed him also. Four more travelers came along and interrupted the creature's frolicking in the treasure, and they were killed. Quite suddenly, the images vanished, leaving the spectators gasping in horror and astonishment.

"It's a ghoul," said Katla. "My grandmother taught me about such things. Some deeds are so horrible that they never quite disappear from the earth. Images remain."

She was scarcely done reassuring them that the ghoul-images could do them no harm when the haunting recommenced, playing out its gruesome scenes again. This time, the final party to be killed by the beast was clearly recognizable as Havarr, Katla, Brynhild, and Gils, after a savage battle.

When the ghoul-image faded, the four travelers gaped at each other in stunned shock.

"This must be the work of Kugan," said Havarr with a moan. "He's the wizard who once ruled here. I thought he'd be long dead by now."

"Wizards have ways of extending their lives," said Katla. "This is nothing but a spell. We'll have to thwart it before we go on, or we'll end up just as we saw ourselves. Kugan's not going to trap us this way. The next time those draugar appear, we're going to attack them and drive stakes through them to stop their walking."

Gils shook his head. "Draugar are seven times stronger than a living man. All of us could not subdue even one."

"Then what shall we do?" asked Brynhild. "The next time they appear, we will perish!"

Nothing happened, however, for the rest of the night. They dozed in uneasy shifts, listening for the first windy shout to come from the ravine. When the sun rose, they were well upon their way, winding through dank, shadowy valleys where the sun did not appear until midday.

After crossing a cold little gill, they had halted to tighten a loose cinch when suddenly they were overtaken by the pounding of hooves and the shouts of drovers. A pony train came plowing through the water, raising a cloud of misty spray, with two drivers galloping along in the rear. The pack ponies halted on the green sward and fell to grazing. Then the drovers started quarreling, exactly as they had in the moonlight. The moment came for one to strike his death-blow, and he drew out his axe.

"It's them! We'll be killed!" Brynhild gasped, cowering back against Havarr.

Katla, however, strode forward with a scowl on her face. "See here, you dolts, stop this quarreling!" she commanded in a voice that rattled the echoes on the overhanging crags.

The two pony-drivers turned and scowled back at her, their faces indistinct in the perpetual twilight of the ravine.

"Don't interfere in matters you know nothing about!" said one of them in a hoarse, rumbling voice.

Brynhild replied in a steady tone, "You are quarreling about the division of your treasure. It's common for mortals to divide treasure for--for other people. Allow us to divide it fairly for you and we shall travel on our way."

The drovers stood uncertainly, as if considering. Katla nudged Brynhild and they approached the heap of

treasure, eyeing the two drovers warily. The draugar made no move to stop them as they began dividing the loot into two equal piles. When it was done, the draugar nodded in agreement and slapped palms with each other. At that instant, their images shivered away into dust, taking with them the ponies and the treasure as well.

That evening Havarr insisted upon stopping at a house, to avoid any further strange occurrences, despite Katla's objections to the air about the place. Few people had ever made him feel so put upon. When she put him into a choler, he imagined the fights she would have with Digfus.

Although the farm and its occupants were perfectly pleasant, Katla continued to sulk. Gildra and her five pretty, plump daughters kept an excellent table and an immaculate house and dairy. Brynhild played her lute and sang for them, while Katla scowled in a corner by herself and Havarr chatted pleasantly with Gildra.

After they had retired to bed, a dismal howl rose from behind the house.

"Didn't I tell you something was wrong here?" Katla hissed triumphantly. "It sounds almost human!"

"It's Elska," said Gildra. "I forgot to warn you about her. She's a wild troll-hound of Kugan's that hangs about here. You musn't go outdoors after dark because of her."

Presently something sniffed under the crack of the door and whined. A paw clawed at the door.

"Help me!" pleaded a faint voice outside. "You must help me and my sister! Please come and save us! I am Elska, Logun's daughter. You are in danger if you stay here!"

"Pay no heed to her," said Gildra. "She wants only to lure people outside to kill them."

Beds for the guests were made on the sleeping platforms around the walls and Gildra climbed into a cupboard bed. For a long while there was silence, except for Gildra and her daughters, who all snored like bears. Another desolate howl sounded from outside the door. The snoring did not miss a beat, but the company in the house sat up to listen.

Havarr lay down and shut his eyes. He had scarcely dozed when he felt a cool breath upon his face and heard the soft sound of the door closing. Sitting up quickly, he saw that Katla's sleeping eider was vacant. Muttering unkind things, he pulled on his boots to go after her. Gils awakened too and would not hear of him going outside alone.

"I'm coming with you too," whispered Brynhild. "I can't sleep anyway with all this snoring."

She would not be dissuaded. Havarr listened to the grunting and sawing and snorting, wondering how such dreadful sounds could come from polite people. They tiptoed out as quietly as they could, using the uproar as a convenient screen for any sounds they might make.

Across the sheep paddock, they heard Katla calling softly to Elska. Beyond her, in a shadowy copse, a white

figure was moving toward her. A faint voice was calling, "Come with me! You can help us! It's dangerous here!"

"Katla! Come back!" shouted Havarr.

Gildra and her daughters rushed from the house in an anxious twitter, urging them to return to safety before Elska saw them.

Gils vaulted over the wall, with Havarr dragging Brynhild after him. Katla turned, probably to glare at them, not seeing the white streak suddenly launch itself from the copse. It veered around her and came straight at Gils and Havarr and Brynhild. Havarr glimpsed gleaming teeth, blazing eyes and a lot of white fur as the troll-hound charged past him.

Havarr was transfixed with horror. Gildra and her daughters uttered terrible screams as the troll-hound tore into them. The screams turned to screeching snarls and growls as the white night-dresses were ripped to shreds. Six hairy black forms emerged from the tatters, shrunken of head, stooped of shoulder, with hairy ears long and pointed. A repulsive smell filled the air.

"Trolls!" gasped Gils. He shoved Havarr and Brynhild toward the house, thrust them into its safety and shut the door, commanding them to pull in the latch string. Then he was gone, in search of Katla.

The trolls took to their heels with Elska in hot pursuit, and their squalling diminished over a nearby ridge-

top. Gils did not return until dawn, without a trace of Katla or Elska. They spent the entire next day searching, calling, and waiting, but when the sun began to creep westward, they had to move on, knowing that Gildra and her brood would return at dusk with vengeance in mind. No one spoke their unspeakable dread that Katla had perished.

The loss of Katla numbed their hearts with unexpected pain. Her cheerful, unthinking chatter that lightened the hours of tedious travel was replaced by a great void of silence. The absence of her impulsive and inexhaustible energy left them feeling as heavy as lead. Havarr knew without asking that Brynhild felt as terrible as he did. He wondered how a creature so different from himself, so frequently annoying and argumentative, could ever have made his balanced and regulated life seem so suddenly interesting, even to himself. It was typical of Katla, though, that she had come to such an end, testing herself against every challenge that came her way.

In an hour they arrived at an abandoned hall, once an ambitious fortress, but now a grass-grown ruin, knobbled with moss. Havarr picked his way into the echoing courtyard, noticing dried racks of horse skeletons still tethered in their stalls, as if a fast-moving storm of incredible cold had frozen them where they stood. Every instinct warned him away, but he thrust aside a screeching flock of possible consequences. Sometimes it was best to do

as Katla did, and charge ahead without thinking. He shouldered open the mouldering doors of the hall, letting the dim twilight fall before them. At long table in the center of the room were seated at twenty warriors, or what was left of them after many years of deterioration. Some were still in the act of raising cups to withered lips; others had crumbled into heaps of dust and bones.

On the dais overlooking the hall was another table, where sat a solitary figure, still overlooking the ghostly feasting from empty eyes. A gold-embroidered cloak hung from his shoulders and glimpses of gold chains and jewels still shone brightly in the ruin of his chest. One hand lay upon the remains of a small lap-dog, and the other hand clutched a staff with a dusty silver knob and serpent carvings. At the feet of the lord of the fortress lay the carcass of a hound, hardly more than bones and dust.

Havarr felt Brynhild trembling and he put one arm around her shoulders to lead her away. At that moment, the ghostly howl of Elska rose from right before them, echoing through the empty hall. They could not get out of the haunted hall fast enough. Once outside, they dived into the shelter of a fallen cow byre and watched as a ghostly assembly of horsemen spewed from the old hall and took to the sky in a muted thunder of hooves and shouts. Leading his horde of Myrkriddir was the warlord with the small russet hound on the saddle before him.

Elska howled again, appearing at the doorway of the cow byre, gazing in at them with unfathomable dark eyes. Havarr gripped his sword and held his breath. Elska turned and walked away to a root cellar beneath a craggy old rowan tree, sunken in the earth with a stout door and a thick bar to hold it shut. She stood there with one paw raised, looking back at them. From the inside came determined bumping sounds, which jarred the heavy door.

"Katla, is that you?" called Brynhild.

Immediately she was answered by a muffled, excited voice that indeed sounded like Katla.

"It might not really be Katla!" said Havarr. "It might be something else, in this cursed place. Should we open the door or not?"

Brynhild studied the door, while Elska jumped around in a frenzy of anticipation, whining and yapping and wagging her tail like nothing more dangerous than a large puppy.

"Open the door," she finally said with a worried sigh. "We'll have to do as Katla does and simply deal with things when they happen."

Uneasily Havarr eyed Elska, but she made no unfriendly move as he unbarred the door and threw it open.

"Havarr! Brynhild!" Katla flung herself at them, sobbing. "I knew you'd come! I swear I'll never get myself into something like this again! I've decided that I'm not ever going to do anything without thinking of all the

consequences first." She suddenly noticed Elska standing at Brynhild's side. "And as for you," she snarled furiously, grabbing up a stick, "it's all your fault I got into this. Get out of here, you monster! Back to your master Kugan!"

She brought the stick down as hard as she could on the hound's back. Elska leaped away with a startled yelp, then sank down and rolled over on her side, gasping and twitching a moment, then she was still.

"Oh no!" exclaimed Brynhild. "Katla, how could you? She guided us to you! She's not evil!"

A cloud of mist gathered around the hounds's body.

"Oh no!" wailed Katla. "I've done it again!"

Suddenly the figure of a woman rose from the mist, and they fell back, already acquainted too well with draugar.

"Stay a moment! Listen to me!" she implored. "Don't be afraid. This was only a shape-shifting spell Kugan put upon me, and on my sister too. She's the little russet hound he carries everywhere. When both of us refused to marry him, long ago, he destroyed our parents, our retainers, our thralls, and changed us to hounds. With that stick from the rowan tree you've broken the spell over me. Now all you must do is deliver my sister, and Kugan's spell will be broken over this place."

"What must we do?" demanded Katla. "Tell us and we shall do it!"

"The hound is my sister Fallegur," said Elska. "If you call her name, she'll jump down and the spell will be broken."

"Listen, they're coming back!" said Katla.

The distant roar of the Myrkriddir approached over the tops of the skarps and cliffs. Like a zig-zag of kiting bats they swooped into the old hall.

Pale flames leaped in the two great hearths and the dusty whale-oil lamps sputtered into life. All the crumbling corpses were perfectly restored to human form, and had resumed their feasting. The echoing old hall resounded with voices upraised in song and argument, and the smell of mould and must was replaced by roasted mutton and smoke.

Seated in his chair, Kugan gazed at the three of them, while the little russet hound whined imploringly. "So, you have come," rasped the voice of the wizard, giving his staff another rap. The small russet hound on his lap whimpered, fixing its large dark eyes upon Havarr and Brynhild. "Those who come to Uldinn-hof seldom depart. You have trespassed and released my prisoner. And what have you done with my hound Elska?"

"I killed her," said Katla, stepping forward.

The Myrkriddir arose from their feasting with an angry rumbling and rustling and to surround the three intruders, reaching out with skeletal clawing hands and hollow grinning

faces. Havarr drew his sword and faced them, but they only cackled in derision.

"For that treachery," said Kugan, "I shall give you a riddle. You must tell me why this little russet hound always whimpers and sheds tears. You shall have three guesses, and then you are part of my Myrkriddir!"

"We know what you've done here!" Brynhild called out ringingly. "You killed them all and changed the two sisters into hounds because they refused to marry you! The answer to your riddle is pure grief as Fallegur cries from despair!"

"Who has told you? Elska!" Kugan rose to his feet, glaring around in murderous fury. "Where is she! I shall destroy her for this treachery!"

"Fallegur! Come to me!" Brynhild commanded.

"No! Stop!" Kugan roared, but the little russet hound leaped from his grasp with a yelp. The moment the little dog's paws hit the earth, her figure crumbled into dust and a cloud of rising mist. Kugan uttered a terrible shriek as his feet and legs began dissolving into dust. The Myrkriddir also commenced collapsing into dust, raising dismal groans and shrieks. The ruin progressed rapidly, and in a moment he and his grisly company of Mryrkriddir had vanished, leaving nothing but heaps of dust. The light of the rising sun poured in through the doorway, banishing the murky shadows.

"The spell of Kugan is gone from Auster-fell," said Elska, raising her face to the sun. "And my sister is free at last." She turned and smiled at Fallegur standing beside her. "How long we have hoped that someone would come! Kugan might have have controlled these mountains forever."

"No one of us could have done it alone," said Havarr. "I feel that between us everything comes into perfect balance. I have made my decision, Katla, and I know it is the right one. I hope you feel the same way. It is you I need to stir up dull old Arrin-fell and to put some new ideas to work. Your astrologer was right about filling eh empty places. And Brynhild is just what Digfus needs to put Blomgast in order."

"Every loaf needs its leavening," said Brynhild, "or it is nothing but a useless lump. If Digfus needs putting in order, then I am perfect for the job. I shall enjoy the challenge, as much as Katla will enjoy stirring up Arinn-fell. New life is about to come to two households, and beware to anyone who attempts to stand in the way!"

The times that followed for Arinn-fell and Blomgast were anything but peaceful. Katla introduced constant uproar with the roisterous visits from her brothers and other clansmen, and horse-racing and pony-trekking augmented the gentler pursuits of the Sanngjarn clan.

As for Digfus, at first he was not convinced of the need to remove the dogs from under the tables at mealtimes,

nor did he find anything particularly offensive about his three-day-long celebrations that emptied both cellar and larder. But Brynhild was beautiful, as well as subtly and powerfully persuasive, so presently he forsook his favorite occupations of picking fights among his neighbors and plotting bloodthirsty raids upon his enemies. Blomgast became less of a battle-fortress and more of a prosperous land-holding, surrounded by the lands of his loyal and protective retainers, including the sisters of Austerfell. In his later years, he even gained a reputation for his wisdom and moderation, but he was as liable as ever to pound on the table with his fist and roar like a lion, until Brynhild and his chief judge Havarr changed his mind with words of reason and reconcilliation.

Those who came to know Digfus and Havarr and their wives became earnestly convinced of and grateful for the obvious necessity for opposition in all things.

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