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The Golden Tower

Book 1

And a Road to Chaos

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Cosmic/Chaos Fantasy

Action/Adventure

PROLOUGE

Wet Soil, Rotted Wood

By all accounts, the north was a savage place. Blistering winds brushing in fattened clouds from seas in the east, engendering icefalls from the glaciers in the mountains. Those who dwelt in the lowlands were spared their wrath; many were not so. But through the whispers of many in the realm of Eldewind, the savagery of the northern state’s people far surmounted that of its temperament. Whether in the taverns of Weshare; market streets of Easwal, those whispers were tailed by ones of doubt; ‘one of these years, a bitter winter’s going knock them out their place in those mountains.’ Though the men of the mountains had dwelt there since the turn of the era, three hundred years ago, then ever before that in the frosted wastes, and icy peaks of the realm beyond the north of Eldewind. No; in truth no treacherous icefall nor relentless winds could fell them from their place in the peaks; for the peaks were their home, and their home was Direhal.

Though, Direhal was not the home of Winithay; least yet he did not call it so. For now, he remained in his birth home: Hilkoray. An entirely unremarkable town in the similarly unassuming theocratic state of Kilthos, wedged between the realm’s two great powers, Weshare in the south, Direhal in the north. Though Kilthos remains the oldest established governance in the union, this ever seemed to afford it no credibility. Ever did Kilthos seek to make friendly with the rest of the union, ever was it spurned by all, but the ‘savage’ men of the north. For the men of Direhal were just as fierce friends as they were warriors; a fierceness the Kilthish had come to depend upon these past three hundred years. It was this solidarity that led many men to seek lives and work in the partner state.

Many years ago, perhaps fifteen or sixteen, Old Minhily had done just that. ‘I’m going north, Wini,’ he said, ‘to the mountains, there’s not for me here but wet soil and rotted wood. But in the mountains, where in the cracks of stone, flows golden, I’ll again find my strength.’ He had gone to Hvarkinal, a gold mining town of Direhal, a seemingly odd choice Winithay then did not appreciate. ‘But why leave home, Hily?’ a young Wini asked. ‘Why leave here all that you’ve built?’ But Minhily looked from the shelf upon the homestack, down to the bubbling river below, and up to the top of the stacks across the way; many of which he had a hand in building. ‘What I’ve done here will remain. Though I will not.’ He met Wini’s gaze and placed a hand upon his shoulder, ‘lives are not defined by what we’ve lost—rather it is what we build that makes us. I’ve built all I can here—now I have a responsibility to the mother—and to all my fathers to continue to build, until I am stripped of the flesh to do so.’

That night had come and gone, just as all nights before; the blue of the moon continued to glow and gold of the sun still shone; the green of the earth turned to browns and reds in autumn’s beckons; and just as Minhily had said, what he built remained. Though what he built was more than homes: a doubt in Winithay’s mind, an itch of the heart. It started small; in time, it grew. Wini came of age years later, letting pass the opportunity to take a wife, the shadow ever growing, the desire ever gnawing, the fear of what would come of such a change ever reeling back his dream raddled mind.

Then came the day of Winithay’s thirtieth birthday; this day brought with it change. In the later hours, he had gone to eat with an old friend Kahisa, and his wife Lara. ‘This day is good, old friend,’ said Kah, pouring Winithay a cup of red wine. ‘Not only for your good health,’ he looked to his wife, ‘but for Lara’s two-fold as well!’ The candle flames flared; a flicker of a new life had been gifted to the world. ‘This is fantastic news!’ said Wini, feigning no joy as he raised his cup, ‘may this make the wine all the sweeter!’ Did it so—for the rest of the night was spent in great merriment; reminiscing, rumoring, relishing, and ultimately resting. Though when the hour reached late, Winithay did not sleep—he remembered. He had seen what Kah had built: comfort in home, love in family. Wini had not but wet soil and rotted wood. It was the simplicity and reliability of rock that he craved. A rigid foundation that he might build upon: his legacy.

On this day, October twenty-seventh of the two-hundred and seventy-sixth year of the Era of Expansion; in light of Wini’s coming thirty-second birthday, he would follow the plans he had set over these past two years. He would follow Old Minhily to the slopes of ice, and rivers of gold he had sought. There he would find it, it that craved so long, it that he could not yet put a name to, but it that grew so familiar in his heart. He stood atop the perch of the homestacks, where this all began those years ago; looking down to the river, up the top of the stacks across it; many had he a hand in maintaining.

‘The day’s finally come, has it?’ Kahisa asked, joining Wini on the perch.

‘It has.’ Across the river, children could be heard playing, screaming, and laughing; fishermen sang their watersongs, the reeling of a cast line accompaniment; blessings of the Myra singing from the Green; the sounds of home, they were—each and all.

‘What road will you take?’

‘There is really only one road to take. North the Thulim River, cross the border by way of the Fjol; northwest hence.’

‘I almost envy you. Fjol’Ferin is one of the world’s great wonders; one day, I should very much like to see it. Then again, you must brave that accursed cold; that I do not envy. I’ll be honest Wini, I can’t quite say as I understand why you choose to do this.’

‘Neither did I.’ Said, under breath; Kahisa seemed to not hear. Together, a moment of respectful silence was shared, the world around them continued moving.

‘Nevertheless,’ Kahisa raised his hand, the neck of a dark wine bottle gripped tight, put forth to Wini. ‘A gift from my family, and I. Something to keep you warm on those chilling northern nights.’

A bottle of Easberry Company Red, one-eighty-two EoE. A good bottle; perhaps too. A great deal was a bottle such as this worth. ‘Thank you, Kah. I only hope they have cups of quality enough to enjoy an Easberry such as this.’

‘If not, drink from the bottle, no sharing needed where you’re off to anyway!’ Kahisa gave Wini a pat on the shoulder, together laughing. Wini left the perch, a jacket splayed out on the bedend stool, along with a pair of walking shoes, walking stick and his pack. ‘You will write, won’t you?’

‘Of course, though I suspect this is that last time we will speak. It’s a long way, and I don’t intend to make it twice.’

‘I thought as much. Would make less the impact of this choice. So, if I’m ever to see your face again, I’ll know you’ve failed.’

‘Cheery.’

‘Quite.’ They smiled, laughing once more, drawing in for a hug. ‘Now go, my brother; gold awaits.’

Wini slung his pack, grabbing the shoes and his walking stick. Taking one last look out onto the perch, he breathed a free sigh—letting his feet carry him out the door, down the stack, through the green sheltered streets of Hilkoray. Up the river to the borders, where he dawned his walking shoes, humming an old Kilthish drinking song, he’d become familiar with in his youth. North was where he was going. Now the North was where he would stay.

PROLOUGE

Sounds, Smells, and Sights

The journey north was a long and painful one; Wini’s knees beginning to weary, small sores forming in the arches of his feet. Near eight-hours hike every day beginning to weigh; but today, ten days into his month-long journey, Wini was excited, for this was the day he would look upon the Fjol, finally leaving the borders of this country. With only eleven miles left to the foot of the Great Gate, he could hear faintly the ringing of its bells in the distance, ringing for the morn. He snuffed the fire, rinsed his bowl and spoon in the Thulim River and set northward.

By midday, he had reached the road to the Fjol. For the first time yet in the journey, he was walking the path with others, many others. Possibly a hundred people in all making their way with carts, full of goods, and tools; a few more proper looking folks with vibrant robes, trotting atop horses; and guards. The guards paced the roads, with their battle hammers, or ‘thrashers’ people called them; each man wearing thin leather armor, iron furnishings about the waist, and chest; a large animal hide draped over their shoulders and around the waist, an iron jawguard covering the lower half of their faces. Though even this light armor seemed almost laughably unnecessary; each man stood taller than all travelers on the road, many standing taller than even the horses; their shoulders broad, arms and legs like those of a great wolf; and their hands the claws of a bear. By any normal standards, these men were giants; animalistic and brutish; a chill as cold as the steeps they call home sit dead in their eyes. Wini had known men of Direhal; willed, and mighty they were without a doubt; these men, however, were some, new breed entirely.

The road rounded the corner, finally parting from the river which ran the mountains, up to a great glacier that could only just be seen through the peaks and the fog over the heights. At the end of the road, however, was Fjol’Ferin; the Wall of Direhal; Shield of the North; Garrison Gate; grand as the glory placed upon it by the tales told in the lowlands. Three great towers traced the wall, one on either end, and the final in the middle, each nearing the height of the jagged summits surrounding them, and plenty wide to bear the load. The wall connected the towers, though the label ‘great’ seemed insufficient; it was half the height of its towers, and just as thick. Drawing ever closer, the great grey stone ever towering over him, making him dizzy; the sense of awe among the crowd: palpable. ‘What manner of men could build such a thing?’ A peasant women asked her husband.

‘Not men.’ He responded, hoisting his grain cart. Many believed that its creators; the Bavedonians (or Mikthili as they’re called in Old Argaloni), were not men at all, an idea bolstered by the current state of their ‘empire’: accursed, immortal, but dormant in the wild westerlands. A strange fate: one that Kilthos would have shared, were it not for Iyrismn breaking Kilthos from the state to join the union against the empire.

He now stood at the foot of the wall, guards standing by the main gate, solid iron, fitted with a twice thick portcullis. The guards vetted each entrant before letting them pass into the heart of the wall. The gate alone was massive; twelve feet tall at least, thrice wide; four men standing guard on either side. ‘Purpose of passage?’ The nearest asked.

‘I seek work in the mines of the north.’

‘An honorable ambition. I suggest you take to the east road; there’s a silver mining village: Lostinek, one-hundred miles down, desperately in need of strong arms.’

‘I would no doubt; but already I plan northward, to Hvarkinal.’

‘Then you’ve a long way ahead of you. Thres ikfelor dager dagthir kjen: may your feet find strong earth.’ The guardsman bowed his head, Winithay returning the sentiment, proceeding into the long hall of the Fjol.

There were five gates about the length of the hall, large holes in the arched ceiling of each divided segment. Every step taken by the crowd echoed through the tunnel, like the rolling of battle drums in the distance; but no other sound was present, but the whistling of winds through the cold stone. Out the other end: Direhal. A long narrow valley ran north, towers on either side, dividing the grassland from the sheer of the mountains. The road branched; one eastward, toward the coast, passing the Direhal capital of Baldengard, on its way; the other road led west, into the heart of the mountains, where Wini’s destination lay.

He walked for a few hours more, until his feet could carry him no more. The evening was approaching; sun glowing red over the horizon in the west; clouds painted from a thick white paste, slowly rolling over the pink velvet sky. He found a small trench, a dip in the earth between the road and the foot of the mountains to the south, a small bubbling stream drifting down from above. Its water was cold, sharp, and pure as clear crystal. With the set of the sun, brought with it a chill, carried upon the westerly winds; brushing amongst the evergreens, from where Wini gathered firewood. He set the wood up in a small pyramid, some dry grasses, and small twigs around and underneath, a small mound of ashpowder at the base. He struck the flint, a spark, small and bright, landing on the ashpowder, fizzing to a flicker of a flame. Soon, the grasses caught, then the wood.

Wini took the small pot, tied, hanging from the side of his pack, with some water from the stream; while he waited for a boil, he took a pinch of fine Kilthos tea leaves, wrapping them in a small tea paper he kept tied in a bunch, between two dried squares of thin bark. Setting his tea to steep, he started on supper: a steak of salted pork, grilled in wild mushrooms, and leeks, he’d been gathering about his journey. The meat hissed meeting the pot, thin pale pink juice seeping from the quickly browning edges, the mushrooms and leeks softened and let forth a fragrant air that quite complemented the tea. And very soon, Wini’s little trench was filled with sounds, smells, and sights that one wouldn’t forget in a hurry.

He'd got to bed early that night. Something about the air that seemed different, cool, comfortable, and clear. It was thin, unlike the dense forest air he had grown accustomed to. That, and a nearly ten-hour day of walking, the pleasantness of the hole he’d found himself in, all made for quite a restful night.

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Over the next few weeks, Wini carried on the same routine of walking, breaking for lunch, then again walking until it was time to rest. But as he reached the Sovadreth Lake, the pleasant cool winds turned bitter, blackening clouds from beyond the borders rolling over mountains, laying a thick black shade over the land. Now, as he ascended the Navdanthir Mountains, where Hvarkinal lay, he could feel the stiff air, and flakes of fattened white snow drift down from above. He camped for the night, once more, thirty-five miles up the mountain path, with only fifteen left to go. His legs ached, feet covered with sores, blistering hands, and bluing flesh under his fingernails. But tomorrow, November twenty-fifth, the day of his thirty-second birthday, he would finish his journey, and reach Hvarkinal.

So came the morning, like all mornings before. Winithay snuffed the fire, packing his pot, bowl, and cup, in his pack, washing up in the stream (after struggling against its cold), and finally he was off. Though the fact that it was his final day of travel afforded him no ease, for this day was the most difficult yet. The mountain grew steep, the road filling with snow, cloud fogging the way ahead. The sun reached noon, but Winithay did not stop. He had only a few miles left to go and could not bear to pack and unpack in this condition. Instead, he ate the last of his food while he walked, no longer concerned with rationing, or pacing himself. The only food or drink item remaining in his pack; the bottle of Easberry Red that Kahisa had gifted him the day of his departure, remaining unopen.

And after another few hours of trudging through the cold; the sun in its final phases of the day; a warm glow in the distance, and the piquant smell of hops on the wind. A thin mist laid over the village, the western glow; vibrant pinks and oranges dancing between the bulbs of cool, sweet water. And so would be the sight of his nights, as he sits outside Hvarkinal’s temple, looking to the west, for the months to follow; his back warmed by the heat of the temple’s hearth, his face cold, frozen in the awe of the expanse.

PROLOUGE

Westward

Over the following months, Winithay grew accustomed to his new life, Minhily taking him on as his student. Though it was all rather simple; they would wake early, while the sun still slept below the crest of the eastern mountains; the men would gather in the temple for sharing of drinks, music, poetry, and discussion of local and distant lore—as was the custom of the people of Direhal; then would set for the deeps. The work was taxing, and often dangerous, food rations often ran low; the roads would snow over, and the caravans would delay shipments; though the drink was never lacking—when delivered rations began to thin, the men would turn to their own brews from whatever fermentable rations remained. When Winithay planned his new life, he’d never anticipated drinking such a quantity of beer made from pine sap, though it was not all unpleasant. The men called it ‘ljelsov’, once meaning ‘stiff tree water’ in the tongue of the north, but over time, became so simplified to the point of meaning nothing other than the drink it was made to label.

Winithay long thought it a rather curious thing—most of the men had small, quarter gallon kegs that they kept by, or even under their pallets, for purpose of personal brewing. The men would often bring their kegs along to dinner in the hall, to share in whatever they’d concocted over the previous weeks. It did not take long for Winithay to follow; it was April twenty-ninth, the first agreeable day of the year—Minhily had taken Winithay west, down the slope to a thicket of redwood pines. Under Minhily’s direction, Wini had hewn one in its early adolescence. With every pull, his axe coating in the redwood’s thick, deep reddish-gold sap, making it difficult, though the flesh was soft, and the stalk thin.

With the lumber in tow, Wini and Minhily returned home, spending the rest of the following three day’s free time shaping the wood and working the steel, until Winithay had a small keg of his own; quarter gallon deep crimson red body, fitted with a metal spout and hoops (made with help from Hvarkinal’s blacksmith, Friggen). Soon, Wini was making ljelsov of his own, slowly branching out to even more adventurous brews.

But drink was only a small facet of the Ljakeln culture, for the cold dark of the mines, and the bustling warmth of the Drinkhouse were seldom absent the ringing of song and story. Over time, Wini grew familiar with the lore of the northmen. The tales of the Father Creator Orsel; how he created the Brother God Ikev, to be his opposite, and Sister Goddess Enev to be the keeper of balance; the imprisonment of Ikev in the center of the earth, and the destruction of his children; and the creation of men to watch over, and guard this prison, that Ikev may never challenge the nature of balance again.

Many of them, Wini found quite peculiar. They had a queer sort of comedy to them, that he didn’t quite understand, but could appreciate the macabre artistry of. There was such a mass of stories about the misadventures and misfortunes of the Gods and their many children in their home of Vajanull. The work was hard, no doubt, but somehow, these stories, the songs and psalms eased the physical burden the days wrought.

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A few years past, two-hundred-eighty, a day in early-June, Winithay recalled quite clearly, was the first serious injury he had sustained during the tenure of his position. However, a few small cuts, bruises, and heavied lungs notwithstanding. Injuries were frequent—it was indeed dangerous work, but always did he manage to keep together. He woke up that day, having a rather restless night; already unusual as the day’s work put him right to sleep any other night. Despite this, however, his morning showed nothing out of the ordinary. It was not until midday that misfortune began to peer; a spot of cart track used to transport the ore throughout the system warped, sending the cart, and its contents down an adjacent, unoccupied shaft. Both the tracks and carts were very old, and maintenance was widely neglected. It was due entirely to good fortune that this instance resulted in no injuries. The same good fortune was not to last however; as a few hours later, the strike of Wini’s pickaxe snapped, the head wedging in a mass of rock, heaving it down onto Wini’s left hand, crushing his pinky and ring finger between it, and the slab below. Minhily, and another man, who were digging nearby came to help. Minhily lifted the rock off, and the other man dragged Wini back of the shaft to the Axis, in the center, a large furnace, and around every wall, shafts leading deeper down. Friggen worked at the forge, seeming entirely unsurprised when Wini was lofted on his table. He simply took his axe, rending the two severed fingers, and burning the ends with his glowing furnace tongs. Once the bleeding stopped, Friggen tossed the tongs down into a pot of water, fizzing and bubbling before settling. He grabbed Wini by the collar of his shirt, and asked: ‘alright, son?’

Wini, still groaning in pain, looked at his hand, and the three fingers that remained, tears streaming down his cheeks, the phantom aches already setting in. He nodded with whatever strength he could muster.

‘Good,’ Friggen grinned. ‘Then get the fuck back to work.’

He hoisted Wini to his feet, and gave his shoulder a pat. Wini, still looking at his hand, still feeling this great pain, but now felt something new. A strength that he had not felt before. It overcame him, and, as a surprise to even himself, through this agony, this distance in his mind, this unnatural laceration of his mortal self: he smiled, and so it was. He wiped the tears, and grabbed a new pickaxe, and returned to work, not because he had to (the others would understand if he took a few hours to regain himself) but because he wanted to. He couldn’t exactly name it, but he knew it; he might have lost a part of himself, but he gained something new. And he understood.

\* \* \*

It was mid-December, two-hundred-ninety EoE; the coldest day of the year thus far, and a burgeoning storm lay over the horizon, but work continued. The warm glow of torchlight reflecting off the flecks of gold in the stone, and the drum of ‘Ein Leki Adelsonalak’: ‘the Marriage of Leki’, a favorite of the men of Hvarkinal, for its song was one of hope, one of love and peace, one of strength and perseverance; the quiet before Vinlor Sovak: the break of Chaos, and dawn of man.

Wini hummed along; with the three other men he’d been sent in deep with. His charge was to clear a space near the end of the easternmost shaft, to establish another checkpoint, where a stock of supplies would be housed. It was not an uncommon thing, it was the third time of one of the men, and first of the two others; for Wini, it was his second.

With two torches between them, the four, led by Mjan, the most experienced of them, delved into the deeps. They reached the end around late-morning, large beams of wood, and some iron fittings had already been carted down, as far as the set tracks went, though there was still quite some distance between them and the end of the track, so much of the wares they had to move by hand. Wini was put to work clearing the area, and evening the walls to better fit the supports, the others began to set the supports in place. They worked tirelessly until midday, after using the first load of materials, Mjan returned to the previous Axis to retrieve the next set, but Wini’s work continued.

Continue, he did. His mind drifted as he picked at the stones, breaking them from the wall, and placing them in a pile, to be carted off. Whatever after that was none of his concern.

‘Make way, the cart’s come loose!’ Mjan shouted down the shaft, the other two men leaping aside, the cart ringing and crashing down into the clearing, shaking the dormant dust from every pit. Then it was dark; the torch had fallen from the wall and snuffed in the pile of stones below. All, but for a faint golden glow peering from a crack in the stones. For a moment of quiet, Wini gazed at this glow, wondering about its source. It was not gold; the ore was far too dull to produce such a glow.

He pressed the point of his pickaxe into the gap, leveraging off the wall above, to open it. And it was there. A bright, gleaming golden compass, sitting upon a stump in a small cavity in the stone. Untarnished, unblemished perfectly crafted; a thin golden needle in the middle, and a raised golden lid. Could someone have placed it here? He did not think it possible, but the alternative did not seem any more so. But for all its perfection, it had one major flaw. It pointed west. Rather, it pointed an arbitrary angle westward. But *always* did it point this westward angle.

Wini took the compass, looking over its flawless form, even his dust covered fingers not smudging its perfect gleam—the room relit, returning Wini from the near trance that he had fallen into. The three men talking behind him, looking around to make sure no damage was done.

‘Wini,’ Mjan asked, ‘everything alright?’

Wini quickly pocketed the compass, not entirely sure why, though he had a strange urge to keep its existence to himself. ‘Yes.’

‘Good, then let’s continue.’ Mjan hoisted the cart, returning it upright, beginning to work once more. The rest of the day was rather uneventful in comparison, they finished the day’s work, returning to the surface, having a meal, Wini visited Minhily, who spent much time in recent months resting. Then Wini went to bed; but he did not sleep that night. His mind was too fixed on the compass, fixed westward.

Minhily grew old, his seventieth birthday now in the recent past; his spirit remained strong, but his body was frail, slowly beginning to wither. No longer was he able to work the stone, so he was put to assist in the kitchens. In the beginning, he protested, he was never a cook, and he believed it an insult to his strength. In the end, he understood that it was best; by continuing in the depths, he would only put himself and others in danger.

He was always a stubborn man, the north only hardening those tendencies. Alas, stubbornness was not enough to ward off the sickness that befell him. It was a slow decay, and all that could be done was to watch him struggle against his own body; finally claiming him the following year, August twenty-first two-hundred-ninety-three EoE. Wini was at the bedside, sharing a drink, one last time: Easberry Red, a fine drink. Some may think it sad; Wini didn’t. Minhily was a strong man, more than just his aptitude for physical work. He believed, he read, he wrote, and he sung: the music of his fathers, and the psalms of his people. *Lives are not defined by what we’ve lost—rather it is what we build that makes us.* It always confused Wini. Minhily was a builder back in Hilkoray, and a miner in Hvarkinal. If it was building he wanted, why change? Now, he understood. What Minhily built here was nothing that could be seen, indeed, it could not be held, built upon, or broken down; but it could also not wither, or decay, as it was something he would bring forward, with him to whatever end awaited. It would live on, also, in the heart of Wini, in the spirit of adventure, comradery and soul it brought to him. And it was enough.

His funeral was done in the customs of the Northmen, as was his wish. His body was placed upon a large mound of dried wood, and oil, and set to blaze. The men danced, sung, and drank in the raging glow illuminating every face. Wini stood back. ‘This all seems rather tawdry. Why do we celebrate his death?’ He asked Friggen, who handed Wini a beer.

‘We don’t, three-finger. We don’t celebrate that he is dead, rather, we celebrate that he had lived. We celebrate what he did for us and—see that glow, warmth?’ He pointed to the fire at the center. Wini nodded. ‘What he *still* is doing for us. We celebrate not that he is taken from us, but that he is returned to his fathers; to his mothers, and that he might drink with them in Nalerin, just as we do *here* in Ethnal.’

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The following eight years were cold and slow, it seemed like all of Direhal had fallen to quiet. The First King of Direhal, Balden Bearblood had died only a week prior. Wini did not know him, but even still, he knew King Balden was a great man. He had to have been. He was the one who united the scattered towns and tribes of Direhal under one flag, over thirty years prior; he was the man who ended the constant cycle of war, enslavement and upheaval that still consumed Ljakenvel: the realm north of Eldewind. It was Balden who set in the form of the Monarchical Republic that Direhal was now. A king by election—strange thought to most, but Balden gave his life to ensuring its longevity; now leaving the Lords of the Holds were left with the great question: who next?

But a different question lay on Wini’s mind. A question that began to consume his mind and ate at his heart. What lay westward? What lay at the end of the golden compass’ needle. The compass could not possibly be simply broken—in that case, it would just point nowhere. This, however, pointed to something, and a pit began to form in Wini’s heart; a longing for that something. He found himself lying awake every night, pondering the compass. How was it left in a cavity, deep in the Navdanthir Mountains, how was it unable to tarnish, why was it presented to him, where did it lead? The toll of none of these questions became lighter to bear; they only pulled him further down. All days began to meld together, and his thoughts and memories became clouded, confused, his body felt as though it was no longer his, like his spirit was occupying the life of another.

Then one night, at a time he could not place: he stood from the bed, compass in hand, walking out the door: westward; his eyes not diverting from the needle for even a moment. He walked, in the frost of a blizzard, clothed only in cotton shirt and trousers. But this did not seem to matter to his body, for it carried on despite it. He passed the forge, cold and dark, the temple, now silent, the edge of Hvarkinal, bordered by a thick vail of fog, into the thick of the trees, down the steep of the mountain.

And he was gone.

PREFACE

Asd

I find a preface for the following text necessary, as much of it still remains a mystery to even me.

YLVA

The Stringer

The girl was a peculiar one. Her existence was wholly enigmatic; a daughter of Direhal, surprise child to both parents; born, stripped of her voice; hair whiter than the greatest froststorms of the Northrealm, eyes, and half her flesh to match. There existed only one reason she was not discarded at birth: her parents’ desperation. Already, they had two sons, but both desired a daughter; and even though to them, she seemed only a half-measure, took what they got.

Upon her birth, she was given to the Sinmulayril: Kilthish doctors, in a futile attempt to recast the white flesh on the left side of her body, in the natural pale. With no luck. Even the assurances of the Sinmul that she was in perfect health did not sate their concerns about the appearance of their daughter. They had little faith she would make it past her first year… she did; they were certain her health would fail after five… it didn’t, and now, after eight years, were still not convinced…

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In the Elsirel’Dagren: the forest west of Baldengard, upon the branch of a redwood, Ylva sat. The forest bed laid in a thick white sheet of snow, disturbed only by Ylva’s small trail of bootprints, from ‘Arrinaull’Ylva’ (the small fort she had built around a large pine; walled off with the sharpened trunks of adolescent trees, a small hut in the corner), to her perch. Few came out here; there was ever little reason to. The game was superior in the larger forest east of the city; the quarry was down the sheer cliff to the south; and all structural lumber was imported from elsewhere in Direhal, as the redwoods making up the majority of the Baldengard forests were poor material to build from. However, where most saw a tedious bother, Ylva saw freedom.

A long while of resting up in the height; long enough she nearly forgot the world, and herself. It was the lekadrethseir ljakel: the great bell of Direhal signaling akkeleks, to all those seven miles from the epicentre in every direction. It was time to eat, but Ylva had no food; nor did she desire to return home. Instead, she pushed herself off the branch, the string of the bow slung around her chest catching on a small limb of the branch, snapping the bowstring plummeting her down, into the bed of snow below.

Ylva growled, shaking the snow from her matted white hair, and wiping the mud from her face; though little of it came off, as much of it was already dried from earlier escapades. Picking her bow up from the snow, she sighed looking at the two—now loose strings hanging from each limb of her bow. She stood, able to see the Arrinaull’Ylva between the trees to the north and set her black boots into the snow before it. Her small figure, three foot nine, and only forty-three pounds, barely left small, shallow prints in the snow; still, she followed in her previously left prints to not upset the perfect image of it anymore than necessary.

She peeled back the hide door to the Arri, quickly hardening in the cold. It was a mass of small pelts: rabbit, squirrel, white fox, and even a deer, all sewn together, an unholy amalgam of flesh, poorly cleaned and tanned. The only thing keeping them from the rot, was the frost coating them. The ground of the Arri was laid in snow, packed tight as rock, breaking only for the fire pit to the right side, that was floored in hardened mud. A small cabin sat in the back corner, made with clay, built around thin trunks for support, hardly big enough to fit one grown man. But she was not grown, nor was she a man. Besides, the close, intimate nature of it comforted her; it was easier too, to heat. In the room, there was a small cot, planks she’d stolen from the lumber-mill, and a sleeping wrap made from a buck, she’d proudly fell two months back…

‘How’d you come upon this, Little Wolf?’ Ethed, trapper asked as she hauled the pelt onto his table: stained in dried blood and gashed from where knives had been planted. It wasn’t a particularly tall table, still, Ylva’s eyes barely saw over the surface.

Ylva shrugged, holding up her hand made bow for Ethed to see. She could not handle fixing this pelt herself; not if she wanted to use it for sleeping. *No telling what sort of vile diseases the thing had*, she thought to herself.

‘You want this cleaned up?’ He leaned forward onto the table, looking down to her. Ylva nodded. ‘Did your father send you with this, by chance?’

She gruffed, shaking her head. The questions were beginning to tire her.

“Alright, Little Wolf. Come back One to Orskoth, it will be ready then.”

And she did. The skin side of the pelt was hard, only lightly broken. But over time, and through use it softened.

She pulled at the knots on the limbs of the bow, tossing the two loose bow sting halves into the clay pot filled with scraps of loose fabric, skin, and string; and the bow onto her cot, leaving the cabin. She hopped over the fire pit, and pushed through the Arri’s hide curtain, heading southward, to the stream.

It was a small stream, only perhaps two feet wide, and deep to the base of her shin. The water was cold, shimmering like white crystal as it lapped and bubbled over the gravel, breaking around the rocks that poked out the surface. The stream flowed eastward from the glaciers high in the west, breaking south at the west wall of Baldengard, streaming then south, meeting the ethnadorsel (military camp) south of Baldengard, at the falls.

She met with the stream, only a short way down, following then east toward the wall. Passing along rows of snow-capped trees; white foxes skittering into burrows; squirrels brushing around in the trees above; small rotting stumps where trees once stood tall; finally arriving at the western gatehouse. It was much smaller than the main gatehouse to the south-east, but still bore two large gates, both outfitted with a thick steel portcullis