

# WOLVES OF THE SPIRIT

by Liz Williams

\* \* \* \*

*“When I sent my first story to Asimov’s, I thought it didn’t have a hope. I literally could not believe the acceptance letter; it was rather like slipping into a parallel universe. Things haven’t changed much. Great going to all of you and happy thirtieth!”—Liz Williams*

**Liz Williams is a science fiction and fantasy writer living in Glastonbury, England, where she is co-director of a witchcraft supply shop. In the US, her novels and story collections have been published by Bantam Spectra and Nightshade Books. Liz appears regularly in Realms of Fantasy, Asimov’s, and other magazines. In her latest tale, she takes an icy look at some haunting songs and some ominous...**

\* \* \* \*

I am the keeper of the Baille Atha light now that my mother is dead, a princess in an ice-colored tower. My kingdom is the last hummock of land before the wastes of the Western Ocean, the final island before Darkland, and the enemy, and the start of storms.

Generations of women, generations of lighthouse keepers. It’s all kept in a book, a real one, bound with leather and iron as well as being stored in the computer database of the light. The book isn’t necessary, of course, and neither is it necessary for a living person to tend a lighthouse—they’d even stopped it on old Earth, long before we left for the stars, but something about Muspell, something about the sea and the mist and the ice, the way that ships vanish between midnight and morning, the way that you hear a sudden voice on the open ocean, seems to have convinced my ancestors that you need a living soul in a lighthouse, a small stand against the dark.

And there’s a lot of darkness, on Muspell.

My mother hated the winters here, the short bleak days followed by the quick fall of the sun, and she loved the long light summers, with the Northern Fire playing greengold above the horizon and the sky flowering with the summer stars. But I am the opposite, liking the stormy nights and the crash of dark, restless in summer with the gleaming length of days.

Shoredwellers always ask if you become lonely, out on the ice. They don’t realize that you are never alone: the weather is always with you, and the sea, and these are the great presences beyond the smaller spirits, of birds and sealstock and the selk. And others, too: once I went out onto the field at the end of winter to see an old woman standing at the very end of the crags, above the sea. She raised a hand

and waved to someone, but when I reached her, she was no longer there.

You would have thought that I'd have dreamed of a man, coming across the sea to claim me, a young girl's dreams, but I was content with what I had. There seemed enough time for that; I would wait, I told myself, until I became lonely, but somehow I never did.

Then, one day, a man did come.

\* \* \* \*

This is the way things are done. My own father was an island-man from Haut-terre, blown off course by the equinoctial gales, his little boat crashing onto the rocks beneath the lighthouse. My mother nursed him back to health; they fell in love, she fell pregnant.

He left anyway, when the next provisions drop came. They winched him up onto the copter and that, my mother said, was the last she saw of him. She cried, but not for long. There was too much to do. He did not come back.

She stayed, and brought me up, here at the Baille Atha light. We were not confined to the lighthouse itself. We would skate out across the green expanse to where the birds are, so thick along the ice cliffs that the air is one great shriek. And beyond the birds are the selk, and in winter, the selk sing.

Until the arrival of the man, I heard them only once, when I was a child and my mother had taken me out onto the icefield.

"Mother?" I said, when we had skated almost as far as the edge of the cliffs, our high-proof slickskins barely keeping out the cold. "Where are we going?"

And she said, "Why, we're going to the end of the world."

Beyond the cliff, the sea was like metal. As we reached the top and looked out over miles of silver water, the seabirds came up in a cloud and settled back down again. Their shrieking ended. The icefield was suddenly very quiet.

"Why have they stopped?" I asked. I looked up at my mother's face behind the translucent film of her slickskin; it was rapt and distant, her grey eyes fixed on the far horizon.

"Why?" I asked again, but she ignored me.

I didn't know what it was when I first heard it. It was thin and high, as cold as the wind. It drifted out across the icefield and we stood still in its path, frozen in the wake of sudden song.

"Mama?" but I never knew whether I had spoken the word aloud or whether the song had conjured it, was speaking to me out of the air. But my mother reached out and took my hand and drew me forward, to the very lip of the ice.

The sea churned, hundreds of feet below. I felt dizzy if I looked down, so I stared ahead instead, out to the bright line between sea and sky, and let the song go on.

My mother nudged me. “There. Can you see them?”

I looked down, wished I hadn’t, but she was holding tightly onto my arm and then I realized that the song itself would not let me fall.

The selk lay on the rocks below. They are nothing like the sirens of old Earth: there is little that is womanly or fair about them, although they were interbred with human genes. Like seals, but larger and more tapered, with front paws that are almost hands and with which they are able to manipulate basic tools. But they had no real need of tools, not with that song. It crept into my head and it spoke to me of the northern seas, the deep green, the dive and the rush. Listening to that song, I knew what it was like to be something other than myself.

I don’t know why they stopped. Perhaps they glimpsed us far above and took us for predators. But abruptly, their song ended and they slid over the edge of the rocks and into the water, *one, two, three*. A ripple marked the point of their dive and we did not see them again. The weather was changing, a storm driving down out of the north, and we skated fast before it, arriving back at the lighthouse just as the first flakes of snow hit. We locked the doors behind us and looked out at white sea, white sky.

“There,” I said. “That place, the cliffs. Is it really where the world ends?”

“No,” my mother replied. “Beyond the sea is Darkland, the home of our enemies, where the vitki come from.”

“The vitki,” I said. I’d heard the word before; my mother had used it to frighten me, when I was younger: *don’t go out on the ice alone, the vitki will come, they will take you away and change you into something terrible*.

“Who *are* the vitki?” I asked now, and my mother answered, “They are the wolves of the spirit.”

But that night, I dreamed of the selk, and of songs.

When I was nineteen, my mother died, of an infection in the lungs that might have been cured if she had lived on the shore. But the winter storms had come again and we were too far from a medical center. She went downhill fast, so quickly that I could not believe it, and I do not think I believed until several days after I had sent her body, in its burial pod, down into the green depths of the sea. I used to see her all the same, standing by the light, a younger woman than I had ever known, and nothing about this ever struck me as strange.

I ordered supplies, and a replacement pod, and carried on. That spring, I went out onto the ice again, finding a freedom in not having to ask permission of anyone,

and visited the selk, but I did not hear them sing, neither that year, nor any year that followed. I dreamed of it, all the same.

\* \* \* \*

When the man appeared, I did not know at first whether he was real. I was used to ghosts, by then. I took up the binoculars and watched him trudge over the ice: an ordinary fisherman's slickskin, a half-moon of face under the hood. He was dragging something behind him, something grey.

I went down to the intercom. Moments later, his voice came through.

"Is anyone there?"

"I'm the lighthouse keeper. My name is Siri Clathe. Do you have ID?"

The scan glowed blue and data showed on the screen: Edri Lailoken, out of Harkness, the registry numbers of a fishing rigger.

"You'll do," I said to Edri Lailoken through the intercom, and opened the door.

He wasn't so much older than I was, perhaps ten years or so, in his early thirties. When he pulled back the hood I saw blue eyes, dark hair, a face that was all harsh, sharp angles. But he had a winning smile.

"I've got a problem," he told me. "Got blown down out of Uist last night; my rigger's a wreck. Spring gales, you see. Come up faster than the eye can blink."

"Where is it?"

He gestured towards the northwest of the icefield. "Up there, at the base of the cliff."

"You were lucky," I said.

He grimaced. "You won't say that when you see the rigger."

He dumped a small pack on the floor and moved to open it, and it was then that I saw what he'd been dragging across the ice.

Dapple and pale, like a shadow made flesh. I felt as though he'd brought in the flayed skin of a man.

He saw me looking. "I know." His voice was very quiet. "I found it. Someone's been hunting."

"I'll have to report this." I felt sick. "The spring equinox was a fortnight ago—you know they're sentient, now?"

"Of course. But Siri, there are plenty of folk even in the Reach who think the selk are nothing more than animals. Even when they plead for mercy under a hunter's

club.”

“Why did they leave the skin?” I forced myself to look at it.

“Maybe they’re just after the meat—but I think it’s more likely to be *this*.” He tugged the skin over and I saw the black bands around it. “See? It’s a young one. The pelt-merchants don’t like the banding, it’s not fashionable.”

“So they just dumped it.”

I could see the disgust in his eyes. It had struck me, of course, that he’d been the one to kill the selk, but that expression convinced me otherwise. “You need to get someone out here, Siri.”

“I don’t know if they’ll come for only one selk.” The culls were another matter; I’d seen those on the newsfeeds, the ice running red, the pups begging for their lives.

“It won’t be just one. It’s so far out here, I suppose they thought they’d be undisturbed. Would you have gone out there, in this weather?”

I shook my head. “I’ll put that report through,” I said, and did so.

Communications this far out are often subject to delay. It was evening before I got a reply, telling me that the report had been filed and a response would be with me in the next couple of days.

“When is the next provision copter through?” Lailoken asked.

“Another week.”

“I’m afraid in that case, you’ll just have to put up with me, Siri.”

He said it with a smile. A lot can happen in a week, the thought came to me.

On the following morning, we went out to look at Lailoken’s rigger.

“I’m taking this.” I showed him the harpoon gun, the only weapon I had. “Just in case the hunters are still around.”

He gave a grave nod. “Good idea. I don’t have anything with me—I had a small weapon, but it’s still in the rigger; I couldn’t get at it.”

When I saw his craft, I knew why. Looking down from the top of the cliff, the prow of the rigger had been stoved in and it was sinking. The back half was already submerged.

“You were really lucky to have made it up the cliff,” I said. “There’s no way we’re going to be able to drag that up.”

Lailoken cursed. “It’ll be gone by the time we can get a rescue copter out here

and anyway, I'd have to pay. Oh well. It's insured, at least."

"Will you get the full amount back?"

He snorted. "I pay a high enough premium."

When we got back to the lighthouse Lailoken, with an air of resignation, asked if I had a spare fishing rod. I watched him walk across the ice, a graceful prowler, and chop a hole in the ice with a borrowed prong.

A fish supper, in pleasant company. Maybe I'd been lonelier than I'd thought.

I had a number of tasks to do around the light: basic maintenance. I went down into the base area to fetch some equipment; the skin of the selk was still there, folded as neatly as I could manage it, and so was Lailoken's pack. We'd made up a bed for him on the couch.

As I crossed the room, I heard a whisper.

*Iskir. Iskir.*

It was surprisingly loud and it startled me. I looked around, but nothing was there. My head rang with it. *Iskir.*

"Who's there?" I said aloud.

The whisper came again and it was coming from the pack. I was an idiot, I told myself. Lailoken must have a radio in there. Not much use, however, if the battery went flat. I didn't like rummaging about in his bag, but I opened it a little way anyway.

There was no radio. A handful of clothing, a spare slickskin, a long, flat parcel in a waterproof wrapping, that whispered, *Iskir, Iskir.*

I flicked the parcel open and snatched my hand back. There was blood on it, from a thin, shallow cut. I put my hand to my mouth and, carefully, drew the wrapping aside. Inside, was a long black knife: black blade, black shaft. It looked almost of a piece, the metal and bone blending into one another so seamlessly that I had to look hard for a join. My mouth flooded with the taste of iron.

*I had a small weapon, but it's still in the rigger.*

The door hummed and I hastily shoved the bag shut. Lailoken stood in the entrance with a brace of limmerel, his face wind-reddened and smiling.

"They're shoaling. You could almost pull them out of the water."

"Oh, well done." My voice sounded almost normal, I found to my surprise. I kept my injured hand out of sight, behind my back. "That's dinner settled, then."

Perhaps this was what marriage was like, all cheer and plans for supper, with

the hiss of secrets underneath. I got through the next few hours with difficulty, and excused myself shortly after dinner. I told Lailoken I'd cut myself on a weathered sheet of metal. He seemed hardly to hear me.

My mother might have lived alone, apart from me, but that didn't mean that she didn't communicate. She had friends all over the Reach: on the message boards and the genealogy lists. One of them was a sea marshal named Kari Shoar. I sent her a message, then went to bed and tried to sleep.

I could still hear it, in my restless dreams. *Iskir, Iskir.*

Around three AM, I found myself wide awake. The *message-in* section of the console was blinking. I went to look at what Shoar had written.

*I've not met Edri Lailoken myself. Some of the older guys here know him, though he hasn't been out with the boats for years, since his accident. They say he's a miserable old bugger, keeps himself to himself. What's he doing all the way out at the Baille Atha light?*

I hadn't voiced my suspicions yet, but I did so then. I did not feel able to handle this on my own. I needed help and I asked Shoar to send a sea marshal out, or come herself. Why would you take on someone else's identity, unless you had something to hide? And besides, identity theft in the Reach is not an easy matter. Not easy, or cheap.

I did not sleep for the remainder of that night. There was no further reply from Shoar; her part of the Reach was several hours ahead of Baille Atha, and she had probably gone on shift. I watched the moon drift down over the ocean, sliding into its own silver track, and still the whispering went on.

Towards dawn, there was a flicker of green in the corner of my eye. *Message-in*, I thought, and ran to the console. But it was on another array to the communications console—a small emerald light, telling me that the main door of the lighthouse had been opened.

I should have waited. I should have locked myself into the lighthouse, a princess in my tower, and made sure that the override switches were on lock. Because I knew what Lailoken was, now, and where that black blade had come from: a land of dark glass cliffs, of echoing forests, of experiments and spells.

Should have waited, but did not. I thought of that sad piled pelt in the base of the lighthouse, of the selk singing at the ocean's edge, and I could not stay. I picked up the harpoon gun on my way out; he had not taken it with him. I suppose he did not need to. I also checked his bag. The knife was gone.

In the cold glow just before the dawn, the spires and pinnacles of ice gleamed green with their own faint phosphorescence. Lailoken had left no tracks in the snow, and that nearly made me turn back to the reassuring column of the lighthouse. But I

went on, following the whisper of the knife in my mind, and at last I came to that same cliff, that my mother had called the edge of the world.

Lailoken was nowhere to be seen. Cautiously, I made my way to the lip of the cliff and looked over. The ice field extended some distance out from the shore, a thin spring sheet, and he was already halfway across it. Ahead, shadowy shapes marked the rocks. The selk were there. I raised the harpoon and measured a shot but he was out of range. I could see how he'd made his way down the cliff, the handholds. It was still dark enough that he might not see me even if he looked back, or so I prayed. I shouldered the gun and went after him.

When I was almost at the bottom of the cliff, and Lailoken's figure was approaching the rocks on which the selk lay, something changed. The world around me became colder and seemed to darken, but at the same time, I could see more clearly. I caught a glimpse of Lailoken's face, as if I was kneeling before him. It was white and rapt against the pre-dawn sky and I knew that I was seeing through the knife itself, through Iskir. My blood hammered and pounded in my head and I came close to falling. I snatched at a handhold of ice, half caught it, and slid the rest of the way, luckily only a few feet, to the base of the cliff.

Down here, the rocks were slippery, like wet glass. I did not know how Lailoken had made such quick progress and my fear of him grew. I saw his face again and he was speaking, whispering to the knife as someone might whisper to a lover. Something pushed against the world; I had the sense of force—and then the song began.

This time, it was not wordless. The selk, sentient now, was singing in its own tongue of Shelta. I did not understand it, but I could grasp repeats, refrains—and Iskir did understand, I somehow knew, and was spinning the song out of the selk like a long skein of blood.

Lailoken gave a single shout, a cry of triumph. He raised Iskir, brought it down through the air. I had a dizzying rush, cleaving the air with the knife, as it cut the song. Lailoken's other hand held a bag; the song fell into it. From across the icefield, there was a heavy, echoing splash as the selk rolled and fell. And I dragged the harpoon from my shoulder, aimed and fired.

The world slowed down. Lailoken turned as the bolt glided towards him and I saw his face, clearly at last. He looked nothing like the blue-eyed, black-haired young man from whom I'd sat across a table, eating limmerel. I don't know what he looked like, except that I wouldn't have described it as human. The bolt crept on and Lailoken smiled and stepped unhurriedly out of the way.

"Iskir!" I cried. "Iskir!" My voice sounded thick in my mouth. Lailoken's smile widened, but out on the rocks, something stirred. A selk was singing.

It wasn't the plaintive, desolate song of a few minutes before. Lailoken's spell had been broken just long enough, the knife's concentration shifting. This was a war



song.

My hands hammered at my ears. I dropped to my knees. Time came back in a rush and the harpoon bolt sailed past Lailoken and struck a spire of ice, which shattered. But the ice was shattering, too, thin splintering cracks stemming out from where Lailoken, suddenly, was flailing for balance.

It happened quickly after that: the ice breaking, Iskir flying from Lailoken's hand like a black arrow, the vitki going down, down, into the killing sea. The selk's song stopped as abruptly as it had begun. I was crouching, my forehead nearly touching the ice. A few yards from me, where the ice was unbroken, Iskir skittered to a halt and lay waiting.

After a moment, I became aware that the pounding sound in my head wasn't my own blood, after all, but the rotor blades of a sea marshal's copter, landing above me on the cliff. Slowly, I got to my feet. I stepped out onto the ice, picked up Iskir, and put it in a fold of my slickskin. It felt slippery, as if coated with blood. Then I climbed back up the cliff to where Marshal Shoar was waiting.

\* \* \* \*

An hour later, she and I went back up to the northwest quadrant of the icefield. It was not long past dawn, with a strong morning wind blowing offshore. Together, Shoar and I looked over the cliff to where the wrecked rigger lay. It was not wrecked now. It hovered slightly above the surface of the water, quite safe, with the flicker of a dying holo-form shuddering over it. In the moments where the holo-form was failing, I saw that it was nothing like a fishing rigger, but a thin craft. I'd never seen anything similar before, but Shoar nodded when she saw it.

"Vitki," was all that she said.

"He wanted me to file the report about the skin," I said. "He was prepared for someone to come."

"Arrogance," she said. But she did not sound sure. Then she added, "Perhaps he wanted a copter."

Her team took the rigger back with them to Uist, proof of enemy incursions into the Reach. The Baille Atha lighthouse was put on the nearest marshal's sea patrol and now a wing comes over perhaps every three days or so, undergoing routine checks. But Lailoken still walks the ice, head down in its vitki hood, stumbling along as if looking for something. I can see the ice spires through his body; I have seen no need to alert the sea patrol to his presence.

I keep Iskir in a metal box, up in the light near the storms and the sky. Sometimes, I take the knife out and look at it; it seems to grow harder, more solid, year by year. I have not told the sea patrol about Iskir, either. For if another wolf of the spirit should come, searching for a knife that can cut a song from the air, I think I would like to see just how far Iskir can pare, spiraling flesh and blood and bone

away, all the way down to the cold hollow of an enemy soul.

Copyright © 2007 Liz Williams