

### *How Erik and his Men were Turned to Stone*

After they had celebrated their safe arrival on shore, Erik and his men slept soundly through the night. The next day, they were up at first light, eager to see what sort of a land they had arrived in.

But their hearts sank as they looked around. There was not a tree nor a bush nor a blade of grass to be seen. Neither were there any signs of animals or even any birds, only rocks and stones and ice.

'We have found a land that has been forgotten by Life itself,' said Erik.

And his men said: 'Without trees we have no wood to repair Golden Dragon, and without plants or animals or birds we shall starve to death here on this lonely shore.'

But Erik said: 'Let us not waste our breath talking.'

So they hauled Golden Dragon onto the beach, and then they built a shelter of stones. That night, Ragnar Forkbeard said to Erik: 'This is a strange country that is shunned by all living things.'

Erik replied: 'We must not stay here long.'

But when he looked at the great hole in the side of their ship, Golden Dragon, he shook his head and said:

'We shall need the wood from many trees to put our ship to rights. And I fear we shall all be dead before any trees grow in this land.'

Erik did not sleep that night. He sat up gazing into the darkness. He had never seen a night so black, nor heard a night so silent in all his life. But then, just before dawn had begun to break, he saw a light in the far, far distance.

He wrapped his cloak around himself and stepped out over the rocky shore. As he walked towards the light, dawn began to break, and as the sun rose the light grew dimmer until it was lost altogether, and all he could see were rocks and boulders, the one indistinguishable from the other. So he returned back to his men and did not mention what he had seen.

The next night Erik again sat and watched, and again, just before dawn, he saw the light. This time he jumped up at once and ran as fast as he could towards it, but again the sun rose before he could reach it, and he returned none the wiser.

On the third night, when all his men were fast asleep, Erik took a blazing torch and stumbled along the rocky shore towards the point where he had seen the light. Sure enough, just before dawn, he saw it for the third time, only now he was much closer, and he could see there was not one light but six lights. Before dawn had risen he had reached the spot where the lights were, and there he saw the strangest sight. He saw three black cats sitting on a rock washing themselves, and their eyes shone like bright torches and lit up whatever they looked at.

Erik watched the three strange creatures as the sun

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rose, and as it rose the three cats washed themselves slower and slower, and they grew greyer and greyer, and their eyes shone less and less, until, by the time the sun had risen above the horizon, all three had turned to solid stone.

Erik went over to them, but now they were not the shape of cats any more but just three grey rocks.

Erik shook his head and said: "This place is enchanted for sure. We must leave at once."

Then he retraced his steps towards where his ship, Golden Dragon, lay on her side on the shore. But he walked and walked, and still he could see no sign of her. At length he reached the spot where his men had built their shelter of stones, and there it was . . . but of his men there was no sign.

Erik sat and gazed for a long time at the sea washing against the great grey rock that lay on the beach. And then suddenly he leapt to his feet crying: "That great grey rock wasn't there last night! And he strode over to it and gazed up at its height, and its height was exactly the height of Golden Dragon. Then he paced out its length from one end to the other, and its length was exactly the length of Golden Dragon . . .

"I am too late!" he cried. "My ship has been turned to grey rock!"

Then he turned to the shelter of stones that he and his men had built, and he noticed for the first time the grey rocks strewn about inside and the grey rocks scattered over the beach, and Erik put his head in his hands and sat down in despair saying: "Is it possible? Can it be that even my men have been turned to stones and rocks? Ragnar Forkbeard and Thorkhild and even

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Sven the Strong? Who could have done this? Who has laid this enchantment upon this whole land?"

And the wind blew and the salt spray of the sea mixed with the salt of his tears, and Erik was more alone at that moment than at any other moment in his life.

That night he hid himself near the rock where he had seen the three black cats with shining eyes. Sure enough, some time before dawn he heard a noise. It was someone or something approaching in the pitch black night. Erik could see nothing, but he heard the click-clack of hooves stepping over the rocks and the tapping of a stick.

Then he heard a strange voice saying: "There . . . where are you my lovesies?"

Erik waited a bit and pretty soon he heard another sound — like a deep rumble. At first Erik was frightened, but then he realized it was just a cat purring. And he saw two lights begin to glow as gradually one of the rocks turned back into a cat with shining eyes. Then by the light of its shining eyes he saw the Enchanter who had laid the spell on the island. He was an old man dressed in black, and under his robe instead of feet he had hooves. The black cat turned and looked up at its master, and its eyes shone on his face, and Erik could see that instead of eyes the old Enchanter had two grey stones.

"Where's my other beauty?" muttered the Enchanter, and he reached out a blind hand and groped until he felt the second rock. Then he started stroking the rock, until it seemed to shiver a little, and then it began to shake, and Erik heard the cat's purring again as the rock changed gradually into the second cat with



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shining eyes. Then the blind old Enchanter reached out and stroked the third grey rock so that it began to tremble and came back to life.

'Come, my beauties,' said the Enchanter, 'light my way.'

Erik watched as the three cats stretched and yawned and then rose from their rock and led the way down into a deep chasm. And their eyes lit up the grey rocks on every side, and the blind old Enchanter walked behind them just as if he could see.

When they got to the bottom of the chasm, the old man pushed at a great rock which slid aside to reveal a cave, then he stood at the mouth of the cave and called out: 'Daughter! Daughter!'

A thin girl, white as paper, came out into the light from the cat's eyes and stood there blinking.

'Father,' she said, 'when may I be free?'

'Soon enough, Freya,' said the Enchanter, 'when I have made this island beautiful enough for you.'

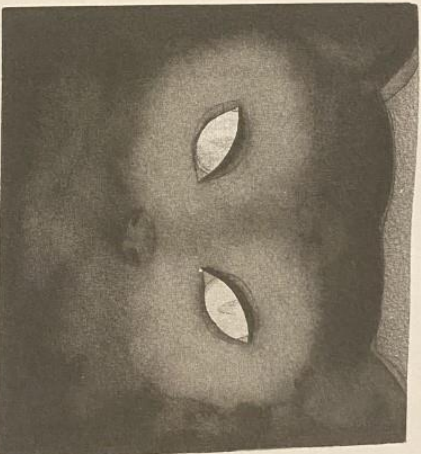
'But even to see the sun would be beautiful enough for me,' said the girl.

'What good is the sunlight if it has nothing to shine on?' replied the old man. 'Stay where you are, daughter, for bit by bit I am making this island green and pleasant.'

When Erik heard all this, he leapt up from behind the rock with his sword in his hand and cried out: 'You are blind! Can't you see you've turned it to nothing but rocks and stones?'

As soon as he spoke, they all turned to look at him, and the cats' eyes shone straight at him, lighting him up, and as they did so he felt his blood freezing, and he knew that he too was turning to stone.

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But at that moment, Freya, the Enchanter's daughter, ran up to him and cried: 'Don't be afraid! They dare not shine their eyes on me,' and as she spoke the three cats turned their heads away as one. But when Erik tried to move he knew he was already half stone. Then he spoke very slowly, and said to Freya: 'My . . . sword . . .'

He could say no more, but at once Freya took his sword from his hand and cut off the heads of those three creatures, and the moment she did so they changed from cats into demons that flew away and were gone forever.

And at that moment the sun began to rise.

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'What is happening?' cried the blind old Enchanter. 'Follow me,' said Erik, and slowly, very slowly, he led the way back out of the chasm, past the rock where he had first seen the three cats, and back along the shoreline. And Freya and the old Enchanter followed the sun had fully risen. Then Erik slowly turned to the blind old Enchanter, and slowly, because he was still half stone, he reached his hand towards the stones that were his eyes, and plucked them out.

And then the Enchanter was blind no more and he saw what he had done. He saw the rocks that were Erik's men, and he saw the great grey rock that had been their ship, Golden Dragon, and he saw the desolate island of stones and rocks and ice, and he wept.

And the moment his first tear touched the earth, a most wonderful and amazing thing happened. The enchantment began to lift and the grey rocks on the beach moved and shook and then stood up and were Erik's men again. And so too every rock and stone and pebble along that shoreline began to turn and tremble, and turn back into a living thing. Some into flowers and plants, some into animals and birds, until the whole coast was green and teeming with life again. And there on the shore were Thorchild and Sven the Strong and Ragnar Forkbeard. And there too lay Golden Dragon herself.

The old Enchanter begged his daughter's forgiveness that in his blindness he had imprisoned her and allowed the island to be turned to desolation by the three cat-demons.

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Freya gave him her hand and at once the great mountain behind them turned back into a palace, and there Erik and his men lived well and happily all the time they took to repair their ship, Golden Dragon.