

A Tale of Chaos in a Dying World

WYRDCASTERS



ROBERT ROSINA

BOOK ONE

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About the author



ROBERT ROSINA is an obscure writer engaging in imaginative storytelling set within reimagined mythological worlds.

He has no fans.

He has no publishing deal.

He has no other books, and — in fact — this book isn't even finished.

Though probably better suited elsewhere, or perhaps nowhere, the domain of writing is his unwelcome home until such time as it stops providing him with solitude, escapism, and a sense of purpose.

For my beloved, deceased goldfish Elliot

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Acknowledgement

There is no one to thank.

No one helped. No one cared. This book wasn't born of support or faith or "community," but of sleepless nights in liminal spaces and a world too indifferent to notice.

To my family and friends, who alternated between polite disinterest, unsolicited advice, and deliberate obstruction: your interruptions were, if nothing else, a constant reminder that solitude is the only true companion of a writer. You taught me patience by testing it, and for that, I am... well, let us not be impolite.

There were no editors, no publishers, no guiding hands—so ruined was my reputation by the end. Only me, in the creeping dark, scraping words out of those damn papers because there was nothing else left to hold on to. If there is any gratitude here, it is the kind that comes from staring into a void and being thankful to yourself once you have pulled yourself out.

So here is my "acknowledgment": to a world that gave me nothing but the chance to crawl through its wreckage, and to the people who taught me — by their absence — that I am on my own.

May these words offend you if you recognise yourself in them.

Foreword to the Draft Edition

Through the Veil of History, the Truth Calls

The introductory novel you are about to read opens an epic not just of the Norse gods and their universe, but of the human spirit, the mystery of life, of consciousness, and the nature of reality itself. Some people may wonder at how a lowly lawyer from Sydney, having had no training (or interest) in Norse history, in mythology, or in creative writing, came up with such a fantastically imaginative story. I confess, from the outset, that I have had little to do with its construction. Yes, I have converted the tale into the form of a modern fantasy novel, but to say that involved any creativity on my part would be generous. Though there is some overlap with Norse mythology, let there be no doubt that it was in fact the manuscripts of my great grandfather, Lennart Erlander, that provided me with this story in its entirety.

My great grandfather Lennart was a strange man. Shunned in his youth for being a mad eccentric -- what would certainly nowadays be classified as a schizophrenic with delusions of grandeur -- having poured over his "ramblings" I am now convinced there was more at play in Mad Lenn's troubled mind than lunacy. The parallels between Lennart's writings and the ancient Norse texts could be easily disregarded as plagiarism or inspiration. However, it is how they overlap that causes me the most pause: the subtle understandings, the intimate details, the "filling in the gaps" that completely, and ingeniously, reinterpret the authentic historical texts. Even more disquieting are

the differences, which seem to borrow from other sources of mythology that were not known to my great grandfather, who seemed to possess a knowledge of esoteric mechanics beyond the greatest guru of the Mahabharata, and whose then-laughable predictions on developments in technology have proven uncanny, rivalling Asimov's, rivaling Verne's. There is no doubt in my mind that these are the works of a mad genius, of an Einstein, or an Oppenheimer, someone cursed with unhinged insight, capable of peering into that which would render the rest of us *mentis morbus*.

I have endeavoured to be as invisible as possible in my interpretation, striving to realise Lennart's vision for what it was. Something of a family embarrassment, his preserved tomes are dusted off from time to time at the behest of some historian or other who has stumbled upon their existence from a footnote of a more established figure of history. Never having had much interest in history, our family's or otherwise, I find it odd that in the end I was to be the one to modernise the material after so many a hungry author was denied the right by my great grandfather's estate. I have done this out of a deep respect for the man seldom afforded to him by others in my family, with full acknowledgement that I too, before I knew better, joined in the jokes at his expense around many family dinners and functions. Considering myself the foremost expert in his body of work, after the uncomfortable experience of realising this early part of it, I am floored by the unpolished masterpiece that was his "Novegard".

And so, I dedicate this book to Lennart. If this book accomplishes anything, it is my hope that it in some parts legitimises the inner quest of my ancestor, who toiled in the darkness so that we may see the light.

ROBERT ROSINA
New South Wales
August 2024

WYRDCASTERS



BOOK I

A Tale of Chaos in a Dying World

*“One must have a mind of winter
to regard the frost—
And have been cold a long time
to behold the—ice.”*

WALLACE STEVENS (1879—1955)

Interregnum

The majestic spire that was the Æsgarthian Watchtower loomed over all of reality. Within its heart, footsteps echoed in the marble stairwell as the determined son of the absentee king ascended to its peak, to the viewing room that had become his second home of transcendence and strife. To look out on the mystical twilight from there was sobering, and yet, of late, the mere sight of the highest of the realms, the perfected civilisation painted in ethereal hues of white and grey, had brought only a sense of dread.

The panoramic vista flooded his mind as he entered the circular room without exterior walls, the apex of the Watchtower suspended above him by forces unknown. The dazzling view evoked a sense of superiority, of elite power, as if alone, this lofty watcher of Æsgarth, stood at the top of the universe itself peering out onto all its wonder. The prince winced at the hubris, and proceeded to the centre. The serene energy that permeated the room brought a dizzying nausea that only worsened as the robed figure approached the dais at the heart of the boundary-less chamber. As he approached, the room expanded out infinitely in all directions, defying conventional laws of science, and stretching his mind along with it. Reality bent and warped around him, opening up to him, and flooding his senses relentlessly. The fair prince grimaced in agony, clutching his temples as he willed himself through the final steps against the forces of nature, at last collapsing onto the rune-inscribed iron dais and catching his silent breath.

As always, the short trek had altered him. His transformed mind, less a man's though not quite a beast's, adopted a silvery keenness and a cosmic, ancient, almost tribal otherworldliness. Disgusted at

himself, he adopted his new mental form, pushing through the resistance as he rose to behold the dais, that multidimensional dais of the Aesir, that whispered its harsh secrets to only a cursed few. Already he could feel the thrumming currents of time beating through him, drawing him into history itself. He remembered the name Baldur, his own name, though it was by now foreign to him; and the name Odin, that enigma of a name that defied even itself. He feared how far would he go to learn its secrets. Yet it was his yearning hope, that longing for answers, perhaps even the simple want of a child to be reunited with his father, that remained familiar. That spurred him on as the young god wrestled against the merciless quantum stream, forcing it to his ends. At the zenith of the mental maelstrom, struggling to hold on to his fleeting purpose and already losing his grip on his multitudinous senses, Baldur dove into the eternal waves of time and was lost.

As the city collapsed around them, no one screamed.

There was a high-pitched ringing that droned as if an explosion had shocked his pounding eardrums, and looking around at the chaos around him, at the unconquerable city falling to pieces before his eyes, this seemed feasible, through unconfirmable due to his presently inaccessible memory. How long had he been standing here, at the precipice of world-breaking doom, and why was he not brimming with concern for his own safety?

Carelessly he roamed the rubble strewn streets as others fled to an unknown safety they could not possibly hope to arrive at. Many bled from fatal wounds, or had bled until they could bleed no longer. Many ran, from the dust clouds, the earthquakes, the falling mortar, and, more generally, from the omnipresent pandemonium. A mother held a child in her arms that did not survive the cataclysm, though she did not weep but only gazed in horror at the tiny corpse. A father searched desperately as his family stood mutely by, huddled in fear, searching for perhaps a loved one, perhaps a way out, or a tool to aid in his survival, though the object of his frantic investigations, whatever it was, was not forthcoming. A veteran's foot had become lodged between what remained of a building's facade and a crashed vehicle, which had plummeted from its course after suddenly losing power, and the man

scrambled in the debris for a stray, and sufficiently sharp, piece of fallen glass or metal, and for the courage to do what had to be done. Many more, undoubtedly, lay in wait beneath the fallen buildings, unseen and without sight, bleeding and suffocating as they endured till their fast approaching ends.

He stood atop one of the few skyscrapers that was still standing, though again he was not quite sure how he had arrived there. He gazed out, transfixed, at the unfolding catastrophe playing out before him. Fires had broken out all across the city, and the sky was uncharacteristically empty save for a thick smoke ever deepening. The skyline itself was jagged, and missing large sections, like brutalized teeth after a savage lost battle. Only brief glimpses of the city's eviscerated inner wall could be seen. Even the Citadel, and all its orbiting enclosures, that had spun at the city's centre for endless cycles in triumph over gravity and banality, lay in ruin out of place in their newly formed craters below. Northgard was no more, for what remained was no longer Northgard.

He could see them now, the invaders, attacking in squadrons the survivors of the already fallen city. Spectres wreaking blood-soaked, unflinching havoc like a plague of locusts with an insatiable hunger for destruction. Among these translucent phantoms could be seen all manner of beings, Aesir were among them, and the enemies and allies of the Aesir from the remote worlds. Wild life — some known, some unknown — filled their ranks, adding a chaotic savagery to the ordered annihilation of the advanced Aesir-like beings and the off-world counterparts. Standing at their centre, gazing up at him from the unfolding destruction he saw himself. A spectral mirror, staring knowingly through the distance.

They were both in the ruined Citadel. Banners of nations lay torn and burning still. The glorious architecture returned to the rubble from which it came, though occasional glimpses of mostly intact pieces remained. He was holding the corpse of the spectre, much as he had seen the mother holding her child what seemed like moments earlier. Though the corpse was melting and fading, there was victory in its eyes; eyes that reflected the fires of the Citadel, that in turn reflected the fires of the fallen city, that danced and faded into nothingness.

Baldur tore his mind away from the erroneous vision and his consciousness returned to the rarefied plane of Æsgarþ, and the Watchtower. Ignoring the sublime beauty of his surroundings, the ardent prince took a focused breath and steeled himself, detaching from the drama and refocusing on the goal: Odin. Like plunging back into deep, ice-cold waters, Baldur re-engaged the dais and descended into the past.

Suddenly the weariness that had been weighing down his body, the confounding tiredness, the aching and the wanting and the nagging unease, the screaming dissonant discomfort, lifted. Like a drowning man breaking through the waves to the life-restoring air, something came over him. Everything was suddenly clear, but without any harshness such clarity usually brings. He was overjoyed and filled with a life that savoured life, ecstatic at the opportunity to live, separate from the accompanying reprimand or judgement of his usual self. His eyes, heavy a moment earlier, seemed to shine brighter than the morning sun as the light of dawn fell upon them. Had he ever been alive before this? He was swimming in joy that pulsed through his veins propelling him forward to hopeful days filled with promise. He was unchained. Slow and immediate. A twisted, focused avarice with a sole mandate: to enjoy. The part of his own mind that was filled with terror at what he was — this powerful, elevated, peaceful, and wicked force — diminished and faded away. He was free to gleefully hunt and revel in his own glory.

He saw them clearly now, those phantoms that crept in the shadows of his periphery. How had he not noticed them? Their neon effulgence and colourful phosphorescence that contrasted their drab surrounds made them impossible to miss. There was something primal about them, like wild wolves overgrown, hairless, with coral-like protrusions ornamenting their near scaline flesh, and they adopted unfamiliar postures that would seem unnatural if adopted by native beasts whose bodies were ill equipped. They noticed him the instant he saw them, but it was like seeing an old friend, one that evidently you had failed to recognise. Like sunflowers greeting the sun, and each other. It was

such a beautiful day, and the moment was intensely pleasant beyond comprehension.

What was that he had been saying?

yim krim 'Δi' rehlamuna·n

yim krim 'Δi' rehlamuna·n

yim krim 'Δi' rehlamuna·n...

He understood. It was something that simply had to be done.

Calling one of the Phantoms over to him, extending his weightless arm and willing the command, it took off with a clap, scurrying through the twilight brush like a possessed crab, pouncing on one of his captors, and tearing at his throat sending a magnificent fountain of red blood catapulting into the sky before raining down on the barren earth. It was a joy to behold and felt like the right thing to do. Other phantoms he sent, teams of them, they seemed to come from nowhere and were so eager to do his bidding that he called on more and more of them. They erupted, like lava from some unseen supervolcano, spewing out over all the land with fiery and absolute destruction in an instant. This way and that way they ran, and gnawed, and had their way with the fleshy obstacles to Ullrich's peace. He was starting to breathe more easily now, and the next few kills came and went without much interruption: the children barely had time to scream before they gurgled and splattered and were no more. This one and that one and all. It was such a beautiful day. A beautiful morning and so much glory left to experience. Even the Alteric blood that covered every visible part of him seemed to rejoice, the very stuff of life covering him. He was alive.

He was the day. He was the night.

He was life, and the end of life.

He was reckoning and sanity and madness.

Baldur pulled back—disturbed, discouraged by the thought of yet another day of failure, and unable to continue his attempt at forcing the Watchtower into his favoured direction. To the past, and his father, whose continued absence weighed heavy upon the land. The day-star had risen, but it was far too soon for the compressive throbbing in his

head, yet far too late in the hour of man to abandon the day's efforts. The weariness of his quest weighed upon him, the frustration and the feeling of being imprisoned by fate. Why was the tower resisting his desire to learn the truth, he wondered, annoyed at this final deadlock after much deliberation and sacrifice.

Baldur turned his attention to his ring, Draupnir, the heavy gold ring which had belonged to his father and now adorned his mid-finger. The perplexing band reflected the circular room strangely, and, as always, its eight mirages fanned out around his hand confounding the gaze. After Baldur had discovered its whereabouts in the bowels of Muspelheim, and toiled to retrieve it, he was sure that he had obtained the final piece to the puzzle; that the answers would be forthcoming. How absurd the thought seemed to him now.

A flash, a mere flash. A figure -- could it have been Odin? -- removing the ring and placing it within the dais, at a protrusion imperceptible to the eye. Baldur fumbled at the fleeting image, that vanished as quickly as it had appeared, as if his reaching for it pushed it further away! Galvanised by some progress at last, Baldur mimicked the shadowy figure, removing the ring and placing it upon the dais, feeling for the protrusion he could not see. Locked, the dais shifted from within, the sound of stone grinding against stone as the ring was pulled into it, and the runes lit up magnificently. The natural forces remained, but stabilised somehow, bringing a feeling of separation from the Watchtower that simultaneously reversed some of its more imposing effects. With the ring serving as a lightning rod for the wayward visions of the enigmatic tower, the currents of time seemed to part. The path had become clearer than ever, and, emboldened, Baldur surged with duty and purpose. Once more, his father's pitiless face fixed in his mind, the son of Odin descended.

The hull creaked as the turbulence became unbearable. Loader collapsed to the floor as displays sparked around him, and explosions from every corner of the ship reverberated deafeningly. He clung in vain to the floor, scurrying underneath a panel at the rim of the command centre.

From across the bridge he spotted Odin, left eye smothered in blood that was still dripping from the wound at his crown, his one good eye fixed on the display. Intensely focused with no time for fear.

"Commander, the ship will not hold. We must turn back."

Odin, face composed and immediate, piercing through the panic, shoved the objector from his station and usurped his duties.

"Nobody leaves! No one turns back! This is our last stand, gentlemen. Retreat into a cold death. Or fight like heroes with a chance to save your world and your people. Do not turn back!"

The turbulence became so intense the ship seemed at the brink of tearing itself apart. Someone on the bridge was yelling the screams of a dying man.

"Hold you dogs!" Odin roared, cut off as the display ahead of him burst into flames and was torn backwards into the vastness of space. As the vacuum jerked Loader forward a bright light drowned out the chaos.

And all was still.

Baldur inched back from the unfolding history pouring into his mind. With increasing confidence, spurred by his partial success at compelling the mechanism to his father's early days, and hoping at last to locate the man himself, Baldur willed the temporal adjustment, his father's juvenile years passing by like rain falling upwards till the rain could be compelled to rise no more.

It was wintertime, always wintertime, and all the world was cold and grey.

At the rear of the farmstead, deep in the wilderness at the foot of the Bundaven River that ran between the foot of the family property and the Glumsmir Hills, the white-haired young man's icy shovel struck the small coffin. His mind had raced through the macabre digging, looking for answers to questions upon questions, questions of ethics and metaphysics reserved for philosophers and those of questionable sanity. Alongside these were sought answers to more immediate questions of a more mundane, but no less morbid, nature. Beneath light

snow and the hazy, Frost-obscured moonlight, one question, in particular, perhaps the most important of them, dominated his thoughts: "Should it be done?" At a loss for answers, his reticence had fought against a curiosity that, inch by inch, won out, albeit not by much. And so, staring down at the exhumed grave, the temptation to turn back almost too much to resist, the man, who only weeks before was considered a child, resigned himself to the grim task ahead.

Planting the shovel like some conqueror staking claim to new territory, the novice grave robber removed the coffin and, covering his nose with his elbow, opened it before the creeping wilderness. The bloated lupine corpse with its foul odour and ghastly appearance was offensive to the senses, the once peaceful countenance of the grey wolf replaced with a horror of decomposition and decay. The young man stilled his stomach, and wondered if it was too late, but pressed on, the memory of his faultless animal companion, as it was, still fresh in his mind. Daylight was breaking, and soon his father -- who had undoubtedly risen -- would be expecting assistance in the morning chores; there was no luxury to delay any further.

Still unsure of how to use his emergent power, which he had kept even from his parents, he placed his hands over the corpse before him and tried to recall how he felt the previous times the ability had manifested. He remembered the dragonfly, how its wings fluttered back to life after he was compelled to touch the fallen insect on the day of his naming little over a month ago. And the rat, freshly poisoned, who shook off its mortality like the evening rain and scurried off out of the pantry larder to rejoin the living once more. He tried to ignore the failed attempt with the possum, which had somehow caused a forest fire that led to his rations being halved for a week and his duties doubled. He remembered his successes, trying to stimulate the peculiar feeling, and felt the dark energy begin to surge within him.

Nothing happened.

Wondering at the setback, he evaluated the situation and sensed he was holding back, and instantly knew why. The transgression, the wrongness, was keeping him from willing the morbid deed. He shook the uncertainty from his mind and refocused his attention on the dead wolf, reinforcing his focus with purpose. This time, he thought to himself, he would silence his doubts, and do what needed to be done.

Before long, a faint purple glow began to emanate from his hands. With increasing intensity, it engulfed the small corpse, slowly entering and saturating it as it sucked in licks of the glowing, purple fumes. The young man began to feel lightheaded and intoxicated. In the distance, a savage fight between wild animals sounded, but he ignored the distraction, focused, and pushed on. As intoxication gave way to head-pounding delirium, and it felt like his veins were being sucked dry. Vistas of his consciousness opened within him, fundamental concepts like time and being ceased their meaning, and his understanding of what it meant to be was irrevocably altered. Head buzzing, and no longer able to focus on the magnitude of the moment, he gazed out at falling snow and the Frost-hued sunrise, his mind a cosmic inferno. After a timeframe that could have been hours, weeks, or millennia, the wolf started twitching, mildly restoring the man's focus on reality. Its disgusting form started writhing, and convulsing, then piecing itself back together -- muscle, bone, skin and fur -- resembling in all ways the steadfast companion that had brought him so much joy. Much to his surprise, the young man watched the sickening display not in horror, or guilt, but vacantly, numbly, as one might witness the events in a dream. After the otherworldly glow had seemingly restored the corpse as much as it was able, the coffin dimmed.

The beast sprung out of its foetal rest and onto its paws, adopting a predatory stance alien to the creature during its previous lifetime. Overcome with awe and love at the sight of his returned companion, and eager for a reunion, he reached out a hand toward his resurrected pet. The wolf stiffened in alarm at the approaching caress. When the hand was in range, the wolf growled loudly, and lashed out at it, leaving the pale skin scratched and bleeding. The young necromancer exclaimed in pain, which brought him back to his senses, perplexed at the peculiar turn of events. Without delay, affection, or gratitude, his beloved animal ran off, alone, into the dark woods.

Following the re-embodied wolf into the mess of trees that was once its home would have been a pointless exercise, but neither could the young man bring himself to accept the fact that his pet had so readily abandoned him. In a daze, after busying himself for a time at the site, setting the grave as it was and returning the shovel to the graveyard shed, the young man resigned himself to the fact that his pet was once

again lost to him, and he started his way back to the farmstead and the irresistible smell of sweet smoke and cooking meats. With each step his head cleared a little more, allowing him to wrestle with the mixed success of the curious morning. As he arrived by his home, he saw his father, Jofrid, preparing the tools.

"Visiting the ancestors, good son? And at such an hour! I can only hope when I go west you will remember me so well."

As he walked closer, his father noticed his pale face.

"Odin, what has happened, my boy?"

"Fenrir..." said Odin with choked breath and a vacant stare.

"You are too queasy around death," Odin father scoffed, getting back to his preparations. "I miss the rascal too, the place is vacant without him, but he is in a better place now."

"He is?" said Odin, suddenly paranoid his father had caught him out.

"A silent grave, lad! You're half asleep, I wager. Get back and ready yourself for the day.

Odin recalled the last time he had shared his powers with his parents nearly a year ago. They had learned to manage his strength, which he had long possessed, but the day he lost his temper in public and totalled Alderman Dryer's truck was the day his parents went from overprotective to isolationist.

"Father, has it occurred to you that keeping me away from the whole world is only making things worse."

"Worse?" he said as a stiffness crept into his voice. "If the Learned Order was to realise what the Stormr family has kept alive in violation of their Iron Law that would be worse. You'd be locked in a cage in the centre of Blackwater never to be released. To say nothing of what they will do to your mother and I."

Odin looked up at his mother who was working on the balcony of the studio. The morning light created a halo around her as she worked, highlighting her pleated blonde hair, and her piercing green eyes, as she stared down through the bloom at her commission.

"I will never let that happen," said Odin defiantly.

"Son, you may be more resilient than one of your grandfather's blades, but may you never learn all the ways that you can be hurt,"

he shook his head in frustration and slapped his son on the shoulder before making his way into the farm to get to the day's work.

Having completely acclimated to the temporal currents of the Watchtower's dais, surfing through the currents of time itself, Odin's son focused and adjusted the stream for the last. To the commencement of the age that Baldur suspected held the answers to questions of legacy that could remain buried no longer. The time before the Æsgarthians were gods, *if* indeed they were. To the era of the Wyrddasters, when the chosen few of that dying world resisted annihilation and attempted the impossible. And King Odin the Grey, heir apparent to the throne of Æsgarth, rearranged the universe in his image.

Godchild

The wind howled through the iron wood as Halvar's thoughts of his ailing wife kept his feet planted on the freezing steps of the secluded cabin. It was the dead of night. Fog clung to the trees. He had come prepared, armed with several of his father's weapons, including the pistol that he gripped tightly beneath his cloak. For the lands south of Riverfall, near the Outlands, were rumoured to be teeming with monsters—and the spellmongers of Ironwood were well-known courtiers of such horrors. If the rumours were to be believed. Halvar wasn't taking any chances. A crack of twigs in the dark sent his heart racing. The decrepit front door creaked opened, and a hideous crone greeted him with a smile—ghastly, and more sadistic than welcoming. Unable to drag it out further, she bowed and stepped aside, allowing him entry.

Halvar shuffled inside the warm, oddly-smelling cabin, and removed his snow-heavy cloak and boots, albeit with some difficulty given the numbness of his trembling fingers.

"You are armed for war, Aesiri," she sneered, eyeing Halvar's advanced weapons with disapproval.

"They're not... for you," Halvar said, jaw tight with cold.

"A believer in children's tales, then. Warm yourself," she barked, gesturing to the fire, and making her way to the kitchen and the kettle. "When you are able, we discuss the matter of your visit."

"I am... able... now," said Halvar, convincing nobody. The witch simply ignored him and prepared tea as Halvar did as instructed. By the time she handed the mug to him, feeling had returned to his extremities and with it an overwhelming sensation of quiet exhaustion.

"You are terrified," she said savouring the emotion.

"Yes," said Halvar, his mind hard and focused.

"But not of me," she said, somewhat disappointed. "Nor of the terrors you believe to be prowling these lands."

"It is my wife."

The witch pulled away and peered into the man.

"Pregnant," she said nodding with understanding.

Halvar's suspicions only increased with the statement; but if she was a charlatan, she had researched well.

"It has been... irregular," said Halvar.

"My midnight trips to the latrine are irregular, Aesiri," she spat. "Waste my time at your peril."

Knowing he could not trust to this stranger, having only the referral of some rather shady individuals from out of town, Halvar was aware that his options were few, and his need great.

"She is in near constant agony. She doesn't sleep. She refuses to eat anything save lavender and elderflowers. Our only respite is a trance that seems to offer her sublime relief, but in that blissful state she is taken to ranting of delusions of an utterly terrifying nature. I fear she has become possessed by some foul being, though even to utter these words—" he faltered "—is a stab in my heart at how I betray her and my unborn."

"You are a man of fine clothes and a finer tongue, Assemblyman. And I dare say a fine mind." Her grin widened with each compliment, like a blade drawing out its edge. "Your wife's illness is clearly a most present danger. Yet you have come to Ironwood, and not Stormhold, that fine city with its arcane machines." She gestured to Halvar's weapons with disgust. "Have you so little faith in the mechanical wonders of your fine people?"

There was a self-congratulatory tone to the witches' words, as if she savoured the opportunity to see a Aesiri crawl to her in an hour of need.

"We have reason to believe the issue is of an... otherworldly nature."

"You know full well that it is!" she taunted, the facade of her politeness dropping to reveal the bile.

The fireplace flared green for a moment, then returned to normal.

"Out with it!"

Halvar forced the word, for it seemed blocked a great shield had been placed over his mind.

"Wyrddcaster," he said, guilt coursing through him. "The child she carries, there can no longer be any doubt."

"Is he?" said the witch, eyes glinting. "And you know this how?"

"There have been omens, too many to ignore. Yet ignore them I did, for as long as I could. Then came the visions, and the terrible sickness. I thought my wife was going mad. I hoped... But the pregnancy has held for much too long. Fourteen months and no sign of an end. And the things my wife can do..."

Halvar stared out at the cascade of impossible memories of his wife that constantly plagued his mind.

"Omens and visions, pah!" she spat in irritation. "Out are out of your depth, and should return to the shallows. Wyrddcasters, indeed—is there no fairy tale you do not believe, Aesiri?"

Halvar had hoped to not reveal all, yet seeing the witch's scepticism compelled him. Rolling up his sleeve, he showed her the red, raw handprint—burned into his forearm.

"This is only the most recent," he said as the witch caressed the wound. "The power shines from her, it is... inhuman—I can no longer touch my own wife!"

She turned away, as if to conceal her salivation at the prospect. The piping tea within Halvar's palms seemed to grow suddenly cold.

"The pregnancy has eaten her through—life has all but fled from her! She is less than a husk of herself, hanging by a silk thread. Each night could be her last, and I fear I will return home to a corpse! Our physician is certain she will not survive delivery, let alone possession of the power; she has begged us to terminate for the sake of the mother... Please, if you have any means of saving them both..."

"Will not survive, you say?" she mused, turning once more to face him. "Dire straits, indeed, hmm?"

She drifted to a cabinet lined with tinctures and oddities. Into a wooden bowl, she placed strange materials whose origin Halvar could not begin to guess. When she was done, she whispered over the mix and slipped it into a pouch.

"A single dose. Be sure she keeps it down—if you want her to survive."

“Thank you...” said Halvar, on the verge of tears. “Name your price, and you shall have it.”

“Price?” she laughed. The flame flashed green once more, and the wind howled outside. “Let us not sully ourselves with so lowly a thing as price. What cost could be placed on something which is priceless? This fine son of yours. With so much to give. No price,” she said, as if robbing Halvar of something precious. “Saving the life of your son—that is payment enough.”

Had anyone else spoken those words, he might have found comfort in them—but as the pouch made its way into his palm, Halvar darkened.

From within their celestial spiral beyond the spheres—between what was and what could be, the thinnest veil between them and the Great Projector itself—the Highspirits conferred.

“She is breaking. She is desperate. She tries again,” said Duration to the other representations of her kin, eyes fixed on the birth unfolding the furthest realm. “Another comes.”

“This one ripples,” said Causality, sending a pulse through the Ether and watching as it disturbed the entire sub-system. “The chain reaction—”

“Shall be contained,” interrupted Relativity, as she nullified the disturbance. “The loop is finite.”

“Even a finite loop is consequential,” said Causality, quite pleased by the neutralisation. Duration nodded in sombre agreement.

Blackness and a heavy mood permeated their environment, demanding to be known; Entropy, voicing her dissent.

“It needn’t be destroyed,” said Causality impatiently into the surrounding cosmos—for Entropy, to the great relief of her sisters, could not manifest a form. “The first—he dealt with her cleverly.”

“Entropy is right—the second must fall,” said Duration, gazing upon delirious mother whose torment transcended worlds, and then upon the wound festering at the base of reality. “Her time has come.”

“Fools! The time is hers!” quaked Relativity, eyeing the corpse lying, as it had for a century, at the foot of the so-called Soul Engine. Something in it stirred, as the child breached its way into the world—tainted,

even before his story had begun. And Entropy darkened the spiral with sadistic glee. But the fear beneath it—that bitter fear for their own survival, hitherto alien to the place—that fear belonged in equal parts to them all.

“Odin?! Odin!!”

Startled from his reverie, having walked aimlessly through the cold to the point of near-freezing, Odin looked back toward the sound of his father and the howls of the family’s wolf.

“Damned, boy, enter this chariot this instant!” yelled Halvar as he pulled up next to his son at breakneck speed, the snow carrying his voice sharply.

“I just... started walking... I couldn’t stop... I just couldn’t stop,” Odin whispered, his strength all but failing him as he stared out into the frozen currents, fighting back the consuming urge to continue onward—into the ocean itself.

Halvar excited the chariot and knelt down in the snow, embracing his son.

“What has gotten into you, lad? And how in Heim did you get past the blockade?” He caressed his dazed child, looking him over. “Come, into the carriage with you.”

Lacking any physical reserves to resist, Odin moved lifelessly into the chariot guided by his father’s arm around him. Whatever anger Halvar had felt when searching for the boy vanished upon seeing the state of him. Now his thoughts turned single-mindedly toward getting his son home safely, for they were perilously close to the border of the Wyrld-infested Outlands. Bloodfang, overcome by a deranged instinct, ran past the pair and growled defensively at the roar of the sea. Halvar whistled for the wolf, but it ignored its master and merely continued its aggressive posturing against the freezing rapids.

“Bloodfang! Come!”

“Come on, Bloodfang,” mumbled Odin, shivering, dimly aware of the situation around him as the cold bit into his flesh.

Halvar stormed over to his misbehaving wolfling, preparing to drag him into the chariot if need be.

“Even the animals refuse to obey this day...”