

Thorchild and the Starsword

Erik and his men fought the Dogfighters hand to hand and sword to sword. And each of the Dogfighters stood head and shoulders three feet above each of Erik's men. And their swords were twice as long and twice as broad as the swords that Erik and his men had in their hands. 'How can we fight against such fearful odds?' thought each and every one of Erik's men. But they said not a word. They stood their ground and blow for blow, thrust for thrust they fought the Dogfighters . . . on that stony beach . . . beneath the wintry northern sun.

Ragnar Forkbeard was cut through the arm and fell down on the stony beach, but, before his dog-headed foe could raise its sword again, Sven the Strong had run his sword through the creature's heart, and it gave a cry like a hound of hell, and turned and stumbled back into foaming sea, and the white foam turned red. Then Erik looked up and saw another wave of Dogfighters leap out from their boat and wade across the churning waters.

'There are too many for us!' he cried to Thorchild. 'Too many or too few – what choice have we?' shouted Thorchild, and he dived to miss the swinging blade of the biggest of the Dogfighters – he whose helmet was made of gold that shone so bright it re-

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flected the flashing of a hundred swords. Then Thorchild grabbed the creature by the foot, and pulled with all his might so that it toppled from the jagged rock into the boiling waves. And Thorchild caught its mighty sword as it flew from its hand and with one blow he severed the creature's head in its golden helmet. The head roared for a moment, and then it roared without sound, and then it rolled beneath the waves, and Thorchild turned with his new sword held high above him.

At this moment Erik heard a strange noise. It was like a groan from hell, and he looked and saw the Dogfighters stopped, still, staring at the sword that Thorchild held. Whereupon Erik's men seized their chance and cleaved those terrible creatures through to their backbones, each and every one of them, so that before they had turned to fight again they were already dead upon the stony beach . . . all but one.

And that staggered towards Thorchild, still gazing at the sword, the bright blood oozing from beneath its helmet, and it stretched out its hand towards the great sword, and they heard it say one word: 'Starsword!' before it too fell onto the stony beach.

Then Thorchild moved forward, still holding the sword above his head, and the second wave of Dogfighters had frozen in their tracks and stood there motionless in the rolling sea, with the waters breaking about them, staring at the sword. But as Thorchild stepped into the waves himself, they turned and surged back through the waters to their ship.

And at this a great cheer went up from Erik's men, there where they stood. But Erik did not cheer. He

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gripped his sword and cried out: 'We must stop them going back to whatever hellish land they came from lest they return here with more of their kind!'

But Erik's men looked at each other and murmured: 'We could never fight them in those icy waters!'

And Erik, seeing his men hesitate, turned to them and said: 'You think we have won a great victory? But what when we are gone? Who then shall prevent these hounds of hell from returning to take revenge on the old Enchanter, and his daughter?'

'But the sea is deep!' cried his men. 'The waves are cold . . . Our swords would be frozen in our hands.'

'Where is your courage?' cried Erik.

But then the old Enchanter stepped forward and said: 'They are right! How could you fight these creatures amidst the icy waves? And see! They have already reached their ship. Best let them go!'

'I have sworn to protect your daughter,' replied Erik. 'Our victory just now was but to protect ourselves. Unless I prevent these creatures going, I shall have broken my vow.'

Then Sven the Strong stepped forward: 'I will come with you, Erik,' he said. 'Though no one else goes with us, you shall have my sword beside you.'

And then Ragnar Forkbeard rose up on his good arm and said: 'I too will come,' and he struggled to his feet, with his arm's blood still streaming onto the rock. Then Erik's men hung their heads. They were put to shame by their wounded comrade, and one by one they stepped forward to join in the desperate venture.

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'You will all die!' called Freya, the old Enchanter's daughter.

'Do not go after them!' cried the old Enchanter. But Erik and his men moved down to the water's edge.

'Stay where you are!' said a third voice. And they all turned to see Thorhild standing where he was, the Starsword still held above his head.

'Here is a power I have never felt before,' he was saying, and the Starsword seemed to be trembling in his hands. 'This sword is alive. I can feel it! I can feel it turning in my hands!'

And as they watched in wonder, Erik and his men, Freya and the old Enchanter, they saw the strangest sight. The Starsword seemed to glow – bright as the brightest stars – as Thorhild held it there above him. And then slowly it seemed to rise into the air, leaving his grasp, and there it hung above him. Then the Starsword turned and began to fly over the foaming waves. Sure and steady it flew. It flew towards the ship that now was speeding the Dogfighters away, inch by inch, drawing closer and closer over the boiling sea. And the Dogfighters rowed, fast and furious, to find the offshore breeze. But the sword drew closer and closer, glowing brighter now in the wintry northern sky.

'Who has ever seen such a sword as this?' said Erik, as they gazed from the shore and saw the strange ship with the round sails catch the wind and start to run before it. But the Starsword seemed to catch the wind too, and before the ship reached the horizon, Erik and his men saw the mighty sword strike it. It cut through the very timbers, as if they were snow, and it seemed as if the very entrails of the boat were poured out into

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the ocean, and the icy water flooded in, and the Dogfighters' ship began to sink beneath the waves.

And then the sound reached the shore, faint and far-off – like the braying and barking of all the hounds of darkness – before the Dogfighters too were gone, lost beneath the pitiless ocean, and nothing remained.

Then Erik and his men gave a mighty cheer, and they lifted Thorkhild up on their shoulders and carried him back to the Enchanter's palace. And they held a great celebration that night, and everyone rejoiced at the great victory.

Only Thorkhild was silent. He neither smiled nor joined in the feasting. So Erik took his seat beside him at the table and said: 'What is the matter, Thorkhild? Today you have saved us all from the most dangerous of foes and you have made this island safe for the old Enchanter and his daughter. You should be happy, and yet you seem sad.'

Thorkhild looked at Erik and said: 'Today, for a brief moment, I possessed the greatest sword I have ever seen or held in my hands. Now it is gone, and I fear I shall never see nor hold in my hands such a sword again.'

And no matter what Erik, or his men, or the old Enchanter or even his daughter could say or do, Thorkhild would not join in the celebrations. Instead he left the palace, and went and sat on the stony shore in the darkness – gazing out to sea, where he had last seen the Starsword, grieving that he would never hold it in his hands again.

The Three Wonderf

Some time after the battle Erik came to the old Enchanter's ship, Golden Dragon, and said: 'I will leave you before the sun sets. Then they shook hands and Erik and his companions three precious gifts,' said the old Enchanter. 'The second is for tomorrow, yesterday. But do not open it until you need of them.'

Erik wondered to himself but he thanked the old Enchanter's daughter, gave her the first gift, and said: 'No matter what the wind nor the rain, I will always keep you warm.'

Erik took the gifts and gave them to the old Enchanter aboard Golden Dragon. The old Enchanter and his daughter Forkbeard aboard who were wounded. And thus the Enchanter was healed.

Many days passed and the Golden Dragon ship became their home. The Golden Dragon was no longer there, and the Golden Dragon was with storm clouds.