

## Prologue

### The World Will Burn

People say that Gods used to walk across these lands. That the world used to be a place of grandeur and peace. Until mortals, with their twisted evil, forced them to go away.

Now all must live with what was left behind. To walk the lands of turmoil, that were once those of bliss. And those who preach of divine salvation are sure that one day mortals will allow the world to burn. Even those who say that these stories are just that. Ways to make people feel ashamed of their nature. To keep them in line. To make them follow the rules. They still feel the dark tide of human nature. Gods or no, they can sense the end of all things.

The girl thinks none of it matters.

She is stuck in this desolate forest. The burden of the cold air, and the unceasing miles of walking, and the lack of a destination; these are the only Gods she knows.

The girl is a lost soul. But it is with her that it all begins.

The morning is frigid, like all others. The day will contain more hard miles through the fur trees. She started walking as soon as the sun breached the canopy.

And on this morning, when all seems the same as any other day, a scorching light pierces the woods. A deafening explosion strikes like thunder in her ears. An earth shaking wave bends the trunks of trees and throws a wall of snow in all directions. The force hits her in the chest, flinging her into the nearby bushes.

In an instant all settles. Everything goes silent and still again. Birds return to their morning songs, as the sound of the winds refill her ringing ears. She lays in the foliage, her mind screaming for her to get up and run. But her body is frozen. Lying there unable to move even an inch, besides the trembling spreading down her body. She lies here and she waits. She waits for the bad ones. The horrors that can manifest such feats of power. For the people twisted by infernal magics to find her.

Every second feels like an eternity. Despite the subtle ringing still present in her ears she seems to hear more than she ever could. Focusing on every sound. Waiting for the ring of sharp steel. Or boots crunching the snow.

But there is no sound. Only the familiar wind passing through the valley, and the song birds. No footsteps, no whispers, not even a breath.

Ever so slowly she begins to rise from the brush. Being delicate with her movements so as not to cause any noise herself. Her bow has found its way into her hands, an arrow nocked and drawn. With a low stance and gentle steps she makes her way behind a thick fir. Here she stays and listens again.

Minutes pass with still no noise, no movement, no voices. Ignoring the pain that now grows in my arms from keeping the arrow drawn and pointed. Again she moves with silent steps from tree to tree, taking a moment behind each one. Listening.

Soon there are no trees behind which to hide. She is close to the source of the explosion and the woods now resemble the remains of a devastating battle. Though no men lie dead, the trees have turned to splinters. Buried roots, torn from the earth, razed the frozen soil. The canopy above has been ripped away, allowing the morning light to shine upon the debris. From here, behind the closest tree that is still standing, she can see where it must have happened. A deep, smoking indent of blackened dirt lies in the middle of the wreckage, spanning a few metres across.

The girl takes another moment to scan the treeline, and search for any signs of life. After seeing the scale of this destruction the last thing she wants is to run into the bad ones responsible for this.

Still there is no movement, no sound. Nothing but quiet.

She should run. That's the smart thing to do.

*"If you don't know what it is it's probably dangerous"*, that's what her father would say whenever he sensed that her curiosity was getting the better of her.

It's a good rule, and easy enough to follow when handling unknown plants or sharp objects. But this is something more. And that creeping curiosity is winning the battle against her instincts. No one is around. No sound, no movement. Nothing. The girl is completely alone in these woods. There is no harm in getting a closer look.

She releases the bowstring slowly and sheaths the arrow as she takes the first steps out into the clearing. She tries to move stealthily, as she was before, but the wreckage makes that near impossible. Not that it matters. Now that she is completely out in the open she can be sure that she is alone. Based mainly on the fact that she hasn't been blown up. In no time she has hopped her way over the debris, and stands at the edge of the crater.

The remaining fear and curiosity inside the girl turns to confusion as her eyes fall upon the crater. It's three metres wide and sunken about half a metre into the ground, with dark black scorch marks streaking from its centre. A thick smell of ash rises with a light smoke off of the smouldering embers resting within. And there, in the middle of it all, lies a book.

Wrapped with dark leather, held shut with a simple steel latch, and about the size of my hand.

The girl looks around at the forest again, this time almost wanting to see someone. Someone who can explain what the hell is going on. How can it be that a forest is turned to splinters, everything in a hundred feet blown into the sky, and in the centre of it all is nothing but a book?

Just a simple book.

Curiosity winning over completely, she jumps down into the charred crater and bends down to look even closer. A small book, wrapped in leather, bound shut with a strap and a steel latch. The only thing unusual about it is that it hasn't been scorched like everything around it. In fact, other than its worn edges, the book is completely clean.

Maybe I'm losing my mind, the girl thinks. None of this makes any sense. Could it be exhaustion? The endless hunger and cold causing hallucinations or has led to insanity. It can't be, this journey has been hard, but she is sure she is not near her breaking point.

Pushing aside any remaining hesitations I reach out my hand, and I touch it.

Darkness surrounds the girl in an instant. The book, the crater, the forest. All gone. Then in another instant a light so blinding she has to cover her eyes with her hands. She blinks rapidly, forcing her eyes to open and adjust to the light. When she can finally make out what is in front of her, the girl lets out an uncontrollable cry and falls backwards.

Something bad has happened again. She was kneeling right over that book. Right there in that forest. And now she is somewhere new. Somewhere horrible.

High above the world, on the rim of a writhing volcanic crater, with the whole world stretched out in front of her. She can see as far as the coasts in every direction. All the mountains, all the valleys, all the rivers, the lakes, the fields, and the forests. Up here on a ridge as high as the clouds.

Lightning erupts from swirling, black storm clouds striking the volcanic rock behind her. She turns to find that the ground where the white hot bolt had struck is fracturing open. Blazing lava spews from expanding cracks. She hears the mountain below roar, like a gargantuan monster crying out in pain. The earth shakes as the fractures spread down the mountain face, through the fields and forests, before finally striking the shores. Oceans turn to steam, as the cracks expand until they are gaping ravines, filled with a hellish crimson glow.

Fire spreads, and grows and grows, devouring towns and cities in their flames. The screams of millions rise from the ashes, they cry out their terror, their pain, their sadness. A horrifying cacophony of suffering.

All the girl can do is kneel on the ridge, eyes open and unblinking, mouth wide with horror, without enough courage to scream.

And then it's all gone. The blackness returns, then light again.

Eyes still open in terror, she sees the shattered forest, cold, scorched, and white. And the book clutched in her shaking hands.

Now the girl screams.