

**THE SORCERESS AND THE SEA STRIDER**  
**By SARA MACKENZIE**

The longboat followed the coastline until it reached a rocky point of land and then it slipped into the wide bay, just out of reach of the waves that swelled and crashed upon this sandy northern beach. Above the beach the land rose to green hillocks and Sigurd could see English people standing against the sky, watching the approach of the Sea Striders.

They would be afraid. They were always afraid of the Vikings. For Sigurd it was a matter of pride to see the fear in those English eyes. He and his men were strong and tough, seasoned by weeks at sea and a hunger for the pickings they would find in this rich land. Sigurd and his men would strike and take their treasure home, where the women's eyes showed admiration and invitation rather than terror and loathing.

Sigurd frowned. The beach he had thought deserted was not. There was a woman standing on the white sand, her flame colored hair streaming in the wind.

Who was she? How did she dare to set her face against the Sea Striders? Why was she not as terrified as the rest?

He watched her shivering in her woolen kirtle with its fine gold cord—a lady of nobility then. There was a thin silken veil framing her face and a sudden gust of wind caught it and blew it away, down the beach, allowing her red locks to tumble free and wild. With her white

skin and blazing blue eyes, she was a beauty, and unlike any woman he had ever seen.

He wanted her. There was no doubt about that.

Sigurd stood at the prow, taller than any of his men, his long yellow hair tossed by the wind where it wasn't held by the thin leather braids wound through it. His massive chest and shoulders were covered with his rough woolen jersey, belted at his waist with a leather belt studded with metal that also held his razor-sharp sword.

He was a sight to inspire fear. More than a mortal man, a descendant of the Norse gods. And yet the woman stood and waited, seabirds screeching and whirling in the sky above her.

As soon as he was able, Sigurd jumped down into the cold, swirling shallows and began to wade toward her.

He saw now that there was a servant boy crouched behind her, hidden in her shadow and plainly terrified. "Lady we must run!" the servant was tugging at her arm, but she shrugged him off, standing bravely as Sigurd came up to her.

"I will not run from any man."

Sigurd had reached her now. "I am not any man," he said. "I am Sigurd." He liked the look of her. She would make a good Viking wife, brave and fearless and beautiful. He smiled despite himself, his pale blue eyes creasing at the corners. "What is your name, lady?"

“I have no name,” she said. Her own eyes were full of light and power. They made his head spin.

“Even the gods have names,” he retorted.

“Why do you come here bringing death and terror? This is not your land.”

He laughed arrogantly. “I am the wolf and you are the sheep, lady. It is the natural order of things that I come and have my way.” He waved his hand at the longboat and his men. “We are Sea Striders. There are none who dare stand against us, and when we die we go straight to Valhalla and sit at the side of Odin.”

She stared at him a moment more and then she shook her head. “It’s useless, isn’t it?” she said but to herself rather than him. “I can’t change you. I should never have tried. You cannot be redeemed, Sigurd, because you do not believe you have done wrong.”

He frowned and peered at her more closely. Something was wrong. No normal woman spoke like this. And he felt as if he had been here before, done this before. “No, this isn’t right,” he said, “this wasn’t what happened. We made landfall and climbed the dunes and swept through the village with sword and fire. There was a monastery . . . gold and food and wine. A good day’s work. This,” and he spun on his heel, “is wrong.”

“Do you remember what else happened? After the monastery?”

He frowned. "I . . . I was killed. There was an attack on us by some of the villagers who had escaped. An arrow pierced my heart. I was dead before I hit the ground."

Behind him the longboat had gone, and so had his men. There was only himself and the woman, alone, on the empty windswept beach.

"I am dreaming again," he muttered. "This is another dream. Blessed Odin, when will I wake up?"

"Soon," said the woman with the flame red hair.

"Who are you?" he was looming over her, using his height and his breadth, but she wasn't afraid of him. Power crackled around her slender form and flashed from her dark blue eyes. He knew then. She was one of the Valkyrie, maybe even a goddess from Asgard.

"I am the Sorceress," she said in confirmation.

"Why am I here?" he demanded, hand threatening on the hilt of his sword. "Tell me, Sorceress!"

"Because I will it," she said proudly, lifting her chin. Her red hair danced around her as if it were alive, and she raised her arms high and began to chant.

Sigurd's head was spinning but he kept his gaze on her. The beach began to tremble, the world was crumbling about him. He was lost in a place he could not escape from, and all because of her. And then the darkness enclosed him, and sleep overcame him, and he sank once more into nothingness.

The candle fell over and went out with a hiss. For a moment the vision of the beach and the Viking lingered, and then she remembered she was in her crystal room, all alone.

“Blast and damn it! Blast and damn *him* . . .”

By inserting herself into his dreams, she'd hoped to fool Sigurd into thinking she was a mortal woman, and that what he was seeing and feeling was real and actually happening. She'd hoped to talk him into accepting his actions were not those of a hero. But it wasn't working. It wasn't just that Sigurd believed it was his right to raid along the coast and take what he could, but lately he'd become less easily convinced that the dream was reality, as if repetition had increased his suspicions.

The Sorceress kicked at one of the broken shards of crystal. She should never have taken Sigurd from the World of the Dead and made him an Immortal Warrior. She had known it at the time and she knew it now, but there was something about him . . . She wanted to save him. She wanted . . . Yes, the real truth was that she wanted him for herself. His arrogance and his confidence were incredibly attractive.

Was it so wrong that she wanted to lie in his arms, even if it was only in dreams? Was it so wrong for her to love a mortal?

Of course it was. She knew it was.

She was the Sorceress. The ruler of the between-worlds and a controller of time should never interfere with the lives of mortals, and

that was what she was doing. The Lords of the Universe would be furious if they found out, because she was destined to be entirely alone.

Forever alone.

She stood up, shaking out her fur cloak, and stepping into the gloomy passage. Sigurd was right, this nonsense had to stop. It was time she woke him and set him free. He didn't belong here. It was only her selfish desire that was keeping him prisoner in the between-worlds, and now it had become a danger to them both.

Zany, her creature, had told her so. He worried for her . . . but more likely he worried for himself. She could hardly blame him for that. If she was replaced in the between-worlds he might not be so well cared for.

Her determined steps led her to a grove where there was a small chapel. This was her creation, made of white stone and scented with incense and lilies, and lit by the warm glow of candles. Sigurd lay sleeping here, awaiting his second chance at life. If the Lords of the Universe discovered what she was doing she would be punished. She would lose everything. But where Sigurd was concerned she couldn't seem to help herself.

Inside the crypt it was always winter. Ice crystals hung from the ceiling and crunched under her feet and her breath became a misty cloud. A frozen paradise for her Viking—it seemed fitting. On a marble tomb he lay, a massive man, bare chested, his yellow hair spread about

his handsome masculine face, at his side was his sword. Sigurd, the Sea Strider.

The Sorceress stood gazing down at him. Her fingers itched to stroke his skin but she knew better. Her touch could burn mortals. Even the brush of her lips on his would injure him. Her power was a blessing and a curse, but right now it felt like the latter.

Sigurd had been sleeping here since 818 AD. At first she'd believed she would find the right mortal woman for him, someone he would long to please. She had seen it so often down the ages, the way love conquered the most savage beast. But there never seemed to be the right woman, no matter how she looked, and in her heart she knew there never would be.

Because she wanted Sigurd for herself, and she wasn't unselfish enough to give him up and see him happy with another.

But an alliance with a mortal was impossible for the Sorceress. Her kind did not fall in love. She would destroy herself and Sigurd if she tried to live such a life.

Better to return him to the World of the Dead, where he belonged.

She smiled as she gazed down at him. Had she really thought to redeem him, turn him into a hero?

Sigurd had raided back and forth along the British coast with a disregard for human life that was unforgivable. The Sorceress's criteria for saving him and giving him another chance was that he was capable of

redemption, of understanding where he'd gone wrong and making amends.

A man like Sigurd didn't believe he'd done wrong. Vikings strode across the sea and raided and took lives. That was what they did. How could he be redeemed if he couldn't accept that he'd done wrong? She'd chosen the wrong man for her experiment; she'd allowed her senses to rule her brain.

Yes, it was time she gave up this nonsense and woke him.

There was an ache in her breast, and she smiled a sad smile as she raised her arms and began to chant the old words. The spell of waking. The air crackled, flashes of light sprang from her fingertips, the ice around her began to melt and drip, drip, drip.

Sigurd's eyelashes flickered.

He moved. His chest rose, drawing in a mighty breath, and his big hands shifted restlessly. Pale blue eyes opened, dazed, they found her and fastened on her.

"Lady? Where am I?" he said huskily.

The Sorceress stepped back. "You are in the between-worlds, Sigurd. The place of waiting."

He frowned. "Not Valhalla? All good Norsemen go to Valhalla when they die. Why am I not there among the gods?"

He sat up and swung his feet down to the floor. He rose to his full height, towering over her, and looked about him. He wore golden

amulets on his massive biceps and a medallion about his throat, tied with a cord. There were markings on it, runes, a spell to Odin, the god of his choosing.

The Sorceress reached for it, but he caught her hand and held it easily. She waited for him to flinch, to cry out, to suffer from the power of her presence as every mortal did, but he did none of those things. Instead Sigurd smiled.

“That belongs to me,” he said.

Startled, the Sorceress jerked her hand free. “You do not rule here,” she said. “I do. You will obey me or you will suffer.”

“I obey no one.”

Eyes blazing she sent a small bolt of her power, striking him in the middle of the chest. He gasped and stumbled back against the tomb. He peered down at himself, touching the spot with his fingers, clearly amazed, and then he smiled again. “I am impressed, lady. Show me more.”

“You will obey me.”

“Will I?” And then his pale eyes narrowed, and she could imagine him looking far distances across the ocean. “I know you. You are the woman who comes to me in my dreams,” he said.

She knew her face betrayed her. What was wrong with her? Such weakness was not like her—the Sorceress was never weak. She was a creature beyond mortal emotions; she could be harsh and cruel because

she did not understand kindness. But Sigurd touched her in a way no other creature ever had, and that was why he was so dangerous.

At that moment there was a clatter of footsteps approaching from the entrance to the chapel. A small man appeared, only four feet tall, wearing what appeared to be a medieval jester's costume. It was plain that he was deformed, one shoulder higher than the other, one leg shorter than the other. The Viking reached for his sword, but the Sorceress stepped in front of him.

"Zany? What is it?"

Zany was breathing fast and his eyes were round as plums. "The Lords of the Universe, lady! They are on their way. I hurried as fast as I could but they are close behind. You must do what you can to protect yourself." He glanced sideways at the Viking, who had stepped around her. "Send him away. You must."

Panic clawed at her but she forced it back. Now was not the time to be afraid, even though Zany's words had brought cold terror to her heart. This could be the end for her.

Sigurd seemed to know it instinctively.

"What must I do?" he asked gruffly, his hand clasping her shoulder. "Tell me, lady."

"I must make this place disappear," she whispered. "I will have to send you to your death."

He reached out and touched her cheek and it was only then that she realized she was crying. She had not thought herself capable of it. She could lose her very existence, at worst. Punishment and banishment, at best. And yet . . . the Sorceress looked into those pale blue eyes and found herself wishing it could be otherwise.

Sigurd could feel her strength, like lightning in the air, but it didn't frighten him. It invigorated him. Her power seemed to enter his own body, making him light headed, but only briefly before dispersing through his flesh and blood.

He wanted to be like her. One of the gods—or near enough.

“Will you send me to Valhalla?” he asked her levelly.

She shook her head. “You will sleep. A deeper sleep than this one. A sleep for all time.”

“You lie!”

The little man, Zany, took umbrage. “She doesn't lie, Viking, she tells the truth. Once you leave here you will go to the World of the Dead . . . where you should have been long ago.”

Sigurd ignored the little man's rudeness. Besides there were more important things to think about. He didn't like the sound of being dead. This enforced sleep in the between-worlds had been bad enough but at least he'd had his dreams. An eternity of nothingness was horrifying to a man like him.

“It is time now,” the Sorceress was watching him.

He shook his head, gazing into her eyes. She appeared full of steely resolve but he thought he caught a hint of doubt, of regret. Sigurd was aware of his great charm, and he knew she wasn't immune to him. He needed to convince her to keep him.

“Is there something I can do here, lady?”

“I don't need anyone killed today, thank you, Sigurd.”

Mockery. He shrugged it off. “I am a great deal more than a murderer, lady. I am a leader of men. My Vikings followed me without question across the seas and onto the land. I inspired their loyalty and their courage. They feared me, but they loved me too.”

“I broke the rules, Sigurd. I committed crimes against the laws of time by bringing you here, and keeping you here. I had some notion that I could change you, but I see now that was ridiculous. I am not a mortal woman and I should never have allowed my feelings to sway my better judgment.”

Flame hair and blue eyes, power crackling from her. She was a Valkyrie, he decided, beautiful and frightening, and not for the likes of mortal man. Her smile was like ice brushing his skin. And yet he was drawn to her, he wanted to be like her. If he could not sit at the table with Odin in the afterlife, then this was the next best thing.

“I wanted to give you a second chance at life,” she went on. “I thought you could be redeemed, that I would send you out into the world

again and with some guidance and care you would grow to see the error of your ways, to understand where you went wrong in the past, and to correct it. I wanted to rewrite your history.”

He laughed aloud.

Her eyes narrowed. “You think that wrong?”

“I think you were misguided. I have nothing to redeem myself for, lady. My world was a bloody one and I died, that is all. I do not want another chance at it. It is over.”

She frowned at him. “Then I must send you to the World of the Dead to sleep for eternity.”

“But I can be of help to you here. There must be other men who are not beyond redemption, men who can be turned into the heroes you crave, their histories rewritten. Why not let me help with them? Let me try, at least.”

“You are arrogant to suggest it, Sigurd.”

But he could see she was already turning over his words in her mind. She wanted to do it. She had a weakness and he continued to playing on it.

“Of course making such a decision takes courage,” he went on, with just enough doubt in his voice.

Her eyes darkened and flashed. “I have plenty of that, Viking.”

“Then why not do as you wish?”

She wanted to. She knew that even without his charming persuasion she would probably have carried on doing what she'd failed to accomplish with Sigurd. History had been unkind to so many men who deserved better, and she could turn their stories around and make them the heroes they deserved to be. Just because she'd failed with Sigurd did not mean she could not succeed with others. Especially when the Viking had never been redeemable in the first place.

She had the power, she had the time, and if she was breaking the laws of the universe then she would take that risk.

But to keep Sigurd at her side? No. It was far too risky. He made her careless, he made her weak. He made her feel like a mortal woman in the throes of love.

Zany was hopping about in front of her. "Lady, you cannot . . ."

If anything was designed to make her stubborn it was Zany's presumption. "I can do what I wish, Zany."

He seemed to realize his mistake. His shoulders slumped. "I beg forgiveness, my lady. I was thinking of your welfare. The danger to you."

"To us, you mean," she said icily.

Zany hopped to one side and back again, the bells on his shoes jingling. "There is the Dark World," he suggested cautiously.

"I had forgotten." The Sorceress cast Sigurd a searching look. "There is a place in the between-worlds, called the Dark World. It would be safe—the Lords of the Universe don't even know it exists."

“So you would send me there? Out of sight, out of mind?” he growled. “If I go then you must give me something to do, Sorceress.”

She thought. “You say you are a leader of men. I can send you those men I find beyond redemption. It will be a challenge, Sigurd. Redeem them for me. Do for them what I could not do for you.”

“I will be a king in this world? The Dark King.”

He was pushing her but she shrugged and let him have his way. A title meant nothing. He reached out to touch her and she waited for him to scream in agony, to cry out as his fingers burned.

He didn't.

“Will you visit me there, lady?” he said.

The Sorceress felt that aching pain in her breast again, the weakness of a mortal woman. She knew then she would not visit him, for her own sake she would not dare, but she could keep an eye on him. He would be within her realm, whether he knew it or not, and his business would be hers.

“You will be busy, Sigurd. There are creatures in the Dark World who need your governance.”

His eyes gleamed. “I look forward to it,” he said.

The Sorceress glanced about her. “You said the Lords of the Universe were coming,” she said to Zany with a frown. “I do not see them.”

He shuffled. "I lied," he admitted. "To make you decide on the Viking. I was tired of him lying in there and you mooning over him like a love-sick mortal."

She felt anger burn inside her but it was cold anger. She was herself again. "I command you go to the Dark World with Sigurd, Zany. You will be his servant. That is your punishment."

"But my lady . . ."

"Enough. I have made my decision."

The little man bowed low but not before she'd read the expression in his eyes. He knew this was more than a punishment. Zany would be her ears and eyes, her spy. Her watcher in the Dark World.

"Who will your next mortal be, lady?" Sigurd was watching her, as if daring her to admit that none other could mean as much as he.

The Sorceress turned about, flame hair whipping. "I will need to build something bigger to hold all the mortals I bring here," she said. She spread out her arms. "I will need a cathedral! And my Immortal Warriors will sleep within it until it is time to wake them and give them another chance at being the men they should have been."

"I wish you luck then," he said, his voice dropping low. Even now he was trying to seduce her with his charm, but she refused to look at him. She'd made the right decision, and if some corner of herself would be able to find pleasure in knowing he was closeby, then that was her secret.

*Later*

Sigurd stood, hands on his hips, feet apart, gazing about him. It was even more gloomy here in the Dark World than in the between-worlds. Never mind, he could cope with that. He would build a palace fit for a king and live here with his men—Dark Lords, he would call them—and he would teach them the error of their ways.

He smiled.

He was looking forward to it.

And there was always the Sorceress. One day, he promised himself, he would win her around.

One day she would be his.