

The Snow- Walker's Son

Catherine Fisher

Random House Children's Books

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Epigraph

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

About the Author

Also by Catherine Fisher

Copyright

About the Book

Whatever sort of thing Kari is, he is my son ...

Some say Kari's a monster, other's hope he's dead, and no one has seen him for many, many years. Until outcasts Jessa and Thorkil - banished to the very ends of the earth - are forced to cross frozen rapids and icy wastes towards the lair of the unknown terror that is ... the Snow-Walker's Son.

CATHERINE FISHER



THE
SNOW-WALKER'S
SON



RED FOX

To Rachel

The quotations, which head the chapters and are reprinted here with the kind permission from the publisher, are from 'The Words of the High One', a poem that appears in *Norse Poems*, edited and translated by W. H. Auden and Paul B. Taylor; Faber and Faber Ltd, 1983.

The door was the last one in the corridor.

As the flames flickered over it they showed it was barred; a hefty iron chain hung across it, and the mud floor beneath was red with rust that had flaked off in the long years of locking and unlocking.

The keeper hung his lantern on a nail, took the key from a dirty string around his neck, and fitted it into the keyhole. Then he looked behind him.

'Get on with it!' the big man growled. 'Let me see what she keeps in there!'

The keeper grinned; he knew fear when he heard it. With both hands he turned the key, then tugged out the red chain in a shower of rust and pushed the door. It opened, just a fraction. Darkness and a damp smell oozed through the black slit.

He stepped well back, handed the stranger the lantern, and jerked his head. He had no tongue to speak with; she'd made sure he kept her secrets.

The stranger hesitated; a draught moved his hair and he gazed back up the stone passageway as if he longed suddenly for warmth and light. And from what I've heard, the keeper thought, you won't be seeing much of those ever again.

Then the man held up the lantern and pushed the door. The keeper watched his face intently in the red glow, and his great hand, as it clutched a luck-stone that swung at his neck. The man went in, slowly. The door closed.

Outside, the keeper waited, listening. No sound came out of the room and he dared not go too close. For six years now he had locked it and unlocked it, letting in the witch

Gudrun and the sly old dwarf she brought with her. No one else in all that time - until today, this gruff red-beard.

For six years he had left food at the door and taken it away half eaten; had heard rustles and movements and had never looked in. But there had been that night, nearly a year ago now, when halfway up the corridor he had looked back, and in the dimness seen that hand, thin as a claw, lifting the platter.

Suddenly the door opened; he stiffened, his hand on his knife. The big man was there, carrying something heavy, wrapped in old bearskins. He cradled it with both arms; whatever it was moved in the heavy folds against his shoulder. It made a low sound, wordless and strange.

The man had changed. His face was pale, his voice quiet. 'Tell her,' he muttered through his teeth, 'that her secret is safe with me. I'll keep it better than she did.'

Shoving the keeper aside, he strode through the flames and shadows of the stone tunnel.

The keeper waited; waited until the echoes of distant chains and gates were still. Then, furtively, he slid his lantern around the door and looked into the room.

He saw a small cell, with one window high up in the wall, icicles hanging from its sill; a low bed; straw; a fireplace full of ashes. He stepped in, warily. There were a few scraps of food on the floor, but nothing to give any sign of what had been here.

It was only when he turned to go that his eyes caught the patterns: the rows and rows of strange, whirling spirals scrawled on the damp wall next to the bed.

1

*Young and alone on a long road,
Once I lost my way:
Rich I felt when I found another ...*

THE HALL WAS empty.

Jessa edged inside and began to wander idly about, pulling the thick furred collar of her coat up around her face. She was early.

It had been a bitter night. The snow had blown in under the door and spread across the floor. A pool of wine that someone had spilt under the table was frozen to a red slab. She nudged it with her foot; solid as glass. Even the spiders were dead on their webs; the thin nets shook in the draught.

She walked to the great pillar of oak that grew up through the middle of the Hall. It was heavily carved with old runes and magic signs, but over them all, obliterating them, was a newer cutting: a contorted snake that twisted itself down in white spirals. She brushed the frost off it with her gloved fingers. The snake was Gudrun's sign. A witch's sign.

She waited, grinding the ice to white powder under her heel.

Light gathered, slowly. Corners of tables and tapestries loomed out of the shadows; a cart rumbled by outside, and

the carter's shout echoed in the roof. Jessa kicked the frozen fire. Why hadn't she come late - sauntered in sweetly when the Jarl was waiting, just to show him that she didn't care, that he couldn't order her as he wanted? It was too late now, though.

Five slow minutes slithered by.

Then, a hanging was flipped back; a house-thrall came in and began to take down the shutters. Frost cracked and fell from the empty windows; a raw wind whipped in and rippled the tapestries.

He hadn't seen her. Jessa was annoyed. She shuffled, and watched him whirl around, his face white. Then the terror drained out of him. That annoyed her even more.

'I'm waiting to speak to the Lord Jarl,' she snapped, in a clear voice. 'My name is Jessa Horolfsdaughter.'

It was the voice she always used with servants, cold and rather distant. Old Marrika, her nurse, used to say it was the voice of pride. What was Marrika doing now? she wondered.

The man nodded and went out. Jessa scuffed the floor impatiently. She hated this place. Everyone in it was afraid. They were littered with amulets and luckstones; they glanced around before they spoke, as if someone was always listening. Gudrun. The Jarl's strange wife. The Snow-walker. They said she knew what you thought, even as you stood before her. Jessa shivered.

The man came back and knelt at the hearth. She saw the welcome flicker of flames and hurried over, warming her hands and rubbing them against her face until her cheeks ached. The thrall propped some logs on the blaze and went out. Jessa did not speak to him. People said all the Jarl's servants were dumb. Whatever the truth of that, they never spoke.

Crouched over the fire, she looked down the high Hall. The trestles and stools were toppled here and there on the straw. At the far end was a raised platform; here the seats

were piled with red cushions, the table littered with half-empty plates. Jessa went over and picked up a pewter jug. The wine in it was frozen. She put it down with a bang.

As she turned, one of the tapestries behind the dais was drawn aside and an elderly man came in, with a boy of her own age behind him. She knew the boy at once. Thorkil Harraldsson was her first cousin; they'd brought him here about three months ago. His clothes were very fine, she thought, scornfully. Just like him.

The other was Jarl Ragnar. He was still tall, but his shoulders stooped; the splendid blue quilted robe hung loose on him. He looked like a man dried out, sucked dry of all life, his eyes small and cold.

She made him the most careless bow she could.

'You have your father's manners,' he said, wryly.

Silent, she watched Thorkil drag up two stools and the Jarl's chair; he caught her eye and gave her a brief, wan smile. She thought he seemed uneasy, and very pleased to see her. No wonder. Prison was prison, even with fine clothes.

They sat down. The Jarl stared into the flames. Finally he spoke, without looking at them.

'Your fathers were two brothers. I had thought they were loyal to me, until they joined that last foolish march of the Wulfings. All my enemies together. It was a pity they both died in the snow.'

Jessa glared at him. 'Your wife's sorcery brought the snow. She won your battle for you.'

He was angry, but Jessa didn't care. 'The Lord Jarl has always come from the family of the Wulfings. That's why they fought you. You have no right to be Jarl.'

She caught Thorkil's nervous, warning look, but it was done now. She had said it. Her face was hot, her hands shook.

Grimly, the Jarl stared at the flames. 'The family of the Wulfings are almost all gone,' he said. 'Those that are left

lurk in farms and steads and byres, their women and children disguised as thralls, hurried indoors when riders come by. Gudrun knows. She sees them. One by one, I am hunting them out. The leader, Wulfgar, was taken two days ago; he's in a room under your feet, with ice and rats for company. And now there's you.'

His hands rubbed together, dry as paper.

'I left you alone. I left you on your farms, fed you and let you be, until now. Now, you are old enough to be dangerous.'

Jessa watched his eyes on the leaping flames. She wanted him to turn and look at her, but he would not.

'Your land will be given to men loyal to me, and you will have somewhere else to live.'

'Here?' Thorkil asked.

'Not here.' He smiled briefly. 'Far from here.'

Jessa was glad. She had been here two days and that was enough. But she didn't trust that smile.

'Where then?'

The Jarl moved, as if he was suddenly uneasy. The silver amulets and thorshammers round his neck clicked together.

'I'm sending you to live with my son,' he said.

For a moment they couldn't realize what he meant. Then Jessa felt sick; cold sweat prickled on her back. Slowly her hand sought the amulet Marrika had given her.

Thorkil was white. 'You can't send us there,' he breathed.

'Hold your tongue and let me finish.' Ragnar was looking at them now, with a hard, amused stare.

'Your fathers were traitors; they wanted to bring me down. Many men remember them. Do you expect me to set you up on farms, to give you herds of reindeer and dowries of silver?'

'Why not?' Jessa muttered. 'You took ours.'

He laughed. 'Call it exile, and think yourselves lucky. At least you'll have a sort of life. You leave tomorrow for

Thrasirshall, at first light. I'll supply a ship and an escort, at least as far as Trond. I don't suppose my men will want to go further.'

Jessa saw Thorkil was trembling. She knew he couldn't believe this; he was terrified. It burst out of him in a wild, despairing cry.

'I won't go! You can't send us out there, not to that creature!'

With one swift movement the Jarl stood and struck him in the face with the full weight of his glove, so that he staggered back on the stool and fell with a crash on the stone floor. Jessa grabbed him, but he shrugged her off. Tears of fury glinted in his eyes as he scrambled up.

'Take a lesson from your cousin,' the Jarl said. 'Look your fate in the eye. I'd thought you were stronger, but I see you're still a boy.'

Jessa took Thorkil's wrist and held it tight. Better to keep quiet now.

The Jarl watched them. 'Gudrun is right,' he said. 'Traitors breed traitors.'

Then, slowly, he sat down, and ran one hand wearily down one cheek.

'There's something else.'

'What?' Jessa asked coldly.

He took something from inside his coat and held it out: a thick piece of sealskin. She saw the blue veins in his skin.

'It's a message.' Ragnar looked at them, almost reluctantly, 'I want you to take it with you. It's for Brochael Gunnarsson ... the man who looks after the creature. Give it to him. Tell no one.' He looked wearily around the empty hall. 'Whatever sort of thing Kari is, he is my son.'

There was silence. Then he said, 'Take it.'

For a long moment Jessa did not move. Then she reached out and took the parcel. The parchment inside it crackled as she slid it into her glove.

The Jarl nodded, and stood up, straightening slowly. He walked a few steps and then stopped. Without looking back he said, 'Come here tonight, after the lawgiving. Gudrun wishes to speak to you. There's nothing I can do about it.'

He looked over his shoulder at them. 'Keep my secret. I can do nothing else for Kari. Maybe, years ago, if I had tried ... but not now. She would know.' He smiled at them, a bitter smile. 'I've never seen him. I do not know what he is.'

In the silence after he had shuffled out, a pigeon fluttered in the roof. One glossy feather whirled down through a shaft of light.

'Why did you take it?' Thorkil asked.

Jessa was wondering too. 'Not so loud,' she murmured.

He went to the fire and knelt near the dirty hearth; Jessa followed. 'We must escape.'

'Where?'

'Your farm - Horolfstead.'

'His men have got it.' She pulled at her glove. 'Three days ago.'

Thorkil glanced at her. 'I should have known. Well, why bother to talk? There's nothing we can do - he's sending men with us.'

'To Thrasirshall.'

'Mmm.'

Jessa was silent for a moment. Then she glanced round. 'Thorkil ...'

'What?' But he knew what.

'You've been here longer than I have. What do they say here about Kari Ragnarsson?'

'Nothing. No one dares.' Thorkil dropped his voice. 'Besides, no one has ever seen him, except the woman who was there when he was born. She died a few days later. They say Gudrun poisoned her.'

Jessa nodded. 'Yes, but there are rumours ...'

'The same as you've heard.' Thorkil edged nearer to the fire. 'She kept him locked up here somewhere, in a