

Tales of the Northern Lights

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Nights in the cold north, around the arctic circle, often play host to a strange and beautiful sight. The night is deep and dark, with countless stars shining in the black, and then a colourful, shifting ribbon blossoms in the sky – the aurora borealis, or the Northern Lights.

What causes this strange and beautiful sight? Nowadays we can say with confidence that the phenomenon is caused by electrically charged particles interacting in the atmosphere, but even knowing this that knowledge makes the sight no less spectacular, no less magical.

Imagine, then, how it must have seemed to people many years ago – shimmering green firelight in the sky, a thing of true wonder and magic. But even long years ago people would find explanations for the Northern Lights, sharing them and passing them on until they took root in the memory of a people becoming folklore and myth.

Some tales say that the lights are an omen of good fortune and prosperity, such as one belief from Sweden that the aurora was caused by the shining scales of the shoals of herring waiting to be caught on the morrow...

Fin lay in his bed, blankets curled about him, and stared through the window at the fire in the sky. The shifting light had faded into being a little while before, and he was captivated by it. As he watched, he heard the quiet creak of the door, but he didn't look away from the strangelight, afraid that if he did it would vanish.

"Fin...?"

His mother's voice was soft, and followed by a sigh as she saw that he was awake. He heard her step into the room, felt her sit at the end of the bed, her gaze also on the dancing fire in the night sky.

"What is it?" His voice was barely a whisper. "What does it mean?"

His mother reached out a hand to stroke his hair.

"The norrsken, Fin. It is a good omen. There are great shoals of herring swimming offshore, so many that their scales catch the light of the stars and set the sky alight with it. Your father will make a good catch tomorrow, and we will prosper. But now you must sleep."

His mother tucked the blankets about him and Fin turned away from the window, curling up tighter, smiling up at her. She leaned down to plant a kiss on his forehead, and then stood and moved to the door. Fin stayed curled up until he heard the creak of the door closing, but then he turned back to the window. The dancing fire of the norrsken was still there, and his eyes drank it in.

"A good omen," he murmured, and thought of his father setting out in his boat under the blazing night. Fin gazed at the burning sky beyond his window until at last, sleep claimed him.

It is also said that the Vikings believed the northern lights were caused by reflections on the armour of the Valkyries as they led those warrior who had fallen to the halls of Odin. It is worth pointing out that this idea isn't found in any Old Norse literature, but rather was claimed by more modern scholars – however, it does make for an inspiring story idea...

The world shimmered as Erik opened his eyes and stared at the warrior who had called him by name. She stood tall and proud, the light of battle making her eyes shine as she reached out a hand to pull him to his feet. Erik stood, his bearded axe still held tight in his fist, and glanced at the battlefield about him. It was the field where he had fallen,

and yet it was not. He saw perhaps twenty others, standing with figures like the maiden who had called to him, but no more. All about them, though, were strange figures, moving as though in the dance of battle. They were roughly human in shape, but featureless and hazy, as though seen through a thick sheet of ice...

"I greet you, Erik Grímsson, you fought well and died in glory. I am Kára."

Her voice was rich and warm, and Erik turned to the shining warrior and grinned.

"I greet you, Kára. Why have you called me?"

She grinned in return and turned, gesturing him to follow. About him the other warriors and those they had called began to move, leaving the battlefield behind. They increased their pace until they were running, the landscape passing by in a blur, and Kára called out to Erik.

"We are the Valkyrie, Erik Grímsson, and we call on the worthy. Run hard, warrior, for there is far to go and Odin awaits."

Erik and the other fallen warriors let out a cry of joy and ran faster still. All about them the night glowed with green fire as the Valkyrie's armour reflected the light of the stars.

Grinning with a fierce pride and joy, Erik ran the Valkyries, onward to Valhalla.

Another tale, and I think my personal favourite is that of the tulikettu, the firefox which, according to some stories of Finland, lights the night afire...

In the light of the day the firefox sleeps, curled into a ball of night black fur. But when night falls and the darkness comes, the firefox wakes and sets out to explore. In the darkness flames blossom in the firefox's fur, lighting its way as it runs across the snowy landscape towards the mountains. Seeking out the rocky mountain peaks, the better to see the stars, the firefox climbs higher and higher, until the trees are far below and the rocky mountainside breaks through the snow. As he runs through the forest and over the mountains, the firefox's tail brushes against tree and stone, sending sparks curling up into the sky. The sparks shimmer and dance in the night air, forming a shifting aurora of fire that lights the sky for miles around.

It's little wonder that such a spectacular phenomenon has inspired folktales, myths and stories around the world, so when it came to adapting Andersen's tale of The Snow Queen, it was only logical to take inspiration from some of them.

The three tales mentioned here all play a small part in Gerda's journey to rescue Kai and confront the Snow Queen, and in the same way that she could not have succeeded without them, our story could not have been told were it not for those tales of magic and myth that have come before.