

GRANDMOTHER TROLL

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Eleanor Arnason sold her first story in 1973. Since then, she has published six novels and fifty works of shorter fiction. Her novel *A Woman of the Iron People* won the Tiptree and Mythopoeic Society Awards. Her novel *Ring of Swords* won a Minnesota Book Award. Her story "Dapple" (*Asimov's*, September 1999) won the Spectrum Award, and other stories have been finalists for the Nebula, Hugo, Sturgeon, and Sidewise Awards. Eleanor's most recent story in *Asimov's* was "Tunnels" a Lydia Duluth adventure, in the May/June 2020 issue. *Hidden Folk*, a collection of short stories based on Icelandic folklore, came out in 2014. She continues to write Icelandic fantasies about trolls, elves, were animals, and saga heroes, as is evident in . . .

GRANDMOTHER TROLL

There was a girl named Helga, whose parents owned a summerhouse outside Reykjavik. It was so far out that it had no neighbors, except an old farmer who kept a small flock of sheep. "Mostly for company these days," he said. "And to keep my dogs entertained."

He had two dogs, both black and white with bright eyes and tails that curled up. One had a black spot over one eye and was named Spotty. The other had a black band over both eyes like a bandit or a superhero. He was named Striver.

In the spring the farmer drove his sheep into the mountains, helped by his two dogs. The sheep grazed on their own all summer, since Iceland had no large predators. "They are smarter than most farmers and take care of themselves," the farmer said.

In the fall he went to the local sheep gathering, when the sheep were brought out of the mountains and sorted among their owners. It was the best event of year, he said. He talked to the other farmers and shared drinks. He always brought a bottle of brennivin, Iceland's national alcohol. "Awful stuff," he said. "But other people like it, and I can usually find something else to drink."

Helga's father said the farmer was overly talkative and somewhat strange. Helga liked him.

She was a quiet girl who read a lot and was often teased in school. She didn't tell

her parents about the teasing, and her brother Bjarni did not notice, because he was two years older and spent all his time playing computer games. As a result of the teasing she kept to herself and had no good friends, except for the books, of course. She was a bit young and naïve for her age of fourteen.

Her family went to the summerhouse on weekends and on most vacations. It was hard to pay for a summerhouse and an apartment in the city, her father said. So foreign vacations were mostly out. In any case, her mother did not like flying; and what was the point of taking Bjarni anywhere? He would just stare at his computer screen.

They went to the house to be close to nature and away from Reykjavik, which was full of noise and tourists. Her father, who was a government economist, said the tourists were a necessary evil. Iceland had too few resources, nothing except fish and sheep and geothermal power, which was difficult to export, and emptiness and natural beauty.

"How much emptiness will we have, if the country fills up with damned Americans, trampling on the moss and falling into rivers?" her mother asked. She was a fabric designer and an enthusiast for nature. They had the house because of her. She drew on the Icelandic landscape for her designs, which had names like Hekla (the great volcano) and Gullfoss (the famous waterfall).

Most of their stays at the summerhouse were alike. Bjarni played computer games. Her mother drew designs or took drives to find inspiration. Her father worked on papers from his job and cooked. He was excellent at both, Helga had been told, though she could only judge the cooking. "It's hard work," he said. "Cooking in a country that historically had little except fish and sheep, though these days more can be imported. Always remember your ancestors, Helga, who lived on almost nothing, oppressed by the Danes."

Helga said she would remember and took a book out to read by the low cliff that overlooked a little river. The cliff sheltered her from the wind, as did a large boulder that rested by the cliff. It was twice as tall as she was, thick and knobby and twisted, made of black volcanic stone. She felt comfortable there, between the boulder and the cliff, close enough to the river that she could hear it rushing over its stones. She always took a blanket to put down on the grass and some food: milk and a sandwich or skyr, which is the Icelandic form of yogurt. She liked skyr when it was sweetened by sugar or fruit.

Sometimes she walked to the farmer's farmhouse, which was a short distance away, though out of sight behind a rise in land. Her mother wanted to see no other human habitations. They would interfere with her creativity. Her father was not entirely happy with these visits, since the farm was in a cell phone dead spot. Their own service was sometimes erratic, but mostly good enough so her father could call his office. But the farm might as well have been in the highlands, where there was nothing except fields of black lava spotted with lichen. No people lived there, and there was no reason to have cell phone towers.

"What if something happens?" her father asked her.

"I don't expect it to," Helga said. "If it did, Kveldulf or I can walk out to where we can get service. It's not far."

Her father looked dubious. Did he think Kveldulf was some kind of molester? He didn't forbid the visit, just told her to always tell him or her mother whenever she went to see the farmer. There was no point in telling Bjarni, because he would be hunched over his computer and paying no attention.

Kveldulf's farmhouse was modern. If this were a story, it would have been a sod hut with tiny windows and a dirt floor, and the farmer would have been some kind of monster. Instead, he was a kind enough person, although a little gruff; and his house had concrete walls, large windows, and linoleum.

The dogs ran out to greet Helga, their eyes gleaming and their tongues lolling between sharp teeth. The farmer usually followed, limping a little because he was old and had sciatica. His name was Kveldulf, and he had a magnificent beard: long, bristly, white, and gray.

One day he said, "I notice you are reading by the grandmother troll."

Helga felt surprised.

"The boulder," Kveldulf said. "It's an old troll woman, who got caught out at sunrise and turned into stone."

"I didn't know it was a person."

"A lot of stones in Iceland used to be people, and a lot of the living people in Iceland have hearts of stone. Mostly these people go into banking, but some are politicians."

Helga wasn't interested in politics, so she paid no attention to this.

"I know you take food there," the farmer added. "When you do, pour a little into the grass at the boulder's foot and thank the troll for her shelter."

"Why?" asked Helga. "I thought trolls were our enemies."

"Some are. Others can be friendly, if you treat them with respect. Elves are another question. They are rich and self-satisfied and indifferent to the suffering of humans, like the bankers in Reykjavik." The farmer spat into the grass near one of his dogs. They remained calm. They must be used to this. "Avoid elves, but treat trolls with respect."

Helga was not sure if Kveldulf really believed in elves and trolls. She was positive she didn't. Nonetheless, she began pouring a little food into the grass at the boulder's foot and thanking the boulder for its shelter. It didn't hurt to do this. If there was a person inside that block of stone, she must feel lonely and neglected. Always be kind to the less fortunate, her mother said.

This went on for some time. Helga liked old books: folk tales and fairy tales and the stories about the Norse gods. She also read comics she bought at a store in Reykjavik. She especially liked the American comics about Mighty Thor and Loki. Maybe her reading made it easier for her to listen to Kveldulf. Even though she didn't believe in Norse gods and elves and trolls, she wanted to.

Summer passed. Her family went back to Reykjavik. The winter was unusually cold and snowy.

"This is global warming," her father said. "It is not a simple question of the climate warming. It is changing in strange ways, and we can no longer predict the weather."

Her mother designed a fabric called Snowfall: mostly white with patches of black lines: bare twigs, rising out of the snow. "It will work well on linens," her mother said. "Sheets and pillowcases."

Helga's classmates teased her as usual, but she was used to this.

Spring came, and they went back to the summerhouse. Helga went to her boulder and spooned skyr out of a container into the grass. "Thank you for your shelter," she told the stone.

The day was gray and overcast. A raw wind blew, but Helga was safe between the boulder and the cliff.

"I missed you," a slow, grating voice said. It came from above her.

Helga started back and looked up.

The rock was topped with dry grass, intermixed with feathers. This must be a bird's nest, Helga thought. White streaks of guano ran down from it.

The rock top bent, making a grinding sound. Two or three feathers fell off, drifting down around her. Now she could see a face: a bulbous protrusion that must be a nose, two deep pits that had to be eyes, and a horizontal slash, a mouth. The slash moved. "I have missed you," the rock repeated in its stony voice. "The food is fine. I thank you for it, though I can't eat it. But it's the thought that counts. And I have

missed the stories, especially the picture books about Thor. I can't read them, since they are in a foreign language, but I know him by his hammer."

"Who are you?" Helga asked.

The side of the boulder moved, becoming an arm and hand. "I am—I forget."

"Grandmother Troll," Helga said.

"That will do," the boulder replied.

"Are you alive?" Helga asked.

"More alive than dead. More here than in the past."

"I thought you were a story, like Mighty Thor."

"Stories can be true," the boulder replied. "And it's never a good idea to disrespect Thor."

The boulder shuddered, rocking on its base, and Helga took a step away from it. Now she could see the troll clearly. Two long, flat breasts drooped to a potbelly. Below this was something that Helga had thought was a patch of lichen. But now it looked like a patch of sparse, gray hair. On either side of the hair were legs, descending, thick and sturdy, to large, flat feet. She was like a peasant in a folk tale, Helga thought, not at all like the modern old ladies in Reykjavik.

"There are two things we need for you," Helga said. "One is clothing, and the other is a safe place for you to stay when the sun comes out." Although she was naive, she was also practical.

"Good enough," said the troll. "I used to have clothing, but it didn't change to stone when I did. Time and the weather wore it away."

She could bring the troll to her parents' house, but they would get upset, and then—most likely—call the government or Icelandic television. The troll would be advertising for her mother's designs and a great help to Icelandic tourism, which her father worried about. "We need the money tourism provides," her father always said. "A country that imports must get money in."

It didn't seem fair for people—even her parents—to use the troll, when she was barely awake.

Helga picked up her book, a collection of Grimm Brothers folk tales, and led the troll through the gray day, a few drops of rain hitting them, to Kveldulf's farmhouse. The dogs ran out and barked. Kveldulf came out and looked up at the huge, gray, rough, naked woman. "I did not expect this," he said.

"Do you have anything she could wear?" Helga asked.

Kveldulf stood a moment, thinking. "I have tarps for my hay," he said. "One of them ought to cover her. Or two."

"And she needs a place to stay when the sun comes out," Helga added.

Kveldulf grunted, then nodded. "It doesn't look as if these clouds will clear away, but the Met says tomorrow will be clear. My sheep barn is empty right now, since the sheep are in the mountains. She can stay there."

"Thank you," said the troll in her grating voice.

He went inside. Helga stayed with the troll. There was something sad and vulnerable about her. How could a creature like this, out of old stories, exist and be comfortable in the modern world of nuclear weapons and global warming? When she was young, if trolls were ever young, she had been the most dangerous thing around. Now, she was barely plausible.

Kveldulf came out with a dress made of two bright blue, square, plastic tarps stapled together. He had left a hole for the troll's head and two holes for her arms. The troll put it on. It was stiff and unhandsome, but it covered her drooping breasts and pubic hair. As a rule, Icelanders were not bothered by nakedness, though they might be bothered by a naked troll, Helga thought. More than three meters of gray, rough nakedness was a lot.

“Thank you,” the troll said again. She was polite, which seemed odd to Helga. Weren’t trolls always crude and rude? Maybe not. Kveldulf had said that trolls varied.

The old farmer gestured. They followed him to his sheep barn, the troll ducking through the door. The inside had a smell that was both sweet and dusty, with a tang of old dung. Sheep and hay, thought Helga. After a moment, the troll sat down, folding her gray legs and tucking the bright blue dress around her.

“How did you wake up?” Kveldulf asked.

“I was always awake, but I couldn’t move or speak. It was difficult—standing year after year, with no company except sheep and the birds who nested on top of me, dripping their guano down me.” She reached up a gray hand and rubbed her face.

“After Helga came, I became interested in her books. I could read over her shoulder so long as the books were in Icelandic. And I liked the pictures in the picture books: Thor with his hammer and the man in green with horns.”

“The green man is Loki,” Helga said.

“Loki doesn’t look anything like that,” the troll said firmly, as if she had seen the god. “He’s thin and pale-skinned with freckles and dark red hair. His clothing is ordinary: dark pants and a dark jacket. He never wears anything bright, though Thor often wears arm rings made of gold. Nothing about Loki is noticeable—except his expression, which is always changing, flickering like fire.”

“I’m surprised you can read,” Kveldulf said.

“A priest taught me centuries ago. He wanted to convert me to his religion. I refused. In the end, he tricked me into sunlight, and I turned to stone. I stayed that way for a long time, alone except for sheep and birds. Though you did come by sometimes, Kveldulf, and pour a burning liquid in front of me.”

“Brennivin,” Kveldulf said.

“It warmed my feet. I thought I might be able to move once my feet were warm enough, but it didn’t happen.”

“But now you can move.”

“Yes. I liked the girl’s stories, and her gifts of food were kind, though mostly they fed the grass.”

“I don’t know why that would have awakened you,” Kveldulf replied. “Kindness has never awakened the stony hearts of bankers. But maybe trolls are different. For whatever reason, what has happened has happened. I am going into my house to make sandwiches and coffee. Helga, you need to entertain the troll.”

The farmer left, his dogs following, and Helga sat down opposite the troll. They sat there, saying nothing further, until Kveldulf came back with sandwiches and a jug of milk.

Helga wasn’t hungry, but the farmer and the troll wolfed down everything. Finally, the eating was done. The troll woman belched hugely. “That’s good. I wasn’t hungry when I was stone, but I did miss the taste of mutton—and fish. There is nothing better than fish pulled out of a river and roasted over a fire.”

“I like cod myself,” Kveldulf said.

“Also good.”

The farmer sat frowning, while Grandmother Troll finished the milk and belched again.

“You can stay in my barn for a while,” he said. “But when the sheep gathering comes, I will need it for my sheep. I suggest you begin looking for another home. A cave in the mountains. Do you know how to live there?”

“We trolls have always lived in the mountains, fishing and hunting birds and stealing sheep since humans settled here, bringing their sheep.”

“Not my sheep!” the farmer said.

"If you tell me how to identify them, I will let them go free. You have treated me well, Kveldulf, and hospitality is a strong bond."

Helga realized it was time for her to go home. She left the farmer and the troll discussing how he marked his sheep.

When she got back to her family's summerhouse, her father asked how her day had been.

"Fine," said Helga. She didn't want to explain about the troll.

He asked if she was hungry. She was not.

That was in the late spring. The summer was spent as usual, though she visited Kveldulf more often and sat in the sheep barn with Grandmother Troll. The troll's stories were like a history lesson. She remembered Iceland before the settlers came. Birch forests covered the island, and there were willow thickets in the low places. Perching birds sang among the leafy bowers; wild swans nested in the meadows; and puffins nested on the cliffs. There were no predators except arctic foxes.

"Which didn't bother us," the troll said. "They were small and made good mittens. Other clothing—in those days—required seals, and there were plenty of those, sleeping on the beaches."

"It sounds like a utopia," Helga said.

Grandmother Troll didn't know the word.

"A perfect place."

"Except for the elves. They arrived before the humans and made themselves at home, as if we weren't here already. They could be hard to bear, with their arrogance and self-satisfaction. For the most part, we ignored them, and let them brag to one another. Then the human settlers came."

The settlers cut down the trees, and their sheep ate any shoots that appeared, so the trees could no longer grow. Instead of forests and thickets, the land became fields. The perching birds—the songbirds—left, having nothing to perch on. "But there were still swans and puffins," the troll said in a cheerful voice. "Plenty to eat. The songbirds were never more than mouthful."

As the settlers grew more numerous, she and her fellow trolls retreated inland to the wilderness at the center of Iceland: the vast fields of cold lava and ice. They could still find fish in the rivers and birds nesting on the ground and sheep, if they ventured a little way down toward the coast.

"Did you ever meet any of the saga heroes?" Helga asked.

Once, the troll said. One night she was in Iceland's interior wilderness, sitting in a cave by a fire made of peat, which she had cut in a bog not far away. A man came out of the darkness, huge for a human, unkempt and dirty and dangerous looking, carrying a sword and an axe.

"He gave me a strange look, when he was able to see me clearly, and then spoke courteously, even though he did not look like a courteous man. Could he stay by my fire until morning?"

"I said yes, and he sat down. After a while, he told me a story: something that disturbed and haunted him, though he didn't use these words. I could see he was a man who would not usually admit to being disturbed or afraid. But maybe there was something about that night and my cave and the firelight that made him willing to talk.

"There was a slave named Glam, who died, but would not rest. Instead, he troubled his former owner, killing sheep and doing other kinds of damage, so much that the farmer fled his farm. The story traveled around Iceland, as stories will do. The man sitting with me—I did not know his name yet—heard it and decided to confront Glam. He was strong and restless and eager for fame.

"He went to the farmstead and waited inside alone, since the farmer and his family refused to return. The first night nothing happened. The second night, my visitor

said, his horse—which was outside, tethered in a good place to graze—was killed and broken into pieces. This was angering, my visitor said. It has been a good horse. The third night Glam came into the farmhouse: a huge, ugly being that barely fit through the door. My visitor said that he had been resting on a bed. But now he rose, and the two of them struggled until they rolled out of the house, still gripping one another like men in a wrestling match. A full moon stood in the sky, and moonlight struck the slave's dead eyes.

“Nothing else has ever frightened me,” my visitor said. “But those eyes did, both dead and shining. I chopped off Glam’s head soon after and burned it, and that was the end of him. But since then I don’t like to be alone after dark. Thank you for sharing your fire.”

“Then he went to sleep. I watched till morning came. He rose and left, and that was the last I saw of Grettir Asmundarson. Do you know about him?”

The great saga hero. He died on the island of Drangey, fighting off his enemies. He was always good at making enemies. By that time, the saga said, his leg was poisoned by gangrene, and he was dying. But still he fought—on his knees, because he could no longer stand. Of course Helga knew about him, though she was not sure Bjarni did, unless there was a video game about Grettir.

She looked at the troll, considering what it must have been like to meet an actual saga hero.

“Did you meet any more famous people?” Helga asked.

“No. The people who came inland were usually shepherds or hunters, and few enough of them. The important people, the chieftains, stayed closer to the ocean. Sometimes a group of travelers would ride through, wearing brightly colored cloaks. I would watch them from the shadows and wonder about them. But our land—Trollheim—was not hospitable to anyone except us.”

Most trolls disliked humans and avoided them, but she was curious, the troll grandmother said. Sometimes she would come down into the human fields, though only after dark and always making sure she had somewhere to hide from the sun when it rose. Over time, she noticed, the human houses changed. At first there were wooden long halls, at least for the chieftains. Later the wood was gone, and the houses became huts made of sod with grass growing on the roofs and sheep grazing on the grass. The people looked increasingly poor and miserable. Sometimes diseases swept the country, and she would find entire families dead in their farmhouses.

“That was the Danes,” Helga said. “They ruled us for centuries and mostly ignored us, giving us little help. There were times when we needed help badly. The best fishing grounds in Europe are right off our shores, but we had nothing except rowboats, and no way to make larger and better boats, since our forests were gone. We are too far north for most crops. In the Viking age, we exported wool cloth and imported wood and grain, and we stole silver from England, of course. All that ended. Though there was enough here to make the Danish merchants—and some Icelanders—rich. But not most of us. Or so my father says. He’s an economist.”

“A what?” asked the troll.

“Someone who studies circumstances. How people get along. Whether they are doing well or badly.”

“There were no such people in the days before I turned to stone,” the troll said after a moment. “Unless pastors are the same.”

“Not exactly,” Helga replied. She frowned, thinking. “I don’t believe the Danes were responsible for the diseases, though the diseases must have come from Denmark or Norway. Most likely, they were carried by accident from the mainland. But poverty makes people vulnerable to illness.”

“Trolls rarely get sick,” the troll grandmother said. “I can’t say we have ever been

wealthy. Maybe in the days before the elves came, and we had Iceland to ourselves. Mostly we have hidden from other folk, the elves and the humans, and done the best we could in hiding. Would our lives have been better if no one else had come here? Maybe. Nothing good has come of the elves, at least as far as I can remember. And humans have been bothersome, though I like the taste of sheep."

She wished she could tell her father the troll's stories. It would make for a new kind of economic history, but she still did not want the troll on television or in *Fréttablaðið*, the daily newspaper. The troll was her secret. Her friend. Someone who was part of the old stories and folk tales. She didn't want to lose her. Maybe this was selfish.

Once, when Kveldulf was there, she asked the troll if she would like to be famous. The troll looked puzzled.

"Well known," Helga said. "Glorious. Like Grettir or Björk."

"Grettir is long dead," said Kveldulf. "He was a brave man, but also difficult. Not anyone to emulate."

"Who is Björk?" asked the troll.

"A musician," said Helga. "A kind of skald."

"We trolls keep to the shadows. We have done so since the first elves came to Iceland with their bright colors and their golden arm rings. They have skalds, and the gods know they are able to brag. But we do not make that kind of poetry."

She seemed definite. That seemed to mean she would not be happy on television.

"What kind of poetry do you make?" Kveldulf asked.

"Poems that praise the weather and the land, also food. We don't praise kings and nobles, as the elves do and humans did. For the most part, we do not have kings or nobles and never did. We are ordinary folk: hunters and fishers, gatherers of moss and berries, and stealers—I mean takers—of sheep."

"You admit that it's stealing," said Kveldulf.

"It's only a few. A few sheep always die up in the mountains. Some fall into crevasses. Others meet trolls." The troll grandmother did not seem ashamed. What would shame a troll? Helga wondered.

In any case, the summer passed with conversations like these in the sheep barn. Kveldulf was there sometimes. But he had farm work to do. Helga was polite and offered to help. But he said, "Stay here and talk with the troll. It's a lucky child who can have conversations with such a one. I have my dogs for company."

Sometimes, after the nights began to lengthen and the sun hid itself behind the mountains, Helga sneaked out after her family was asleep and went to meet Grandmother Troll. A little light at the horizon did not hurt the troll, though it made her uncomfortable. It was direct sunlight that would turn her to stone. The days continued to darken. Now the two of them went out by moonlight, which did not harm the troll at all. The cool evening air smelled of drying grass. The troll said she could smell stone as well, also the cold water of glacial rivers and sometimes, when the wind came from the right direction, the snow on the distant Vatnajökull Glacier, which covered the Grimsvotn volcano. "He's thinking of erupting again, that old monster," Grandmother Troll said. "I can sense him stirring around below the glacier. But not yet. He has a way to go before he melts the glacier's ice and causes flooding."

"The Meteorological Service says there have been tremors, but they don't expect an eruption," Helga answered. Unlike her brother, who paid no attention to geology unless it happened in imaginary lands, she listened to weather reports and went onto the Icelandic Met website. There were always earthquakes in Iceland. The entire island was alive and shaking. But the Met was not worried about any of the shaking at the moment.

"Not yet," Grandmother Troll said about the volcano.

Sometimes they startled sleeping birds. Less often they would see a hunting fox,

summer-gray and wary. In the winter it would be white, of course, and almost invisible in the snow.

These night walks were important to Helga. Her maternal grandmother had died young, and Helga had never known her. Her father's mother was a cold, remote woman. Meeting her, it was easy to see why her father had become an economist. But Grandmother Troll was friendly and talkative and had seen the whole history of Iceland. Helga had not studied all of it in school. Her teachers, for example, did not talk much about elves. But Grandmother Troll had plenty to say about them, none of it kind. Humans bothered her less, though they could be hard to ignore, like midges by a lake. Mostly she talked about the days when the trolls had been alone, as they still were in the stony highlands of Iceland, or so the troll believed. She had not met any in her night journeys, looking for a cave that would serve as a winter home. This worried her somewhat. "But they must be there. We have survived everything."

Then she would change the topic, talking about the island that was her home. "Stone, moss, lichen, ice, and snow," the old woman said. That was Iceland to her. Fish in the rivers, birds in the sky, and the occasional sheep, wandering far from its companions.

"Do you eat lambs?" Helga asked.

"If we find a ewe with lambs, we take them all. The lambs would not survive on their own. It would be cruel to let them die of starvation or be torn apart by foxes or eagles. Such animals cannot kill an adult sheep, or a ewe defending her young. But lambs alone are vulnerable. Lamb tastes better than mutton."

Finally, one day in the sheep barn, Kveldulf said he would need his building back. The troll said she had found a comfortable cave. Trolls grew sluggish in the winter, she said, and spent most of their time sleeping. The cave she had found was deep and would remain warm through the winter.

"My parents say it's almost time to go home to Reykjavik," Helga said. "I will miss both of you."

"Next summer," Kveldulf said heartily. "I can't remember when I've had a better time. Now I must go to the sheep gathering and collect my sheep and bring them home. It will be a lonely winter with only my dogs around, instead of you two. But I will hope to see you both in the spring, and maybe your family will come up here for weekends and holidays, Helga."

Helga went home, feeling unhappy.

Her family went back to Reykjavik, and Helga went back to school, which she didn't enjoy. The fall was warm and mild. After a few weeks, her mother decided they should go back to the summerhouse for a day or two, so she could design more fabrics. Kveldulf's flock would be back in the home field by now, and she (Helga's mother) had never done a sheep pattern fabric. Surely the tourists in Iceland would like to buy linens with Icelandic sheep on them. Helga's father grumbled and agreed.

The day they drove north began warm and sunny, the sky almost entirely clear. By the time they reached the summerhouse the sky was gray and full of lumpy, heavy-looking clouds.

"That wasn't expected," her father said, as they got out of the car.

"Well, we are here now," her mother said. "And we don't want to drive back in the dark."

They unloaded the car and made the house comfortable, the heat and lights turned on. As darkness fell, the first flakes came down, big and wet. They shone in the light of the lamp above the front door.

Her father went online and checked the Icelandic Met. It was a storm that was supposed to pass south of them, crossing the Atlantic and dumping snow on Great

Britain. But the jet stream was behaving oddly, and the storm had been pushed north onto Iceland. "Due to global warming, most likely," her father said. "We are getting weather that belongs south of us. If this continues, our puffin colonies will die, because the fish they need to feed their young will no longer be off Iceland."

Helga had heard this before and wasn't paying much attention. Instead she helped her mother fix dinner. By the time they sat down to eat the snow was falling thickly, covering the ground in front of their summerhouse. It swirled in the light cast by the front door lamp.

"A proper storm," her father said. "We won't be going home tomorrow, and you won't be drawing our neighbor's sheep, Signy."

"Maybe not." Her mother helped herself to a second portion of dinner. She had made pasta with tomato sauce that came from a jar and a salad of iceberg lettuce and hothouse tomatoes.

How was Kveldulf doing? Helga wondered. His sheep must be out of the mountains, which was good. But were they safe in his barn, or still out in the home field? She couldn't call him to find out. Her phone would not reach him.

In the end she went to bed. Her father stayed up to follow news about the storm, and her mother was in the living room, sitting next to a reading lamp and drawing imaginary sheep.

In the middle of the night Helga woke to the sound of knocking. It came from her bedroom window. She climbed out of bed and went to the window, seeing nothing at first except the wind-blown snow. Then a huge hand appeared, covered with snow, and rapped on the glass. She opened the window, looking down at Grandmother Troll's face, barely recognizable through its coating of snow.

"I need your help," the troll said in her gruff voice.

"Why?" asked Helga.

"I came down to visit Kveldulf and see how he was doing in the storm. You understand, weather like this is no trouble for a troll. I'm bare footed and can feel the land, so I know where I am going." Grandmother Troll paused, then said, "Kveldulf wasn't in his house. I went to the sheep barn. He was there, lying on the floor. There were a few sheep in the pens, but not many, which means he was bringing them in when whatever happened happened. I can't wake him. I thought you must know more human medicine than I do."

"You want me to go to the farm?" Helga looked out, seeing only the wind-whipped snow. "In this?"

"I can carry you," the troll said.

This was a difficult situation. What she ought to do was to wake her parents. But how could she explain that she knew Kveldulf was in trouble? A troll told her? Then she would have to explain the troll. In any case, there was no way anyone except the troll could get to Kveldulf's farm in this storm. They couldn't call the farmer, since he was in a dead spot. Not that calling would do any good, if he was lying unconscious in the sheep barn.

It was the middle of the night. No one would be awake, except Bjarni playing his games, and he wouldn't notice if she crept past his room and downstairs. She could get her parka and boots and come back up and go out the window.

She knew it was foolish. But the troll had gotten to Kveldulf's farm and then to her through the storm. It seemed likely the troll could make her way back to the farm carrying Helga. Even though going with the troll would be foolish and maybe dangerous, it was also interesting and exciting, like the events in sagas and folk tales. Friendship was important in the sagas. Remember how Egil Skallagrimsson's friend Arinbjorn saved Egil from King Eirik Bloodyaxe in York.

"I'll be back soon," Helga told the troll and closed her window.

As she expected, there was no light under the door of her parents' bedroom. Bjarni was awake. Light shone under his door and she could hear faint sounds of a battle. She collected the first aid kit, her parka and boots and a backpack, and went back upstairs, moving as quietly as possible. Once she was back in her bedroom, she dressed, making sure to put her cell phone in a pocket. It might not work at Kveldulf's farm, but it would in other places, and it was never a good idea to leave her phone behind.

The first aid kit went into her pack, along with the biggest flashlight in the house.

She slung the pack onto her back and looked out the window. The troll woman was still there, coated with snow, snow falling thickly around her, swirling in the blizzard wind. Helga opened the window and put a chair under it, climbed onto the chair and out the window. The troll reached up and took hold of her, settling her against her chest as if she were holding a baby or a small child.

"Close the window, but not all the way," Helga said. "I don't want my room to fill with snow."

The troll did this, then turned and strode off into the storm. Helga looked back and saw light shining out her window. She had forgotten to turn off her lamp. Too late to worry about that. Soon the light was gone, hidden by snow. Flakes landed on her face and melted. She could feel the troll through her parka. The creature's skin was hard and rough, more like stone than human flesh and skin. Her dress—the plastic that was meant for covering rolls of hay—was slick and cold. She stomped through the snow, which must be deep by now, and Helga in her arms rocked up and down, her cheek rubbing against the plastic dress. This didn't seem very saga-like, being carried like a baby.

She had a watch on, but she couldn't see it. Helga had no idea how long the troll walked through the storm. The farm wasn't far in good weather, just over a rise of land. But now, in darkness and snow, the trip seemed endless. Was this a good idea? She wondered. She could have stayed home in safety and then regretted not going to help Kveldulf, possibly for the rest of her life if he died and she could have saved him. Not that saving him seemed likely. All she had was the first aid kit and what she had learned about first aid in a class.

"We are here," the troll said.

Helga could see lights, barely visible through the snow: the farmhouse and the sheep barn.

The troll lowered her onto the ground, then moved toward the sheep barn lights. Helga followed. The snow was wet and heavy and not easy to move through, even with the path the troll had broken.

Grandmother Troll opened the barn door. Light spilled out. Helga stepped inside. The troll followed, ducking her head. An aisle went through the middle of the barn between two rows of pens, all except one empty. A few sheep stirred restlessly in that pen. One bleated.

In the middle of the barn, lying in the middle of the aisle, was Kveldulf. He was on his back, his arms folded across his chest, apparently asleep.

Such a strange place to sleep. Helga hurried toward him. The old man was breathing. She could see his chest moving up and down. She knelt by him and checked his pulse. It was strong and regular. His color was good, ruddy as it always was, and neither side of his face was drooping. His breathing was deep and even and sounded uncongested. The right thing to do was to call for help. But she was in a dead spot. Even if she reached Search and Rescue, could anyone get here through this blizzard? At that point the old man gave a snore. It sounded perfectly ordinary.

She grasped his shoulder and shook it. "Kveldulf! Wake up! What's wrong? Can you tell me?"

The troll must have done this, and it hadn't worked. But this time the old man's eyes opened just a bit. She saw the glint of the irises. The light reflecting off them made them look yellow, though Kveldulf had bright blue eyes. "Do not wake me," he said, his voice slow and soft.

"What?" asked Helga.

"This can only be done when I'm sleeping."

Helga rocked back on her heels. What did that mean?

Kveldulf continued. "I fell in the yard and twisted my foot. I can't walk. I had to crawl back in. There are sheep out in the storm. This is the only way to get them. Let me sleep."

She noticed now that the fronts of his pants were wet and muddy.

"I have to look at your eyes," Helga said. "You might have gotten a concussion, and people with concussions should not sleep. I need to see your pupils."

Kveldulf groaned and opened his eyes. The irises did look yellow, but that must be a trick of the light. She had never heard it was a sign of any illness. His pupils were both the same size. Not a concussion then, and most likely no stroke. Just a bad fall and a twisted ankle.

He closed his eyes again. His breathing got deeper and slower.

The troll by the open door said, "There are sheep coming."

The animals burst through the barn door, ten or more, snow covering their backs and falling in clots onto the floor. She knew nothing about sheep herding, but it was obvious to her that they needed to be in pens. She opened the nearest one. The troll waved them in. They went willingly enough, glad—Helga thought—to be out of the storm.

Three animals stood at the barn door. Two were Kveldulf's sheep dogs, Spotty and Striver. The third was huge, gray, rangy and shaggy. Its mouth was open, a red tongue hanging between sharp, white teeth. Its yellow eyes regarded Helga with interest. A dog, she thought, but not one she recognized.

The troll fastened the gate to the pen. "I'll go with them. There are more sheep to rescue. Stay here and watch Kveldulf, and make sure the sheep have something to eat. I know now what is wrong with Kveldulf. Don't try to wake him again, at least until all the sheep are in."

The troll turned and headed out the door, the three dogs going ahead.

Sheep ate mostly roughage, Helga knew, and most of the roughage was outside in large cylindrical bales that she could not move. But there were heaps of hay on the floors of the pens and water in troughs. Clearly Kveldulf had known the animals were coming in and had prepared for them. He should have gone out to get them first, but he was an old man, set in his ways; and the storm had not been expected. A storm this huge should not have crept up on the country.

If the sheep did not need hay, what did they need? There were bags of feed at one end of the barn. They were clearly labeled as being for sheep. She opened one and dumped some into each pen, hoping it would be sufficient and not too much. It certainly interested the sheep, who began to eat. Their fleeces were still wet and had lumps of melting snow on them. When she read folk tales and sagas and imagined herself in these stories, it never occurred to her that she might need to know how to feed sheep. Of course the saga heroes had known how to care for sheep, as had the clever farmers in folk tales. None of them were city dwellers.

She settled on the floor next to the old man. He was still breathing slowly and steadily. Snow blew in the open barn door, settling into drifts on the floor. The sheep were mostly quiet, except for moving around in their pens. The air was cold and damp. She wasn't willing to shut the door. Light from the barn would guide the troll and the dogs back.

Finally, they returned, driving more sheep. Helga scrambled up and opened the

doors of pens. The sheep went in. It was hard to tell what sheep thought, but these looked relieved to her.

The troll brushed snow off. "I have to go back out. I think there are more sheep buried under the snow. The wolf is good at finding them, even in this storm. What ears he must have to hear the bleating under drifts!"

"Wolf?" asked Helga.

The troll gestured at the gray dog.

"There are no wolves in Iceland," Helga said.

"That is true, but there are humans who can send their minds out in the form of animals. They brought this ability with them from Norway, and often the animals are ones that are not native here.

"We trolls always know we are looking at someone like Kveldulf here if we see a wolf or bear, since there are none in Iceland. Eagles are harder. They may be sendings or they may be ordinary eagles. I met an arctic fox years ago that I'm almost certain was unnatural. Its expression was far too knowing."

The wolf circled the barn, looking in the pens. The sheep weren't frightened. Why would they be, since there were no wolves in Iceland? Helga had a sense that the animal was counting. Then it trotted to the open door and glanced back at the troll.

"I have to go back out," Grandmother Troll said. "Clearly there are more sheep to find."

She left, the two dogs following her, and Helga sat down to wait. This time she checked her watch. The minutes passed slowly. She wondered if her parents had missed her yet. Her mother was an early riser and would be up soon. She would let Helga sleep in for a while, then come upstairs to wake her and find the bed empty.

At last the troll returned, driving more sheep, the dogs helping her. The wolf held back, as if he were supervising.

Once the sheep were penned, the wolf extended a front paw and scraped it along the muddy floor five times.

"Five still missing," the troll said. "Back we go."

This trip took less time. The troll, the dogs, and the wolf returned with four sheep.

"The wolf has given up," the troll said. "The storm's getting worse. That last sheep will have to take care of itself, until the weather improves." Grandmother Troll came over to the farmer and shook him. "Wake up, old man. The job is done."

Kveldulf groaned and opened his eyes. For a moment his irises were yellow, just like the wolf's eyes. Then they turned back to blue. Helga glanced at the door. The wolf was gone.

The troll stamped her feet and brushed herself off. "I'd like a cup of coffee. If I helped you into the house, Kveldulf, do you think you could make some?"

"I'll do it," Helga said. This was something she could do.

"Well, then," the troll said. "I'll help Kveldulf into the house, and he can sit down and tell us what happened."

The troll carried Kveldulf out of the barn, and Helga shut the door. Together they plodded through the snow to the farmhouse, the two dogs with them. By this time the drifts were so deep that snow was coming over the tops of her boots and sliding down inside. It melted quickly, turning to ice water.

Once they were inside, the troll set Kveldulf in a chair in his living room. The dogs settled next to him. Helga went to the kitchen, found coffee, and brewed a pot. She brought the cups of coffee back to the living room, set on a tray with a box of cookies she found.

Kveldulf had taken off his boots and was feeling one ankle. "Not broken, I think." He looked around at Helga and the troll. "Thank you for your help. I should have moved more quickly when the snow began to fall. Maybe I am too old to keep sheep."

"Have some coffee," Helga said.

There were no chairs big enough for Grandmother Troll. She sat down on the floor and took a cup of coffee. After a swallow, she said, "Ah. This is an improvement on what we had to drink before humans came to Iceland."

Kveldulf took several big swallows, then said, "I went out to get the sheep and fell in the yard. My sciatica has been acting up, and I think I stepped on a tool that I left out, though I am not certain. The pain was sudden and intense, and I can't remember exactly how the fall happened.

"For the most part, I have no need to send my spirit out, though I've always known I could do it. But now I had to do it, since I could not walk. I knew the wolf that held my consciousness would be able to find the sheep, and I was almost certain my dogs would follow its lead. Then you two arrived and helped me. There's no more to the story."

For a while they sat together, drinking coffee and eating the cookies, which were old and dry.

At last Helga said, "Your name means evening wolf."

"Yes," the farmer replied. "I was named after an ancestor. He could send his spirit out in the form of a wolf, as I can. The ability has run in my family since the Settlement Times. But we keep quiet about it. We were especially quiet after Christianity came to Iceland. The priests were suspicious of people like us. We had no desire to be called sorcerers, simply because we had an inherited quirk, which is not even useful most of the time."

"The grandfather of the saga hero Egil Skallagrimsson could do this," Helga said. "Are you descended from that family?"

"Yes," Kveldulf said. "As are many people. I think half the people I've met at the sheep gathering have bragged about being descended from Egil. But most of Egil's descendants don't have our ability. If they did, the whole island would be full of wolves by now."

She had always wanted to be in an old story, Helga thought. Now she was in a story with trolls and wolves. Well, one of each. She wasn't sure how much she enjoyed this. The old troll had been fun and interesting. But a werewolf out of a saga? She looked at the farmer, his clothing wet and dirty and his face sagging with exhaustion, and at the huge, stony woman sitting on the floor.

"I need to get home," she said finally. "My family will be waking soon."

The troll stood up, bending to keep her head from hitting the ceiling. "I'll take you."

"I will be fine now," Kveldulf said. "But I'd like another cup of coffee before you go."

She took his cup and refilled it, then brought it back. He took another swallow. "The important thing is the sheep. We have saved all except one, and maybe I'll find that one tomorrow. They are hardy and canny creatures. People denigrate them, because people always denigrate the animals they exploit. Get home safely, Helga, and thank you for your help." He sagged back in his chair, both hands holding the cup as it were a life belt. He looked old, Helga thought.

She went outside with the troll. "You'll come back and see how he does, won't you?" she asked.

"Yes."

The troll bent and picked her up, then set off through the storm. Snow was still falling heavily, and the drifts were getting deeper. It did not seem to bother Grandmother Troll. She waded confidently.

At length she said, "I have reached your house."

"Can you lift me to my window?"

"Yes."

The troll lifted, and Helga pushed the window open, scrambling in. There was snow on the floor of her bedroom. She stepped in the little drift, then turned and

closed the window. For a moment, she saw the troll, a huge, dim figure surrounded by whirling snow. Then the troll was gone.

Helga changed her clothes and hid the parka and backpack under the bed, in case her mother decided to come in. Then she went downstairs. Her mother was in the kitchen, making pancakes. “I decided not to wake you,” she said to Helga. “Why get up? We can’t go anywhere in this storm.”

“I’ll make coffee,” Helga said.

Her brother Bjarni was at the table, making a map of some imaginary land out of a video game. He had colored pencils and was shading the mountains green. Helga felt a pleased contempt. While he played games, she had been out with a troll and werewolf, saving sheep. Of course, saving sheep did not sound heroic. But it had been necessary. Unlike video games, in her opinion.

The snow began to lessen after breakfast. By evening it had stopped. Helga went to bed early, exhausted from her night’s adventure. Once she was in bed, she began to worry about Kveldulf. He might be a werewolf, but he was also old and had an injured foot, and he couldn’t call for help. She was too tired to keep worrying and went to sleep.

The morning was bright, sunlight reflecting off mounds of pristine white snow.

“I am going to try and draw the snow,” her mother said at breakfast. “A pattern of bright white and blue shadows. I may be able to make something of it. And I can do it while staying inside.”

“I want to ski over to Kveldulf’s farm and make sure he is all right,” Helga said.

“I’ll go with you,” her father said. “That stubborn old man may have gotten himself in trouble, alone in a storm like this one.”

She didn’t want him to come. What if Grandmother Troll was still there? What if Kveldulf’s wolf form was roaming around, looking for the last lost sheep? But she couldn’t think of a reason for her father to stay home.

They set off together. The sky was brilliant blue and absolutely clear. The nearest mountains, which had been black two days before and bare except for a little green, were snow covered now. Their breath came out in white clouds.

“A lovely day,” her father said. “Though that storm is going to cost the country a lot. Global warming is expensive, Helga. Remember that.”

It was a much quicker trip on skis. Soon Helga saw the farmstead, its roofs thick with snow. There were icicles hanging from the farmhouse eaves. They skied into the yard and heard the dogs barking inside the house. Once their skis were off and stuck into a drift, her father knocked on the door.

“Come in,” Kveldulf shouted.

Her father kicked snow away from the door, and they went in, Helga hoping that the troll was not visiting. Surely Kveldulf would have come to the door, rather than let other people see the troll. But could he walk?

He was sitting in the same chair he had been in when she left. But he had managed to get up and put on pajamas and shearling slippers. There was a cane leaning against the chair and no sign of the troll. His hands and face were clean now, but he looked old and tired.

“The dogs found the last sheep and got her home. An old ewe who had the sense to take shelter and wait for help.”

Her father looked puzzled. Kveldulf was talking to her, Helga realized, continuing the conversation from last night.

“I’m sorry,” Kveldulf said. “I forgot there was no one here last night. I found all my sheep, or rather my good dogs found them and brought them home through the storm. I twisted my ankle and could not walk, though the ankle seems better today. Still, I need a cane.”

The dogs were sniffing the company. They looked bright-eyed and cheerful, unwearied by the storm.

"I can offer you coffee," Kveldulf said and pushed himself upright.

"Let Helga make it," her father said. "Will you be all right for a few days, until the road is cleared?"

"Yes," Kveldulf said. "I can get around."

Helga went to make coffee. Her father told Kveldulf the news of the storm, which had come over his smart phone. Kveldulf had been lucky. Many farmers had been surprised, and their sheep were still out in the fields, covered with a meter or more of snow. Iceland Search and Rescue was out in snowmobiles and four-wheel drive vehicles, trying to find as many of the animals as possible. The situation had been complicated, her father said, by some tourists who had gotten lost in the storm and put their cars into a river, where they were stuck. IceSAR had to leave the sheep rescue in order to save the tourists, who should never have been out in the storm. The sheep had some excuse. "Our economy relies on tourism, but that doesn't mean tourists are easy to have around."

"In my experience, sheep are much easier," Kveldulf said.

She brought the coffee out and they all drank a cup.

"Do you have enough food?" her father asked.

"Yes."

"Nonetheless, I will send Helga back with a cooked meal tomorrow. Neighbors must always help each other."

After that, they left. After they put on their skis, Helga said, "I want to look in the sheep barn."

"Very well," her father said.

She opened the door just a bit. The troll was there, sitting on the floor, her knees up, her arms wrapped around them and her head pressed against them. She was naked, her blue dress folded up next to her. Around her the sheep moved in their pens. The air was warm and smelled of hay and animals.

Her father reached past Helga, pushing the door all the way open. She gasped in fear. Sunlight entered the barn. But Grandmother Troll remained in shadow and was safe.

"Why did you gasp?" her father asked. "There is nothing to worry about here. Though I can't imagine why Kveldulf built his sheep barn around that great lump of stone. A few meters over, and he would have had level ground."

Helga looked again. She was positive the troll was alive. But her father couldn't see that. All he saw was a boulder, placed oddly in the middle of a barn. She pulled the door shut and made sure the latch was in place.

After that, they went home. It was late enough so the fences and mountains cast long, blue shadows.

"Your mother will like this. Blue shadows. White mountains. A pure blue sky."

Her father was right. Her mother was happy with her drawings, and Bjarni was happy with his map. Helga let her father talk about Kveldulf. "He should probably move into the city into an apartment or a retirement home. He's too old to be out here alone."

"He has his dogs," Helga said. And he had the troll and the wolf, she thought.

"That isn't enough," her father said firmly. "I will see if he has any relatives who are concerned about him and might be willing to move him."

Helga took food to Kveldulf the next day. They sat with the troll in the sheep barn and ate, all of them still tired.

"That's the hardest I've worked in hundreds of years," the troll woman said.

"And going out as a wolf was hard on me," Kveldulf said. "That's one reason not to

do it often.” Then he added, “I don’t know how you could wake me and Grandmother Troll could not, as she tells me. Maybe I needed to hear a human voice.

“Grandmother Troll can’t leave now, even at night,” he continued. “Your family might see her tracks and wonder what made them. But you will be gone in a few days, and she can return to her cave. There is no one else nearby to see the tracks. The wind will blow them away, or they will melt in a thaw.”

“My father wants you to move into the city,” Helga said.

“That won’t happen. How could Grandmother Troll visit me then? And what if the wolf inside me wants to get out? I’m fine here.”

“My father sounds determined.”

“So am I,” Kveldulf replied. “If he tries to bully me, I’ll contact the newspapers and maybe a famous director, such as Friðrik Þór Friðriksson.” He paused, thinking. “Or maybe famous musicians such as Björk and or the group Sigur Rós. Will they let an old farmer be oppressed by economists and social workers? I know how to make a noise.”

Helga finished her sandwich, which was smoked fish and iceberg lettuce. Then she said, “All of this has been strange and almost like a story. But if this were a story, it would mean something. I don’t know what this has meant.”

“Life isn’t like stories,” Kveldulf replied. “Often it simply is, though we can always give a meaning to everything. If you want a meaning, this is mine: you must always take care of your sheep. Most of the time, they are self-reliant. After all, they care for themselves all summer in the mountains. But sometimes they need help, as they did in this blizzard; and we gave them the help they needed, which should make us feel satisfied. Now, what do you think this means, Helga?”

“This started when you told me to be polite to Grandmother Troll, even though she was only a boulder. I think what happened means we should always be courteous, even to rocks, because you don’t know if they will turn out to be people.”

Her moral was silly, like something a child had come up with. But she was very tired, and she could not come up with anything else.

Kveldulf smiled. “That is a fine thought, especially in Iceland, where land is alive or close to alive. Anyone who has seen a volcanic eruption knows this country is not merely rock. Do you have a moral, Grandmother Troll?”

The troll sat silent for a while. Finally, she said, “I have been reading Kveldulf’s copies of the sagas, though the books are tiny and it’s hard for me to turn the little, thin pages. The sagas remind me of what the land was like when I was much younger, in the early days after humans came here. I found this moral in the Njal’s saga.” She paused and cleared her throat, a gritty sound. “The land is built on law, and through lawlessness it is destroyed.”

“That has nothing to do with us or our story,” Helga protested.

“No,” said Kveldulf. “But it’s a good moral and a famous one. Take care of the sheep, be courteous to the land, and remember the importance of law. I think all three morals are excellent. We should remember them.”

Helga was not convinced. She thought Kveldulf might be laughing at her and the troll, but she couldn’t be certain. She stood up. “My father thinks the road will be cleared tomorrow. I may not see you again for a while.”

“Come back when you can,” Kveldulf said. “We will be here.”