

Direction. Purpose. Honor. Glory.

Miguel Lopez

From set *Kaldheim*

Ranar opened his eyes to find himself in an inglorious place. The old warrior lay on his back, though he had not been asleep. He stood. Around him stretched a sparse and endless tundra, a pale green fading to black as the frigid earth gave way to lightless sky. He was alone. He leaned on his axe, taking a moment. He noticed then that his chest bristled with dark arrows fletched with greasy feathers.

Ah, Ranar thought. I am dead and taken by the Valkyries.

A memory, fading: the last of the children he had trained, stepping through a rift between realms just as it stitched shut. The gray bulk of raiders, their horns black and stinking, trailing smoke as they charged. Snow on a cold stone courtyard, the clash and scrape of hobnail boots, a wet thunk of his axe on demonflesh, and the vile, steaming blood. A pile of demonic dead, and Ranar's duty complete.

A name, given to him by the Valkyries. But what was it?

Ranar tugged the arrows from his chest, regarding the holes left behind in his breastplate. Nothing issued from them but a faint green wisp, and there was no pain. After a moment, even the faint green stopped as the holes flowed closed. His armor was part of him now. Without horror, he realized he was in an afterlife unexpected: Istfell.

Istfell was the judgement the Valkyries handed down to those who lived mundane lives. Ranar had thought his lonely saga was glorious enough to grant entry to Starnheim, but it appears the Valkyries disagreed. There was no bitterness to Ranar's revelation: his armor and weapon were still with him. If he had not proved his worth in life, then he would prove his worth in Istfell.

Much to do yet—but where to begin?

Ranar lifted his axe. With two hands, he flung it into the air. He stepped aside as it fell, blade landing with a soft thunk into the pale sand. The haft pointed the way. Ranar tugged the axe free, shouldered it, and started walking.

Ranar walked for an era or an eyeblink. He felt no hunger or thirst. Fatigue lingered, but here in Istfell, it was a little weight gently carried. Time in this viridescent desert slipped away and stilled. In the living world, time passing was the progress of the sun across the sky or up from the night. When no sun climbed or scraped, then no time passed at all.

Ranar put one boot in front of the other and stalked across sere dunes, dull and cold. He did not breathe—as it did not seem that he had to—but surely his breath would have steamed in the dead air. Alone with the crunch of his boots on frigid sand he tried to recall the names and faces of his life but could not. Eyes fixed forward on the withered emerald horizon, he stalked. He felt a chill of the spirit, though would not freeze. He could feel fatigue settling across his soul, but it was not ruining. He could feel

the weight of his armor and axe, but it was not oppressive. As Istfell held the souls of the living, so too did it hold some reminder of their tribulations. Pain, exhaustion, thirst, ache—burdens that the living carried, but mirrored by their cousins. If this realm had room for the bad, then surely it had room for the good; would a spirit in Istfell not care more for their fellows if they knew that others felt the cold, too? Was there room in Starnheim for solidarity?

Ranar had never been a scholar or wise man, but in life, he knew enough to know Istfell was a realm of the numberless dead. The unremarkable dead. Wander far enough, and he would find them. With them, surely he would find purpose on this humble plain. With them, he would see what arc his life-after-life would take when refracted through meaning's prism.

Throughout his searching, Ranar marveled at the light of Starnheim high above. Though diluted by the lattice of the World Tree's roots, its glory was evident. A northern star that encompassed the realm.

A mystery, far ahead: the twin green suns of Istfell, low on the horizon. It was only when they moved that Ranar realized they were not suns but the reflecting eyes of a titan lurking in the Cosmos. The titan blinked and stretched, and in Istfell's boreal light, Ranar could see the silhouette of a wolf, as large as a world. The wolf stood atop a forest of legs below which a faint light filtered. The wolf at the end of the world did not move; it simply observed.

Ranar did not feel fear, as he was already dead and did not think he could be killed again. He lifted his axe into a ready guard. Maybe this was it: his test and challenge, to fight the wolf at the end of the world. Ranar decided he would face it with courage, and if he died in this realm, he would surely be greeted by Valkyries eager to usher him into that golden hall of Starnheim above. Axe in hand, its blade heavy and sharp, he knew this was his moment of glory.

The wolf at the end of the world exhaled, and a realm-swallowing ice storm burst up along the distant horizon. In that moment he knew; fighting a thing of that size was a challenge for gods—many gods, not just one. Ranar may have been virtuous (surely he had been virtuous, at least?) in life, but he was not divine. Was it valorous for the fool to lift an axe and take to the woods, hewing at trees and thinking them ogres? No. Stupidity would not convince the Valkyries to usher him into Starnheim.

So, instead of charging, Ranar raised his axe above his head in quiet salute and trudged along toward his own destination. The wolf at the end of the world watched Ranar for a long, long time, then turned and walked away into the Cosmos.

The tundra fell away to a vast basin of cracked clay crossed by bristled gnarls of undead vegetation and wandering stones. Here the pale green rime faded to bone white. Though it brightened the land, the bleached clay and stones only served to deepen the sky's darkness.

Ranar was not alone here. Across the basin, as far as Ranar could see, stood lonely stone cairns. The smallest was easily twice as tall as Ranar, and all seemed spaced from their neighbor by a distance equal to their height. The effect was disorienting, creating an entropic regularity that gave the landscape a sense of system; ordered chaos, a statuary garden erupting from raw nature.

A wind moaned between the cairns, ice and fine clay dust whistling high. Ranar imagined ragged banners flapping in that wind. He imagined the light dancing at the edge of burning houses that served as watchfires. He realized he did not imagine these things but remembered them. The wind, the cairns, the burning homes—it was a memory of the village that he had once kept his own watch over, as excised from its realm as this statue garden was from Istfell.

Ranar marched deeper into the statuary garden, recalling his patrols through the sliver of taiga that the Omenpath swallowed. Ranar passed cairns and saw instead mighty pines, heavy with snow, dying as their roots had been cut when the realms collided. Though he walked alone in Istfell now, once he had walked at the head of a small column of children, the only refugees of that transported village. Hardy as any tree that aged knuckled to the wind but did not fall, Ranar held the line he drew. He raised those few survivors from children to formidable youths and saw them off to safety. Among the cairns, Ranar wandered an echo of his death in the living realm—the children, the village, the light around them, and the flames—and he lost himself in it.

A hand grabbed his ankle. Ranar did not attack—if the hand had meant to strike him down it would have done so instead of grabbing him—but raised his axe all the same. A withered, rag-wrapped spirit, little more than parchment skin stretched over bones, sat cross-legged next to him. They raised a finger to their lips and wheezed.

Silence.

Ranar obeyed. The spirit pointed ahead.

Danger.

Ranar followed its gesture to see that the cairns ahead had been reduced, the places where they once stood sunk into depression. Few remained at the terminating line, where thousands of spirits worked together to tear them down. This labor spread out across the whole of the visible horizon: spirits advanced across an empty plain, tearing down cairns, throwing the constituent rocks into open pits dug by other spirits. The features of this world, slowly eaten.

They will never stop. I have fled them for an eternity.

Ranar watched the slow progress of the cairn-eaters.

I realized for EGON this tribute, and my reward was the hatred of these most lost souls, animated to tear my great work down. He will do the same to you.

Ranar hefted his axe. He would continue. Behind him, the tribute-builder persisted in its whispering, muttering to no one.

Was I not great enough? Did I not shape the land in veneration of your glory? Where is my reward EGON?

Ranar skirted the deep pits and the cairn-eaters, some so thin on this plain that they were all but invisible. One he only saw when he stopped to examine a floating rock—a cairn-eater, he realized, invisible to his eye and only strong enough to lift the rock a mere inch from its stack. Was this his fate, if he were to linger in this realm for too long? The strength of his own being sapped from him, the light he cast dimmed to little more than background scatter. Less than a shadow, but still not gone.

I would build you all a tower to Starnheim if you would only obey. You would walk behind me on a golden stair to glory.

Ranar looked closer: the cairn-eaters all wore the broken remains of fetters, some even dragging chains behind them. They worked together to tear down these stone monuments. Ranar realized they had not been sent to ruin a great work by a great artist: they were tearing down the greedy monument of one who thought they alone deserved reward.

Ranar came upon a green river. As he approached, he saw it was not a river, but a winding march of spirits conforming to some unknown contours of this listless land. Their passage made little sound—the hush of rain on stone, or mist as it slips over a still and rocky coast. Most spirits were indistinct

smears, fog-like and discernible only as spirits by others of their number less far along the process of phantasmic decay. Ranar could see limbs and heads, silhouettes seated on ghostly mounts—themselves in myriad states of being wiped away—and others in almost sharp relief, their faces twisted into scowls, different only from their living bodies in that they were rendered translucent in soft green rather than living flesh.

Ranar did not join the river. He walked up its current and alongside it; there would be a point at which he could ford. He did not think it wise to step through, for he remembered how the cairn-eaters could move stone; if those spirits working together could move stone, then surely this river of spirits moving as one could move him.

Ranar followed the marching river around a wide bend and saw on its banks a pair of figures who stood apart. They wore foul armor, layered leathers and furs cured and matted. They held long black glass spears. Each stood with a shield strapped to their back, draped in little garlands of small bones and teeth. These were not spirits but demons of some kind. The two noticed Ranar's approach and turned to face him, revealing faces twisted into the fearsome approximation of faces under war helms, horned and plated, with deep-set eyes in boiling red.

STOP.

Ranar did.

WHY ARE YOU HERE?

The two beings stalked toward him. Ranar stood straight-backed before the two, his axe at rest, as they evaluated him.

ARMOR AND AXE.

ONE OF US?

HE CANNOT BE. HE WOULD NOT WALK ALONE.

YES. HE IS NOT FOR THE FEED.

They swept their spears aside.

CONTINUE, SPIRIT.

Ranar did not. He looked to the river of marching spirits. He could see some carrying sheep across their backs. Children swaddled in their arms. Packs laden with goods not to sell but to make a life from. The fear in their eyes could not be hidden. The fear and the fatigue, furtive looks toward the wicked glass weapons and ebon leather armor. New arrivals to the realm—but where were they being led? And what had that one spirit said—not for the feed?

IGNORE THEM.

The pair swung their spears back around.

WE TAKE OUR DUE.

MOVE ALONG, SPIRIT.

OUR TRANSACTION IS APPROVED.

Ranar did not move along. The demons looked between each other. Ranar thought he saw a smile form on one face, but recognizing a face that could smile out from under all that chitinous plating was all but impossible. The cruelty and joy emanating from the demon, though, washed over Ranar in curdling waves. These two reeked of power granted by possession, of respect given to wicked weapons and what they could do to a body.

MOVE ALONG.

LEAVE YOUR WEAPON LOW.

MOVE ALONG.

The demons advanced toward him, spears leveled. Ranar did not know if he could die again in the afterlife, but this place was Istfell and the realm of the ignoble; if there were any afterlife one could die in and find themselves worse than before, it would be here. Ranar dragged one foot back, shifting his weight.

One demon lunged, spear tip lancing toward Ranar. The other dashed to the side, spear tip tracing an ember wound through the air, couched to strike.

Ranar was a good warrior. Swift in life, even in his advanced age. A single strike was all he needed: one movement flowing from three steps.

First, he stepped around the lunged spear, driving the heavy, metal-capped end of his axe haft into the attacking demon's faceless helm. The impact was far less than he expected—the weight of dragging a stick through cold water.

Then, as the first demon fell, Ranar turned, axe lifted in a two-handed guard; he had tracked the other demon as it darted to his side to stab at him from his flank. He parried the second's spear with his axe haft, completing this second motion.

Finally, using the momentum of his guard, he spun, bringing his axe around and up high into the demon's side, catching the beast just under its leading arm. Ranar's axe snagged on the demon for a moment, then carried through. The strength of Ranar's swing threw the demon away from the column, where it landed with a heavy thud on the ground, dead.

Ranar choked up on his axe and wiped the blade edge clean. No others accosted him or charged from the slow, shuffling column of souls. He was, but for a river of fading humanity, alone once more. Ranar intended to dive in, to wade across and continue on, but when he approached, the marchers nearest him stopped, and one began to shove him away.

You have done your duty to us.

Go. Trouble us no more. We are free now.

We desire only peace. We are content to wander.

Peace is not for you. Not yet.

Ranar stepped back from the river of people, and the entirety of it began to drift into mist, what solid shapes he could discern dissolving to haze and fog. In some time, the river was gone.

The gates of Istfell stood open, a starry gap in the curtain wall that hid the horizon and Cosmos beyond. Ranar felt no cold as he crunched down to the gates, crossing under their mighty arch to stand in the middle of a wide marble boulevard: the bridge of Istfell, broad as a city plaza and empty of anything but fingers of rime. The grand crossing reached another hundred feet or so before it ended abruptly; there, it met the opalescent darkness of the Cosmos, and depths that Ranar would not hazard to explore. He had followed his axe and could go no farther. So, Ranar waited.

A river ran underneath the bridge. Ranar could see it flowing parallel to the great wall, arcing away to either side, yet another feature marking the edge of the realm. The river and the wall—did Istfell conspire to keep spirits within, or turn invaders away? Despite the wide-open gates, Ranar saw no steady trickle of spirits ushered in from the Cosmos by Valkyries. There was no procession of the newly dead

crossing into the humble and empty realm. Alone, axe in hand, did he too become a marking of the edge of Istfell? A sentinel against invasion, or a warden against escape?

Some centuries passed and Ranar came to understand what he had long ago known: Istfell was where he was meant to be. No vaunted halls of Starnheim, no crowded tables with only just enough space for Ranar and his boasts. No river of mead, giving blessed ignorance of sorrow. A decade after this revelation, Ranar crouched, tugged off one glove, and touched the cold marble of the bridge. Would he feel cold in Starnheim? Would he even think to try?

The darkness at the edge of the realm shivered, and a youth walked into Istfell. Deposited onto the bridge, he wore fine but dirty clothing, a sword belted to his waist, and a scowl. He walked with a noble bearing, and as he drew closer, Ranar could see he wore a fine, though simple, circlet. Some small noble, or a second son of a wealthy jarl, no more than a handful of years past his decade. Curious.

“Are you Ranar of Istfell?” The youth spoke. He looked *alive*, flush with the full color of the living.

Ranar nodded.

“Good,” he said. He dropped to a knee, drew his sword, and held it out to Ranar, hilt first. “My name is Bjorn of Beskir, and I am not supposed to be here,” the youth said. “I was told to find Ranar of Istfell, who would help me on my quest. I ask for your axe and your strength to help me in this endeavor. Protect me, and I will see you rewarded.”

This. Ranar stood to his full height, unaware that he had curled to a slouch. This was something new.

“Bjorn of Beskir,” Ranar said. He paused. Interesting that he could talk—it appeared that Bjorn had brought something of life to Istfell. “You are young for this realm.”

“I am, sir.”

“How did you know to ask for me?”

“From the tales my father told me,” Bjorn said. “You are the guardian of Istfell, a great warrior who is said to be honorable and steadfast—a guide to the lost. My people speak of your legend—the Omenpath and the children you protected.” Bjorn looked up to Ranar, tucking his sword back in its scabbard. “My people say you should have been granted entry into Starnheim.”

Ranar laughed. “That’s enough then, boy. Stand up.”

Bjorn furrowed his brows, confused for a moment before the realization set in. “You’re a hero,” Bjorn said, standing. He composed himself, tamping down on his excitement. “Will you accept this quest, Ranar of Istfell, and help me reach Starnheim?”

Ranar of Istfell, who could speak once more, felt a chill go through him. At first, he did not register the novelty of the feeling, but a heartbeat later he realized—he could *feel* again. His heart beat again. Life, distant, nevertheless had begun to fill him like liquid fills a vessel.

“I will,” Ranar said.

“Good,” Bjorn said. His demeanor changed, but Ranar did not notice—as life hummed through him again, it clouded his perception. Bjorn strode past Ranar and struck out for the interior. Ranar turned to watch the youth cross under the Gates, then followed, axe in hand.

Bjorn led him by a hundred yards. He was the only feature in the rolling tundra, and so Ranar was content with the distance. He seemed tireless, striding ahead through the rolling dunes with one hand on the hilt of his sword and the other swinging at his side. He walked with a purpose, assured in his step if not in the knowledge of where he was bound. Better for Ranar to ask than to wonder; even in Istfell, wanderers seemed to always have purpose.

"Bjorn," Ranar called out.

Bjorn did not respond.

"Bjorn, where are you going?"

"To Starnheim," Bjorn shouted. "Are you coming with me or not?"

Ranar stepped up his pace. Of course he would. Istfell in his wanderings had proven a far richer tapestry than he had first thought it to be, and though he had come to accept it as his realm, the gods often changed their minds. Never ignore a sign, especially if it demanded you to follow.

"How do you mean to reach Starnheim?" Ranar asked, pulling alongside Bjorn. "Surely not by walking?"

"With this sword and your help," Bjorn said. "There already exists a wound in the Cosmos; I'll find it and cut open my own door."

"The two of us could never accomplish such a feat. I do not mean to be unkind, but I worry this is a fool's errand," Ranar said.

"No," Bjorn barked. He rounded on Ranar and shoved him back. "I am Bjorn of the *Beskir*, who should be alive, and I will not languish in serene waste." Bjorn stomped his foot. "I will carve my way into Starnheim, and you will help me."

"How?" Ranar was taken aback at the sudden change in tone. The hopeful youth on the bridge had gone cruel.

"My augurs told me my great-grandfather came here," Bjorn said. "To the center of Istfell under the roots of the World Tree. There, he laid the foundations of a tower. Then his son built upon it, as did his son, all for me. Now I will climb it, and with this sword cut open a passage to Starnheim." Bjorn said. He stabbed a finger at Ranar. "You are Ranar of Istfell. In life, you guarded the children of one of my vassals. Now, you will be my first axe, who will lead the way."

Ranar considered this, weighed what he knew of Istfell, Starnheim, and his own desires. Though he felt new to this realm, time was a river with many eddies in the afterlife; perhaps this realm was not where he was meant to reside. Perhaps—arrogant as this young nobleman appeared to be—this quest was his purpose. A focus for his duty beyond stoic wandering. Ranar nodded his assent.

"Good," Bjorn said. "Now, follow me. We have kings to kill."

Ranar carved what would in life had been a blood-soaked path through the keep of a petty Istfellian king, and Bjorn followed. The youth had more than just training—he was a consummate warrior, his sword quick, lethal, and precise. The King's Guard, shimmering borealis armor and form distinct from the base spirits of the realm, were hewn to viridian gore. They had been mighty, but old Ranar and young Bjorn were buoyed, fighting for entry rather than defending what was jealously held.

Bjorn requested he deal the coup de grâce to the king. He walked up to the throne where the thin and wounded noble slumped, pleading with breathless voice for mercy. Bjorn showed him none. He plunged his dagger into the spirit's neck and levered him to the floor. The king's crown bounced and rolled to a stop at Ranar's feet.

"Don't touch it," Bjorn said. "That is my key to Starnheim."

"What about me?" Ranar asked.

"We'll find you another." Bjorn said. He scooped up the fallen crown. "Before I came here, my augurs read the organs of a bear, a crow, and an elk." He held the crown up to Ranar, showing him the intricate jewelwork, how the circlet was woven from braided iron bands, worked in the shape of elk antlers. "We take the crow next, and last the bear, and then Starnheim opens to me." Bjorn said, grinning, eyes bright.

Ranar could feel the heat of life coming back to him. The pounding, slack-jawed hunger of a greed that pumped hot through him. He could take and take and claw and climb, and Starnheim would be his. Ranar's hunger spoke: Bjorn was his key, the boy only thought himself in command—so *take*.

A sudden, splitting headache caused Ranar to flinch as if slapped. Ranar shook his head, the ache sudden and overwhelming, and then gone. He stepped back from the youth.

"Good," Bjorn said. "Remember that. This is *my* saga." He threaded the Elk King's crown onto his belt.

"How will we find the Crow King?" Ranar asked Bjorn.

"The dead will point the way," he said. Bjorn hefted a short spear from one of the fallen King's Guard, examined it, and then tossed it among the fallen spirits. It landed with a clatter, and when it came to a rest it acted as the focus around which the hidden pattern of the room revealed itself. The slain King's Guard, indistinct, broken, and scattered, nevertheless conformed to a grim cartography. Severed or whole, they all pointed in the same direction, toward the same wall of the king's chambers and beyond.

"Istfell is not without direction," Bjorn said. "Or reward." The youth pointed to Ranar's own hands.

Ranar looked down. His hands, once the faded green of spiritflesh, were made whole. He held one before his face, marveling.

"You and I must be alive to enter Starnheim," Bjorn said. "I need to strike down three kings of myth; you, my guardian, need only to obey."

Ranar squeezed the haft of his axe, felt the well-worn leather wrappings, heard the creak of his grip. Already the young hero's presence had blessed Ranar with life, and each kill had flushed him further with the red blood of the living. Trust in the youth had rewarded him—what prize waited for perseverance?

They left the hollowed keep of the late Elk King and made for the mists of Istfell's deep interior. Neither Ranar nor Bjorn noticed the disturbance in the Cosmos far above them. The wolf at the end of the world had returned from its wandering. Silent, it watched the two of them with intense curiosity, its eyes hanging once more like twin suns above Istfell.

Atop the Crow King's perch, Ranar and Bjorn battled the Crow King's Feather Guard. The wind snapped through the airy castle, rattling the layered-feather cloaks that gave the Feather Guard their name. In pairs, they dove at Ranar and Bjorn, wielding their wicked, curve-bladed swords with raptor-like fury. Back to back, Ranar and Bjorn fought the Crow King's most loyal murder, axe and straight blade clashing and singing in the flame-lit hall of the perch. Tenacious and sturdy, Ranar weathered the Feather Guards' black blades, muscling through their alacrity to cut them down with his heavy axe.

The last of the black-cloaked Feather Guard died with a screech. Their armor and cloaks, dark as the sky above Istfell when Starnheim's light could not break through, grew darker yet. In the dying moments of the melee, the Crow King himself managed to score one strike on Ranar, cutting a gouge through his armor with a wicked talon before Ranar landed a mortal blow with his axe, sending the Crow King to the ground. Ranar raised his axe, bloodlust raging through him, and—

“Stop,” Bjorn commanded.

Ranar stopped. Every ghost of every muscle that once composed his body—and the reanimated ones that now did—hummed with power, with the howling desire to bring his war-blunted axe down on the Crow King’s exposed neck. But he stopped. Bjorn’s voice fettered him.

“The king is mine.” Bjorn had not so much as a spot of blood on himself, though he had been in the thick of the fighting with his sword. “Go and bar the doors before the rest of his warriors arrive.”

Ranar did as he was commanded, holding the door to the king’s chambers shut against the clamor of his subjects outside. Bjorn wrapped himself in a one of the fallen Feather Guard cloaks and approached the wounded Crow King.

“Throw down your mask and crown. Flee with your people, and I will spare you,” Bjorn said. “I am on a quest to break free from this realm to which I was cast, and you stand in my way.”

“Child,” the Crow King spat, voice a croak from behind his beaked, black steel casque. “No one who finds themselves in Istfell thinks they were judged correctly. It is as it is in the realms of the living—you must find a way to live despite your fate.”

Bjorn plunged his sword into the Crow King’s belly. The king did not resist. He grabbed the blade and folded over, his helm and crown falling to the floor. Under the dark armor, he was a green and thin spirit, and he did not cry out. His face was a mask of stoic resolve. He had been a king in this land of the ignoble dead—what did Bjorn know that he did not?

“No,” Bjorn growled. “I reject my fate.” He tugged his sword free. The king slipped to the ground. The clamor outside died. The city fell silent.

Ranar stepped back from the doors, axe in hand. They groaned open, pushed by the gentle wind at the airy heights of the Crow King’s castle. The spirits that had been there were gone. Cautious, Ranar stepped out of the perch and walked to the vertiginous edge of the cliff-top fortress. The city below was empty.

“Where did they go?” Ranar asked.

Wrapped in one of the Feather Guard’s dark cloaks, Bjorn was a child wearing his elders’ clothing. He tugged on the Crow King’s helm and did not answer.

“Bjorn,” Ranar said, raising his voice. “What happened to the people? Where did they go?”

“Elsewhere,” Bjorn said. “As we must.”

Ranar felt a deep twisting in his gut as the bloodlust faded. The worry. Was this how a grand quest should feel? Like he was doing something wrong?

“The Bear King,” Ranar asked. “He is your father.”

“Is that a question or an accusation?” Bjorn said, his voice low.

“A question,” Ranar said. “Did you know this Crow King? The Elk? Were they your kin as well?”

“No more than I knew the Bear in life,” Bjorn said.

“Fratricide cannot be valorous,” Ranar said.

“Lack of valor does not make a feat any less grand,” Bjorn said. “Cunning is its own virtue, as is arrogance.”

Ranar looked at the youth with horror. “How did you come to Istfell?”

Bjorn did not answer.

“You did this on purpose, didn’t you?” Ranar said. “Your augurs, your prophecies—you came here by your own hand.”

“I make my own fate,” Bjorn said. He showed his blade to Ranar. “You think a sword that could cut a door into Starnheim couldn’t easily tear passage into Istfell?” He laughed. “Come. This conversation will take us in loops I don’t care to wander.”

The wolf at the end of the world watched them go, curious. As Ranar and Bjorn walked deeper into Istfell, the wolf wandered off into the Cosmos to tell certain beings of certain things, and the approach of certain events to come.

Bjorn and Ranar came to the center of Istfell, having been steered through the mist by the unerring sight granted to Bjorn by the Crow King’s helm. Across a tumblestone field split by a razor-straight road, the umbral bulk of a great tower loomed from the fog. Its heights were lost in the thick mist, and what features defined its stone face were only discernable by the deeper shadows they cast from the light high above. Bjorn led the two of them down the broad and straight road, the eyes of the Crow King’s helm glowing a feeble yellow in the darkness. Megaliths lined the road. Between the standing stones and the fog that drifted over and between them, it was as if they walked through a tunnel.

Ranar walked behind, the many wounds collected from the Feather Guard aching, the pain on his living skin an ever-burning flame, but none of them mortal. He made a great effort to carry his axe, though fatigue bade him drag it along in the sand. He would not be showed up by a youth who barely had any beard. That, and he had begun to wonder if the Valkyries would hear of their exploits; should they show, Ranar would rather be dead clutching his axe than alive dragging it. Dead, Ranar thought, or whatever happened to the spirits that were struck down in Istfell.

“Bjorn,” Ranar called out. “Bjorn, what awaits us in the tower?”

“The Bear King,” Bjorn said. “The jealous guardian who crouches at the way into Starnheim.”

“I thought the only way in was by the Valkyries?” Ranar said.

“There are more ways in than what you are told. Do you know how Istfell came to be?” Bjorn asked.

“I do not,” Ranar said.

“I’ll tell you: the world was born from a seed,” Bjorn began. “That seed grew into the World Tree, and everything else grew from it.” Bjorn’s voice changed, and Ranar realized he had been quoting something from memory. “The First Saga,” Bjorn said. “The first time humans tried to condense the wonder of creation into words.”

“What else are we to do with our time?” Ranar said. He spoke only to himself: Bjorn conversed in the same manner that he marched.

“Istfell,” Bjorn continued, “was ignored long enough by those with the strength to destroy it that it grew in the shadow of the Tree, under the light of Starnheim.” Bjorn grinned. “This realm has always held the castoffs and the forgotten; those above never think to look down—we will use this to our advantage.”

The two reached the doors of the Bear King’s tower. No one accosted them or attempted to bar their entry. The doors groaned open under their shoulders, revealing a dark and austere interior. The tower was large enough at its base to hold a town inside of its walls. Instead, there was nothing but a standing pool of water and a body at the foot of a grand staircase leading up into the tower’s heights.

Stabbed into the fallen body—a mummified form from a time long past—was a spear of ancient make. Wrapped around the spear was a cloth, a banner. Unraveled, it had a single word painted upon it: *CLIMB*.

And, so, Bjorn and Ranar ascended the tower, climbing through the fog and soup-like gloom on the wide and winding stair. As they progressed, the tower aged in reverse: the lowest floors were dark and crumbling, crude-hewn stone worn smooth by countless eons of passage; as they climbed, such raw stone gave way to finely chiseled stone, which gave way to mortared stone, then brick, marble, and on through materials as-yet unknown to Ranar. The strata made it clear: the first builders of this tower must have preceded Bjorn's great grandfather by millennia, and its most recent builders were far more accomplished than any craftsman Ranar was familiar with.

"What age is this," Ranar muttered, a question Bjorn ignored. The walls of this floor of the tower were made from some hammered metal, cold to the touch. "Bjorn, how far do we climb?"

"We are nearly there," Bjorn said. He pointed to the walls. "These are formed from the same metal that the Valkyries use to make their spears. The light outside," Bjorn said, indicating the tall, narrow windows ringing in the floor. They were white, blinding, and it pained Ranar to look. "That light is the light of Starnheim itself. Be ready. We are close."

This close to the realm of legends, in a tower built from the metals wielded by the Valkyries themselves. Ranar's humble axe seemed all the more mundane. Wood and iron, not iridescent, not gold, not crafted from some material of legend, plucked from the Cosmos. He held it forward and ready, though he knew that only when he met the keepers of the path to Starnheim would he learn how useful his old axe truly was.

As best he could, Ranar made himself ready.

Atop the roof of Istfell, below the blinding light of the rent into Starnheim, Ranar and Bjorn stood before the Bear King and his final Ursan Guard. The final floor of the Bear King's tower was a flat and featureless plateau formed of seamless black glass. The air was still. At this height, the light of the heroes' realm obliterated any shadow. The Bear King was younger than Ranar had thought he would be—a man who bore all resemblance to his title, heroic in size and profile. Standing in rank with his Ursan Guard, he towered over the largest of them by a head, his shoulders broad under shaggy, fur-covered pauldrons. His sword was a slab of steel as large as he, a killer of giants, jötunn, and demons.

"Bear," Bjorn began. "You know why I am here."

The Bear King nodded. "Indeed."

"And you know who I am."

The Bear King nodded. He rolled his shoulders. "Indeed."

"So then why do you block my path?"

"We are guardians of this realm," the Bear King said, "and we stand against those who would send it to ruin."

"I demand you stand aside," Bjorn said, his voice rising.

"No, my lord," the Bear King said. "We stand against all threats to Istfell—threats from within and without."

"So be it," Bjorn said. "You'll find the Cosmos far less kind than I." With that, Bjorn strode forward, sword ready, and charged.

The fight to follow was balanced between elegance and the gutter. Bjorn, with grace, followed his blade through and around, up under the guards and between the plated armors. He was a flash of dark lightning, untouched. The Ursan Guard were better equipped to fight Ranar, and the crash of their clashing weapons rang out like thunder across Istfell. Axe to slab-sword, the impact of blade on blade cracking the black glass under the warriors' boots.

Ranar was the battering ram that smashed the gate aside; Bjorn, the sniper's arrow that would bring down the king. Together they slew the Ursan Guard. When the last fell, nothing stood between them and the Bear King.

"There is still time to cease this grim work," the Bear King said. "Leave my tower. Give the lands of the Elk and the Crow to your champion. Make him a loyal vassal," the Bear King said. Though his voice was level and calm, it was tinged with sadness. "Istfell is already yours. Tend to this garden as a humble steward. Be happy with its fruits and flowers, and with the pilgrims called to this land."

Bjorn spat, and his spit sizzled on the black glass plateau. He stabbed his sword toward the sky. "I am come for what is owed to me by strength and song," he bellowed. "Starnheim and all the realms of the World Tree will be mine."

"It will not," The Bear King said.

Bjorn charged, Ranar only a step behind. Across the black glass they thundered, and the wind around them began to rise, and as they reached the Bear King, Bjorn slid under the king's opening swing, leaving Ranar to take the blow. Ranar—as fast as he could, though it felt in the moment to be slow as sap on a winter's morning—brought his axe around into an awkward guard, enough to intercept what otherwise would have been a killing blow. The haft of his axe snapped, the hungry edge of the Bear King's blade crunched into Ranar's mail, and Ranar was thrown to the side, a mix of blood and pale green spirit essence trailing through the air behind.

Ranar crashed to the black glass ground and rolled to a stop near the tower's vertiginous edge. From where he lay, Ranar watched as Bjorn scored a quick cut to the Bear King's leg. The king fell to a knee, and Bjorn was able to circle around him. With a quick strike, Bjorn drove his sword up through a layer of the Bear King's mail and into his chest. The king gasped and dropped his sword. The fight was over.

Ranar groaned, held his wound, and tried to stand. Blood and green essence dribbled out from between his fingers. It was all he could do to struggle up to a knee, using the broken haft of his axe as support. He watched as Bjorn and the king spoke their last words to each other, father and son in a patricidal embrace.

"You may have fooled the Elk and the Crow, but you cannot fool me," the Bear King said. "If you mean to send me to the Cosmos, grant me the honor of seeing your true form."

Bjorn grinned, and as his smile grew so too did the form of the young man peel away from him like dirt rising off of a beaten fur. The dirty-but-fine noble clothing shimmered and shifted, darkening into a cloak and vestments of pure stygian night. His tanned skin paled to an exsanguinated gray, and his hair turned white as bleached bone. Bjorn was gone. In his place stood the very lord of Istfell himself, Egon, god of the dead, old as the bleached rock under Istfell's tundra frost.

"Egon," the Bear King whispered. "My Lord."

"You were a good servant," the God of Death said. Egon held the Bear King from behind. His sword had transformed with him, flowing from steel to form a wicked scythe of smoking glass. Egon pressed the black edge to the Bear King's neck. "Go, voyage," Egon said. "And when you return here, tell me what demons threaten my realm."

Before the Bear King could respond, Egon pressed the king forward into the blade of his scythe. The Bear King's body tipped forward, falling with a heavy, inglorious thud onto the glass. Egon held the Bear King's head up, high above his own, stabbing it toward the glowing sky above.

"Starnheim," Egon bellowed, his voice loud as thunder. "You are mine. Open!"

Ranar watched from the ground, in awe, as the sky above opened, green-white reality peeling away to reveal a golden substrate beyond. A vista resolved, showing a lake of glossy ink, still, with grand longships gliding across its surface. Starnheim was open before them. Ranar reached for the glorious realm, closing his eyes against the light.

"Egon," a voice like a choir, a war cry, split the moment. The light of Starnheim vanished, the rent in the cosmos sealed shut. "Again?"

Egon dropped the Bear King's head and raised his scythe, baring his teeth in a soundless snarl.

The speaker was a Valkyrie of singular authority. She drifted to the tower, carried down by two sets of wings, one alabaster and the other as dark as Egon's vestments. In one hand she held a fine spear, and across her armored form was strapped a mighty herald's horn. Light as dust, she landed before Egon.

"Firja," Egon yelled. "I demand—"

"You may not," Firja said, curt. "Starnheim is not open to the gods without judgement; it is not yet your time Egon. You will remain in Istfell."

"You have no authority," Egon sneered. "I am grand. My quest was glorious. I am mighty. Per your own laws, you must let me in."

Firja laughed. "I make no laws, Egon. I am its judge, and I use my own discretion. Allowing you into my realm would speak the end. So, I will not allow it."

Egon raised his scythe to strike but Firja slapped it away. It skipped across the glossy surface of the tower before flying out into the open air. Egon watched it, groaned, and fell to his knees. The fight quit him. He punched the ground, cracking the glass.

"Spirit," Firja said, turning to Ranar. "Look at me."

Ranar did as commanded. Firja was terrible and grand, without equal. Terrified, heartened, but suffused with hope, Ranar stood. He clutched his halved axe—a warrior, always.

"If any here deserve entry on merit it is you, old man," Firja said. "Though I question your judgement; following this one on such an endeavor, and all the while not knowing who he was." Firja shook her head. "Desire for glory is blinding."

"The God of Death led me, aye," Ranar said. "But I made my own choice. If I did not harbor the same desire as he, I would not have followed."

Firja raised an eyebrow. "Be honest," she said. "What will you do if I refuse you entry and urge you to remain in Istfell?"

Ranar looked between Firja, radiant, and Egon, seething. "I know how to serve," Ranar said. "And I know how to humble myself when I have made a mistake." He offered Firja his broken axe. "In life, I stood guard, and in death, I did the same. This quest has tested me, and I failed. I ask for your grace so that I may guard others from my same failure."

"Good answer," Firja said. "It is done."

Ranar stood, marveling as his axe repaired itself in his hands. Though battle-worn as before, veins of Valkyrie metal flowed through the wood and etched themselves into knots on the axe head.

"I will return, Firja," Egon sneered. "I will find my way into Starnheim."

"I'm sure you will try," Firja said. "Ranar, guard your realm. Strike him down."

Ranar considered for a moment, then made his decision. Against Egon's protestations, he swung his axe, striking down the God of Death in a single blow.

"Good," Firja said.

"Will he live again?"

"Oh, of course," Firja said. She clapped a hand on Ranar's shoulder. "This is his own realm, and for now, it follows his own rules. He will wander the Cosmos for a time, and then come to his body and raiment and armaments, sit at his throne, and rule again." Firja untucked her wings and stretched them wide, preparing to depart.

Ranar watched Egon's body turn a whiter pale, crack, and blow away to dust.

"Egon has done this before," Ranar said. "Have I?"

The Valkyrie nodded. "For eons he has tried. I have seen you many times, though not always," she said. "You are an integral part of this cycle. If you reach the end, you are always helpful," Firja said. "Though you never remember until I name you guardian again—that is the difficulty with this place. Istfell is the realm of the forgotten and unknown. All who find themselves here fade in time; those who keep it are not immune from the realm's power either." Firja spoke without sentiment, level in a way that might sound harsh to those with tender ears, but not Ranar. He had only ever known the winter bite of a jarl's command, or the braying howl of a raider demon's war cry: he could read when cold was cruel and when cold was only cold.

"How am I to guard a realm when I forget my own duties?" Ranar asked.

Firja directed his gaze back to the ash-white ghost of Egon. A bare outline of his collapsed form remained on the dark glass surface of the tower floor, the rest blown away by the wind.

"Before it comes to that, I mean," Ranar grunted.

"You are a guardian," Firja said. "In your soul, you are steady in your task. Whether your duty looks like this or is simple in its execution, you will shape to it." Firja beckoned Ranar over to the edge of the tower, where they could look out over the whole of Istfell. She pointed toward the far horizon, where Ranar knew the realm to end, bordered in by the river. "Consider the river," Firja said. "Though the water that gives it its body may change—is it not always a river?"

"I suppose so," Ranar said. "Though that river is well kept."

"Isn't it?" Firja grinned, a rare sight. "Serve this realm and its people well, Ranar of Istfell." She flapped her wings once, and then lifted up from the tower top. Golden light broke through the cloud cover. Starnheim's distant shore opened above them. Ranar lifted his axe in salute. With it, he shielded his eyes, and watched Firja fly into the light. Alone, like he was, in duty.

Sometime later, the corporeal green of Istfell fell over Ranar's body once more, and he found himself walking along the pale, hard ground of the realm's vast tundra. The glow of the fog-blotted light above fell soft on the sparkling ice below, and there were no shadows.

Ranar felt no thirst, pain, hunger, or ache. He was, once more, a phantasm. A spirit in a realm set aside for spirits. It was his duty to stand guard, but where to begin? Hold vigil at the Gates of Istfell, where

entering souls would meet him? Seek news or rumors of raiders from this realm or another? Ranar carried his axe made whole by Firja. As before, he knew it to hold the answer.

Ranar heaved his axe into the sky, stepped to the side, and marked where it fell. The haft pointed the way, far away to a distance unfathomable, where the very Cosmos itself swirled. Across Istfell, where spirits unsung still cried out for heroes.

“Good,” Ranar said. Direction. Purpose. Glory. Alone, the guardian of Istfell pulled his axe free and set off toward the far horizon.