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DRAGONSEEKER

by

Dag Rossman

In the ignorance of my youth, I longed so fervently to meet a dragon that the yearning almost broke my heart. Then, when finally I did meet one, I wished to all the gods in Asgard that I had not—and my heart did break!

I came by my fascination with dragons and other magical beings honestly, for my mother was a swan maiden and my father a man of mystery. I say “mystery” because I had never seen him—and mother refused to talk about him. Eventually, I learned from my Uncle Ragnar that one day—after my parents had been together for more than eight years—Mother felt an irresistible compulsion to fly. So off she went, soaring southward over the vast and eerie forest of Myrkvid, back to the home where she had been born and grew up. And there in Sorlandet she gave birth to an infant son, me!

Uncle Ragnar told me that after I was born, Mother begged my grandfather, King Hlodver, to send messengers to seek out my father and bring him to us. So I suppose that Mother must have really loved him after all—surely it was that cursed swan cloak that made her fly off and leave him. At any rate, the messengers weren’t able to find him, and some of them never came back. After a time, Grandfather wasn’t willing to risk losing any more men.

You may be wondering why—once I’d been weaned or provided with a wet-nurse—Mother didn’t simply fly back to where they had lived and look for Father herself. But dealing with magical objects often isn’t as simple as most people think. Apparently one peculiarity of a swan cloak is that its owner can only use the

cloak every ninth year—and then she has no choice but to put it on, whether she wishes to or not. I wish I fully believed that. It would make it easier for me to forgive her for depriving me of a father—and then abandoning me in the same way when I was eight years old.

Once the first heartbreak of Mother’s disappearance had dulled, I actually began to enjoy living with Uncle Ragnar, to whom she had fostered me in a letter she left behind telling him she was off to seek Father. Ragnar was a wizard of considerable skill, and a wonderful storyteller! I could sit and listen for hours to his tales about the gods and heroes, but my favorites were always those about elves or dragons. And it wasn’t too long before he actually took me with him into Alfheim to meet some of the Light Elves. There I was able to hear their stories right from their own mouths. I soaked up all the lore I could, treasured it, and mentally poked at each story like a kitten does a mouse as I tried to uncover the deeper meanings.

The quest to acquire this lore became the focus of my life, and this compulsion—combined with my natural aptitude for learning—soon made me knowledgeable far beyond my years. Unfortunately, knowledge and wisdom are not the same . . . and as rich as I had become in the former, I was still lacking in the latter. Thus I grew arrogant. From time to time, if Uncle Ragnar felt I had become too full of myself, he would chide me in his gentle way. In the earlier years I usually heeded his admonitions, but as I grew into young manhood, I fear his remonstrances often fell on almost deaf

ears. After all, didn't I know almost as much lore as he? Blind was I then to how much he had not yet shared with me, and how much more there was still to learn.

And it was in that mood that I pressed my uncle to show me a dragon. Not that I had tired of the elves—far from it—but the lure of the unknown is always strongest, especially to the young.

“You tell me all these wonderful tales about dragons, but you've never taken me any place where I could actually see one. And I do want to see one for myself—I'm sure they must be even more awesome than I am able to imagine.”

“Hmm, well,” mused Uncle Ragnar, “some things are better enthroned in our imaginations, my boy, than met with in the claw-slashing, venom-spewing, fang-piercing flesh. Dragons really are quite dangerous, you know, and never, ever to be taken lightly.”

“Well, you've always told me that there is no substitute for first-hand experience, and I want to learn everything I can about dragons. That way I'll be able to tell really exciting and convincing stories about them when I go out on my own as a wandering skald.”

“That's a worthy aspiration, Dag, and I'm pleased that you want to give your audience full measure, but you'll do them no good if a dragon picks its teeth with your bones!” He paused and, seeing my crestfallen expression, placed a kindly hand on my shoulder. “Now, now, don't look so crushed. I didn't say we wouldn't ever look for a dragon—I just want you to realize that such a quest requires a most cautious approach. Now, it just so happens that my old friend Ketil Arnesson, the king of Ormerdal, has been urging me to pay him an extended visit. And, as I recall, there probably still are more dragons in Ormerdal than anywhere else in the Nine Worlds save Niflheim. So it seems to me that Ormerdal would be just the place to begin our quest. What do you think?”

“Oh, Uncle Ragnar,” I cried, giving him a quick bear hug, “you are always so good to me. And I won't be afraid of any dragon as long as you are with me.”

Holding me at arm's length, Uncle Ragnar

looked into my eyes. “You've been like a true son to me—not just a fosterling—and I will always try to protect you, but you would do well to remember that even a wizard's magic may not be proof against the power of one of the greater orms. Let us hope that we'll never need to put mine to the test!”

At the time, I thought my uncle was just being modest. Only later would I discover he had meant exactly what he said.



We were nearly a month in reaching Ormsby, the chief city of Ormerdal, because Uncle Ragnar had insisted on making the journey in relatively short stages. Since we were travelling afoot, he said that there was no point in arriving exhausted and footsore. The dragons had been around for eons, he reminded me, and another month was hardly likely to make them harder to find. Often we slept beneath the stars, but whenever we stopped at a human habitation, we were greeted with warmth and hospitality. Everyone seemed to know Ragnar Rune-Wise from previous visits, and they looked forward to hearing the news he brought—and, of course, the stories he gladly shared. He even let me tell a tale or two—to gain experience, he said—and the listeners were generous in their praise of the “apprentice skald,” as they called me. This was heady fare, and it did little to help check my already rather inflated sense of self-worth.

Once we reached Ormsby and met King Ketil, my uncle and I were given quarters in his great hall for the duration of our visit. For one who was used to spending a great deal of time outdoors, the hall seemed close and dark. But I never tired of seeing the dragon-adorned wall hangings, nor of sharing meals with the most colorful and hardy assemblage of warriors I had

ever met. It was more than enough to excite any young man's heart, and it certainly did mine.

Not surprisingly, whenever I could catch the king's attention, I pestered him with dragon questions: how did Ormerdal, the Valley of Dragons, get its name; what stories did he know about Ormerdal's dragons; and—most importantly—where could I go to find one? And, yes, I'm afraid I preened a bit about the quest on which Uncle Ragnar had promised to take me.

At first I don't think King Ketil knew quite what to make of me. "By the black scales of Nidhögg! It's dragons this, and dragons that. You've got dragons under your hood, young ormseeker. Would that my son, Solvenn, had half your curiosity and ambition. Still, he's a good lad and of a more sensible bent than you. I fear that your curiosity about dragons is going to cost you dearly one day." He shook his shaggy head sagely, but I have to admit that I had faded out on his later comments, fascinated as I was by what he had named me.

"'Ormseeker' you called me, your Highness, and gladly I accept the name. Dag Ormseeker I shall be from now on. And what shall be my naming-gift?"

The king looked startled, though not angry, at my presumption, for such was the custom in the Nine Worlds that a namer always presented a name-gift to the one named.

"Hmmp. Well, with a name such as yours, it would seem only right to find something more fitting than the usual arm-ring or sword. Ah, I know just the thing. Give me a moment to find it." King Ketil unlocked a large ornate chest that sat over along the wall, threw back the slightly domed lid, and began to rummage through the contents.

"Yes, here it is. Right from the home of the dragons, or so I'm told." The king turned to me, holding in his right hand a small amulet attached to a silver chain. Uncle Ragnar drew closer to get a better look, then interposed his hand between the king's and mine.

"A moment, Ketil. Do you mind if I take a look at that trinket before you bestow it upon my nephew? A gift from the dragon realm could

prove to be a double-edged sword."

The king handed the amulet to my uncle, who held it up in such a way that it dangled from the end of the chain connected to the amulet by what appeared to be a finely wrought representation of a dragon's claw. As Uncle Ragnar peered at the amulet from all sides, I could see that it was a thin, polished, roughly rectangular piece of stone that seemed to contain within its depths a flickering, bluish-white light.

"So this is where it's been hiding all these years! Ketil, you old fox, do you know what you've got here? This is Firefrost, a chip from the original Ormerstein in Niflheim that bears the laws governing all of dragonkind. Some mages wise in dragon lore even insist that the Ormerstein itself is a slab of petrified dragon venom."

Ragnar continued: "None knows all that Firefrost can do, but it is said that the stone will grow ever brighter the closer it approaches one of the greater orms. Are you sure you want to part with it?"

King Ketil looked quizzically at his friend, with a sideways glance at the expression on my face. "I had no idea this little thing was so famous, and some might think it amiss for me to part with a family heirloom. But since I don't care to have my heir encountering any dragons—and your foster son would like nothing better—I think this 'dragon lodestone' is better off in Dag's hands than in Solvenn's." Turning to face me, he queried: "There now, does that relieve your mind, young Ormseeker?"

Kneeling, I thanked the king profusely, then excused myself so I could examine my prize, consider the implications of my new name, and let my uncle and King Ketil enjoy some private conversation.

* * *

Now that I possessed an amulet that would actually point the way to a dragon, I was increasingly anxious that Uncle Ragnar and I resume our quest. He, on the other hand, seemed to be in no hurry to set off. In fact, when I broached the matter—which I did several times each day—he seemed distracted and quickly changed the subject. On the evening of the third

day following my naming, I refused to be put off any longer.

“Uncle Ragnar, when are we going to head out on our quest? You have put it off—and put me off, too—and I just don’t understand why. Do you really think it is fair to keep me in the dark?”

My uncle grimaced and tugged at his beard. “No, Dag, I don’t suppose it is. You’re a young man now—no longer just a lad—and you deserve to be treated like a man.” His eyes twinkled as he added: “But you’ll have to be patient with me, my boy. You’ve been with me ever since you were a child, and sometimes it’s hard for me to realize that you’ve grown up.”

A wave of affection for my foster-father swept over me. “Oh, Uncle, you’ll have to be patient with me, too. I know I’ve been pestering you about leaving Ormsby for the past three days, but I really don’t understand what is keeping us here.”

Uncle Ragnar looked rather somber. “The truth is, Dag, that I have been casting the runes each evening . . . and each time I have done so, the reading was not favorable.”

“Do you mean that the runes said we won’t find a dragon—even with the help of Firefrost?”

“No, they said that we will, and that the encounter is likely to end badly. That’s why I have delayed our departure. You know the old saying: ‘The wise man knows not to seek trouble—more than enough trouble will find him on its own.’”

“That’s as may be,” I countered, “but we’re also told that a faint heart never won a battle, a great treasure, a fair lady, or anything else that brings honor and makes life worth living. I have to seek out a dragon. For what other purpose was I given my name and the amulet Firefrost?”

“You are still determined to do this, despite the advice of the runes?”

“I am determined. It is my wyrd—my destiny—and how often have you told me that a man cannot avoid his wyrd?”

“So I have, but I also tell you: ‘Beware the self-fulfilling prophecy.’” Uncle Ragnar paused, then shrugged and sighed with resignation: “Still, if your mind is made up, we’ll leave

tomorrow. I only hope that your wyrd doesn’t lead to your death—or to mine.”

* * *

Determined to make full use of Firefrost’s powers, I proposed that we circle the perimeter of Ormsby to determine the most promising direction in which to begin our search. Our readings to the south and the west revealed only faint flickerings within the depths of the stone, but when we turned to the north, Firefrost flared with such dazzling brilliance that there seemed to be no need to check the eastern quadrant. And so we commenced our journey northward, a journey I will never forget.

From the first, Firefrost led us in a bee-line toward Odin’s Eye, the pole star, though our actual path was not so straight, for we had to wend our way around or through the obstacles that nature placed before us. For a time we walked through rich woodlands, but as our path led higher, even the stunted birches became fewer and more widely scattered, finally giving way to dense thickets of dwarf birches, willows, and junipers that scarcely reached our knees. Before the novelty wore off, there were times when I felt as if Uncle Ragnar and I had been transformed into giants who were striding above the forests that grew on the roof of the world. Covering the ground between the thickets of dwarf trees was a sea of short grasses and endless clumps of greyish reindeer moss. And, in the depressions still wet with snow melt, the bright white tufts of myrull, bog wool, fluffed in the gentle breeze. Across the hoyfjell, the high plateau, we wandered for many days, drinking in its stark beauty and breathing its clean, cold air.

Boulders there were aplenty, all of them lichen-encrusted . . . and some disturbingly humanlike in form, though much larger than human in size. Could these be trolls that had failed to reach their caves before the sun rose and petrified them? When I asked my uncle, he peered closely at one of the boulders, ran his hands lightly over the surface of the rock, and muttered: “Perhaps, perhaps.”

Maybe Uncle Ragnar wasn’t entirely convinced about the presence of trolls, but each night thereafter we took pains to be as

inconspicuous as possible. We lit no fires after dark, and were careful to camp well away from the beaten path—as well as from any rock wall that might conceal cave openings. He seemed to feel that these precautions would be adequate, inasmuch as trolls on the prowl are usually fairly noisy and slow-moving. “Moreover, my boy, if you are downwind from one of them, you can’t possibly miss the odor. In a word, they stink!” And, as it turned out, my uncle was right—trolls were not to be our bane on that



journey. As each day passed, he became ever more talkative; it was as if he sensed that our time together might be limited, and he wanted to impart as much lore as possible. Foolishly, I had thought that I knew nearly as much lore as he. I soon learned that I had but scratched the surface.

One night the northern sky came alive with dancing, shimmering lights of red and green and frosty white. I was entranced, and more than a little apprehensive.

“What is that, Uncle Ragnar?”

“Well, Dag, nobody is altogether certain,” my uncle replied, pursing his lips, “but some say that those are the spirits of dead elves dancing across the sky.”

“Really? Why, I thought the Light Elves were immortal!”

“No one knows that for certain, either. They surely are long-lived, but even immortals can be killed through mishap or intent. Still, the elves

themselves have a different story about those lights. They say the lights are the breath of First Maker’s children, the dragons of Hvergelmir, during their great mating ritual—and that, if you listen very carefully, you can sometimes hear their trumpeting calls off in the distance.”

“Those are both beautiful stories, Uncle, regardless of which is true. But who is this First Maker you just mentioned? I’ve never heard of him before.”

“Actually, First Maker is—or was—a her. I know that you have learned that Ask and Embla, the first humans, were created from trees by Odin and his brothers, Vili and Ve.”

I nodded agreement.

“But have you never wondered where the other beings came from? The gods and giants, elves, dwarves, and dragons?”

“Well, I know that the first giant, Ymir, was said to have been formed by congealing meltwater flowing out of Hvergelmir, the Well of Creation, and that the first god, Buri, was licked out of a block of ice by Audumla, the cosmic cow. And I also heard that the gods created the dwarves from maggots they found in Ymir’s corpse. But I can’t say I ever heard anything about the origin of the elves or the dragons.”

“Indeed, my boy, few people have, for the elves tend to be pretty close-mouthed, that story being at the heart of their most sacred lore. Let’s see, now. That nonsense about the dwarves is just that, outsider’s nonsense. The dwarves’ own lore tells that they are kin to the Light Elves, but became as they are through an act of Odin.”

Uncle Ragnar nodded, smiling to himself. “And Audumla, the Great Cow, didn’t actually create the first god—she licked him free from the ice block in which he was encased. So where did Buri come from? And Ymir and the elves and the dragons—and Audumla herself, for that matter? Why, that’s where First Maker comes into the story.

“At any rate, the core of the story exists in the form of an ancient elvish poem that goes like this.” Clearing his throat, Uncle Ragnar proceeded to chant:

“In the time before Time began,
In the space beyond Space,
Lay the cosmic coils of First Maker.

First Maker’s form was that of a dragon,
A dragon with scales so black
They might have absorbed all light
Had there been any light to absorb.

For countless eons First Maker slept.
A dreamless sleep? Perhaps, yet perhaps not--
For who is to know the mind of a dragon?

Then, in an instant, First Maker awoke.
Her shuttered eyes slid open . . . and there was light,
Light so piercing not even the dragon’s scales
Could possibly absorb it all.

First Maker saw the emptiness around Her
And breathed out from Her nostrils
The essence of Her own being
In billowing clouds of life-force.

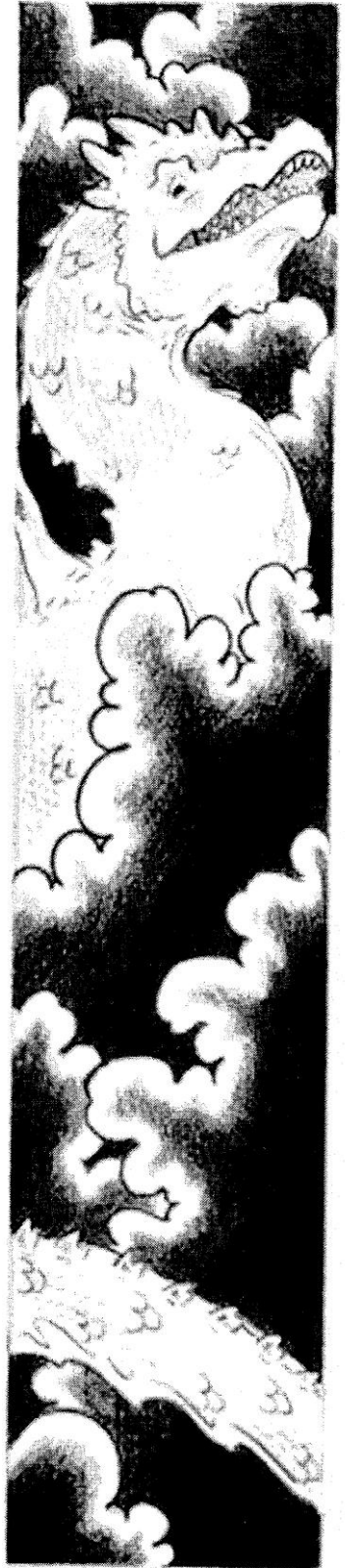
Then First Maker threw back Her head
And uttered a long, bugling call,
A song of such unutterable beauty and power
That the motes of life-force began
To vibrate and draw closer together.

First Maker cupped Her claw-tipped hands,
And in each a swirling mass of life-force
Condensed into a ball; in Her left hand
Lay a darkly brooding ball of ice,
In Her right a raging, radiant ball of fire.

First Maker paused for one endless moment,
Then slammed the balls together,
Joining the opposites in Unity
For an instant before the cosmic egg exploded.

First Maker faded as the motes of Her being
Hurtled outward, ever outward,
To seek that elusive Unity again,
And yet again, for all Eternity.

It was the Beginning . . .



We remained silent for a time, my mind full of the grandeur of the dazzling images the poem had evoked. Finally, Uncle Ragnar spoke again, quietly: “So you see, according to the Light Elves, the Nine Worlds and everything in them—living and non-living—ultimately came from the very being of First Maker, who is—or was—a dragon. The waters of Hvergelmir must have contained an enormous amount of her life-force . . . and perhaps they still do.”

I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I had been holding. “That really gives me a lot to think about.”

“As well you should . . . and to make thinking easier, why don’t we call an end to our storytelling for this night, and turn in?”

* * *

The next day we reached the northern edge of the plateau, and looking into the distance, we could see nothing beyond the trail descending into swirling mist. Uncle Ragnar slowly shook his head and confided: “It’s as I feared, Dag. This trail can only lead us down into Niflheim, and the trail’s end must lie at the verge of Hvergelmir, the Well of Creation. That ancient home of dragonkind is a most perilous place to visit—and I plead with you again, if you must go forward, for Odin’s sake go ever so carefully! I understand your need to follow what you think to be your wyrd—which it may well be, for there is much the runes have not revealed—but remember that your wyrd may not protect you from the dragons we are likely to encounter.

“Knowing now who they are—Goin and Moin, Grabak and Grafvollud, Ofnir and Svafnir, and perhaps even Nidhögg—I also know for a certainty that my powers are no match for theirs. These great orms have dwelt in Hvergelmir since before the creation of the Nine Worlds. They are unimaginably old, incredibly wise, and immeasurably powerful. They feed upon the corpses of our dead, and

gnaw upon the great root of the World Tree—for what reasons I cannot begin to fathom.”

Speechless up to this point, I blurted out indignantly: “Feeding on human corpses and attacking the World Tree? Surely these must be the most evil creatures in the Nine Worlds!”

“Evil by human standards, perhaps, but who are we to judge the great orms? We cannot begin to see the universe through their eyes. Is a wolf evil because it kills and eats a deer? Or is the wolf simply following its wyrd and doing what it must to survive? And, to the extent that dragons think about humans at all, surely they must see us chiefly as prey! So let us be wise and conceal ourselves with great care when we approach Hvergelmir. And once you have gazed your fill, let us depart as quickly and quietly as possible. Do you understand?”

My uncle’s revelations had succeeded in shaking my confidence about the outcome of our journey more than I wanted to admit. If I had used any common sense at all, I would have agreed to turn back there and then—but I was still more stubborn than wise.

* * *

I remember little of our descent into Niflheim save that the farther we went, the thicker grew the mist and the stronger blew the winds, which threatened to tear us from the narrow trail that clung to the rocky escarpment we were descending. And as bad as were the days, so much worse were the nights. There was no shelter to be had, and we must needs sleep on the trail itself when darkness came. Sleep? Finally, when overcome by exhaustion, we slept—for the unabated howling of the winds was no soothing lullaby.

At last we reached the bottom of the great barrier wall and found ourselves in Niflheim. We were still surrounded by mist, but at least the swirling winds had diminished somewhat in their intensity. It was such a relief to be able to hear oneself think, and to carry on a conversation without having to shout. At Uncle Ragnar’s suggestion, we set out to find one of the Elivagar—the eleven frosty streams

that flow out of Hvergelmir—so we could follow it upstream to its source. As it turned out, we would have had a difficult time missing the stream we did encounter, for it exited Hvergelmir with such force and volume that the river churned through its channel with a roar that could be heard several bowshots distant.

Once we had the river in sight, Uncle Ragnar and I slowly moved upstream, slipping from the cover of one huge boulder to another, always remaining in the open as little as possible. In this way we came at last to the very brink of Hvergelmir and cautiously peered over its rocky rim. A well—or spring—it had been named, but such words had ill-prepared my mind to encompass the vast body of water that my eyes beheld. More like an ice-rimmed, mist-shrouded lake it was, but with its milky blue water bubbling and churning up from its depths—coming whence only the gods knew.

“Behold the very essence of First Maker’s being,” my uncle breathed softly. And, for once, I was too stunned to say anything.

Then the mists cleared, and I saw the dragons! ‘Til my dying day I’ll not forget that moment, when my heart’s desire was at last fulfilled. Magnificent creatures they were, and far larger than Uncle Ragnar’s tales had led me to expect. They cavorted in the roiling water, diving from time to time near the center of Hvergelmir, only to be carried forcefully to the surface by the spring’s surge. Breaching, they rose into the air on leathery, batlike wings and circled once or twice before plunging back into the icy waters.

So fascinated was I by the sight, that slowly, involuntarily, I rose to my feet to get a better view. Uncle Ragnar tugged at my cloak and hissed a warning, but it was too late. In rising, my tunic had fallen open at the neck exposing Firefrost, which, with so many great orms close at hand, was glowing like the sun! And Firefrost had not gone unnoticed. One huge beast, his black scales gleaming like burnished iron, lazily glided toward us and alit on a

massive stone outcropping nearby.

“S-s-so, what have we here? Human intruders-s-s, it would s-s-seem.”

Feeling naked and exposed in the presence of this ominous creature—and startled to hear it speak, although I had been told that they could—I remained silent. Uncle Ragnar took it upon himself to try to salvage the situation.

“Humans, indeed, your magnificent scaleyness, but hopefully not intruders. You see, I had filled my nephew’s head with tales of the wondrousness of dragonkind and, as an apprentice storyteller, he simply had to see it for himself. The impetuosity of youth, you know. We were just going to watch for a few minutes, then quietly leave.”

“The youth is-s-s not the only impetuous-s-s one, it s-s-seems-s-s. You, at leas-st, should have known better, graybeard. Humans-s-s are not allowed in Niflheim unless bidden—which you were not. If you are the youth’s-s-s mentor, you have not s-s-served him well.”

The dragon’s words stung my sense of justice. “Don’t blame Uncle Ragnar, dragon. He wouldn’t have come here at all if I hadn’t insisted. I am called Dag Ormseeker, and Firefrost here”—I drew out the amulet and showed it to him—“was my naming gift. Can’t you see it is my wyrd to seek dragons and learn as much lore about them as I can?”

“Very impres-sive, I’m sure,” hissed the ebon orm, “but you should have s-s-sought wis-sdom rather than knowledge. Now, when it is-s-s too late, perhaps-s-s you shall gain both.”

“T-too late?” I stammered. “What do you mean, ‘too late’?”

The dragon inclined his head toward me. “A moment ago you addres-sed me as-s-s ‘dragon,’ as-s-s if one orm is-s-s jus-st like any other. Know then, you ins-significant little worm, that I am called Nidhögg, the Destroyer . . . and in your ignorant arrogance you have brought your doom upon you. Under dragon law, tres-spas-s-s is-s-s punishable by

death . . . and I, Nidhögg, am the enforcer of that law.”

Opening his gaping maw, the dragon forcefully expelled a stream of venom at me. Uncle Ragnar threw himself in front of me and received nearly the full brunt of the Cold Fire. The exposed hand I had thrown up to protect my face was the only part of my body to be touched.

Nidhögg rasped: “You may have s-s-spared him for the moment, old man, but you have only prolonged his-s-s death. My venom will s-s-slowly work its-s-s way up his-s-s arm—when it reaches-s-s the heart, he will die. By then, of cours-se, you will be long gone. S-s-say your goodbyes-s-s while you can . . . I shall return s-s-soon for your corps-ses-s-s.”

The dragon left us then, but I was so full of anxiety and guilt—not to mention the excruciating pain in my hand—that I really didn’t notice. I fell to my knees beside Uncle Ragnar as he writhed in agony on the ground.

“Oh, Uncle Ragnar, I am so very sorry. You warned me, but I was the young fool who had to have his own way. Nidhögg was right about that.” Tears of shame and grief came coursing down my cheeks. “Can’t your magic do anything to save us?”

“Too . . . late . . . for me,” he gasped. “Not enough . . . time. One chance . . . for you . . . though. Quick freeze . . . to stop . . . venom. Hope someone . . . will find . . . heal you . . . someday.” Despite his pain, my uncle raised himself on one arm and forced himself to draw a gleaming rune in the air between us. With his last dying spark, he completed the ice rune, and giving me a wan smile whispered his final benediction: “See . . . you . . . in . . . Valhalla.”

And he was gone.

As the icy coating Uncle Ragnar had conjured up started to spread over me from head to toe, my mental processes began to slow, along with all my body’s other functions. I could have sworn I saw a beautiful maiden ride down out of Niflheim’s misty sky, dismount, gather the body of Uncle Ragnar up in her arms, leap lightly astride her steed, and ride back up into the sky. Was she a valkyrie . . . or an illusion? I can’t say for sure, but I do know that my uncle’s corpse was nowhere to be seen.

Then Nidhögg returned. “What’s-s-s this-s-s?” he hissed angrily. “One tidbit carried off, and the other in no condition to be eaten? I’m not going to ris-sk my fangs-s-s on that block of ice.” He watched me silently for a moment. “Nor will I have it s-s-sitting here forever as-s-s a cons-stant reminder of how my will was-s-s thwarted.” Nidhögg swept his long tail like a whip, striking me such a blow that I spun through the air and landed in the midst of the icy stream my uncle and I had followed in approaching Hvergelmir.

So filled with guilt and remorse was I that I actually welcomed the rapid numbing of my thoughts. To be alone with them for all eternity would surely lead to madness, a fate that perhaps I had earned. So much for following my wyrd! It had led Uncle Ragnar to his death—and he deserved far better from the nephew he had cared for so long and lovingly. As for me, bobbing and spinning in the torrent, I began a journey of which I would have no awareness . . . and whose ending I could not even begin to foresee.