

*Viking*

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### *The Three Wonderful Gifts*

**S**ome time after the battle with the Dogfighters, Erik came to the old Enchanter and said: 'Our ship, Golden Dragon, is now ready. We must leave you before the snows come.'

Then they shook hands and the old Enchanter gave Erik and his companions three boxes. 'Inside each is a precious gift,' said the old Enchanter. 'The first is for today. The second is for tomorrow. And the third is for yesterday. But do not open them until you truly have need of them.'

Erik wondered to himself what such gifts could be, but he thanked the old man. And then Freya, the Enchanter's daughter, gave Erik a cloak saying: 'No matter what the wind nor the snow may do, this will always keep you warm.'

Erik took the gifts and put them in a secret cupboard aboard Golden Dragon. Then they carried Ragnar Forkbeard aboard who, alone, lay still sick from his wound. And thus they left the island of the old Enchanter.

Many days passed without sight of land, and the ship became their home, and they slept on the rolling sea with the stars above. But one night the stars were no longer there, and the next day the skies were dark with storm clouds.

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'I fear the snows will soon be upon us,' said Erik. 'We must find land or we shall be lost for sure.'

But even as he spoke, a single snowflake floated down out of the heavy sky and landed on the deck of Golden Dragon. At that moment, however, they heard a cry and they looked to the horizon, and there was a speck of land. So they set their sails and were soon speeding towards it. But even as they did so, the snowflakes floated down out of the heavy sky and landed on the deck of Golden Dragon.

'We must be swift,' said Erik as they reached the shore, and he ordered all the food and all the clothing that they had to be carried ashore, so they might make their camp there. But even as they began to move all the food and the clothing the snow began to fall ... thick and fast it fell out of the silent sky onto the roaring sea.

Soon his men had disappeared from view and the snow blotted out the very land itself, and only Erik and Ragnar Forkbeard remained on board Golden Dragon.

Then the sea began to swell, and the wind whipped up the waves until they lashed across the deck of Golden Dragon, and Ragnar Forkbeard said: 'I pray we see our comrades again,' but, even as he spoke, the waves grew higher, and the ship pitched and rolled like a wild horse, and the snow swirled and the wind roared.

'I will cast another anchor!' said Erik. 'For I fear our will not hold us in such a storm.'

But even as he spoke the waves grew higher, and the ship tossed and reared and rocked, and strained at the anchor, and the timbers creaked.

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Then suddenly it all went still, and Erik looked at Ragnar Forkbeard and said: 'Perhaps the storm is over.'

Ragnar Forkbeard shook his head, but before even he could speak there was a terrible noise. The snow flew up. The wind bellowed, and a wave six times as high as the mainmast crashed over Golden Dragon and sent her spinning and twisting through the blasting waters that tore at her decks like a giant's hands, snapping the timbers and snatching at the two men who lay on board.



Erik and Ragnar Forkbeard clung on as best they could, but they knew their anchor had gone, and they were now the ocean's toy as they whirled away into the depths of the storm and the gathering night.

All that night they tossed and span in that terrible tempest, until their heads were dizzy and their bodies

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ached, but the wonder of it was that, when dawn broke, the storm had vanished, and Golden Dragon was riding as if at anchor in a little bay.

'How shall we regain our companions?' said Erik to Ragnar Forkbeard. 'I dare not risk taking Golden Dragon single-handed out of this little bay into the open sea.'

'Then we must wait for them to find us,' answered Ragnar Forkbeard.

'But we shall be dead before ever they do,' Erik replied, 'from cold and hunger.'

'Have we no food?' asked Ragnar Forkbeard.

'None,' replied Erik, 'that was all taken off the ship and carried ashore.'

'Have we no clothing?' asked Ragnar Forkbeard. 'None,' replied Erik, 'that too was all taken off the ship and carried ashore.'

'Then indeed we shall die of cold and hunger,' said Ragnar Forkbeard, 'before ever we are found.'

And Erik the Viking, and Ragnar Forkbeard gazed across to the white hills, and were silent.

Finally Ragnar Forkbeard spoke: 'I will not lie here,' he said, 'for death to find me helpless and without hope. Let us leave Golden Dragon, and seek our companions on foot.'

'But they may be far,' said Erik.

'They may be near,' said Ragnar Forkbeard.

'But the way will all be snow and ice,' said Erik. 'If we do not find them by nightfall I am afraid we shall die.'

'Let us try,' said Ragnar Forkbeard.

'You are not strong enough for such a journey,' said Erik.

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But Ragnar Forkbeard had risen to his feet. 'I must be,' he said, and turned to go. At that moment Erik gave a great shout, so that Ragnar Forkbeard looked round in surprise.

'Of course!' cried Erik. 'Can it be that the storm has driven our wits from us? We may have no food. We may have no clothes, but we have the old Enchanter's gifts, and now, if at anytime, we truly have need of them!'

And without another word he opened up the secret cupboard where he had hidden them.

'This is the gift for today,' he said and he opened up the first box and there inside was a bone.

'Alas!' said Ragnar Forkbeard, 'what use is a bone to us today?' But even as he spoke they heard barking and they looked over to the land, and there were a dozen dogs pulling a sledge and all staring hungrily at the bone.

And Erik said, 'This certainly was the gift we needed for today!' Then he took the second box and said, 'What can be the old Enchanter's gift for tomorrow?'

Then he opened it, and he and Ragnar Forkbeard looked inside. But all they saw was one grain of corn.

'Alas!' said Ragnar Forkbeard. 'What use will one grain of corn be to us tomorrow?' And he took the grain of corn and put it in the palm of his hand. But grain of corn and put it in the palm of his hand. But even as he did so a shadow fell across them, and a great white bird swooped down out of the sky and pecked up the grain of corn in its beak. Then it circled once around Golden Dragon, then twice, then a third time it circled round and then finally landed beside them on the deck. Then it turned over on its back and

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they saw to their amazement that the bird was roasted and ready to eat! And Erik took a knife and cut the bird in two and out fell all manner of fruit.

'This certainly is a gift for tomorrow,' said Erik, and they packed all the food up to take with them on their journey.

Then Erik helped Ragnar Forkbeard to the sledge and wrapped him in the cloak that the Enchanter's daughter had given him.

'There . . . now no matter what the snow and wind may do, you will be warm,' said Erik, and he put the marvellous bone on the end of a long pole and hung it in front of the dogs. Then he himself jumped onto the back of the sledge, and off they sped as fast as the wind that flew across those icy waters.

The dogs barked and ran faster and faster, chasing that marvellous bone, and the sledge whipped over the snow and Ragnar Forkbeard called out to Erik: 'I am warm and fine in this magic cloak. Are you not frozen to the marrow?'

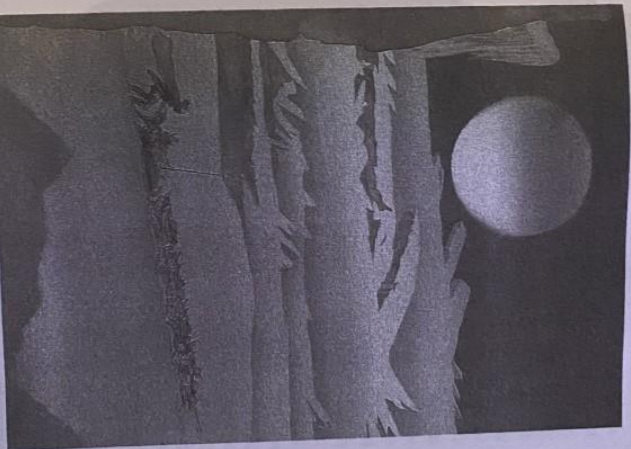
And Erik replied: 'One hair on my head is cold but that is all.'

And on they flew, over the icesheet and into the frozen lands, and the sun stood a handbreadth above the horizon.

Then Ragnar Forkbeard called out to Erik: 'I am warm and fine in this magic cloak, but the wind is icy chill and the sun will soon begin to set. Are you not frozen to the marrow?'

And Erik replied: 'One hair in my nostril is cold, but that is all,' and on they flew, over the ice-covered mountains, across crevasses and snow-filled ravines.

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And the wind blew chill and the sun slipped beneath the horizon.

Then Ragnar Forkbeard called out to Erik: 'I am

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warm in this magic cloak, but the wind cuts like a knife and the sun has gone. Are you not frozen to the marrow?

And Erik replied: 'One hair on my leg is cold, but that is all,' and on they sped through the ice-filled night. And little by little Ragnar Forkbeard fell asleep, wrapped safely in the magic cloak.

When he awoke, the sun had climbed into the sky again, and the sledge still sped through the white winter world, and Ragnar Forkbeard called out: 'I have slept snug and fine in this magic cloak, but the night has been bitter and deathly cold. Are you not frozen to the marrow?'

And Erik replied not one word. Ragnar turned and saw Erik still standing on the sledge behind him but as stiff as rock. When he reached out his hand to touch him, he found his companion was frozen hard as ice.

Ragnar Forkbeard stopped the sledge, took his comrade in his arms, looked up at the wintry northern sun and cursed the day, and the sun hid behind a cloud.

'What shall I do?' he cried. 'Can Erik be dead? And the tears from his eyes froze before ever they reached the ground, and lay there in the snow like pearls.' 'Would that the sun had never risen today!' he cried, for yesterday Erik was alive and well and today he is cold as ice. And there is no man can bring back the day that is gone!

With a heavy heart, he lay Erik down and wrapped him in the magic cloak, saying: 'At least the snow and the wind shall not touch you now.' And he took the

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food that they had brought and put it before him saying: 'How can I eat, when my comrade and leader is cold as death?'

But even as he spoke these words his eye fell upon something that lay in the sledge. Can you guess what it was? It was a small silver box: 'The third of the old Enchanter's gifts,' said Ragnar Forkbeard to himself.

'The gift that is for yesterday. Now, if at anytime, I truly have need of that!' And he took it, and lifted up the lid, and looked in. To his dismay the box was empty.

'Alas!' cried Ragnar Forkbeard. 'The old Enchanter's third gift, the gift that was for yesterday, has been lost, and all my hopes too are fled.'

'But perhaps it is a small gift,' he said. 'A very small gift. . . . Perhaps it is no bigger than a speck of dust. . . . and he put his eye right up to the box to look. As he did so, he noticed that in the lid of the box there was a mirror, and in the mirror in the lid of the box he saw his own reflection and he realized that it was talking to him: 'Ragnar Forkbeard,' it said, 'listen to me!'

'Who are you?' cried Ragnar Forkbeard.

'I am you,' said his reflection, but I am the you that lived yesterday, for this mirror is made of yesterday glass. Now speak to me no more, but show the mirror to Erik.'

So Ragnar Forkbeard held the mirror up to the face of his lifeless companion, and when he looked in the mirror he caught his breath, for there, in the reflection, Erik was as alive as he had been the day before.

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'Hold me closer,' said Erik's reflection, and Ragnar Forkbeard held it closer to Erik's face. Then the reflection leaned forwards so that it came right out of the mirror, and put its face up against Erik's, and breathed on him. And as Ragnar Forkbeard watched, the colour began to return to Erik's cheeks, then his eyelids began to tremble, and the breath returned to his body. At last his eyes opened and he smiled.

'I am back from a dream that had no beginning and no ending,' said Erik.

'You are as you were yesterday,' said his reflection. Then it withdrew, back into the mirror, and picked up a rock reflected there, and threw it straight at the mirror, and the mirror smashed to fragments, and the reflection was gone.

After that Erik and Ragnar Forkbeard loaded up the sledge once more and both wrapped themselves as best they could in the magic cloak. Then they set off upon their icy way once more.

Cold was the way and weary and many were the frozen nights they spent together, and many were the adventures that happened to them. But finally they saw, over a white hill, a puff of smoke and, when they got to the top of the hill, there below them was the camp. And there were all their comrades: Sven the Strong and Thorkild and all the rest of them.

How Erik's men yelled and shouted for joy to see Erik and Ragnar Forkbeard alive, when they had thought them long-since dead, and to hear that Golden Dragon was safe at anchor, when they had thought her broken-up at the bottom of the sea. And how they

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marvelled at the tales that Erik and Ragnar Forkbeard had to tell – and especially the story of how Erik returned from the dead and of the use they made of the old Enchanter's three wonderful gifts.

