

Ravens
(Birgenheim in winter)

He stumbled hastily over the meadow's frozen clumps of grass. He could barely feel his feet which were only wrapped in cloths. By this time, the boy was so much out of breath he had to suck the cold air deep into his lungs. The cold was stinging.

He wiped his dripping blue nose on his sleeve and peered up the hill. The woolen beanie was itching terribly on his sweaty forehead. It wasn't far anymore until he would reach 'the Half'. It seemed to be only five stone throws away but considering the cold and his heavy bag it still wasn't close enough. The carrying straps cut into his shoulders and kept the blood from flowing into his arms, leaving them numb and weak.

It was cold. Very cold. For weeks already. That was merely unusual around this time of the year. The only thing unusual was the missing snow. No single snowflake had fallen since the beginning of the winter unlike in the last years, when the first snowfall had been right after the harvest festival. It was different this year though. The people were talking a lot about the weather.

'Doesn't seem like it'll snow this year.'

'Yeah, you're right. Really doesn't seem like it ... Are all your animals in the barn, yet?'

'Yes, of course ... No snow must be a bad sign.'

'Y'think? My great aunt on my mother's side, the old Rutwin, just told me yesterday that in the last winter without snow, she had been little then, all the animals had died in the barn ...'

'Nah! ...'

'Yeah, seriously ... I'm telling you...'

For now, they didn't have much else to do anyhow when they met. The harvest and the wood had been gathered and the cattle had been put into the stables. Other than a sick cow here and a leaking roof there, there wasn't much for the people to talk about during work. About him though – they almost talked as much about him of course as about the weather.

'Helmin's boy, Moakin ... Have you heard about it? ... He'd been standin' by the village's well, having a bucket in his hand and singing like an elven bell ... when Halpren asked him if he knew another song, too ... and then ... ha, ha, ... then he broke off in the middle and started stuttering so hard he dropped the bucket with the rope right into the water ... ha, ha, ... but the best thing was that he hadn't even tied it up. Ever since we've had one bucket in the well.'

'Well, I guess he'll never turn into anything. He's just a little crazy and confused. With this father.'

It used to hurt him but now he didn't care anymore what they thought of him. He talked to them if necessary, though that didn't happen very often, and although he stuttered they always understood what he wanted after all. Most of the time they already knew it because he always asked for the same things.

For years already had he been running errands in the village for the Half. Actually his mother was behind all of it.

Moakin realized how strange of a name it was – the Half. Ever since he could remember, the Half had been there, though there'd never been anything 'half' about him for he was a rather tall man with broad shoulders. Moakin wanted to have just as many muscles as the Half once he would be grown up. But the Half had been sick for a long time now and eventually lived up to his name.

He was actually only called 'the Half' because no one knew his real name and because he simply lived half way between the village and the herb woman, his mother.

Moakin's shoulders were hurting. In fact, he didn't care at all about the stranger or the others, only about his mother. She had insisted on helping the Half and once his mother was determined to do something, there was neither left nor right. She used to go with him to the village but he was old enough now. Surely, he'd grown to a man in these thirteen winters. His mother was rather happy about it because she wasn't exactly light on her feet. It was enough for her to rush to emergencies in the village. She was the herb woman at last.

Of course, everyone gossiped about her helping the Half, though not quite as loud, and sometimes in quiet.

'What does Helmin see in this old weirdo? He isn't even one of us.'

'She's the herb woman and she knows who to help. The other day though, Inglin's ox almost kicked the bucket because she was late. I'm coming, she said, that ox won't die within seconds. I'm still busy here, she said.'

'Well, hopefully I won't get sick while she's at his house out there.'

'Tell me about it. Garban's wife Iwe, y'know, she's pregnant. Let's hope Helmin will be there in time. A stillbirth spoils the harvest.'

He had all seen them gossip. Sometimes he could figure out what they were talking about just by listening to scraps of conversations.

Finally, he stood in front of the small, warped gate, which was part of a rickety fence surrounding a pathetic, frozen over garden. Latter, however, suited the looks of the hut located behind it.

The roof sagged like the back of an old horse, the chimney looked like it would fall on exactly this back any second and no window shutter functioned properly anymore. He had helped his mother tack them

together before the first great cold, also stuffing straw into the huge remaining gaps. He still remembered his hurting back and sore neck because he had hauled the planks, nails and the straw all by himself.

The wooden steps in front of the door creaked under his weight. He throbbed at the door.

“M ... M ... Mother, it’s m ... m ... me!” After a short but cold moment, he heard steps coming from inside the hut. When concentrating on the noise, he could hear where the steps came from because the hut wasn’t exactly solid material. His mother had been in the rear room and was now moving towards the front door.

Her wrinkly face appeared in the ajar door. The many years of living in the harsh climate, visiting the sick countless times in all weathers and watching over them at the bedside for nights had made her age ahead of time. Neither Moakin nor she knew how old she really was but she’d already been the herb woman of this village for at least thirty winters. Back then, she had taken over the task from her aunt.

Once she recognized him she opened the door a little further: “Moakin! Come in, quick, or else we’ll have to heat this hut all over again.”

Moakin stomped inside, feeling half frozen. The cozy warmth that greeted him instantly turned into a sticky heat mixed with the smell of smoke, herbs, sweat and disease. He put the heavy bag down and quickly took off his itching woolen beanie. His mother helped him get the wood bundles off his back. In the meantime, Moakin peeked stealthily through the ajar door into the rear room. He only saw a part of the bed consisting of straw sacks and pelts. The Half’s right hand was showing. It was a thin, boney, pale hand emerging from a loose-knit, old linen shirt and clinging to the blanket.

“Drink something, my boy. Tea’s above the fire.” His shoulders started to tingle from the blood flowing through his arms again. His toes were itching terribly, too, as his warm lifeblood spread through him.

Helmin busied herself with the bag. Partially disappointed and partially shocked, she asked: “Where’s the willow bark? Was Beol not home?”

“Yes, h ... he w ... was but he s ... s ... s ... said he d ... d ... didn’t h ... have t ... time t ... to dry i ... it, yet.”

“Pshaw, nonsense! This lazy good-for-nothing Beol isn’t any different than the others. Nobody even lifts a finger for him.” Her anger instantly made her face look a whole lot younger and far less kind, though her mood quickly changed into despair. Helmin seemed to talk to herself: “But I do need this bark ... to numb the pain.” After a short moment of silence she shook her head as if she tried to shake off her exasperation: “Why don’t you sit down, boy, and hang your cloths next to the fire. I’ll make you some soup. How was the walk?”

Moakin sat down on a stool close to the fire and started taking the cloths of his feet. In the meantime, his mother had already finished spreading out the bag’s content on the table and was now preparing soup. She sat right next to him in squatting position, cutting shriveled vegetables into small pieces and tossing them into the steaming broth. His head was a little above hers. The glow of the fire illuminated her face and gave her an almost unearthly aura.

“I saw it again.” He didn’t stutter this time.

“What?” She was distracted and looking for a certain herb amongst the multiple bundles hanging beside the fireplace.

“The g ... giant horse. I saw it ag ... g ... gain ... by the pond.”

Moakin rubbed his naked feet which could now feel pain again but were still ice-cold.

The herb woman look at him gravely: "Are you sure? It was a horse?" She turned her attention back to the soup. "Was it an elk, maybe?"

"M ... Mom! I d ... do know what an elk l ... l ... looks like! It didn't h ... have antlers and w ... was way big ... g ... ger than an elk."

"At this time of the year the elks shed their antlers. Are you really sure?"

"B ... Beol s ... saw it, t ... t ... too. He said, it w ... was a war horse."

"Beol?" She paused and frowned. "He fooled you." She tossed some cut carrots into the soup.

"Did you first tell him about it?"

Moakin pouted: "Y ... Yes, b ... but I know h ... him. He w ... w ... was honest this t ... time. M ... Mom, please b ... b ... believe me", the boy's voice got louder. "It was at least s ... s ... seven ells high! Mom, y ...you should've s ... s ... seen it."

"Calm down, boy, or else you'll choke on your own tongue. The tallest horse I know belongs to Mattern. He lives about two days away from here in Bergenbach. Maybe it bolted." She peeled a couple of onions. "But seven ells, boy, that would be as heavy as fifty sacks of flour ... not to mention what it'd eat. Nah ..."

"I s ... saw it. A g ... g ... giant horse and it w ... w ... was black." Moakin stood up and waved his hands around, his voice growing even louder. "C ... Completely black and it had a marking on his forehead in the shape of a crescent! And it looked me directly in the eyes!"

A moan coming from the rear room interrupted the boy. Helmin put the knife aside, stood up and wiped her hands on her apron. "Cut a lil' bit more of that ham, but not too much. The soup's almost ready. I need to check on him."

He didn't know if he should be angry, because their conversation was interrupted so suddenly, or rather thankful because the soup was almost done. Moakin felt the emptiness in his stomach and chose the latter.

Helmin entered the room hastily. Actually, there was no reason to rush. It was only a matter of time until the Half would pass away. His condition had gotten worse throughout the past days and the weather in combination with the drafty hut made it impossible for him to get better. His temperature was high and he had the shivers. He constantly started fantasizing. In the twenty years that she had known him he had never spoken more than three words at a time. And now he could entertain court societies for nights with his feverish ramblings, though she didn't even know if the stories were interrelated because she couldn't understand a single word.

It was odd. She had often nursed people ill with fever and a lot of them had fantasized. The dreams had mostly been about an experience or problem distorted by nightmares. But this time, although she didn't understand a single word, she had the infallible feeling that the ramblings were actually entire memories which the Half told in a quite normal voice, his eyelids flickering as he spoke. However, they must be nightmares for his voice cracked once in a while as if panicking and he said one word. Gorboir or Gordobir. Sometimes, there was also a second word. Something like Garesch or Gebesch.

She had thought about calling the priest last night. She had dozed off for a couple of minutes and had been woken by the screams of the Half. He had cried out the word again as his pinched body had been twisting eerily

between the sheets. His entire body had cramped so hard she'd been afraid he'd bite his tongue. From one second to another he had sat up straight in bed, gazing into the distance with shiny eyes as if he could see through walls, and pointing at something. He had seemed sturdy and almost gigantic when opening his mouth to speak. His voice had sent shivers up and down her spine; the same incomprehensible language as in his feverish ramblings, though it had been a demon's voice. She had felt it in her bones.

The next thing she remembered was waking up on the floor in the morning. Without being drugged with sleep like last night, she now was convinced to have dreamt it all. When washing her hands, the gelid water in the bowl and the thoughts about the dream gave her the shivers.

Helmin dried her hands and tucked the sick man in again. For now, he lay in bed looking peaceful and relaxed. He mumbled something to himself.

She heard a noise and was about to stand up when Moakin called her: "Mom, c ... c ... come, quick! You should s ... s ... see that!"

She stood up and left the small room. Her son stood in the open doorway with his back turned on her.

"Moakin, close the door. After all, it's so bitterly co ..."

She had stepped behind him to close the door when she glanced outside. Only now she noticed where the noise she had heard earlier was coming from.

Ravens were sitting in front of the hut. Hundreds of them, if not thousands. It must be a huge flock. The ground was almost completely covered in shiny black plumage. It was as if the ravens gaped at the two people standing in the door.

Seconds passed and they only heard the low whistle of the wind and the cawing of the ravens which faded more and more. Silence. Helmin couldn't move, even if she had wanted to. A groan cut through the quiet. A

groan that comes from stone walls before they collapse. A groan that comes from a giant tree before it falls. It came from the rear room.

A tile broke away from the roof and loudly slid down the slope, first slowly and then faster, until it eventually jumped off the roof. Time seemed to stand still. Helmin sensed everything at once. The ravens, the tile in the cold air, the dusky sky and the wooden hut, which she now found even more decayed than before.

After a brief eternity, the tile shattered on the old grindstone covered in ivy. As if it was a signal, all ravens suddenly flew away. Moakin and Helmin stood riveted to the spot in the door of the small hut, looking into the deserted landscape. Helmin was the first to find her voice again: "Come inside!"