

Miles inland, beyond the barren, rose, fell, rolled, and tumbled the Black Mts. in crag and cavern and snow-drifted gorge. The wild sinister mass was enough to daunt many a heart even though it did not know every cavern the home of an ice-breathed dragon, every crag echoing with shriek and chant and laughter, every gorge alive with grotesque form and shadow of goblin, imp and yellow dwarf.

Over these things hung an Arctic night.

Perhaps you see Har as a starved little town crouched on her soilless rock between the anger of the sea and the cruelty of the hills. It was not so. She had plenty of food and plenty of gold and little of fear. The sea nursed her well on fish and seal and blubber and booty from strange ships and lands; the white barren clad her in furs. And many lives ago when some Vikings of old had settled the coast with their households and gold and moored a brave long-ship with dragon's head prow, the alchemist gnomes of the far Hoyne Hills had made them the gift of a flame of snow as charm against Black Mt. monsters.

Though the sky was strewn with stars like suspended snow flakes and set with a frosted moon, day reigned at Har—and excitement. Bells clanged on the scarlet sleighs, sleek reindeers sped to and fro; men hurried; women scurried; all left the streets' frost painted lamps and gathered at the barren's edge.

A chamber maid had caused this agitation. An hour since her over zealous broom had swept away the flame. One moment and the palace was in tumult. King Nichulas and his Viking lords gathered in fierce anxiety while all his household frantically rushed to the windows and looked out across the barren, thinking each moment to see dragons and wizards and witches, goblins and imps and dwarfs sweeping over the glistening knolls down on the terrified town.

When Nichulas sat with his lords in debate at length rose old Krak and offered his plan, "Let every young, bold nobile or fisherman brave the Black Mts. on skiis, cross the wastes to the inland ranges, seek the Hogue gnomes and bring home to Har a tongue of the Snow-Flame."

Nichulas thought for a moment, "It shall be," he said. "We may lose the pick of our youth but we must save our town. It is an enterprise fraught with such peril that I shall offer as a reward anything which he who first bears home the flame may demand of me."

All approved though some with doubt. The old men flushed as they longed for youth, and the young, among whom was Ilroff of Ref, suitors of Princess Freya, paled. They feared no honest fighting nor death by blade and wave.

The news and the excitement and terror sped down the ribbon of buildings from the palace of rough dark stone, massive of wall and porch, crouched beneath column on column of white smoke, magic with snow and ice and painted lights, to the lean fisherman's hut of lava and white bones, etc., doorway framing a sputtering candle of tallow, a bed of sea weed and a string of frozen fish.