

Sample

CHAPTER ONE

An ancient race, quite forgotten, exists far to the north of the world in a village spread over a thousand islands where seas lap calmly against their shores, in houses made of wood or rounded stone surrounded by nature. Fire-places are lit and candles burn in the windows to make their homes very cosy and welcoming. The whole land is annually covered in a light frosting of snow, (which tastes of very cold, powdery sugar), and there are many days of warm and bright blue skies so the seas are never long frozen.

They are a peaceful race, few in number and families have remained for generations in the homes of their ancestors, living the same simple life and each carrying on the same family trades which they pass on to their children. The children stay at home and learn from books by themselves (as there is no school), or play in the snow with their friends. At most, maybe five or six families live within walking distance of each other, but usually it takes a day's sailing from one house to another, although some are a week's or even a month's sailing away, so everyone has magnificent ships to sail and they are all great navigators. They only travel for trade, or for their greatest festival: Midsummer. And that day was drawing close.

Everyone looked so much forward to meeting their neighbours at Midsummer after the year-long absence from many of them and it is a great time for trading and feasting. The entire village was beginning to prepare their journey to the Midsummer island - there were clothes to be made, food to be brought, prepared and cooked, wood to chop and the first ones to arrive would prepare the cabins. Most importantly, a tall tree-trunk with a high cross-beam had to be raised and dug firmly into the ground, on the ends of which two rings of interwoven flowers and ribbons would be hung by the youngest members of the village. It is the symbol of a new year.

Midsummer is a whole week in the year when the sun is out in warmth, flowers bloom with the snow gone and there is no night. That meant, of course, that there would be no bedtimes and Stefan and Birgitta could stay up for as long as they wanted. Stefan and Birgitta are friends who live a few hours apart, but they are too young to sail their boats on open seas. There isn't much age difference between them - if at all. It isn't important to them anyway. Their manners are quite similar, as happens when friends are close. In fact they act almost as if they were twins at times and like the same games.

They are always looking for secret messages in holes in tree-trunks, or amongst rocks, convinced that magic spells or treasure maps could be hidden there. Sometimes they would

Sample

leave messages for each other to find. Their favourite game is to play out adventures on the island and no Midsummer passed without them.

Yet their next adventure would be very real indeed, an encounter with powerful forces of good and evil. They were about to embark on something that only the magicians had known about and would set them apart from the others for many, many more such escapades thereafter. That is, of course, if they survived...

Sample

CHAPTER TWO

There is a legend that tells of mythical runestones on which are written riddles and whosoever solved them would have access to the magic it held, or to the few special magical kingdoms beyond. Of course, there are many runestones all over the lands and also in the icy seas; several have already been discovered or known for centuries by people and magicians alike. But those were normal ones which had simple magical properties - to guide people in snowstorms, or protect the village from invaders, or if someone was in trouble in the water and lots more - which would send the magicians to their rescue. Normal things like that. The runestones are written in the language of their ancestors, the language of the Vikings and their gods.

It was much easier to search for runestones when it was Midsummer when all the snow had melted. The magicians taught the villagers the normal ones in case of trouble. There were only three magicians who had sought the use of the magical runestones for the good of their people. They maintained the upkeep of the runestones which had given them their magic and they never mis-used their knowledge. Each had found a special runestone which had a different world on the other side of the runestone. Everyone, though, believed that the special runestones were just a tale, but the children loved to visit them just the same and hear their adventures in the magical lands beyond.

The magicians spoke at time as one. There was a girl, a young man and an old sage. The girl was surrounded by loose papers, parchments and had slung around her a belt with pockets holding several pens, pencils, ink pots and rolls of rough paper. The three sat on tree-stumps of past Maypoles. They dressed as any other of their village. The sage, though advanced in years, was still quite sprightly. He had a lively mind and was an unending source of knowledge. At hand there was a few of his vast collection of wise books which he kept mainly at his lodgings on the hill. The young man was brave and nimble as one learnt from listening to his battles against the fiends set upon him by the vikings. He wielded sword and spell dextrously, and was a great explorer with an insatiable curiosity in the worlds and life that he encountered. He carried in his belt a curious writing instrument - probably found on his travels, and a small notebook to mark his discoveries and spells.

The children sat on the ground in front of them in a semi-circle. Some lay out with their head in their hands, while others kneeled up to look closely at their magical story-tellers. The rest sat obediently cross-legged and absorbed in the story, a lot of which they did not understand because they spoke too quickly, or too softly or with long strange words they did not know,

Sample

but they knew it was something wonderful by the way they spoke. The grass was lush and green, dried by the sun and a light breeze wafted round them with the fresh smell of damp earth, flowers, and pine trees in gentle, constant and warm waves. The air was clear and new with the wonderful scents of Midsummer. The magicians were, for the children, their heroes. How they wanted to be like them! They often played at being magicians, defeating pretend spells of their imaginary vikings and re-enacting the magicians' adventures as they had been told on these days of holiday.

Every year the magicians would tell the children that in the days of their ancestors, the vikings had to fight to protect their village from invaders. They were strong, fierce warriors, but they had a code of honour - to be brave and fight nobly on the battlefield. Those who died with their honour would enter Valhalla, which was the heaven of the vikings, where they could continue in friendly battles and where the viking gods lived, overseeing the battles on Earth and in Valhalla. However, the magicians would also tell of two vikings who had disgraced themselves and their people. They had killed a magician of a viking god to steal his magic potion of immortality. They had wanted to be as powerful as the gods and rule Valhalla. They were exiled by the villagers and the gods were angry with them.

These vikings, who had become immortal once they had drunk the stolen elixir on the same day of their crime, had heard there existed a special runestone of immense magical power that had a gateway to Valhalla and began at once to look for it and with which they sought to take revenge upon the gods with their mis-found magic.

Although these immortal vikings had lived in the times when the runes had first been written, they could not remember where the one they needed lay and the centuries passed, the lands changed and it became increasingly difficult for them to find the runestone that was more magical than all the rest. Their sole advantage was that they knew the rune language well and so could understand the stones easily. Since that unhappy day while they have been searching for it they have found many other runestones from which they have gained magic for evil purposes.

Unfortunately for them, because they were dishonoured, they could not read out the riddles because their evil would render the stones useless and their power lost forever. All riddles had to be spoken aloud to begin them and solved within a week after which, if unsolved, would be left open to anyone to say the answer - even evil people like the vikings. This is how the vikings had gained their magic - by tricking villagers into finding stones and then trapping them under a spell, they waited for the week to pass. For only good people would

Sample

not only be able to say the riddle, but obtain the magical properties of the stone once they had solved it, (if they could). If there was a shadow of a doubt about their goodness, the first challenger and only the first, would be instantly destroyed if he tried to pass through the doorway and the stone would close forever. That was the danger of anyone saying the riddles - they or the stone itself could fall into evil hands.

The magicians warned the children that if they found any new runestones, they should not read anything aloud, nor tell anyone where it was, but copy the message down and bring it to them. The three magicians were in a constant race against the vikings, whom they had encountered on their various adventures, to solve as many runestones as possible so that the vikings would be less powerful. But the riddles were not easy and the vikings had power to follow the magicians into their worlds and spy on them and by these sneaky means, find more clues to the whereabouts of other stones.

'The vikings have tricked many good people into giving the wrong answer. This is how they have gained their magic. The vikings have become stronger and are creating an evil underworld. They have the power of a stone they must have discovered long ago, which allows them to follow us into our worlds for short moments where they challenge us or send horrible creatures and beings to fight us and try to rob our power. Do not worry, they do us no real harm, but they do detain us and this gives the evil vikings time to find new stones. Until now, there have only been stones of magic, and three worlds, one which we each have. There is only one other magical world to be found, and they are looking for it just as we. And we must find it first or there will be disaster for all,' said the sage in a tremendous voice as he leant forward extending his hands over the children, which scared them.

'Sometimes we can sense when the evil ones are near. They usually appear now in Midsummer because they can mix with the whole village and not be noticed,' said the girl.

Sample

CHAPTER THREE

Birgitta and Stefan began to get hungry. They left the group and went in search of their families. All the adults were helping to arrange the feast. The two friends found a kitchen overflowing with goodies: huge sandwiches, chocolate cake and cinnamon bread in various shapes; gingerbread biscuits made into houses, ships, islands, and animals. There were trays of freshly cooked and smoked salmon and trout, herring in many different sauces, some sweet, some hot like mustard. Pizzas in tiered stacks waited to be baked; chocolate brownies, (their favourites), ice-cream of all flavours. There were huge salad bowls of parsley, chopped tomatoes, onion, lemon; platters of roast garlic chicken were kept warm near a gigantic fire in the middle of the room, the smoke curling up through a hole in the roof. Rows of sauces, freshly baked bread, tiny sausages and meatballs in fresh tomato sauce, new potatoes, and great pitchers of juice and banana milkshakes (made from a secret recipe) and wine for the adults.

'Mmmm! Let's make a picnic and take it outside!' said Stefan. Together they gathered food and milkshake until they couldn't carry any more. As they staggered and struggled to the door hardly seeing over the pile of food, they were stopped by an immensely rounded woman, almost the height and width of the door itself.

'Uh-oh!' said Birgitta. It was the cook.

'Where are you two off to with half my menu?' exaggerated Cook, wheezing the words out, as she gestured at the food. Her huge arms waved about them, ushering them back into the kitchen like a hen over her chicks. She was contentedly, beautifully fat.

'Well, I...we...were going to find somewhere outside to eat..but..for a picnic...I mean...' said Stefan

'Can't we?' asked Birgitta.

'Hmm, a picnic, eh? With all the brownies and milkshake?' said Cook, looking at the towers of food. She was only teasing them. She waddled over to the stove almost knocking the children over as she passed.

'You need to eat something more than just brownies!' She poured soup in two flasks, wrapped up some chicken and added it all to the pile.

'Now off you go and remember not to leave any rubbish behind after your picnic! Oh what children!' she remarked fondly of them as they left happy and hungry to begin their feast.

'Let's go towards those trees by the rocks. We can use the rocks for tables,' said Birgitta.

Sample

When they really could not manage another bite, they wrapped the rest and put it in their rucksacks they had brought for their adventure. The previous years they had explored dozens of caves and nearby islands, but this year they had decided to explore the forest. So after a short rest (as they could not move for a while), they set off leaving behind the bubbly atmosphere of the camp.

The forest became darker where the trees grew closer together and there were no paths to follow. It seemed that no-one had ever come into these woods. The children went on - they weren't frightened as they were used to playing alone in the forests and there it was very safe, not like in our lands - . They tried to scare each other with spooky sounds or gasping suddenly 'What's that?' and pointing to the darkness of the undergrowth. It was beautifully silent in the forest, apart from the odd call of a bird or animals scuttling through the grass and fern. The land led gradually uphill and the vegetation was so tall that it almost covered their heads. They could no longer see where they were stepping. Suddenly Stefan fell right out of sight.

'Stefan! Where are you? I can't see where you are!' said Birgitta.

'I've fallen down quite a way, but I'm fine. It's very soft underneath. Can you follow my voice? Be careful, I might be in a pit as I can't see a way out and it's very dark.'

'Don't worry, I'm looking ouuuuuut!' Birgitta fell too! 'Oops!' she said as she landed beside Stefan.

The trees loomed above them and the blue sky was now only a couple of distant blots of blue-white light. They weren't worried, because they could summon the magicians, but they didn't want to spoil their fun. They had only just begun to explore.

'Well, let's try to make our way through this.'

'Which way?' asked Birgitta, looking around her.

'It doesn't really make a difference, does it?'

They began to tear away in front, advancing steadily until it began to thin out in places. They had been moving gently downhill and the trees were extraordinarily tall. After a while, without much care where or into what they were heading they suddenly saw no-more trees ahead. They stopped and looked about. The trees formed a barrier of looming pillars in a wide ring which went round them to a distance ahead and the grass was not so high now. They waded through a sea of gigantic bright flowers and tangles of ivy and brambles towards the middle. They were quite surprised to find an opening that gave onto a small idyllic plain. The carpet of green spread itself out before a beautiful, undisturbed emerald lake, protected by those tall wooden soldiers that flanked it in an undulating circle. The children looked on in awe without a word. Such silence! Such beauty! So still and dreamlike! There was only a little snow left on the ground. Not too much snow could penetrate past the dense tree tops.

Sample

Birgitta and Stefan advanced slowly, mesmerised at their fantastical discovery, scared they might break the fragile scene with a footstep or a word. They approached timidly toward the lake. The trees whose glorious layers of green dappled by the scarce sunlight, were dim in comparison to the still waters. It was translucent and it seemed to be bottomless, such a deep green it was. The pale shafts of sunlight gave a ghostly aura to the yellow mist that the lake gave up in sleepy breaths.

The children sat down heavily on the ground, drawn by such an unimaginable picture. They decided in whispers that this would be their secret hiding place where they should meet every Midsummer. Recovering from their trek through the wood and in the midst of their discovery, they thought a little food and drink would be good. They looked round for rocks to sit on, as they found the grass very wet. They saw four huge boulders at the farther side of the lake. They picked up some broken sticks and sword-fenced their way round to them. Despite having received several 'fatal' jabs by Stefan's sword, Birgitta kept on fighting.

'Oh, come on Birgitta, you can't have survived all that - it's not believable!' complained Stefan.

'Oh, okay... You've won... but I... will... have my.... revenge... Aaaargh!' she said, as she acted out a dramatic death. As she turned to fall, she tripped and almost fell into the lake, had she not caught onto a slab of stone by a tree.

'Wow! That was close!' she gasped a giggle, as she pulled herself back and turned to Stefan. His face was white and his eyes were fixed on the stone.

'Hel-lohh!' she sang, in two tones to catch his attention, 'I'm still alive, in case you wanted to know, and I'm over he-ere!' she said waving her head in front of his face to break his glazed stare. Stefan pulled her abruptly to where he was standing and motioned to the stone.

'OH!' exclaimed Birgitta almost in a whisper as she turned to look. 'A runestone!'