

The Northerner

by

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It was smaller than many of the large travel roads used for the transporting of trade goods between the Southern Kingdoms, yet it was wider and well-trodden than the numerous trails that threaded the wildernesses of the North. The sun's light, slanting from the west, trimmed the green leaves with gold and cast long shadows beneath the tall poplars. The chirping of birds and the smell of the wild flowers filled the air by the empty roadside.

Suddenly, the incoming caw of a raven sounded above their song. Then, in the green foliage that bordered the road, there was a movement. The leaves parted and gave way to a tall, hooded, and cloaked figure who cast a long searching glance up and down the road. The stranger whistled softly, and, in answer to the call, a raven whose lower body was streaked with white flew out of the forest to perch on the proffered shoulder. With one last backward glance at the northern peaks of the Dragon's Teeth Mountains, the traveler set off towards the South.

An observer might have noted the seemingly careless absence of a sword and beneath the woolen cloak gleamed no metal armor or chain mail. Indeed, all the traveler appeared to be equipped with was the dark, hooded cloak, a raven which rested quietly on the stranger's shoulder, and a long, thin, wooden staff whose metal crown flashed ruby as the light of the setting sun struck it. The staff was the only object of apparent value in the woman's possessions. Its head of silver was cast in the likeness of a war helmet from which sprouted two fully-spread, eagle wings. The wood below it was dark and well-polished from the use and handling of many years and was engraved with mysterious glyphs and symbols.

There were no other travelers on the road that day, and it was not until dusk that the way the stranger followed converged at major crossroad—in the center of which was a large, and judging from the crowded stables – a well-filled inn. The stranger hesitated, looking at the sky which had quickly darkened with the passing of the sun, then resolutely turned to the now bright, glowing lights of the inn.

By the doorstep, two large hounds were snarling and snapping at each other in a quarrel over a bone. As the stranger approached, the dogs' attention was distracted and they turned, growling menacingly. The stranger stopped within two feet of them just as the wind shifted and the dogs got their first whiff of their adversary. They whimpered—uncertain. Then under the shadow of the hooded figure, they fled with their tails between their great hind legs. The raven croaked softly—the wind gently ruffling his long sleek feathers.

The door to the inn was heavy, but the stranger's tall frame seemed to have little trouble wielding it. The appearance of a new traveler did not visibly disrupt the busy, noise-filled inn. The air was thick with smoke and ripe scent of wine and sweat.

The stranger allowed a moment to get accustomed to the dim light before heading for the bar. After handing large mugs of beer to two very impressive, but drunk warriors, the red-faced innkeeper moved over to serve the new arrival. His mouth stretched into a leering smile.

"And what can I do for you sir?" he asked, polishing a beer stein.

"I want a room," came the reply.

"Very well. Would you be wantin' food and ale too?" The stranger shook a concealed head and replied, "Water."

"That will be eight coppers for the room and twelve for the en-ter-tain-ment." A crowd of rowdy warriors and their whore companions guffawed at the innkeeper's crude remark. The innkeeper himself broke into a loud chuckle until the newcomer's silence dampened his mirth. Disquieted, he ran his tongue across yellowed, broken teeth, and spat on the floor. A long, gloved, hand reached out from under the fold of the stranger's cloak and placed eight coppers on the counter. Sobered, the innkeeper pocketed the money. He took the stein he was polishing and put it under a rusty faucet.

Taking the water, the strangers' gaze travelled around the room to a corner where the light from the fireplace cast long, flickering shadows. The stranger steered across the tavern towards it passing the glint of gold rings and earrings, the sheen of a Southern scimitar and the gleam of a Northern broadsword. Merchants, warriors, thieves and whores passed before the stranger's eyes until...

The mercenary looked up and met the unblinking gaze of the raven over the rim of her mug.

"You should clip his wings," the woman mercenary remarked.

"Why?" came the reply. The mercenary shrugged.

"He'll fly away."

"We travel together. He will not leave my side." And deep within the shadowed folds of the hood the stranger's eyes glittered with curiosity. The stranger pulled the chair back and sat down. The warrior paused in the act of lifting the mug to her lips. She studied the newcomer warily then set the mug down on the table.

The firelight in the room flickered across the features of her young face and illuminated the gold of her earring—trademark of the Southern mercenary. Short, black hair curled about her temples in smooth, even waves. One elbow rested on the chair. Her short grey cloak had been thrown back over her left shoulder, revealing a deep red tunic beneath it. And as if to dispel any lingering doubts as to her profession, the hilt of a wicked-looking sabre reared from her belt.

“Are you the one they call Ironhawk?” the stranger asked.

“Maybe. Depends. What do you want?” There was a flash of gold as the stranger flung two coins upon the table in front of the mercenary. Ironhawk raised an eyebrow, darted a glance left and right, before surreptitiously pocketing the money. “So, Northerner, what am I being paid to do?” she asked. Tilting her chair back, she studied the stranger carefully. “A Northerner,” she affirmed aloud. The stranger gave no reply. The mercenary continued her assessment with growing confidence. “Your staff is of Northern craftsmanship and no Southerner in their right mind would throw money around like that... no—uh—disrespect intended,” she added. “But I might help if I knew what I was being paid for?” The Northerner hesitated then leaned forward unexpectedly, startling the perched raven.

“I wish to pay a visit to King Arion’s chancellor, the wizard Dar’Alain.”

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Deep in the wild woods of the South, in the shadow of the Dragon’s Teeth Mountains, here sat on the bank of the river, beneath the shade of the lithe willow tree—a mermaid, a fairy, and a frog.

“I tell you,” said the fairy emphatically, “was too a flying horse!”

“Nonsense,” murmured the mermaid, “there’s no such thing!” She lay on a rock in the river half in, half out of the water, combing her long hair with a brush made of blue fish scales.

“Are you suggesting that I am a liar?” demanded the fairy, her dragonfly-like wings rustling with indignation.

“Not in the least,” purred the mermaid, “everyone knows that members of the fairy race are prone to...misinterpretations.”

“Oooooo you fish face! I’ll pluck every single hair on that tiny, little head of yours and feed them to the trolls!” the fairy hissed, rising off the ground in her agitation. The mermaid gasped and made ready to dive back into the water.

“Friends, friends, dearest companions, let us not succumb to the petty squabbling of mortals -we who are representatives of the magic realm.” The willow tree nymph intoned—the soothing undulations of her voice merging with the ripples of the river beside them.

“I did too see a flying horse,” mumbled the fairy petulantly.

“Why don’t you tell us exactly what you saw?” offered the tree nymph supportively.

“Well, I was out gathering primroses—for my dear one...” at this point she stopped and gazed fondly at the frog— “when I noticed a strange sort of bird riding over the mountains on the cool, northern winds. At first, I paid little attention to it, but

then, as it drew nearer, it veered off to the east, so that its back was to the setting sun. It was evening, you see—

“How very perceptive of you,” the mermaid quipped. Here the willow intervened and gently chided the mermaid for goading her cousin. The fairy glared at the mermaid before continuing with her story.

“As I was saying –till I was rudely interrupted—was that the light of the sun tinged the shape of the “bird” with red, and it was then that I saw it was undeniably a horse—a horse with wings. I watched this flying horse slowly descend to the earth where it disappeared in a flash of light!”

The frog’s eyes bugged out in alarm, and he croaked with concern.

“Yes, Pugsley, I was terrified!” exclaimed the fairy to the frog. “It was simply uncanny!”

“This is all nonsense; everyone knows that flying horses are only a myth,” said the mermaid with a toss of her hair.

“May I remind you,” said the fairy, “that I am the one here with the most expertise in arboreal creatures,” she sniffed with a flourish of her wings, “and there is no doubt in my mind that it was undeniably a flying horse!”

“Horses don’t fly,” remarked the mermaid.

“Flying horses do,” said the fairy.

“How odd,” murmured the tree nymph. And on that, for once, they all agreed.

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As the dusk drew near, the last arrows of sunlight found two weary travelers still threading the forest roads. It was not until the sun had dipped below the horizon, leaving only a faint glow to mark its descent that the two travelers turned off the road and into the trees. In the waning light, one could make out that the taller of the two wore a long grey cloak and carried a staff. Beneath the shelter of the trees the pair rested, the taller one taking out a water flask and drinking deeply, while the companion gathered wood for a fire. The striking of flint on metal sounded and a flicker of light lit up their faces. The blossoming flame revealed a woman’s face with dark, short hair, garbed in the red and grey of a mercenary.

“From here on, it should be a journey of two more days.” Ironhawk leaned back against the tree and stretched out her legs. “Now, Northerner, perhaps you can explain yourself? I have traveled for an entire day without even knowing how to address you, and I will not take one step further till you reveal all.” The stranger studied the mercenary for a moment, then leaned her staff against the tree and took a seat by the fire.

“Very well. As you have deduced, I am from the North—from the clan of Lothringen. I am called Elssa of the Lothringen. Many years ago, the wizard—Dar’

Alain— by sorcery and treachery, stole our ancestral war helmet. My clan has sent me to retrieve it. It has great sentimental value.”

The mercenary’s narrowed with suspicion. “Sentimental value eh? Is that why the Wizard Dar’Alain went to all the effort to steal it? I guess he’s a sentimental fool too!” She chuckled at her own sarcasm.

The Northerner shifted uneasily. “In the North, a war helmet is like a Southerner’s coat-of-arms. Imprinted upon the metal of the helmet is the warrior’s ancestry and status. It is also believed to protect the bearer in battle, and in some older traditions it was thought to house the soul of the wearer. And,” she added eyeing the mercenary, “it is a thing of some market value.”

“Oh,” the southern woman grinned, flashing her ivory white teeth. “It’s a thing of some market value. Now it’s getting interesting. Do tell me more!” Her eyes glinted in the firelight like a fox at the smell of blood.

“I have told you enough,” the Northerner interrupted, “you know my quest and my name. What of you?” The mercenary sighed, disappointed at the change in subject.

“They call me Ironhawk –I am a freeman; I belong to no clan. When I was eight, my parents sent me away to join the Grey Guild, and I have followed the way of the hired sword ever since.”

“So young,” the Northerner remarked softly.

“I was taught a trade. Better than starving, or become some man’s property or whore. Save your pity for someone who needs it.” Silence ensued. The darkness had closed in around them like a blanket, and they could hear the sounds of small animals scurrying and snuffling about in the darkness. Elssa of the Lothringen raised her gloved arm; in answer to her gesture the raven flew out of the perimeter of darkness to land on the Northerner’s fist. Drawing the green leaf of a Rowan tree out of her purse, she offered it to the raven.

Ironhawk watched, curiously drawn to this intimate ritual between the woman and the great, midnight black bird with white streaked wings. She found the raven staring back at her with a penetrating gaze that seemed to lay bare the depths of her soul. Ironhawk repressed a shudder and looked away. The raven finished its meager fare and flew off once more into the shadowy canopy of trees. Having no good excuse to stay up, Ironhawk folded her cloak under her head and closed her eyes. The last thing she remembered was the snapping of the fire.

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Ironhawk awakened to a nostalgic and familiar scent. It was musty— earthy. She opened her eyes, turned her head and found herself gazing at the powerful sleek forelegs of an equine. Blinking sleep from her eyes in the dazzling sunlight, she got to her feet to get a better look at the creature.

"I did not know mercenaries were so lazy." Ironhawk whirled at the sound of a calm, mocking voice as the familiar, hooded and cloaked figure stepped out of the shadows of the tree. "What do you think of your steed?" the Northerner asked.

"My steed? Do you always speak in riddles, Elssa of the Lothringen?" Her voice trailed off as she took a good look at the horse. The horse's coloring was unusual. The coat was a deep, shiny black, but it's long, mane and tail were streaked with white. For a moment, the mercenary's gaze was locked with that of the equine's. Deep eyes. Intelligent eyes. Ironhawk shook herself to throw off an uneasy feeling that had settled over her.

"Take this horse and ride on to the city of Lan-eth-rong. I will meet you by nightfall."

"Wait!" Ironhawk called out as the Northerner turned to go. "How will I find you? And how can I be certain that you will not cheat me out of my pay?" The Northerner shook her head. She reached into her cloak and pulled out a small purse filled with gold. She tossed it to Ironhawk.

"Take your money, mercenary," she said, not bothering to conceal her scorn, "This should be enough to pay for decent lodging as well. As for finding me, you need not worry—

I will find you. Watch over the horse," she added, "he means a lot to me. Should anything happen to him, I will find you and you will curse the day your mother bore you, Ironhawk." And before the astonished Southerner could react, Elssa of the Lothringen had melted into the shadows. "Your sword and cloak are in the saddle," her disembodied voice called from out of the trees. Then she was gone, and no matter how Ironhawk strained her eyes, the forest did not reveal the mysterious northern woman.

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By the time the sun was shining directly overhead, Ironhawk had forded the river Sun-dan which marked the border between the Middle Kingdom and the realm of King Arion. The air became hotter and drier as the mercenary rode deeper into the South, so that after a long day's ride when Ironhawk finally reached the city of Lan-eth-rong, its gold spiked towers were a welcome sight.

The head guard was a humorless man with a pockmarked face. He looked skeptically at the tired, dusty woman before him and at the white-maned, black horse which stood still as stone beneath her. He eyed her grey cloak and red tunic with thinly veiled hostility.

"Mercenary, state your business!" he snapped. He, like the other four soldiers, wore the same black uniform of the Royal Guard. Ironhawk eyed him coolly.

"I am a freeman of the Grey Guild. I come to Lan-eth-rong for business, Captain. Is that that a crime?" The man spat on the ground in displeasure, but waved her forward anyway.

“Pass.” Thus Ironhawk entered through the gates of Lan-eth-rong.

It was Darderwynian-King Arion’s notorious carnival of pleasures. The golden city swarmed with half-naked revelers who had come from far and wide to partake in every form of imaginable debauchery. Marble fountains reeked of piss and gutters flowed rank with beer and pig’s blood. The inns were full and Ironhawk spent the remainder of the waning daylight seeking lodgings. The only inn with an available room was the Bull’s Den –a lodge of ill-repute even among the thugs and cutthroats of the city. Ironhawk; however, was a mercenary of the Grey Guild. The bandits and roughnecks recognized the dress code of a trained warrior and kept their distance. Securing a corner of the tavern herself, Ironhawk sat down in a chair to wait.

It grew dark outside. The bright lanterns of the inn made the darkness of the night seem even darker in contrast. From time to time, the mercenary glanced out of the window trying to penetrate the veil of blackness. Ironhawk sighed and tossed back another beer. The door to the inn swung open as another barbarian sought shelter in the Bull’s Den. He was a true barbarian, clothed in furs and skins with a prodigious, red beard that cascaded down his chest. The lout roared at the innkeeper for a drink. Ironhawk, curiosity satisfied, looked away when all of a sudden, the clamor in the tavern stopped.

The door had swung open again letting in the cool night air. A woman stepped out of the moonless night and into the close, tight atmosphere of the tavern. Her hair was the color of the snow-capped mountains of the North. It fell in a single braid down her back. Under the pale, white bangs and thin arching eyebrows, her eyes sparkled with the clear, frost-blue of a midwinter’s sky. The young woman was clad simply in a brown, leather overtunic, deerskin pants, and tall, dark, riding boots. More than one pair of eyes followed her across the room.

As she started across the room towards Ironhawk’s corner, a large, booted foot thrust into the aisle between the tables obstructing her path. The young woman turned her head to stare menacingly at the owner of the foot.

“Move your foot,” she said firmly. The owner of the foot, a dark, lean pirate, gazed straight back at her. His forearms were striated with knife scars from dueling.

“Make me,” he retorted with a self-centered swagger. His comrades guffawed at this exchange. The tension in the atmosphere brought Ironhawk back from nodding off into her beer.

“Hey, sunshine, why don’t you shine somewhere else?” she called out. The man extracted his foot from the aisle and spun around angrily.

“Were you talking to me?”

“No, pretty boy, I was talking to the ape next to you!” Ironhawk replied sarcastically, now fully roused – the haze from the booze quickly vanishing. It was the man’s turn to be laughed at.

“Mercenary, you want to answer up for that big mouth of yours?” A dirk flashed in his left hand. For a moment, the newcomer was forgotten and everyone watched in

silence as the unlikely allies, the barbarian and the pirate, rose and strode over to Ironhawk's table.

Beneath the table, Ironhawk's fingers slowly curled around the hilt of her saber. She stood up to meet them. All the talk in the inn had now ceased; everyone was watching the unfolding scene. Then suddenly, the young man swung his cutlass and Ironhawk exploded into action, raising her saber to block his swing. The barbarian drew a long broadsword from its sheath on his back and brought it down towards the mercenary's head. Ironhawk dodged the blow and kicked over the table. Taking advantage of this distraction, she slipped out of the corner. People scurried to get out of the way as the young pirate furiously attacked, alternately swinging his cutlass and jabbing with the dirk, forcing her backwards across the tavern to the bar. The mercenary countered each blow – whirled and dodged each thrust – always just out of reach of the pirate's blades. People scrambled to get out of the way. Then, seizing the opportunity on a slow swing, Ironhawk whipped her saber in an arc and sent the pirate's sword flying across the room. His eyes flared in stunned surprise, just before the mercenary kicked out with her leg, sending him crashing backwards into the tables. There was a smattering of applause by a few bystanders as well as some curses and grumblings.

Then the barbarian stepped forward, calm – certain of the outcome. Ironhawk scanned his huge frame. He towered over her by a head and a half. She looked for a weak spot while the giant swung his mighty sword at her. She parried his thrust with considerable difficulty – buckling under the weight. Then the barbarian started to heave his broadsword in a circle around his head, building up momentum. Before his inevitable onslaught, the mercenary retreated a step. Suddenly, she fell backwards. It was not until she felt the sharp crack of her head hitting the floor that she realized she had been tripped. Overhead the barbarian loomed, lifting his up his sword ominously. Seeing her death sentence written upon his face, Ironhawk prepared for the blade's entrance into her flesh.

The sharp sound of metal clashing against metal split the air. Ironhawk opened her eyes, not realizing she had closed them, and saw the giant's great sword shiver, then split upon the silver crown of a long, wooden staff. The bystanders stared in disbelief at the stunned barbarian and the young woman with snow white hair who held the staff protectively over the prone mercenary. Beneath the staff lay the shattered remains of the broadsword.

"She was tripped. You are winning by treachery. That is not the warrior's way," the Northerner said quietly. Realization dawning, Ironhawk glanced in disbelief from the staff to the young woman who held it.

For the first time since their encounter, the barbarian seemed uncertain. He looked at the strange young woman, and then at his former antagonist, the mercenary. Then, reluctantly, the big man snorted and moved away returning to his seat. Slowly, one by one, the patrons of the inn returned to their places. Conversation resumed, but was forced and halting. The people of the Bull's Den shunned the newcomer and the mercenary.

Wincing, Ironhawk gingerly got to her feet. Rubbing her throbbing head, she dully followed the Northerner upstairs.

"Which one?" Elssa asked. The mercenary gestured to a door on the right. Inside the room, the mercenary groaned as she lowered herself onto her bed. There was a lack of words between them. Ironhawk did not quite know how to react to the enigma of her companion.

"I guess I owe you my life," she ventured at last.

"He dishonored your blade. There is no glory in such a death. Besides," Elssa of the Lothringen turned towards the Southerner, "I need your skills to help me complete my quest." She had not answered the latter part of Ironhawk's question, but the mercenary wisely did not pursue the matter further. Reaching into a small pouch tied around her waist, the northern girl produced some dried herbs. She crushed two leaves using a small mortar and pestle, and then sprinkled their greenish powder into a half-empty goblet of water.

"Here. Drink this." She handed the goblet to Ironhawk.

"What is it?" The mercenary eyed it dubiously.

"It will soothe your headache," Elssa urged. Ironhawk drank the bitter liquor and, soon, she began to feel her head clear. Then, strangely, the mercenary began to feel drowsy.

"What the blazes did you give me?" she demanded groggily.

"It will restore you and give you the rest you will need to recover your strength. Tomorrow we set out to retrieve the El-Svan Lothringen. We must leave before the moon sets." Just before Ironhawk sank into blissful unconsciousness, she glanced up and saw the Northerner standing over her.

"Goodnight," she whispered.

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Down below, beneath their room in the tavern, wayfarers and travelers still caroused into the wee hours. In the shadows, unseen or unnoticed by most, a lone figure stood and observed the goings-on. When the Northerner and the Southern mercenary had left the tavern and retreated upstairs, his eyes had followed them. He had carefully marked the incident between the northern girl and the barbarian. Surreptitiously, he tugged his cloak over his black uniform bearing the red insignia of the royal guard. Then he slipped stealthily into the concealment of night.

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As the effects of the herb wore off, Ironhawk awakened to see the shadow of the Northerner bending over her. In the light of the newly-risen, three-quarter moon, they lifted the window sash, stepped onto the roof, and leaped to the ground. Ironhawk whirled, startled as the raven fluttered past her head to land on the

Northerner's shoulder. The air was heavy with dew. It pressed against them like cold sweat and made the cobblestones slick. They had to watch their footing, so as not to slip. Whether by luck or by the Northerner's uncanny guidance, they met with little trouble. Even in the palace, the guards seemed to have vanished into thin air, and the structure stood deserted. They eventually came to a halt before two massive oaken doors. Elssa motioned for Ironhawk to pick the iron lock.

"This is too easy," the mercenary grumbled. But as the doors rolled open, the Southerner caught her breath. Towering columns of bright blue lapis lazuli flanked the length of the palace hall adorning a white marble floor inlaid with gold mosaic. Her reverie was broken by the soft scuff of the Northerner's boot as she stepped over the threshold into the Great Hall of Pillars. Recovering her senses, the mercenary gently eased the huge doors shut. The sound of the huge doors slowly meeting rolled outward causing the colonnade to hum softly. Ironhawk tensed, but the sound died away without a response.

The Northerner stood as if in a trance, her gaze riveted on a small pedestal which stood in the midst of the towering columns. Encased in crystal, the El-Svan lay cushioned on plush velvet. Two wings spread from its helm, which was cast of the purest silver. Through an opening in the domed ceiling above, the fading starlight twinkled down causing the precious gemstones wrought in helmet's crown to sparkle softly. Suddenly, several torches flamed into being— the shadows of the columns sprang into prominence against the walls.

"Well, well, what have we here?" Flanked by a dozen royal guards, the figure of a man stepped forth into the light of the torches. "This is not quite what I had expected: a young Lothringen gallivanting around the countryside with a hired mercenary." The Wizard Dar'Alain fingered his whiskery chin with a wry smile. Beneath his creased forehead and graying brows, his eyes glowed with a sharp awareness that belied his advanced age. Ironhawk looked askance at the Northerner, but the latter stood as still as stone her features fixed in iron defiance. "Does your friend know about you?" the wizard continued. "Well, she won't live to find out and neither will you. It's almost dawn and you can be killed." He smiled maliciously in the torchlight. "One of these days I'll learn the power of the El-Svan, but you won't live to congratulate me on my success! More's the pity!" With these words, the Wizard Dar'Alain motioned to the guards.

The Northerner whirled, her cloak slipping heedlessly to the ground. She raced towards the El-Svan, the guards at her heels. Out of the corner of her eye, the mercenary saw the knife materialize out of thin air. It hovered in mid-air, quivering like an arrow taking aim.

"No!" Ironhawk cried out, but the magic blade, under the Wizard's guidance, sang through the air and buried itself in the Northerner's back. Elssa faltered at the base of the raised dais where the El-Svan was encased. The mercenary sprinted to Elssa's side and caught her as she fell. Elssa's eyes gaped wide— blood welling from the corner of her mouth. Summoning her last strength of breath, she strained towards Ironhawk.

"Iron...hawk...get the El-Svan," she stammered.

“Don’t just stand there! Get them you fools!” the wizard bellowed at the dumbfounded guards. The guards closed in with a ring of spears. Ironhawk placed the Northerner down gently then ripped her saber from its sheath. She brandished it and the closest guards stepped back. Then, unexpectedly, she flung it aside and took up the Northerner’s staff. The wizard’s face froze in horror as the mercenary raised the staff above her head then brought it crashing down on the crystal casing that contained the El-Svan war helmet.

A thousand sparks erupted as the metal of the staff broke through the crystal lid to meet the metal of the helmet. The sparks flared upward blinding out everything else. The radiance of their light formed a ring around the mercenary and the northerner. Into that halo of light, a raven appeared, emerging through the opening in the domed ceiling. The feathers of the raven blurred— its beak lengthened – grew soft and fleshy. Its body stretched and expanded until...

Hooves rang against the marble floor and the wind from the sweeping of its powerful wings blew the hair back from Ironhawk’s forehead. She felt a touch on her shoulder. Turning, she beheld the Northerner, Elssa of Lothringen, stood bathed in light. Her form seemed taller, more formidable than the mercenary had ever seen. The El-Svan crowned her head— its splendor setting off the gleaming armor she wore—an armor wrought by immortal hands. Her face was calm and serene, unravaged by pain or blood. She smiled reassuringly at the Southerner.

“Come Ironhawk.” Taking the mercenary’s hand, she led her to the winged horse. She mounted the steed in a single bound and helped Ironhawk up beside her. The flying horse arched its wings and the ground retreated beneath them as they ascended through the opening in the dome and flew out into the dawn.

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The mermaid, the fairy, and the frog met once more under the willow tree to bid bon voyage to the mermaid. Their yearly visitation was at an end since the mermaid had to return to her beloved ocean. Her longing for salt water could simply not be placated on land. The parting was a cheerless one, and while the mermaid seemed a trifle blue, the willow was openly weeping. And in spite of her best efforts to maintain an indifferent air, the fairy’s wings were visibly drooping.

“Do come back soon, dearest,” sobbed the willow nymph. “We shall miss you terribly. We always do.” The mermaid flipped her tail rather impatiently.

“I hate to be so abrupt, but I really must be going. Time and tide wait for no mermaid!”

“So true, the willow sighed. “I’m so terribly sentimental about partings. Still, we mustn’t detain you. Say goodbye to your cousin Perkadora.” The fairy glowered stubbornly. Then, reconsidering, she opened her mouth to speak. The expression turned into a gasp of astonishment, then terror, as the shadow of a winged horse passed slowly over them. It was so close, they could see the color of the rider’s snow white hair and hear the snorting of the horse as it galloped through the air. Then, in a

great sweep of its wings, the horse veered off towards the North flying ever upward and onward.

After a few minutes, the mermaid re-emerged from the water where she had fled as soon as the winged steed had appeared. The frog, Pugsley, croaked noisily in distress while the rattled fairy turned on the mermaid.

“And you still insist that there are no such things as flying horses?” She snapped.

“Nonsense,” replied the mermaid, feebly trying to muster something of her usual smugness. “The thing was nothing less than a figment of our imaginations.”

“Oh, you are incorrigible!” the fairy exclaimed, heartily disgusted.

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Far above them, the Valkyrie urged her winged steed forward. Ironhawk clung on behind Elssa as the flying horse climbed upward heading north to Valhalla. There, in the immortal halls of heroes and gods, they would celebrate their triumph. Odin should not be kept waiting...