

# THE WOLF LORDS



The Fylking, Book Two

F.T. McKinstry

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## Destroyer of the Math Gate

A sun's cycle on the world of Math was little more than the fleeting life of a mayfly to a High Immortal, the lofty race to which the Fylking and the Niflsekt belonged. But to the commander of Niflsekt Covert Operations, it felt as long as all the millennia of his existence.

The commander sat draped like a panther in the boughs of an old pine tree deep in the wilds of the Fylking homeland of Oeoros, his mind focused on the crystalline glow of the Oeoros-Math Gate many leagues to the south. Freezing mist hovered over the towering evergreens carpeting the foothills of the mighty snow-draped mountains that separated this remote realm from the heart of the Fylking Empire.

The distant world of Math had long been a thorn lodged in the paw of the Niflsekt High Command. Enemies of the Niflsekt for tens of thousands of suns, the Fylking had perfected the art of interdimensional travel. They had established an outpost on Math and built the Gate, a plain but sophisticated portal in the shape of a pentacle. The Gate, which was 213 leagues in diameter and defined on each point and intersection by a tower of stone and crystal, allowed the Fylking access to star systems that were once the sole dominion of the Niflsekt. In their focused intent to stop what had become a devastating military advantage, the Niflsekt High Command had given him, Vaethir of the Dragon Clan, orders to destroy the Gate.

He succeeded the first time, over twenty-five centuries ago. He had left the realms around the Gate in cursed desolation for a thousand suns, pleasing his lords and giving the Niflsekt a much-

needed reprieve. But the Fylking, just as resolute, had factored in the likelihood of such an attack. When generations of the trained mortal seers who served the immortal warlords rebuilt the Gate, the Niflsekt's reprieve came to an end.

Just over a sun past, Vaethir had tried again, this time, taking a more aggressive approach. A deft and seasoned operative, he had slipped through the Gate on a pretense and spent twenty suns hiding on Math, during which time he carefully plotted the fall of his enemies.

He had very nearly succeeded but for one mortal, a woman with a pretty smile and a skill for knitting.

Millie, they had called her. A peasant name, simple as weeds fed to goats, but there was nothing simple about her. Favored by the grim and shining Fylking pantheon, she wielded the power of a Norn, a goddess of fate and destiny, a spinner, weaver, and worker of magic. Just as Vaethir brought his plans to fruition, the Norn wounded him by slicing a knife through a patch of wool knit into his image, leaving a nasty wound from shoulder to groin in his otherwise flawless immortal flesh.

And she didn't stop there. Fleeing with his wound, Vaethir unleashed the culmination of his plans, a magnificent demon with one purpose: to destroy Math and everything in it. An ambitious, excessive plan, the High Command had chided him—not because they hadn't smiled on the idea, but because world annihilation had proved too much for the Fylking's gods to abide.

Guided by Othin, the Fylking's Allfather god and a consummate Magician, the Norn knit another spell, a staggering feat of magic the implications of which she was scarcely aware. On the cold earth beneath the far northern Tower Sif, the Gate's first line of defense, she wove the demon's essence into stalks, sticks and weeds, a sprawling image only discernable from the top of the tower. A star's age would pass before the image faded from Vaethir's mind.

Such a plain creature, that woman, yet in her mortal innocence she had wielded the power of a goddess—irrational, devastating and beautiful. Only he knew that she had looked upon him with lust in her eyes. It was a sweet touch he wasn't inclined to share. Or forget.



Another bad idea, in retrospect, pointing that out to her.

Now, to deepen the blow to his manhood, not to mention his standing in the eyes of the High Command, the wound the Norn had put on him would not heal, not even in the fires of immortality. It did not bleed or weep; it gaped on his flesh like a chasm, throbbing with constant pain no healer or mage could relieve. The pain had settled into a black river of hate, running, pulsing, ever flowing to the sea without ever getting there. He would have killed that woman a thousand times over had the Allfather not bent the rules of incarnation and given her life on this very world, where he could protect her. And fuck her too, no doubt.

Fortunately, Fate showed no favors; the gales of winter storms withered all things equally. The same passion that had enabled the Norn to destroy his demon also drove her to return to Math, where her ranger lover awaited her. Vaethir planned to get there first. And no god or Fylking would save them this time.

The sky fled above the mists, a cloak of gray driven by icy wind. Snowflakes whirled in the air. Shifting positions in the tree, Vaethir renewed his sullen gaze on the Oeoros-Math Gate hidden in the far distant woods. He had accomplished one thing by obliterating Tower Sif on his way out of Math and trapping the Fylking there. It bought him some time to build an army while they rebuilt the gatetower.

That time was running out.

Faetros, his master in the arts of sorcery, was fond of saying, *Do not be fooled by high talk of light and order. Chaos rules the universe.* The magician had touched a pool of stars and had assured Vaethir that a shift was coming, as surely as an ice-bound lake cracks in spring: an eclipse of Blith, the largest of Oeoros's three moons. Vaethir glanced up at the pale orb hanging amid the ragged clouds. Faetros was rarely wrong about such things.

For the third day, Vaethir watched, scanning for impressions. A smile touched his mouth. He had recently learned of a blot on Math, near the Fylking's Gate, like the beginnings of a disease on the bark of a tree hiding some interior, invisible ruin. Combined with Faetros's portents, it might be something he could use to his advantage.

He hung in the tree, the Norn's chasm in his body aching with cold, until dusk descended on the forest. Somewhere nearby, an owl hooted. Vaethir stilled his mind and projected it south, through creaking trees, a fox slinking over a frozen stream, an eagle tearing the flesh of a hare, the reflection of the moon, a temple choked by frozen weeds. Flashes of light revealed the tall, alert forms of warriors guarding the Oeoros-Math Gate. Vaethir breathed a word, a soft breeze just cold enough to cause a shiver. In that form, he passed through the dense perimeter glittering with the watchers' awareness without being detected.

The watchers formed a spiral pattern, their minds woven around the perimeter like the inner sanctum of a shell. In the center was a round, black pool, unfrozen and still as a moonless sky. Ash trees surrounded it. On the edge stood five crystals seventy-two degrees apart, forming a pentacle of light over the surface. Beneath it was emptiness, a void that crossed dimensions to one destination: Math. Once a traveler slipped through to the other side, they could use the Math Gate, with its ten stone towers spread over many leagues, to travel to other worlds accessible from the star system of which Math was a part.

Vaethir studied the six seasoned warriors who guarded the pentacle. The Oeoros-Math Gate had always been guarded, but not like this. These men shimmered with the strength and sight of gods. He would never get by them alone, not in any form he knew or by any skill he possessed, including sorcery, to which the portal was highly resistant.

Vaethir circled the pool like a whirlwind, careful not to cast a ripple on the surface. From his scouts he had recently received reports of Fylking coming in and out of this area—not watchers, but warlords and mercenaries, the sort of elite, seasoned blades they employed on Math. But they were most likely doing the same thing he was: watching and waiting.

One of the men shifted on his feet, glancing around with a hard expression of suspicion. *Sensitive*, Vaethir noted sourly. *Of course you are*. He expanded his mind to become the leaves in the trees. He lifted straight into the air and slowly circled, focusing his mind on the energies emanating from the depths of the Gate.

Another of the guards looked up, his dark blue eyes settling on the boughs before casting a glance at his companion.

Then something changed. The Niflsekt watched, a thrill dancing over his heart as the pool shimmered, and a warrior appeared in the center. She was clad in leather, her leggings and hauberk stitched with mail. She wore gauntlets tipped with claws like a cat, a bow and quiver, and a knife on her thigh. Her blond hair was braided on the sides. Her boots resounded on the pool as she strode across, her cloak swirling as she stepped to the ground. The watchers paid her no mind, as if they were used to seeing her.

A messenger. Vaethir might have guessed it by the weathered look of her gear. But then he saw something else, hidden, bright...and vital.

She stopped and spun around, her gaze sweeping over the area, moving upward, until it rested on him with cold, calculating interest, a cat spotting a bird within its grasp. At her throat she wore a charm with *ansuz* carved into it, the rune of Othin. She muttered something under her breath that swept through Vaethir's mind and closed over it like a trap.

A messenger and a witch.

Two of the watchers drew their swords; one of them asked her a question Vaethir didn't catch over the roar of panic in his mind. "Sound the alarm," she said. Snatching off a gauntlet, she reached into her cloak and drew forth a flat crystal the size of her palm. Vaethir slipped through her holding spell like a weasel and focused on the crystal just before she hurled it to the ground, shattering it. Shards flew like ice, lost in the shrill cry that echoed through the woods.

Vaethir returned to the far pine tree, his breath in his throat as the message on the witch's crystal came clear in his mind: *The Otherworld is restless. Someone is trying to summon a great power. We don't know why.*

An eclipse and a crack in an ice-bound lake. Not only was the Math Gate back in operation, so was a sorcerer, evidently, providing Vaethir with a chance, albeit small, of getting to Math through another door.

The Otherworld.

Grinning, the Niflsekt lowered himself from the tree, flipped gracefully to the ground and trudged through the snow to his horse. Clenching his jaw against the ever throbbing pain in his gut, he mounted and pressed the beast into a furious gait, heading north.



Light rippled over Vaethir's aching flesh as he passed through the spell he had cast over the forested wilderness surrounding the ruins of an abandoned hold. It loomed in the trees, its dark stones covered in moss and vines, one tower haunted by ravens and another by archers. Safe behind illusions, his growing army lay in wait for a sign by which their fortune would change. Eventually, the Fylking's magicians would detect his spell and see more than just the frozen ruins—but Vaethir planned to be at war by then, with a carefully picked and trained army capable of overcoming the fancy, sensitive watchers on the Oeoros-Math Gate.

He rode into the hold like a storm, causing his men to jump aside as he thundered by. He dismounted in midstride, headed for the crumbling stairs, and took them two at a time. "Find Alrael," he said as his men gathered with questioning looks. "My chambers. Now."

He strode over the rough timber floor and ascended another flight of steps to a landing. At the end, he entered the room.

"Milord," said someone behind him. Silent as an owl, the dark elf had a way of appearing without warning. He was as tall as the commander, with black eyes and skin the color of twilight. His sable hair lay in long plaits over his shoulders and chest.

"Alrael." Vaethir paced beside the bed. "I need you to get me across the Veil." It might have been a coincidence, the report about the stain on the world of Math and the Fylking messenger's news about a mysterious summoning, but his heart told him otherwise.

The dark elf lifted his brow. While the High Immortal races and the beings in the Otherworld were visible to one another, the races kept to their own dominions. When High Immortals did mix with Others, it tended to be for the same reasons as did

human witches, warlocks, sorcerers and seers: to summon Others in exchange for magic. Alrael was an exception, of sorts; Vaethir and the elf had forged a friendship two centuries ago, and shared not only secrets but also a bed, a rich, wild and rough diversion of which Vaethir had grown especially fond. Indeed, Vaethir knew his friend well enough to anticipate his response.

The elf frowned. "What do you need me for? Cast a circle as Master Faetros taught you."

Vaethir threw him a cold glance. Faetros had shown him how to open the Veil between the worlds ten thousand suns ago, and Alrael spoke of it as if it were yesterday. The dark elf's surly tone told him he was being mocked. Vaethir, powerful enough to bring forth a demon capable of destroying a world, but unable to do something as simple as casting a circle. The point was not lost.

"I'm not looking to summon, but to be summoned," Vaethir informed him.

The elf's dark eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"I mean to be manifested on Math. I won't need to use the Gate if I'm summoned."

Alrael snorted a laugh. "No mortal sorcerer on Math has the power to summon you. For all that, why would he want to?"

"That doesn't matter. Someone there is trying to summon *something*. No sorcerer has complete control; fate and chaos are always involved. I intend to exploit that."

Alrael crossed his arms over his chest. "That works both ways, Vaethir. If you try this, something in the Otherworld could easily see you. It might not be something friendly."

"That's why I need you, to watch and ward."

"Get myself killed on your behalf, you mean. I don't need to tell you how big and ugly things get in the Otherworld. Do you think that demon you summoned last time went unnoticed?"

"That was Faetros's idea," he said offhandedly.

The elf's closed expression did not change. "Is this about the Norn?"

Vaethir closed his eyes and ground his teeth. *Everything is about the Norn*. "It's about the war," he lied. "The Gate is operational and the High Command will expect me to have a plan." A glance.

“Which I do.”

“Are you planning to spend twenty more suns there?”

“No, I am not.” The commander whipped his cloak around him and strode to the door. “I will do this, Alrael, with or without you.” He went into the hall and descended the steps. At the bottom, his warriors, scouts and operatives waited for news.

Alrael followed him. “Anyone powerful enough to summon you can banish you, too,” he reminded Vaethir needlessly.

The commander ignored him. He told his men what he knew—most of it—and gave them orders to be carried out in his absence. He gave private instructions to his first in command. Then he strode out into the cold, looked up at the stars and the Blith moon hanging above the trees, and headed into the woods.

A short time later, he stopped. Moonlight cast the shadows of standing stones upon the snow. They were arranged in a row, with a shallow pit on one end. No one knew what the Fylking had used it for; the stones didn’t align with any celestial event, and there were no carvings save one, on the stone on the end, farthest from the pit. Near the top was the crude face of a bearded man with one eye.

Alrael stood there, his pale hair moving in the breeze. “I will help you,” he said quietly, his eyes hidden in the shadows. “But I will not stay.”

Vaethir nodded. “Fair enough.”

Alrael walked by the stones and moved into the trees. Not far from the clearing, he stopped by an enormous willow hanging over a frozen bog. He circled it once and knelt by the base of the tree, speaking softly. After a moment he rose, stepped back and moved his hand over the air, speaking a string of words in the elven tongue.

The tree creaked and groaned and split, yawning open. Snow slid from the boughs and drifted to the ground in silvery sheets. A black, fathomless opening appeared in the roots. Moonlight touched the edges of stone steps descending into darkness.

The dark elf went down. Vaethir followed him.

They moved through the lightless cold using the senses of cats. Time and space shifted and blurred, losing structure as they passed across the Veil. Vaethir cleared his mind of all but his

intention to step into a moment. Taking a chance on his instincts, he also focused on the report he had heard of something wrong. As he moved through the borderlands between dimensions, his immortal mind expanded into the vastness.

Alorael vanished in the dark like a dream.

Humming vibrated in Vaethir's mind, three voices rising and falling in chant. The air smelled of brine, stone, rose and thyme. The chanting grew louder, echoing in a stone chamber.

Vaethir lifted his gaze from a ring of mist. He hovered, insubstantial, on the edge of the Otherworld, in a rift in the mortal realm. This rift wasn't a natural phenomenon; it rang with art and sophistication. Someone had built it. The Niflsekt commander calculated the dimensions of the chamber, the weight and density of the stone above, the distant rumble of a tide, and the angle of the sun glimmering in the cracks of an ancient keep. The winds on the sea blew from the north. To the east, lines of light streamed over hundreds of leagues, feeding the Gate.

He was on the eastern coast of Fjorgin, a realm across the narrow sea from Dyrregin, Gateway of the Gods. Judging by the age and size of the place around him, and the stunning architecture of the portal on which he stood, he could only have found the ancient keep belonging to a brotherhood of sorcerers known as Fenrir, the Wolf Lords.

Ýr, they called it.

The chanting stopped. Vaethir raised his brow. The Fenrir Brotherhood was an order thousands of suns old that comprised, as far as he knew, men with a stomach for the darker arts. And yet three women had just summoned him here.

A crone with smooth cheeks and iron gray hair to her waist stepped forward. "Name yourself," she commanded him.

"Vaethir of the Dragon Clan," he said dutifully, hiding a smile. *Commander of Niflsekt Covert Operations, Destroyer of the Math Gate, High Vardlokk of Chaos.* Best keep those details private. His name, on the other hand, was irrelevant, as no one on this world knew it, including the Fylking and the mortal warlock he had employed to do his dirty work during his last attack on the Gate.

Another woman of the three, with tangled red hair streaked

with white, lifted her chin. “We offer you life, Vaethir of the Dragon Clan. In exchange, we require of you a task.”

She started to say something else, but the third woman, young, with a willowy shape and a ring of thyme around her neck, said, “You must destroy—”

“Hold!” the crone cut in. Glancing sharply at the others, she held out a hand, her eyes narrowing on the apparition before her. “To what race do you belong?”

*Too late.* Vaethir smiled wickedly as his body came into focus. These women were powerful, but desperate, and Fate knew no better combination. Whatever their plight, it did not concern him. “I will destroy,” he assured them. “You have my word.” He turned and walked across the ring, mist swirling around him.

The Wolf Lords would ask fewer questions. In exchange for Vaethir’s knowledge of the Dark Realms, they would eagerly serve him with a task he had in mind.

“Stop!” the elder woman’s voice rang out. “I forbid this!”

The commander of Niflsekt Covert Operations moved toward a tall arched door, uttering a spell that would hide him from seers, the only mortals on this world with the ability to see him. One of the women gasped; another cried out a banishing command. But they could forbid him nothing.

Chaos ruled the universe.



## Captain of the North Branch

The late afternoon sun sank behind a steely cloud on the watery horizon, bringing a damp, salty breeze. Othin of Cae Forres, Captain of the North Branch of the King's Rangers, checked his mount on the cobbled road that led from the coastal town of Lincot. A stone pillar stained by moss and seagull droppings marked a wide path that wound off to the east, to the village of Birkan. A rune of the same name, carved into the post, was no longer readable. Othin headed that way. The Ogjan Mountains rose in rugged layers of gray before him.

He planned to meet two rangers, Heige of Sibor and Bren of Ottersun, in the station in Birkan, a half night's ride from there and less than that from the border of Ylgr in the north. Veterans on the Ylgr patrol, Heige and Bren were not only two of Othin's best rangers, but also his friends.

Othin planned to beat the rangers to the station before they set out. He had received a report from the rangers who just returned from patrol in Ylgr that the locals had taken to killing ravens. For centuries, the King's Rangers had employed ravens to help them in the wilds. Trained to recognize their handlers, scout patrol routes and deliver messages, the birds were revered, and harming one was punishable by death. But Ylgr had long been outside the king's laws.

As Othin rode east, the mists closed over the setting sun at his back. Foreboding crept over his heart, a change in mood, the spirit of something wrong. Such moods had grown stronger since he began studying with the masters of the Faersc Conservatory, seers who taught the Wardens of Dyrregin the arts of second

sight.

In the distance, a rider maneuvered deftly through the ash and evergreen trees crowding the narrow road. Frida. As a messenger who worked the rangers' coastal routes, she knew how to handle a horse. The shadows and needles of Othin's unease swirled and plunged like a murder of crows around her. Out here, riding at that speed, she had news, and it wasn't good. Othin moved to one side of the road and held up a hand.

When Frida spotted him, she checked her horse in a flurry of hooves, stones and dust. "Captain!" she breathed, her cheeks flushed. She leaned forward in her saddle, catching her breath. She wore a bow and quiver, and a knife on her thigh. She was slight of build, but that was deceiving. Rumor had it she had fallen out with a guardsman at the Garmr outpost over Hel knows what and rearranged his nose, put a scar on his chest and hit him hard enough in the groin to make him doubt his subsequent ability to sire children.

Othin drew up alongside her. "Hail, Frida. You're in haste."

"I've come from Birkan," she said. "Ranger Heige told me you were riding north, but I didn't expect to find you here."

"You have news?" Othin asked, almost dryly. He had told no one his whereabouts.

She nodded. "Heige and Bren were to meet in Birkan three days ago. Heige was late, and Bren went on without him." Her expression fell into some kind of disarray, and she continued as if to avoid further questions. "Before he left, Bren gave me a message to deliver to Heige, that he would meet him at the Borderland."

The Borderland. *Bren, you fucking idiot.*

"Who else was there?" Othin asked more calmly than he felt.

She tossed her head, as if exasperated. "Only Alaric. He was outside"—she made a motion with her hand—"taking care of his business. Bren left while he was gone, and I had no authority to stop him."

Othin nodded. A dark, brooding sort with the patience of a stone and the temper of a molting snake, Alaric wouldn't have let Bren go into Ylgr alone. He would have made him wait for Heige. "Understood. What happened?"

“Heige got in late and went after Bren. He returned a day later, alone.” She paused. “Ranger Bren’s gone missing. Heige is awaiting orders.”

A sliver of fear shot through Othin’s veins. *Missing*. He clenched his jaw as his horse grew restless beneath him. Bren was not one to defy orders as a rule, but recent personal losses in the ranks had turned him sullen and given him a taste for vengeance. Most of his men felt the same. Othin would have strongly forbidden a solitary mission—which was why the bastard had left before he got there.

Fortunately, Heige had decided to wait. Alaric wouldn’t have left the station unmanned to go with him. That—and Frida’s earlier comment as to Othin’s whereabouts—meant Heige had known Othin would be arriving soon, and Othin didn’t have to guess how he knew. Bren, a fledgling seer with remarkable talent, had a penchant for using his Otherworld friends to find out things like that. The fool carried around a pack full of trinkets, food and scraps of roots and shit he used to woo the Others for favors.

Nothing in that pack would save the Northman from an assassin or a bounty hunter.

Othin gazed north at the darkening sky above the border of Ylgr some two leagues away. The plan forming in his mind would spark reprisal, quite possibly over the borders. He dropped his attention to Frida. “Go to the rangers’ station in Grayfen and let them know what’s happening,” he said.

Her expression turned blank. “We’ve stopped using ravens. You’ll be cut off.”

“Won’t be the first time. Ride swiftly.”

“Aye, Captain,” she replied, her mood now stained by trouble as she turned and urged her mount into a heavy pace down the path.

Othin did the same, his earlier foreboding rising like a tide.



*Ylgr*. A desolate tangle of marshes, brush, bogs, barren hills and dark woodlands bordering the northern reaches of Dyrregin

between the Fomor and Ogjan Mountains, the realm had become more of a challenge than Othin had bargained for. Until recently, the King's Rangers hadn't formally patrolled the area for two centuries, since before the Sie War. The king at that time had decided to use the rugged land as a penal colony for traitors, prisoners of war and other miscreants, a lousy idea that had resulted in skirmishes all over the north. When the Sie War broke out, the leaders of Ylgr offered to defend the northern coast from the Fjorginans in return for pardon and noninterference. To this the king agreed, on the condition that the North Coastal Road, which provided access between the coastal realms, be declared neutral territory. Both sides kept their bargain, and so it stood to this day.

Since then, any ranger foolish enough to set foot in Ylgr in his habit was asking for trouble. On the eve of the war, Othin had ridden into Ylgr in pursuit of a draugr, an undying warrior created by the warlock Vargn. He never found the ghastly creature, but a stolen horse and a bloody skirmish with Sheriff Thorn, as he called himself, had convinced him that Ylgr might benefit from some attention. King Angvald agreed. He had received other reports of soldiers and travelers who had run into trouble on the North Coastal Road, convincing him that the old bargain between Ylgr and the crown was no longer sound. So it was decided to bring Ylgr back under the rangers' dominion and protection.

Naturally, having run wild for so long, the Ylgrian locals liked to pretend the new laws did not exist. When Othin came in with his men and a proclamation from the king, Ylgr all but declared war.

The locals now killed Rangers without mercy. In early spring, Othin lost two men, his friend Tasn and a Northman named Rolof, a cousin of Bren's who had served six suns as an assassin in service to the crown. Tasn had been stripped naked and hung in a tree like a grim sacrifice described in the old tales; Rolof had been brutally tortured and left on an outcropping for scavengers. Each man had a dead raven nailed to his shoulder. Othin thought the ravens had been used as a cruel whim until he learned why his birds had not been returning from Ylgr.

To honor his fallen rangers, Othin dressed in formal habit,

returned their remains to their families and delivered the news. And he stood before King Angvald and High Constable Lisefin, head bowed, as they told him without actually telling him he was free to do what needed to be done.

And so he did. To maintain anonymity, he rotated his rangers often. They entered this country only in plain gear and by alternate routes, where possible. He had them move primarily at night and under the cover of scarves or hoods. They also rode different horses, leaving their own steeds in Birkan where the beasts wouldn't be recognized by the king's pentacle branded on their thighs. Othin sent only his best up here, those who could melt into the landscape like foxes and weren't averse to bending rules.

The North Branch had taken down two Ylgrian ringleaders since Tasn's and Rolof's deaths, though they had yet to reach the ones who had put his rangers into bad hands.

A gibbous moon shone through a ring of mist, casting faint light through the forest. The air was heavy; it would rain by dawn. Othin rode at a thumping gait, his nerves taut as he watched for black, hulking forms lying in wait, the glint of a sword, the shine on a horse's eye.

There was a chance Bren was hiding somewhere Ranger Heige hadn't known to look. Or someone could have taken him alive. Othin didn't usually take Bren's sensitivity to the Otherworld into account on Ylgr deployments, but his fears had him hoping his friend had unseen resources to warn or protect him. The thought held no comfort. Bren had recently told him that the Others who haunted Ylgr were nasty and not to be approached. Unsurprising.

Unlike Bren, who was somewhat reckless in his newfound relationship with the unseen, Othin was not inclined to ask the Otherworld for favors. He preferred a warrior's approach that relied on strength and wit. Nothing protected him from the risks of his occupation; he could die by the sword on any given day.

So he continued to tell himself.

The first time he had escaped death was six seasons ago, during the Second Gate War. To survive that war and cast down Vargn, the warlock who had initiated it under the patient hand of the Niflsekt, Othin had made a vow to a phooka. According to his

friend Leofwine, a sorcerer of the ancient Fenrir Brotherhood, a phooka was about the worst thing Othin could have called for help. But he had had little choice. Struck down by sorcery, unable to avenge the murder of his captain and knowing that his love, Melisande, was in the sights of his enemies, he would have promised the phooka anything.

In return for its help, the beast demanded Othin learn second sight.

At the time, Othin had no idea what it meant. When he had asked Leofwine about it, the sorcerer paled, stared off into some weird void and offered little by way of explanation besides some offhand comment about the fickle nature of the Otherworld. Which meant he didn't know. To both their minds, forcing second sight on Othin seemed too simple and meaningless a price for all Othin had gained.

Millie, they had called her. Othin had loved her on sight, six suns past, while on patrol in the Vale of Ason Tae. Free and half wild, she had made her living by knitting, a skill into which she had imbued magic so ancient even the gods took note. Her love had sustained him more deeply than he realized, until treachery and war swept her away.

Threatened by Melisande's art, a mighty demon summoned by the Niflsekt had cast her down. Othin awoke amid the rubble of Tower Sie, alone, the winds of grief blowing over him like howling wolves. He should have died with her that day, struck down by the Niflsekt and crushed by stone and crystal. But he was saved for the second time, by the High Fylking of Tower Sif, the grim and terrible warlords charged with the Gate's first line of defense. Why they saved him was even more of a mystery than the phooka's request.

He hated the Fylking that day and for a season afterward, hated them and cursed the closed doors of Hel—until he felt Millie's presence one spring evening as he stood by her grave. Somehow, by the hand of the Old Gods, she was reborn to the Fylking's homeworld. And one day soon, when Tower Sif was finished being rebuilt, she would return to him through the Gate, just as the immortal warriors moved between the worlds in the deployment of their dark affairs.

Ravaged by loss, Othin had assumed that day by the grave that the phooka's request meant he would be able to perceive Millie when she returned. But now, after the passage of seasons in the void of her presence, all Othin understood was why Leofwine, a sorcerer who knew things about the Otherworld best left to sorcerers, had acted so cagey and suspicious of the whole thing. Why would a phooka care if Othin and his lost love could perceive each other?

A phooka wouldn't. But grief would. And it was grief, not fear of the phooka, that drove the ranger to the broken halls of Faersc to learn the wardens' arts. Regardless of what the phooka had intended, second sight would allow Othin to know Millie again beyond memories and dreams. For grief had left his dreams unbearable.

The road grew steep as Othin crossed a ridge that led down into the valley. Birkan was nestled there near a deep flowing stream that eventually flowed into the Westfork. The rangers' station was half a league north of the village and overlooked the heavily wooded hills that tumbled down into the narrow valley that marked the border of Ylgr like the cut of a dull knife.

As the road began to descend, cliffs glowing pale in the moonlight rose behind the tops of the trees to the north. Othin rode until he reached a burbling stream. The bridge had washed out in the spring and had not been replaced. He splashed through the shallow water and guided his mount off the road and into a small clearing. The eaves of the woods on the far side were indiscernible.

Othin dismounted and led his horse to the water to drink. A fine, dark brown gelding bred for war and steady in a fight, Loge was a good companion. Othin had owned him before fleeing Merhafr with his captain's horse, Arvakr, on the eve of the war. After selling Arvakr to Leofwine, he had bought Loge back from a trader for twice what he had originally paid. He had not balked the exchange.

He moved his hand over the beast's withers, listening to the night. There was no wind. In the distance, the high-pitched cry of a vixen rent the silence. Bren, who grew up in the far north, had learned as a boy to mimic foxes and wolves without flaw, much to

the dismay of mothers and hunters. The vixen shrieked again, darkening Othin's heart. Just a fox, this time. Bren had taught him how to tell the difference.

The forest changed with a breath. No light moved in the shadows, no whispers touched his mind, but someone—human—was near. Probably a watcher or a scout, aware of his presence. His men knew of everything that moved in this area.

Loge jerked up his head as something hissed by Othin's side and struck the ground with a muffled thud. He leaned over and pulled an arrow fletched with black feathers. Then he waited. After some moments, a tall figure emerged on the far side of the clearing, leading a horse. He drew back his hood, his blond hair pale in the dimness.

"Heige," Othin said, handing him the arrow. "One of these days you're going to kill somebody."

The ranger's smile flashed in the dark. "Captain." An expert with a bow, Heige rarely hit anything he didn't intend to. He had taken to using this trick instead of exchanging animal calls. A seasoned outlaw could tell a human call and response from the real thing, and Ylgrians knew the sounds and ways of every creature in their realm. Of course, Heige's method depended on the recipient remaining still after some invisible assailant sank an arrow in close proximity.

Othin drew Loge around and began walking toward the road. "Tell me you have good news."

Heige accompanied him. The moon passed behind the thickening clouds. "None. No Bren. But Prederi is here. He came with me from Merhafr."

As they reached the road, Othin mounted. "Prederi. Is this why you were late?"

Heige said nothing.

"I gave him a moon's leave," Othin said needlessly. Prederi, a rough yet good-natured sort and another of his finest rangers, had a woman in Merhafr named Ursa, whom he loved to a fault. Ursa was a big girl, tough as a deckhand and always ready with an infectious laugh. She and Prederi were expecting their first child, and Othin had given the ranger leave to be with his new family. Othin still recalled his grin and the uncharacteristic humility with



which he took on fatherhood, as if he'd just been assigned an especially interesting mission. What Prederi would be doing up here now made no sense and added to Othin's earlier foreboding.

Heige stood on the edge of the road, clutching the reins, his head bowed.

"I saw no reason to put him on patrol with Ursa and the child on his mind," Othin said. "Why did you—"

"Othin." Heige looked up. "They're with the gods."

For a moment, Othin's mind went blank. Heige stood there, as if lost. Othin dismounted and went to him, put his hands on the ranger's shoulders and searched the shadows on his face. "What are you saying?"

"Ursa lost the child. She was—something happened. She died a day later, in Prederi's arms. He called a healer, but there was nothing they could do." His voice was rough. "He took Ursa and the child down by the sea in a wagon. I helped him put them in the ground. I feared he was going to throw himself from the cliff—drink himself to death—something. I couldn't leave him there."

Othin dropped his hands and stepped back, his heart pounding and his throat dry. *Hel, you are a cruel bitch.* Once again, he found himself on the plain beneath the wolf-gray sky of a world without Millie.

Bad news, more bad news and a hollow dawn. Othin turned and reached for his horse. "Let's go." As the two men mounted and headed out, a new thought entered his mind and stuck there like a nail. Bren and Prederi were as close as brothers. He turned to his friend. "Does Prederi know about Bren?"

The ranger made a sound in his throat. "Aye, no avoiding that. Alaric and I had to hold him down to keep him from riding north. Alaric, Oscar and Rande are watching him now."

"I don't think bringing him on this mission is a good idea."

"No," Heige agreed. "But at least I can keep an eye on him."

They rode for an hour in silence until they reached Birkan. Soft rain fell, and no lights shone in the village, closed up against the night. Fog cloaked the street. A dog barked as the rangers found the winding path that led up to the station. A short time later, faint light glowed through the trees, filling Othin with an uncomfortable mixture of dread and relief.

One of the scouts emerged, a thin man named Oscar who bore a curious collection of scars he never talked about. He drifted down the stone steps with a nervous glance. "Milords," he said, reaching for their horses' halters as they dismounted. "Good to see you."

"Is all well?" Othin asked.

"Well enough, Captain." Not looking at him, the scout took their horses and led the beasts off to a crude stable on one side of the building.

Othin put a hand on Heige's shoulder as they went up the steps. As he opened the door, a warm draft of wood smoke filled his lungs, making him aware of how tired and hungry he was.

The station was small but comfortable enough, with a large stone hearth, bunk beds, a table scattered with weapons, dishes, candles and flasks, and a sideboard crammed with sundry supplies. Alaric got up from a chair by the fire, his shoulders relaxing with relief. He held a finger to his lips. His dark hair hung around his face as he glanced at the corner. Prederi lay in a bunk, asleep. Whispering, Alaric said, "I spiked his wine."

Heige nodded with approval. Othin said, "With what?"

"Something Oscar got from a Blackthorn witch who lives in the village. Put him out cold. You hungry?"

"Aye." Othin took off his cloak and hung it on a rack, followed by his swords, his bow and quiver. He dropped his saddlebag beneath it.

Rande, a ranger who had learned her skills in the wilds of Thorgrim, sat on a bench covered with a ratty sheepskin, one leg propped up. She was dressed in leathers and her hair hung in a tangled braid. "Captain," she said with a brief smile. Rande was fairly new to the order, but she came with a lot of experience and no small skill. She had a calm temperament and a fascinating habit of spinning a knife over her fingers when she was bored. Her gaze lingered with veiled, predatory appreciation on Alaric as he went to the hearth and scooped some brownish looking soup from a small iron pot. Othin's men had a bet going as to how long it would be before the two ended up in bed.

Alaric handed the bowl to Othin and gestured to the chair he'd been sitting in. Nodding his thanks, Othin sat down, took

the bowl and started spooning the lukewarm food into his mouth, some kind of gamey meat mixed with beans.

“Did he say anything else?” Heige asked Alaric.

Alaric shook his head. “Not a word, poor lad.” His expression drawn, he glanced at Othin. “You going to take him with you?”

Othin shook his head, swallowing. “Risky.”

“I don’t know how long I can hold him here if you try to go without him.”

Heige grimaced. “That’s risky, too.”

Othin set his empty bowl aside and yawned. “I’ve been on the road for two days, and I need sleep. Wake me before dawn.”

“Do we have a plan?” Heige inquired.

Othin grabbed his cloak, lowered himself to the floor by the hearth and shoved the blue wool under his head. His plan had come together in his mind on his ride with Heige, an ugly plan he would not likely be detailing to his superiors. “We’ll start with the Borderland.” He closed his eyes. “I’m sure one of the kind folk there will have something to tell us.”

The last thing Othin heard as sleep claimed him was Alaric rumbling with laughter.



## The Borderland

Othin opened his eyes in the near dark as the rise and fall of tense voices came into focus around him.

“We don’t have time for that,” said a gruff voice in a south coastal accent. Prederi. “I’ve done this patrol more often than you. If he’s alive, he won’t be anywhere near that place.”

Othin rolled over and pushed himself up, rubbing his face. Oscar was off on some errand or another, and Rande had gone on patrol. She and Alaric shared the border between Ylgr and Austr.

“Morning, Captain,” Alaric said. Heige stood near the table, half dressed, with a cup in his hand. Prederi sat on the bunk, elbows on his knees and his head bowed. His blond braids lay in a thick tangle on his shoulders.

Needing to piss, Othin walked to the door and went outside. The air was cool, damp, and smelled of pine. Soft rain dripped from the cabin eaves, and birds filled the trees. Crows clamored in the distance. Othin took some comfort from the seeming tranquility of his surroundings, but not too much. His watchers haunted these woods like wolves.

He moved into the trees and unbuckled his trousers, tilting his face back to the rain to take a deep breath. A pall hung over the cabin, his friends and his heart. He had been consoling himself with optimistic scenarios that explained why Bren might still be alive. But alive or dead, they still had to find him, and now Othin had to deal with Prederi who, clearly, did not agree with his plan.

He had known these men well over a decade, respected them as equals, and his promotion hadn’t changed that. Though Heige and Prederi had as much experience as he did, they trusted his

judgment and followed his orders without pause, knowing he would hear and consider any suggestions to the contrary. They worked together.

Now he was in a position of having to give Prederi orders against the man's will, and he knew his friend well enough to question his own resolve. Prederi had a rough and open sense of humor that rarely left him even in the worst situations, but deep down he was a serious man whose quick temper had a root in Hel. He could disembowel someone and crack a joke while doing it.

Othin didn't presume to know what losing Ursa and the child had done to his friend; however, his faltering resolve was not because of some lack of understanding. On the contrary, he understood too well. After losing Millie, he had cared for nothing and been capable of anything. That was the problem.

Othin finished up and returned inside. Heige was putting on his mail. Alaric gestured to a steaming cup sitting on the table. There was also bread and a crock of oats. Othin picked up the cup and drank to clear his head. Chicory, and some kind of root. He turned to Prederi, his chest tight. The ranger sat on the bunk with a look that dared Othin to have any issue whatsoever.

"Leave us," he said to the others. Without comment or hesitation, the two men stopped what they were doing and went outside. Othin set aside his tea, grabbed a chair and pulled it around.

"War God," Prederi said. It was an old nickname Othin's friends called him, an amusing reference to the Allfather, the fickle, self-serving deity of magic, poetry, trickery and war, after whom he was named. In Prederi's mouth, the title had an almost mocking air, as if he believed the Magician himself had dealt out his cruel fate.

"Prederi," Othin returned quietly.

"I'll leave the brotherhood before I'll be left behind here," the ranger said.

Othin let that pass. "I can't speak it, how deeply sorry I am about Ursa. I understand—"

"You understand nothing." The ranger's tone was so out of character it could've been someone else talking. "Your woman will

return to you, and all you have to do is play around in Faersc every moon so you can feel her touch. You've lost nothing."

Othin leaned back as the comment bit into him. "How long have you been rehearsing that? I was going to say, I understand why you want to come on this mission. Bren is my best friend, and I'll raze Ylgr to the ground if they harm him. But neither can I have you charging in with your wits chopped up by grief and acting like none of us knows how it is. Many have been taken from us by war and fate. You aren't the only one in pain, Prederi. We all grieve."

The ranger got up abruptly, stomped across the room and leaned against the mantel, breathing heavily. "Do you think I'd compromise this mission?"

Othin stood. "Not intentionally. But you aren't yourself. You aren't dealing with this by facing Hel on her own ground. You're trying to fill the hole. I've seen it before."

The ranger swung around, his face red and his hair catching the firelight. "You dare say that to me." He started to pace, clenching his fists. "How've you grieved, eh? You didn't have to watch Millie die, you didn't have to bury a child"—his breath caught—"you didn't—"

Othin covered the space between them in three steps, wrapped his fist in the tunic at Prederi's throat and slammed him against the wall by the weapons rack. "Do *not* tell me what I saw, felt and did," he ground through his teeth, his face close. "I was so worthless after losing Millie that Diderik took me off duty half that winter. I'm not happily biding my time waiting for her to return from the dead. I'm not a fool. The woman I knew is gone."

He released the ranger with a push, his eyes burning and his throat dry. It was the first time he had admitted this to himself, and he hated his friend for bringing him to it. "You want to leave the brotherhood, go ahead," Othin continued. "But there's too much at stake for Heige, Alaric and I to have to take care of you. I won't risk fucking up this mission because you need something to take your pain out on."

A tear sparkled on Prederi's cheek. "I'm sorry." The defeat in his voice said he meant it. "The brotherhood is the only family I have now. I can't lose Bren, too. Please, Othin. I know Ylgr. I can

help.”

Othin leaned against the table and studied the ranger with a hard stare and a heart as weary as a rain-drenched firepit. “Bren defied my orders because he’s still grieving Rolof and Tasn and he wants vengeance. He took advantage of the loose rein I give you men because I know and trust you. If you use your grief like that, I swear on the Trickster’s Wolves I’ll—”

“I won’t,” Prederi promised. He wiped his face and squared his shoulders. “I’m fine.”

Othin let out his breath and went to the door to call in the others. *Fine* was a word he had used often after Millie’s death. It was horseshit. He wasn’t fine.

Then or now.



Dawn crept through a cold drizzle as Othin rode in sight of the Borderland. He wore the dark, mangy clothes he had taken from a dead highwayman. Heige had smeared dirt on his face and pond grunge in his hair. Shifting a bit from beneath his clouded mood, Prederi had told him he looked like a right despicable asshole. It was a title Othin fully intended to take in hand.

A seedy establishment in sight of the Westfork River, the Borderland was a snake’s nest of spies and cutthroats who answered to a wicked, mean-spirited woman called Bothilde. The tavern mistress ran a tight operation. Her henchmen were paid to watch the roads and take stock of who came and went. Travelers looking well-off or dangerous, including rangers, were flagged to highwaymen, who gave their informants a cut of the spoils.

Bothilde answered to some big employers that Bren had once referred to as the Dark Lords of Ylgr. Othin had every reason to believe her machinations had put Tasn and Rolof in their hands.

The inn was quiet, and no one prowled the woods besides Heige and Prederi. Oscar and Rande had been busy the previous night and had taken down two Ylgrian scouts, one in the woods beneath Birkan and another perched in a pine tree overlooking the valley. A third, which Rande had in her sights but couldn’t risk killing in the open, had gone into the inn.



One horse stood tied to a post out front, but that was no indication of who was here. More than one patron had come out of this place in a drunken stupor and found his horse sold to the highest bidder. Of course Bothilde knew nothing of that. Or so she would say. Othin tied Loge to a tree on the woods' edge, using a slip knot that could be pulled in a hurry.

When Heige scouted the area earlier, he had seen no sign of Bren's horse. What he had found, stuffed in a crack in a false wall of the common room, was a sprig of sage. For some reason, Bren loved the plant and always had a bit of it on his person. Heige recognized it for what it was—a message from the Northman, telling them he had been here. And he wouldn't have done that unless something had happened.

Othin stepped up to the entrance. Boxes hung under the windows, overflowing with vines and flowers no doubt planted by Bothilde as if to mock her shadowy clientele. The only reason Othin hadn't plowed this place into the Westfork was because he still wanted information concerning his men's deaths, a mission Heige and Bren had been planning to take on as a team. But Othin was no longer concerned with particulars. These scoundrels wanted a war, they would get one.

He went inside.

The Borderland, an inn like any other where a traveler or weary farmhand might find food, drink or a bed, had one distinguishing feature: it was larger on the outside. Inside, hidden from the common room, it contained a beehive of little rooms used for all manner of tricks, deals and deeds. Many who entered this place never left again. The river had carried its share of bodies to the sea.

One of the hidden rooms, Othin had recently learned, lay on the other side of the false wall on which Bren had left his message. Their greatest fear was that Bren had been recognized, perhaps by someone who was paid for the information. Such scum flourished up here, and they came from nearby realms to do it.

Othin strode through the common room as if he owned the place. Two men lounged there, one with his head on a table and the other leaning back against the wall. At this hour, either they were sleeping it off from the night before or plotting the night to

come. One of them got up and headed for the door, unaware that Prederi would be delaying him with a knife and a question or two. The other man stirred with a snort before settling again and returning to sleep.

*Pleasant dreams*, Othin thought.

Prederi was right about one thing: they didn't have time to dally here. Othin moved past the bar and into a narrow hall that led to the kitchen. A child slept in a corner there, on a pile of rags. Othin drew his sword and nudged her with his boot. As she awoke, wide-eyed and ready to scream, he tilted his head toward the door in back of the kitchen. She scrambled up and fled, leaving the door swinging. He hoped Heige had the sense not to sink an arrow into her.

Othin leaned back into the hall as Prederi entered the common room with his sword in one hand and a sack of pitch-soaked linens on his shoulder. The blond ranger woke the sleeping man with a rough nudge of his boot and began to question him. Othin kicked aside the rags where the girl had slept and pulled the iron ring on the floor, opening a trap door that Tasn had discovered on one of his patrols.

Below, a woman stopped on the stairs, her skirt in her fist. Her expression, wary and shrewd, was framed by a wild array of pale and graying curls. Othin moved before she had a chance to flee. As he wrestled her against the wall, she screamed and clawed at him like a wildcat.

"Why Bothilde," he said pleasantly. "How pleasant to see you again." He caught her arms, hauled them up over her head and pinned them there with one hand while he reached under her skirts with the other. Digging her fingernails into his hands hard enough to draw blood, she tried to knee him in the groin. Expecting that, he pressed his bulk against her so she couldn't move. She spat in his face and tried to bite him. "Easy there, love," he said, but he had no amorous intentions. He pulled the daggers she always kept strapped to each thigh and threw them aside. Then he drew his longknife and pressed it to her throat.

Something crashed above them. The floor shook with stomping, cries and shouts as Prederi dispatched the tavern mistress's men who slept upstairs.

Bothilde's eyes flashed in swift understanding and no slight hatred. "You bastard."

Othin mocked a pout. "And I thought you'd be glad to see me." Not likely, after he had taken her to bed, warmed her up and learned the whereabouts of Shinter, one of the slipperiest villains in this gods-forsaken land. Shortly thereafter, his rangers had taken the old ringleader down.

In the common room, someone made a muffled sound, as if gagged. Something heavy hit the floor. After a moment, the smell of burning pitch wafted down the hall. A loud crash shook the place, followed by the sound of cracking, falling wood.

"I'll kill you," she snarled through gritted teeth.

"I'll be the one doing that," Othin returned, "unless you tell me where he is, the Northman who came here two days past, with hair like fire and eyes like the sky."

The smell of smoke touched the stale air. Below, someone screamed. On his earlier visit, Heige had discovered another entrance to the cellar, outside.

She cracked a nasty grin. "Stupid fuck. Your ranger's dead." She beamed in triumph.

Othin didn't respond. While her arch gloating felt more like a bluff than the truth, she had made a point to reveal that she knew Bren was a ranger. If she knew that, so would her employers—which meant Bren's fate was out of her hands.

"Kill me, then," she challenged. "Won't change a thing."

Othin snorted a laugh. "Oh, you'd like that, wouldn't you? Either of us dies, and so does your secret. And it's such a wicked little secret, isn't it? Old Shinter is dead because you sang like a finch in the throes of a good, hard fuck." He caressed her face with a speculative gaze. "I have a better idea. Why should I get your blood on my hands when I can have the Dark Lords of Ylgr take care of that for me? They'll be so much more creative. I'll drop a rumor in a tavern. What man won't believe it? They'll go after it like trout hitting a cricket."

Beneath the loathing, he finally saw fear. "I don't know where he is," she said quickly, her gaze darting up the stairs. Smoke thickened in the kitchen.

Heavy footsteps came down the hall. "War God!" Prederi

called out. Above, he pushed someone with a sack over his head into the kitchen.

"Here," Othin called out. He returned his attention to Bothilde. "He's in Hel, according to your first story." He tightened the grip on his blade, pressing in. "Gods brought him back, did they?"

Her breath quickened. She didn't want to die as badly as she let on. "Men took him. I don't know where."

Othin's patience left him. He brought her arms down and wrenched them behind her back, causing her to cry out. Then he muscled her up the stairs. "I'm in just the mood," he breathed against her neck.

"I'm telling the truth!" she choked.

"You've never told the truth a day in your life." He brought her out and hustled her toward the back door. Behind them, flames ravaged the common room.

Outside, Prederi stalked like a cat around a man on the ground. "I've no idea what you're about!" the man claimed. "Them being held, that's all I saw." His hands were tied and his hair hung in his face. Blood oozed from his nose.

Othin caught Prederi's gaze. The blond ranger shook his head. Othin gestured. The bleeding man shouted as Prederi drew his sword. The sound ceased as the ranger ran him through.

Bothilde dropped to her knees. "The ranger lived when he left," she pleaded. "I swear by the gods I don't know who they were. One of 'em, he talked strange. Not from 'round here. Dressed all in black, he was. The others talked up to him." She searched the ground. "There was another. Had a scar on his face." She traced a long curve on her cheek.

"I've seen him," Prederi said casually, wiping the blood from his blade. "In the Moor's Edge. He's one of the sheriff's men."

Othin gazed down at the tavern mistress. A man with a scar would be easy to remember; she could have mentioned it to throw them off. Sheriff Thorn was crooked as a corkscrew hazel, but he wasn't involved with the Dark Lords, as far as Othin knew. "How did these men know the ranger was here?"

"Don't know! They knew. I gave him up to avoid trouble."

The roof of the inn collapsed. Sparks and smoke billowed into

the air. Bothilde leaned over as if to weep.

Othin knelt, clutched her hair and yanked back her head to face him. A thin line of blood marked her throat where he had held his knife. "Why were you holding him in the first place?"

"I wasn't! He was here, at the bar, having a drink."

"Horseshit." He released her.

Just then, Heige strode around the burning building, leading the horses. He held a small leather pack with straps and buckles hanging from the sides. "Found this in the cellar." He tossed it through the air.

Prederi caught Bren's pack in one hand. He turned it over, his jaw flexing. Clutching it to his chest, he leveled a gaze on Bothilde that could have frozen the Westfork.

She stared at the pack in horror. "I—took it down there to hide it! I wasn't holding him, I swear." She scrambled back over the dirt as Prederi stepped toward her. Still holding the pack, he spun his blade with a swift turn of his wrist.

"Leave her," Othin said tiredly. He turned and headed for the horses.

"Alive?" Prederi said behind him. Heige blurted a laugh.

Othin reached his horse as Prederi joined him. He took the pack gently from the ranger's hand and tucked it into a saddle bag. In a low voice he said, "She has fewer teeth, now. We'll keep an eye on her, see where she goes to ground."

"That's a bad idea, War God."

"Maybe." Othin glanced over his shoulder and then mounted. "Let's put some distance between us and this place."

As they moved out, Bothilde clutched her shirts and leaned forward in a rage, her hair in a wild tangle around her. "Whoreson!" she swore. "You were lousy anyway! You couldn't—"

Her insult was lost as something in the kitchen exploded, sending a blast of heat and wind that spooked the horses. The rangers shielded their faces and Bothilde screamed. Othin glanced over his shoulder to see her scampering away from the blaze on all fours.

He turned to Heige. "There was a girl."

"I saw her," Heige said. "Fled into the woods like a rabbit." He lifted his chin toward the east. "That way."

“Let’s see if we can find her,” Othin said. They headed out, leaving the tavern mistress shrieking curses after them.

The woods had been coppiced, and trampled by horses. The child had a good start on them. Othin turned to Prederi. “Was there anyone else in the back rooms?”

“A farmer who lived upriver and his wife. Bothilde took their farm to use in her operation and made them pay rent to stay there as a front. They refused. No one saw or heard Bren. I let them go.”

“Good. They’ll tell the tale.”

“I think Bothilde will tell a tale.”

Ignoring the comment, Othin gestured to a sack Prederi had brought out of the inn and strapped onto the saddle behind him. “What’s that?”

“Provisions.” He reached back, rustled around and pulled out a bottle.

“Och! Nice work,” Heige said.

“No sense letting it go to waste. Got food, too, if you want it.” He pulled the cork out with his teeth and handed the bottle to Othin. He took it, lifted it to his lips and let the dark golden draught burn down his throat and into his chest. Whisky. Good whisky. Nodding, he gave it to Heige.

“Ah...” the blond ranger sighed as he lowered the bottle and handed it back. “That’s fine. I wonder where that rat woman got it from?”

Othin took the whisky and handed it back to Prederi. “No telling. I doubt she paid for it.”

Prederi took a long, seasoned swig. He lowered the bottle and put the cork back in. “What was she on about, you being lousy?” He scanned the trees around them.

Othin shifted in his saddle. Bothilde’s parting shot. “Remember that good bit of intelligence I got on old Shinter?”

Heige said, “Aye, you still haven’t told us how you knew where his operation was.”

And fine intelligence it was. Someone had been raiding northbound supply wagons and running the loot all over Ylgr. Othin had discovered the operation in the coastal town of Brekon, in a fishery there. He wouldn’t have thought to turn his

attention to the coast if not for the tavern mistress's blithe revelation. "Bothilde told me Brekon was Shinter's home town. The rest was easy to figure out."

His companions rode along, absorbing that. They turned and looked at him as if waiting for him to continue. But they were men, and it didn't take them long to put it together.

Prederi cleared his throat. "You didn't—"

Heige reined his mount with a breathy laugh that sounded like he was choking on something foul.

Prederi pulled the whisky from his hauberk where he had stuffed it and took another drink. "You are a sad piece of shit, War God," he said, lowering the bottle.

"Captain War God," Othin corrected him.

Heige leaned forward in his saddle. "Give me that." Prederi handed him the bottle past Othin. Gods knew, he would never hear the end of this.

He said, "I threatened to spread a rumor that she sang on old Shinter while she was in bed with a ranger. She got a little more cooperative. Though I still think she lied like a goat."

"The Dark Lords *would* like to know that," Prederi agreed with a cold smile. "Shinter was one of their favorites." He cast Othin a glance. "Are you going to do it?"

"First chance I get. Thorn is involved with the Dark Lords. If they take down Bothilde after hearing a rumor, it'll send a message to the sheriff of how far we're willing to go."

Heige wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "So was she good?"

"Well, I was," Othin said. As they laughed, he grew still. A prickle climbed over his skull, a sensation that they weren't alone. He held out his arms to get their attention. "Quiet. Someone's here."

They fell as silent as the wind in the trees, leaving only the sounds of horses and moving tack. Heige pulled around his bow and snatched an arrow from his quiver. Sensing a line of sight, Othin tilted his face up slowly. Above, in an old hemlock tree dense with needles and twining boughs, something pale moved.

"There," he said, urging his mount closer to get a better look. He did not sense danger. "Don't shoot," he said to Heige.

Prederi drew his sword and pressed his horse into motion,

circling the tree. Heige took up a position on the far side. As Othin approached, the branches rustled. He caught sight of a small, pale foot.

“Hold,” he said to his men. “Prederi.” He swung his arm around to indicate the surroundings. “Keep watch.” Othin dismounted and walked to the foot of the tree, looking up. The girl from the kitchen clung there like a treed cat. “We won’t harm you,” he called up. “You don’t have to come down, just talk to me. Aye?”

She stared down at him as if he were a hungry wolf, but there was something desperate, almost hopeful in her face.

Once Othin talked her down, he put her on his saddle in front of him and rode to the village of Silverleaf. The child had been taken by Bothilde’s henchmen after they killed her father. They made her sleep on the trap door to the cellar, to hide it and keep anyone from being curious. As Othin had hoped, she saw the men who took Bren away. Amazingly enough, her description of them matched Bothilde’s, including the man with the scythe-shaped scar. But the child had added two more facts that Bothilde had strategically omitted. One was the presence of the sheriff, whom someone had addressed as such. And the other was a symbol on the leader’s cloak, at the base of the hood. The girl drew it in the dirt, rough and hard to discern, yet clear enough to recognize: a wolf surrounded by leaves, moons and thorns.

The Fenrir Brotherhood. Othin now had to assume that he was dealing with the Dark Lords of Ylgr, that they had employed a sorcerer and that the sheriff was in league with them.

The rangers rode like the wind, east, out of sight of the Westfork. In the foothills of the mountains, cradled in a ravine from which the river sprang, Othin’s men had built a bridge that would take them into the high foothills of the mountains, where the Dark Lords had their lair.

With all luck he’d get a chance to pay a visit to his old friend Sheriff Thorn.



## An Adept of Fenrir

*A true magician loves the twilight.* That's what she said, his mother, a fortnight before he found her body in the mud at the foot of a willow tree.

Now older, Leofwine Klemet of House Earticael thought his mother's wisdom simplistic, the words of a hedge witch. Twilight hid things, too many things, unromantic, hungry things that devoured innocence. Twilight was the abode of the phooka, a prince of the shadows, a consummate shapeshifter and one of the most powerful and fickle creatures that inhabited the Otherworld.

No magician in his right mind would make a promise to a phooka he couldn't keep. But in an act of desperation, Leofwine had done just that.

Leofwine drew a deep, measured breath as he stood at the tall window of his chambers and looked out over the forest surrounding Nosthrod Hall. The late afternoon sun had quietly withdrawn behind a gray haze, casting the trunks, boughs, stones and pools of the surrounding forest in vague shadow. Though nothing moved, Leofwine imagined long horns, dark dirty fur, hooves, claws, eyes and the elegant jaws of wild things, waiting.

*Spawn of the Wolf*, the phooka whispered into his mind, like a nervous twitch. One of Leofwine's more flattering titles.

It had all seemed so bright, when Leofwine was young, to be a servant of the Old Gods, an Adept of the Fenrir Brotherhood. His mother had warned him, of course, as mothers do. A creature of the earth, she had known more than he dared to believe, for all his desperate ideas.

*My dear Leo*, she had once said, while gently touching a

fragrant rosemary salve onto his bruised cheekbone. *You'd do better to take up the sword than tangle with Fenrir. They serve the Father of Hel.* She spat after saying that. A disgusting habit. He hadn't bothered to tell her that the boys who beat him were all good with swords and bigger than he was, besides.

*A sword won't protect me, he'd said, but sorcery will.*

*There are worse things to fear than fools,* she countered. And spat again.

The shadows deepened. Upon his return to Fjorgin, after the end of Second Gate War in Dyrregin over a sun's cycle past, Leofwine had hesitated to take up employment in forests, where the Veil was thin. But the Lord of Nosthrod was persuasive—and his son and heir Sigbjorn, more so. Their realm, Alfr Forest, lay between Valdros and the Wythe Strait. Rich with hardwood trees and caves limned with silver deposits, Alfr was susceptible to invaders. Like many lords in Fjorgin, the land that gave birth to the Order of Fenrir, Lord Nosthrod employed a sorcerer to protect his realm and paid him very well to do so. But inevitably, Leofwine's transgression had followed him and begun terrorizing the people of Alfr, first in subtle ways, and then with more insistence, setting fear alight like brushfires until the whole wood shuddered at every dream and shade.

The village girl who went missing and was found on the last dark moon, floating in her uncle's millpond, was said to have been fey and prone to accidents. A comforting tale. Leofwine saw the poor creature's death in the runes: drowning by twilight, the pale green eyes of the phooka glinting on the surface of the pond.

Leofwine clenched his jaw and closed his eyes. He hadn't told Lord Nosthrod that he had more to fear from his own Adept than he had any invader. The night before, in the comfort of his bed, Leofwine came close to telling Sigbjorn the truth. Touch, warmth, pleasure—these made a dangerous potion. But he withstood the temptation. Thought had power. It attracted things, and for Leofwine to infect Sigbjorn with knowledge of what he had done would sentence his lover to death. Somehow, by some dark twist of fate—a deadly rune, a freak squall, the misstep of a skittish horse—the truth would betray him.

*The Father of Hel.* It was believed that the Fenrir Brotherhood served Loki, the Prince of Wiles and, according to the old tales, a thorn in the side of the Old Gods. Leofwine opened his eyes to the falling gray as a spell took shape in his mind. Today, Loki's brand of trickery would help him leave his lover and his lord in safety. He pulled his hood over his face and stepped away from the window. A pack and a heavy saddlebag lay on the floor by the door. The rest of his things, packed neatly into two trunks he had placed in the corner of the loft where he worked, he would leave until he either managed to extricate himself from the dark deal he had made with the phooka or died trying. He hoped Sigbjorn had enough sense to leave things as they were and hope for his return.

A small leather pouch lay on the table by the hearth. Leofwine stopped, held his hand over the snarling wolf embossed on the pouch, and then flicked aside the ties and shook out a rune. The small pale bone of a hare he had killed during his apprenticeship contained a single mark with a hook on top, ridged as a knife, darkened by the blood he had spilled into the rift from his hand. *Laguz*. Always *laguz*, the power of the Otherworld, vast, fickle and implacable as the sea. The waters hid secrets, poisons and teeth.

He put the rune back with the others and tied the pouch onto his belt. Then he fetched his things, slipped from the room and crossed a landing to descend a flight of narrow steps. Lightly touching the wall, he focused on the cold, on the cracks and shadows hidden from the sun, the places no one saw or cared to look; he wooed them, slipped into them, a shade amid the torchlight flickering in the hall below. As he stepped down and padded along a corridor to a weedy courtyard that led to the stables, the unfathomable presence of *laguz* surrounded him with whispery laughter.

Voices echoed in another part of the hall. Someone laughed; another grumbled something in return. Leofwine's focus wavered as he thought of Sigbjorn, left here with no explanation, no goodbye, no embrace but for the one they had shared the night before. Leofwine had become the thing he hated: *laguz*, an ocean of secrets, impenetrable.

Leofwine entered the stable, walked past a stablehand without

being noticed, and muttered a distraction spell. The lad hesitated, tossed a brush onto the hay and strode out, remembering some forgotten task or other. Leofwine moved into a stall situated beneath his chambers, high above. No accident, this placement. A heavy black gelding stirred and regarded him with a dark, shining eye. The horse whickered softly.

Leofwine placed a hand on the beast's withers. "Hail, Arvagr." The fine warhorse had belonged to the late Captain Ageton of the North Branch of the King's Rangers, the elite warriors who defended the wilds of Dyrregin over the sea. Before losing his life in the war, Ageton had given the horse to one of his rangers, Othin of Cae Forres, a seasoned warrior who took over the North Branch after the war. Though Othin and Leofwine had become friends, Leofwine could still hear the ranger's *Hel no* laugh when he had asked to buy the horse. Leofwine didn't use sorcery to convince him, just old-fashioned coin, five times the worth of his own miserable hide, at that. Nor had he lied to Othin about what the horse meant to him and why—though he had neglected to mention being on the bad side of a phooka.

For some reason, the phooka loved Arvagr. The wily fiend would bring down a branch of the Allfather's Tree to protect the horse, and as Othin had discovered during the war, having Arvagr close at hand was a good way to elude getting killed.

While Leofwine found comfort knowing the phooka wouldn't do anything that might bring harm to Arvagr, the sorcerer wasn't naive enough to think having the horse would keep the phooka from collecting its debt. For that reason he employed a tangled web of binding spells of iron, bone, water and blood that made it extremely irritating for the phooka to do much else but whisper obscenities into his mind. But the warhorse had little fear of this world or the Otherworld. He was a steadfast companion.

Leofwine put down his things and went for Arvagr's tack hanging neatly on an adjoining wall. As he had recently discovered, the phooka had other wiles and was growing more inclined to use them. Chafing under futility, the sorcerer saddled Arvagr, cinched down his things, and led the warhorse into the damp evening air. Glancing about, he steeled himself by briefly grasping the protection rune at his throat. Then he mounted and

rode into the whispering mist cloaking the wood. He did not look back.



The Second Gate War, that's when Leofwine's troubles began. He had been employed as seneschal to Lord Detlef Halstaeg, High Constable of the King's Rangers, a hard, unforgiving man who didn't believe in magic and held his personal and familial reputation above all things. His wife was kind and yet distant as a locked iron door, no doubt because her husband had disowned their firstborn son nineteen suns past for nothing more than disliking war. The silence between the couple became Leofwine's hunting ground. By his arts, and with no regrets, he began sharing Lord Halstaeg's bed, where he learned many things indeed.

Until the war started.

The Lords of Earticael had never actually used to term *spy* when they arranged Leofwine's position with Halstaeg. They hadn't needed to. Ironically, he had done little to earn the charge of high treason laid on him by Halstaeg in an attempt to cover a series of tactical mishaps. The Fenrir Brotherhood was smeared along with him, and blamed for creating an army of undead warriors to tear down the fragile peace between Fjorgin and Dyrregin. On the run and desperate to find the truth, Leofwine had turned to the Otherworld for help.

The phooka answered the call.

As an Adept, Leofwine knew not to take an Otherworld summons lightly. He knew how to prepare and avoid mishaps, and he knew to adhere to the Rule of Exchange. There was balance between the worlds; to ask a favor from the Otherworld required payment of some kind, to keep the balance intact. But Leofwine had been too distraught to attend to details.

The first rule he broke was not matching the summons to the task. A sprite or a nature spirit could easily have tracked a King's Ranger. Leofwine could have paid such a being with a silver bead, a smooth sea shell or an oiled lock of his own hair, black as a crow. A phooka, on the other hand, was a master among Others, a powerful creature capable of anything, a malicious force with a

tangled, self-serving agenda, and its price for even a minor task would be high. Leofwine should have banished the creature at the outset.

The second rule Leofwine broke was not clearing his heart of despair before doing the summoning. After escaping an arrest for high treason and losing himself in unfamiliar country, Leofwine hadn't been thinking like a sorcerer. He was an outlaw and a spy on a mission to discover the truth, clear his name and avoid execution on either side of the Njorth Sea. Only Othin of Cae Forres—a master of the wilds who didn't want to be found and had never trusted Leofwine—could help him do that. Leofwine would have summoned Loki himself to track the ranger down.

The third rule he broke was agreeing to the phooka's demand before asking what it was. Once he had finally ridden far enough from Merhafr to find a silent place sheltered from the road, Leofwine threw down a circle with less care than he should have, forgetting all his training on the wiles and deceptions of the Otherworld. When the phooka appeared, tall and grim, its presence emanating power like the sea brooding a storm and its goat face pinched into an oddly amused sneer, Leofwine foolishly thought the gods were favoring him.

How the Old Gods must have laughed that day. They had favored many things during the Second Gate War, but Leofwine wasn't one of them. In return for its services, the phooka demanded the only thing Leofwine had left in the world besides his own life.

Ingifrith, his little sister.

Younger than Leofwine by ten suns, Ingifrith was slight, wiry as a cat, smart as a raven and mad as a hare. She had their mother's skill in magic, their father's proclivity for trickery and secrets, and a god's sense of humor, which was none until someone got hurt. Ironically, Ingifrith knew the paths to and from the Otherworld, and Leofwine had never known her to fear anything she encountered there. But he didn't think that included a phooka.

Why the phooka wanted Ingifrith surpassed even Leofwine's imagination. For that matter, he had no authority whatsoever to give another mortal to anyone, let alone to a being in the

Otherworld. That was the province of evil; few Adepts would risk the consequences of crossing that line, and Leofwine was no exception.

It was an impossible request; not even a phooka had the power to force an evil deed. For this reason, as the phooka left him standing there on the edge of his circle in the cold and snow that night, Leofwine made a decision. The phooka had tricked him, forced him to make an invalid trade. As the Rule of Exchange applied to Others as well as to mortals, Leofwine played the game and worked a trick of his own—he made sure Ingifrith was long gone by the time the phooka demanded payment.

Leofwine warned her to hide.

One thing Ingifrith excelled at was the art of remaining unseen. She had learned how to evade the eyes of mortals much the way a black cat vanishes in the woods. Leofwine never knew what had precipitated this skill; whether by some event or a personal inclination, Ingifrith had reached womanhood and then slipped into the Veil, as if she couldn't bear being seen. Their mother knew something about it, of course. She had known many things. But she wouldn't tell, leaving Leofwine to suffer his sister's dark looks, the origin of which he never understood, even as he set about to appeal to her nature.

Leofwine didn't send just any messenger to Fjorgin to warn his sister; he sent a water nymph, a lithe, pale-eyed naiad with hair the color of shells. Running water was one power most Others could not cross, including the phooka. Leofwine had paid her with a small silver flute he had bought in a market in Earticael when he lived there. He had planned to learn to play it one day. Instead, he gave it to the naiad to deliver a life-saving message to his little sister.

*Hide.* From a phooka.

It was the best he could do until he found a way out of this.

Since the phooka continued to torment him, he had to assume his plan had succeeded and Ingifrith was safe.

Leofwine had avoided returning to Ýr, home of the Fenrir Brotherhood, where he was trained. The Masters of Ýr would take him to task for making a deal with a phooka, even though he had been desperate and vulnerable to trickery. They had all the

warmth of mother snakes, that lot; they gave birth to sorcerers and then left them to the world to fend for themselves. This approach made for strong magicians, not desperate spies accused of high treason by erstwhile lovers.

Unfortunately, the Masters of Ýr were the only ones who had to power to help him, and unless he wanted to keep fending off nightmares, plastering his blood and spit over protection spells and witnessing mysterious deaths, he had to go to them, in person, and make his plea.

Ýr stood fifteen leagues north of Poes, overlooking the Wythe Strait from a hundred-foot crag. A wide plain surrounded it, stark against the hills and forests to the west. The whole area looked like the remains of a battlefield, gaunt and exposed to the restless wind. It was a hard five-day ride southeast. On the plain, he'd have to drop all his protection spells, else risk the Masters taking note.

It would be them or the phooka.

Leofwine rode through the wood, his thoughts crowding around him like the heavy mist. At some point, he realized he didn't know where he was. He took a deep breath and surveyed the surroundings.

Wood smoke.

He reined Arvkr to a halt, his nostrils flared. The fog had thickened to a pall, swirling around and obscuring the landscape. There were no villages or homesteads in this part of Alfr; that was the reason Leofwine had come this way. What was burning?

Chilled, he drew the horse around. The sounds of birds, which filled the forest when he departed Nosthrod, had fallen silent. Darkness closed in on him as he pressed his heels into the horse's flanks and headed back in the direction he had come. Arvkr sidestepped with a snort, resenting the decision. Leofwine kept going, his foreboding rising like a tide.

The fog had an unnatural air, like a whisper in another tongue. Leofwine took a deep breath, spit into his hand and clenched his fist. Holding it to the forest eaves, he uttered three words in Old Fylking, the essence of wind, brisk and dry, hollow as an old husk blowing on a clear, pale sky. He opened his palm. A moment passed; then the fog began to sink into the shadows, as



if to flee. The stark and tangled contours of the wood emerged, silent beneath an unseen breeze.

Leofwine lowered his hand and wiped his palm on his thigh. His mother's disgusting habit was useful for some things. He maneuvered his horse through a raspberry thicket and up onto a rise that offered a view around.

He reached the crest, gazing in the one direction he feared to see. Sure enough, in the distance, dark gray and billowing with wrath, a plume of smoke towered into the evening sky. His blood turned cold.

Nosthrod was burning.



## Worse Things to Fear

Leofwine dug his heels into Arvkr's flanks, ripped through the raspberry thorns and clattered down the rocks into the trees, landing into a thumping gait. Branches slapped at his chest and face as he rode through the smoke now drifting through the trees, whispering and laughing with malice.

*Laguz.* The sorcerer felt a shift, like a river breaking a dam. He reached down and snatched a knife from the sheath in his boot. Spit wouldn't appease the spirits of storms. Gripping the knife between the reins, he drew his other palm across the blade, gritting his teeth as a thin, silvery pain spread into his nerves. Then he closed his fingers over the cut and raised his fist again. Blood dripping down his wrist, he uttered words of gathering, the deep, silent depths of lakes and pools and the brooding of heavy skies. A sharp wind laden with the smell of the sea swept through the forest as rain clouds fought the spell.

As he neared the grounds of Nosthrod, the landscape grew familiar. An orange glow burned the dingy clouds and screams rent the air. Hoofbeats shook the ground as horses and other farm animals ran wild through the trees, freed from their pens in the small village surrounding the fortress. Two men ran by, heedless of his presence. A woman led a group of crying children away to the west.

No rain came.

Leofwine slowed, breathing curses as he searched his mind for spells, runes, words—anything to stop this. Nothing came into focus, as if something had thrown a heavy cloak over him. Flames reached for the sky, burning roofs, beams, fences and trees. The

walls of the keep were enshrouded in smoke. Arvagr tossed his head, his eyes lolling white. His heart racing, Leofwine reined him back. Then the hackles on his neck rose.

Amid the beasts, trees and smoke, a tall figure moved, its bare chest and the black pelt of its legs flowing with the eldritch strength of the Otherworld. A clawed hand caressed a tree; long horns glinted in the firelight. The beast slowed with cruel disregard, its green eyes shining in triumph.

“There he is!” someone shouted.

Leofwine started as a small throng came through the smoky woods in his direction. Some walked, some rode horses: soldiers of the Nosthrod Guard, villagers and nobles from the keep. When they saw Leofwine, their faces changed into something worse than suffering.

*There are worse things to fear than fools,* his mother chided.

Not today.

The phooka paced through the trees like a warlord.

Leofwine backed up, pulling his cloak around him despite the heat. “What has happened?” he called out.

“Murderer!” cried a man. He carried an axe. Two of the guardsmen drew swords. One of them had a shock of pale blond hair that stirred a distant memory.

“Wait,” a woman said. Leofwine blanched, torn between fear and relief as Idalisa, daughter of Lord Nosthrod, rode forward, clutching the reins of her horse. Her dark brown hair had fallen from its braids and lay in a tangle over her shoulders, and her pale face was dirty and streaked with tears. “You,” she growled, her eyes flashing. “You *dare* be seen here.” She whipped an arrow from the quiver on her back and brought around a bow. Leofwine moved his bloody hand, readying a deflection spell. “Snake! Got bored with him, did you?” Her breath caught. “So you set the stables ablaze? Coward!”

*What?*

“Idalisa,” Leofwine choked. “I did no such thing. Why would I—”

She loosed an arrow, which nearly missed his head as it hissed into the woods. Idalisa had never liked him. Her brother Sigbjorn

had been prepared to marry, produce an heir and ready himself to assume lordship of Nosthrod—until Leofwine came. Only Leofwine knew his lover never wanted any of that.

Neither did Idalisa. Commander of the Nosthrod Guard, she had more love for horses, bows and swords than for motherhood or affairs of state. If Sigbjorn stood down, it would be left to her to take their father's place.

Leofwine maneuvered to keep Arvagr calm as the horse began to prance. "Idalisa, I left the stables intact."

"Why did you leave?" a woman demanded, clutching her skirt. It was covered in mud.

"Aye, you were supposed to protect us!" said another.

Thunder rumbled in the distance.

"You were seen using magic," accused one of the nobles, a young fosterling from Earticael.

Seen only by Leofwine, the phooka pranced out of the trees in the sorcerer's own image, cloaked and hooded in black, its hair unbound and its eyes gazing out from a smiling face. Shapeshifter.

*Bastard.*

"Child of Hel!" another cried, choking out the word like something foul.

Idalisa lost her calm. A sob ripped from her throat as she came forward, her horse stepping nervously about under her. "You killed him! My brother—he's dead because of you!"

Leofwine's heart nearly stopped as the blood left his limbs. He looked between the others, their faces hard in the sickly light. "Is this true?"

No one said anything. The blond soldier lifted his chin, his gray eyes cold and knowing too many things. Suddenly, Leofwine recognized him. Grimar. From his childhood. The one who led them, the boys with swords, the boys who left Leofwine bloody in the hollows and fens until that day he rode east to pledge his heart to Loki.

The phooka's laughter rumbled through his mind.

Impossible—what was this brute doing here? Old memories flooded him, mingling with his grief like blood stomped into the mud by a thousand angry warriors. Last Leofwine knew—for he had kept track—Grimar ran a sheep farm somewhere north of

Earticael. But a phooka, a creature of the threshold, could whisper into the heart of an evil man and spin his fate like a Norn. Somehow, through some twisted series of events, Grimar ended up in Nosthrod employed as a soldier. Had he been living here this entire time, right under Leofwine's nose?

As he watched the flames and smoke rising beyond the steely gaze of his nemesis, Leofwine realized his fourth mistake in summoning the phooka was failing to consider how utterly devious and cruel the fiend would be in the acquisition of its desires.

Idalisa moved her horse around, her chest heaving, so upset she was no longer paying attention to anything. She dragged a bloody sleeve across her nose. "You used him," she accused. "Filled his mind with sorcery and lies and turned him against us!"

*Sigbjorn.* A lover of trees, he had wanted to become a steward of the forest. Now the trees burned, and he was dead.

"Sigbjorn wasn't against you," Leofwine returned, his eyes burning. "And I loved him."

"Liar!" Idalisa screamed, leaning forward in her saddle. "Fucking liar!" She swung around to the guardsmen, flinging her arm out to point in Leofwine's direction. "Bring me his head. *Now!*" With that, she wheeled her horse around and thundered back toward the smoldering remains of her ancestral home.

Leofwine, stunned beyond reason, sat on his warhorse facing an angry mob, his enemy of three decades, and the phooka, who rose up behind them like a god, its goat face dark and still as a midnight curse.

*Sigbjorn!*

The sorcerer twisted aside too late as an arrow struck his shoulder, knocking him from the horse. Arvagr bolted. Leofwine wasn't Arvagr's master; the phooka was. One tactical error too many, assuming otherwise.

As the guardsmen closed in on him, Leofwine gritted his teeth and pulled the arrow from his flesh, stifling a cry. It had gone wide, and not deep, but deep enough. Shocked by pain, he didn't have the chance to rally his powers before a boot struck him in the ribs.

Suddenly, he was a boy once more, small, weak, and powerless against the brutes of the world.

*There are worse things to fear than fools.*

"I hoped it would come to this," Grimar said to the other soldiers with a laugh. After sending the crowd along, they gathered around him. Five of them. Grimar kicked his quarry again. Leofwine choked as his ribs gave way under the blow. "Looks like the gods are favoring me today."

Another soldier came down and hit Leofwine in the face before he got his arms up to block it. What gods would come to his aid? Loki was probably pissing himself with a belly laugh right now. Or pleasuring himself. Father of Shit. What did he care?

Grimar planted a fist in his gut, causing him to double into a fetal position. Then he tore the rune pouch from Leofwine's belt, opened it and emptied it over him. The bones clattered and bounced over his body and tumbled to the ground. "Ah..." Grimar crooned, rolling his eyes in an expression of mock concentration. "What do they foretell?"

One of the runes had landed near Leofwine's face. *Thurisaz*. Misfortune, demons, opposition, persecution. His throat closed up with a sick laugh that caught and died as Grimar hauled him up and slammed him against a tree. "What do your runes say, *sorcerer?*" He hissed the word like a curse.

*Thurisaz*. Breathing heavily, gazing from an eye half swollen shut, Leofwine said, "They say I should've hunted you down and killed you long ago."

Grimar punched him in the stomach again. Leofwine choked, his vision going dark as he doubled over.

"Wrong." Grimar drew his sword, wrenched Leofwine upright and pressed the blade to his throat. "They say, today you'll lose your head."

One of the soldiers snorted a laugh. "Get on with it."

In the boughs of a nearby willow tree, the phooka hung down, its expression wild with hope. A drop of rain hit the ground; then another.

Grimar put his face close. His breath stank. "Ah, you smell nice. Almost as nice as she did." The soldier cast a glance at the

others. “His sister, she’s a pretty thing. A bit skinny.”

*Ingfrith.* How did this fiend know about her? Leofwine forgot the phooka as memories flooded down, his sister’s dark looks, her reticence and hatred of being seen. Why so elusive, and why had their mother protected her with Hel’s silence? Darkness moved beneath the noise of pain, shock and sorrow, the darkness of predators and plague.

*Thuriszaz.* The torment of women.

“What do you know of her?” Leofwine said, now fully focused.

Grimar withdrew slightly, as if surprised. “She didn’t tell you?” He made a face. “Little witch. I’m insulted.”

Shifting on their feet, the other soldiers exchanged nervous glances. One of their horses shied on its lead, broke away and ran into the woods.

“She was soft and sweet as a little flower,” Grimar said, his eyes glinting with steel. “And ah, so tight—” He grabbed his crotch, grinning.

*There are worse things to fear than fools.*

Two more horses fled, eliciting shouts from the men.

Leofwine breathed a foul string of words, the blood on his body and the void of his lover’s death giving them form, the culmination of spit, roots, hate and tears, eyes that never closed, hunger that was never sated. A sudden gale rose up from the north and whipped the trees into a frenzy. With a snarl that rumbled the ground, a wolf tore through the Veil. The soul of Loki’s most fearsome progeny, the essence of a sorcerer’s wrath, it was the size of a draft horse, with crow-black fur glinting with ice.

*Fenrisúlfr.*

One of the soldiers cried out; Grimar, his smile fading to pointless irritation, stepped away from his prey and turned. With spectral precision the beast hit him, rending flesh, linen, mail and leather to shreds. His sword fell to the ground and stuck there as his body blew apart, splattering clumps of gore over the forest. Flesh, pieces of bone, entrails and sinews plastered the ground, dripped down the trunks of trees, stained rocks and hung in the brush like gruesome offerings. The only discernable thing was a piece of scalp with a patch of pale blond hair.



The others broke from their shock in a rush. Stumbling back, their faces ashen, they tripped over roots and brush, clawing at each other, screaming like animals. Fenrisúlfr finished its work, taking each life as payment.

Silence fell. Not even a fly buzzed in the still, damp air.

Leofwine sank to his knees against the tree as Fenrisúlfr approached him, its broad chest and jaws crimson, hackles lowering, nails pressing steaming gashes in the ground. As the wolf sat obediently before him, its eyes, pale as a corpse, bored into the sorcerer's heart. Had Leofwine commanded it, the beast would have drenched all of Fjorgin in blood.

Tears streaming down his face, he released it back to the Otherworld.

The sky opened up with rain.

Leofwine fell on his hands and knees and retched as the rain pummeled him. The paroxysms tore every wound and bruise, causing his vision to swim. He closed his eyes, his heart sinking into a chasm of grief. *Ingifrið*. Owing to his own machinations, he now had no idea where she was, and he would never have time to find her, not with hunting parties running him down. His stomach clenched up again. Did she think he knew that Grimar had soiled her?

Then another thought invaded his mind. What if she'd been willing? Or what if Grimar had never touched her and made the whole thing up to taunt him?

Hovering there, wounded, sick and surrounded by the remains of Lord Nosthod's men in the pouring rain, the inevitable reached his ears. Horses. Soldiers. Coming his way.

Leofwine pushed himself up, steadying himself on the tree as a dizzy spell swept over him. Swiftly, he snatched up his runes and shoved them into the pouch, glancing around the forest, his senses still acute from the summoning.

No sign of the phooka. The horrid creature wouldn't have hung around with Fenrisúlfr on the loose. Maybe it would keep its distance now. A magician could hope.

Panting with pain, Leofwine stumbled from tree to tree, avoiding the carnage. Twilight hung in the forest, cloaked in rain. He moved along until he reached a stream. He slipped on a mossy

rock and fell into the water. It was icy cold. Throwing back his cloak, he splashed it on his face, neck and shoulders to wash away the blood, then drank deeply. Hunger gnawed at him.

Arvakr. *Damnit.* If the phooka did anything, it would turn the horse wild.

Shouts echoed in the distance as the guardsmen found the other soldiers. What was left of them.

Leafwine crept away from the water, into the deeper shadows. The rain had eased to a drizzle. He huddled over himself and sucked in breaths past his broken ribs. Once he had calmed a little, he stilled his mind. Then he put his head back and released a whistle. The soldiers would hear it, but it was the only thing Arvakr responded to.

The soldiers grew louder. Gathering himself, Leafwine moved on, staying near the stream in case the guardsmen had dogs. He froze in his tracks as something cracked in the forest above him. His heart pounding, he crouched. Then the snort of a horse sounded in the trees. He rose and clambered up the rocks. A large, dark shape loomed above him. He caught the flash of a white fetlock. Relieved beyond sense, Leafwine reached the horse and put his arms around the animal's neck, near tears.

"You're worth every coin and then some, my friend," he breathed.

It took some effort to get into the saddle. Behind him, a large company of Nosthod Guard spread out in the woods, their angry voices echoing in the trees. Torchlight glowed in the eaves. Huddled over his guts and ribs, Leafwine urged Arvakr away, clutching the reins in one hand and his wounded shoulder with the other.

He considered his options, such as they were. He was a murderer, in lies and in truth, and he would find no shelter in Ýr. Bringing Fenrisúlfr through the Veil would leave a mighty imprint, a characteristic mark on the Veil that revealed the use of magic. It would only be a matter of time before the Masters connected it to him. Aside from the obvious dangers of summoning the spirit of his order, there were those among the Masters of Ýr who, like Lord Halstaeg, valued their reputation and wouldn't look kindly on one of their sorcerers darkening it. The

phooka and the Nosthod Guard would be the least of his problems. The Masters would make an example of him.

He had to get out of Fjorgin.

Leaving behind the soldiers, he slipped into the night heading east, for the coast.



## A Hedge Witch's Daughter

A spider web stretched between the branches of a wild apple tree laden with green fruit. The early evening sun glistened on the silken net, the center of which held a black spider with a yellow mark in the shape of a star.

*Do be careful here*, whispered a soft, patient voice in her mind. She watched the spider as it moved slightly, suspecting it was the source. Ingifrith moved around the web without disturbing it and lowered herself by the tree. She had learned not to trust every whisper she heard on the Veil. The mists were tricky.

Below, a short walk past the trees and over a small plain, stood Tower Sie, one of two gatetowers outside the realm of Dyrregin. The other, Tower Sef, stood on a rocky shoal nearly forty leagues off Dyrregin's west coast. One day, when she was a Warden of Dyrregin, Ingifrith would visit that one, too.

Aside from the spider, the Otherworld, a vast sea of flowing impressions murmuring like dreams on the edges of her mind, had fallen eerily silent. Only a sylph, a male with pale blue eyes and hair the color of clouds, moved around her, folding her in airy impressions of distracted thought.

Her heart thumped and her feet hurt. She fingered the gaping sole of her right boot. It had worn off five leagues back, forcing her to use vines, leaves and hide to cover the hole. But she was no cobbler, and fixing or replacing her boots would be costly. A gift from her father many suns past, they had once been fine.

She reached into her pack and pulled out her water skin, and then a small silver flute. Nearly a sun past, not long after she had moved into a mill loft near her father's home, she had awakened

one morning to a strange, discordant cry in the waters that flowed and dropped over the mill wheel slats into the pond below. No one but her would have heard it, nor seen the lithe, limp form of a pale naiad caught in the rocks of the stream in the woods beyond the pond. The beautiful creature clutched a silver flute in her hand. As the naiad vanished, the flute was left behind, shining in the water.

Ingifrith never guessed why a naiad would have died there, or how she would have a mortal flute in her hand. But the instrument gave Ingifrith strange comfort whenever she was nervous. She moved her fingers over the thin shaft. Inscribed on one end was a tiny rune, the letter *L*.

Clutching the flute to her heart, Ingifrith leaned around the tree and scanned the countryside around the great battlefields of the Sie War. The weed-choked roads were empty. Soldiers, merchants, messengers, tradesmen and thieves tended to avoid traveling near the gattower when they could.

The tower, tall and built on a knoll of neatly-laid stones, had narrow clefts for windows cut in asymmetrical patterns in the walls, and its heights were crowned with carvings of winged beasts. No standard blew on the wind; no soldier guarded the door; and no sheep grazed upon the surrounding grass. It stood quiet in the lengthening shadows, untouched by time or the strife that had once surrounded it.

Her throat dry, Ingifrith took a sip from her water skin. Her brother Leofwine had laughed like a raven when she confided to him that she wanted to enter apprenticeship in the Wardens' Order. She wanted to leave Fjorgin, go to the Faersc Conservatory in northern Dyrregin, and serve the Fylking. She would be left alone. Maybe even honored. She was already familiar with the Otherworld.

But Leofwine laughed, with that all-knowing, sorcerer's glint in his eye. *Do you think the servants of the Fylking lead romantic lives, wandering around the wilderness looking at the stars? Their lives are cruel. They are alone, cast apart from the rest of us; they have no families, no companions but warriors who care nothing for this world besides using it to their own ends. Besides, the Masters of Faersc don't take just anyone.*

Ingifrith smarted under the memory. Ass, she thought. What did he know? Safe behind his cloak and his runes, he didn't want for anything, sword or staff. Fine for him, to sail for Merhafr and leave her here listening to spiders. Her brother, the sorcerer. No messages, no gifts, he hadn't even sought her out when he returned after the war. She wouldn't have known he was back at all if their father hadn't mentioned it.

The day Leofwine decided to take part in her life would be the day he had any business telling her what to do. Today, she would test the waters with the Fylking of Tower Sie. If she proved worthy, surely the wardens would accept her.

She had to make it to Faersc, the wardens' mountain conservatory, by autumn. Back when Leofwine had worked in the King's Archive, he had shown her a map of Dyrregin. As she recalled it, the Faersc Conservatory was tucked into the Thorgrim Mountains in Dyrregin's northern reaches. It would feel winter's bite long before the rest of the realm. With a bow and quiver that had belonged to Leofwine, back when he cared more for roaming the forests with her than he did brooding in the cold dark halls of Ýr, she hunted small game. She also found edible plants and roots in the wooded countryside. But that was easy here, in summer, where she knew the land. Dyrregin would be different. Her father had left her some coin when he died, but he'd had little to spare after the moneylenders claimed their share, and Ingifrith kept it close. She would need it to buy passage over the sea, and boots, warmer clothes, food and shelter as she traveled north.

She put away her things and donned her pack, bow and quiver and set out for the tower.

"We'll see who's *just anyone*," she muttered.

Her legs stiff and her belly empty, she moved over the grass, brush and stones between the tall hardwood trees. The air elemental soon left her, and the sudden stillness across the Veil was unnerving; she felt naked under the sky. Birds chirruped, unconcerned; a red squirrel scolded her from a nearby bough. It sounded like a warning.

Ingifrith had no idea what she was going to do besides see what happened, and maybe see a Fylking. She had heard stories;

everyone had. Grim and exaggerated, some tales had been passed down through the generations after the Sie War; others were fabricated by the soldiery to keep fools from going near the tower. The King had decreed it forbidden. But such things rarely kept the curious at bay, let alone fools.

The sun descended into the trees, casting long, warm beams between the trunks. Ingifrith kept a sturdy pace. If she caught a glimpse of a Fylking, or even talked to one, she might have a claim to make at the gates of the wardens' conservatory.

The trees thinned and opened to the plain. As she drew nearer to the tower, her hope turned to desperation, like a wound she hadn't realized was bleeding. She had nothing to go back to. Leo had abandoned her. Their parents were with the gods. Cevin, the barman at the Witch's Tree, ironically named, had a wife and children and no use for Ingifrith beyond the fragrant herbs she brought him to add to his brews, and occasional pleasure on the pallet in the tavern cellar. She had nothing but the trappings of a hedge witch: roots, twigs, thorns and the voices of the Otherworld. That was enough for her mother. It was not enough for Ingifrith.

And she was tired of hiding.

A chill crept over her scalp and down her spine like a cat claw, weakening her knees. A gust of wind, cold as the north, swept down from the direction of the tower. The stone beasts crowning the parapet seemed to move. Ingifrith stopped, her heart racing as a weird sense of unreality enveloped her. On the edge of her sight, just between her mind and the air, flashed a tall figure, a warrior clad in shining mail, leather and patterns woven into trees and beasts. On his chest, embossed in a silver hauberk, was a tree. His hair, bright as the sun, moved on an invisible wind. His pale eyes flashed as he drew a sword.

Stunned by his beauty and awash in fear and excitement, Ingifrith said, "Wait!" She stumbled back, her hands raised. "I just want to—"

He moved with the power and speed of a lightning bolt. Something cracked against her body with enough force to throw her ten feet over the ground. She hit the rocks, knocking the breath from her lungs. Gasping for air, her body buzzing with fire



and her mind scattered, she looked up.

Through the dreamlike haze, she saw the warlord clearly. Sheathing his blade, he threw her a disdainful glance as if she were no more than a violet he'd crushed in his path. Then he vanished on the wind.

*Do be careful here*, came the spider's warning. Not a trick, evidently. Her heart thumped. Her chest hurt. Failure was nothing new. Neither was despair. And the Fylking's scorn, his arrogance, she knew that too, for she had properly buried it a long time ago, a weak and shameful act, like shoving something into the ground that wasn't quite dead in hopes that it would die anyway.

Shame hit her in the gut like a fist, cold and without pity. Her eyes blurred with tears under the weight of it. Her voice cracked as she cried, "I hate you!" Not that it mattered. The Fylking's silence was the same as his scorn: she wasn't worth a word. She fought it, then choked on a sob as the memory came, a memory she had managed to keep at bay for fourteen suns, even in Cevin's arms, for he was kind, albeit distracted.

*Sun on the grass. Wildflowers, trembling in the wind.* The Otherworld had fallen as silent as the gategate glade when Grimar and his friend had forced her onto the grass and had their way. Farm hands, strong young men with bright eyes and nothing better to do with their idle time but roam the countryside looking for amusements. Grimar had a mop of hair the color of corn silk; his companion's was as black as Hel's eye. They had descended on her like a cruel sun and a dark moon filling her days and nights, inexorable and ever present, forcing her to flee between the realms where twilight reined.

No charms, sylphs, elves, not even the phooka had come to her aid. The Others didn't do that kind of work for nothing.

Her mother, as always, took a pragmatic approach. Taking someone by force was not allowed, no more than murder or stealing a horse, she claimed. She had donned her finest shawl, grabbed a fistful of vengeful herbs and, muttering to Hel, gone over the hill to have a word with the constable. Then came another blow to Ingifrith's innocence, for the constable and

Grimar's father, a wealthy sheep farmer, were old friends. It was easy enough, for a coin, to brush aside the violation of a hedge witch's daughter.

*It will come around*, her mother had later grumbled into the hearth, drawing on a pipe. *You'll see. This won't go unheard.* She removed the leather cord around her neck holding a rune that looked like a tree branch, and tied it around Ingifrith's throat. *This is algiz. It is your nature. So you don't forget.*

Sour comfort, it all was. Worthless, in fact. And yet, as if to acknowledge the rune or perhaps to accept Ingifrith's lost innocence as payment, the Others had begun to cloak her in airs and spells for nothing more than offerings of mugwort, foxglove, lily of the valley, or any other pretty thing she would find and place upon a stone or a mossy trunk. Grimar and his friend never laid eyes on her again—nor had anyone else she had chosen to elude.

Ingifrith had given her love to men eventually, though sparingly, men like Cevin who understood she needed to ease her body but not her heart. That, she held closed to all but Others.

Until now. She was cast aside by an immortal warlord for daring to be alive. Why would she want to serve them? She was just another fool on the battlefield defying the king's orders. She lay there amid the ruins of her plans, the Otherworld quiet and her body bared to the indifferent eyes of the gatetower. She was no longer a threat. She was nothing.

She reached up and touched the rune at her throat. *Algiz.* She still recalled the odd look on Leo's face the first time he saw it on her. As if he didn't understand what made her worthy of the powers of the cosmos, the forces of protection, the voices of gods. Lying here now, bruised and thrown out by an immortal, Ingifrith no longer wondered at her brother's confusion.

A raven, wheeling high in the dusk sky, released a harsh cry. Ingifrith blinked up at it. The bird glowed with weird light.

Her heart leapt into her throat as the raven appeared several feet above her head. Swooping, it landed next to her, then rose on two powerful legs, a fully armed warrior glimmering with immortality, clad in leather and mail, closely fit and finely

wrought. Another Fylking, a different one. He stared down at her, his dark eyes holding faint surprise, his black hair woven into the plaits of a heavy braid. *What have we here?* he asked, his voice caressing her mind. *A tale, surely.*

He vanished with a laugh.

Still shivering with a sense of unreality, Ingifrith rolled up and scrambled back, catching her breath as pain shot through her body in a dozen places. “Hel,” she swore, feeling sick.

As she moved to get up, she spotted another figure in the distance. Cloaked and hooded, he carried a staff.

Ingifrith rose, steadied herself on trembling legs and started walking toward the trees, away from the tower, away from the cruel warlord’s scorn, away from the raven warrior and this cloaked man in the distance, whom she could only assume was a warden.

The warden hailed her. His voice was deep, resonant and commanding. Ingifrith ignored him as she limped along, pebbles and stalks digging into her heel through the hole in her boot.

The raven circled above with a chiding squawk. Ingifrith ignored it, too. On her right, the silvery shape of an animal moved through the grass without disturbing it. It looked like big wolf, and shone with the same weird light. The warden’s Guardian Fylking, she surmised.

She was not as far from the tower as she had been before the sylph deserted her, but she opened her mind nonetheless, pleading with the Veil for shelter. She had no pretty herbs or roots to offer, no milk or raspberries. Only her desperation, now bleeding freely.

The warden hailed her again. Ingifrith turned and nearly choked as she saw how close he was. He was following her, no doubt to accost her for being near the tower. He might even report her to the King’s Guard.

She started to run. She was too beat up to move fast, but soon the glade closed around her. “Help me!” she squeaked to anything that would listen.

The sylph came first. Ingifrith nearly tripped and fell as he swirled from the dark and surrounded her. It wouldn’t fool a

warden—let alone a Fylking—but she thanked her friend and kept moving.

The warden's voice echoed in the trees. "Please, stop! I'll not harm you." He spoke in a strange accent she had never heard. She didn't want to talk to him. And he was gaining on her.

Just as she was about to plead to Hel herself, the Veil parted in the twilight glade and a tall, wiry beast appeared, dark fur and pale chest in stark contrast, long horns curved away from the face of a goat. Its green eyes glowed with love.

Ingifrith ran into the phooka's arms as the Veil closed around her.



A guttural bird call cut through the muffled silence.

Dense fog cloaked the glade. The slim, graceful form of the phooka changed into a black horse, hooves striking the earth, eyes burning red. The fog billowed after it as it moved away and vanished into the forest.

Ingifrith sat up. She didn't recognize where she was until she spotted the gatetower in the distance, peering over the crest of a wooded hill. Somehow she had ended up deeper in the woods to the west, out of sight of roads and paths. It was still evening, full of birdsong. The sun cast long, somber shadows through the trees. She dared not assume it was the same day. She had made that mistake before.

"Is that her?" a man said, not far away.

"Looks like it," said another. "This is where he said to look." A pause. "Is she alive?"

"I don't think the Fylking would hit someone this far out."

Two men led their horses through the trees from the same direction the phooka had departed. They were clad in dark gray, brown leather and black cloaks, and they were armed with blades and bows. They held the reins of black warhorses, the kind bred to the king's service. Neither of the beasts had red eyes, unfortunately.

"You there," the first soldier said as they approached.

Ingifrith got to her feet. She didn't say anything as she

attempted to piece together what had happened. The Others had fled like dreams. The Fylking must have told the warden where to find her, and he'd dispatched the King's Guard. Bastards, all of them.

"We have a report that you were near the gatetower," the guardsman said, his hand on the hilt of a blade on his waist. "That's in violation of the king's law. Are you aware?"

For a brief moment, Ingifrith considered making a run for it. Then she released a breath and nodded. She couldn't outrun their horses. There was no point in lying, either; they wouldn't take her word over that of a warden. If she hadn't run from him, he might not have reported her.

"We'll have to bring you in," the second guard said, not unkindly.

"To do what?" Ingifrith asked.

"Just a fine," the first guard replied, as if bored. "If you'd done anything that bad, the Fylking would have taken care of you."

Little did they know. A fine, however, could seriously hamper her plans, whatever those were now. She had left her original plans of becoming a warden at the foot of the gatetower.

The first guard drew his horse around, mounted, and held out his hand. "Unless you'd rather walk."

Ingifrith stared up at the beast moving around, its muscles rippling with strength. She had never ridden a horse, in any dimension. Before she could open her mouth to object, the second soldier closed his hands around her waist and lifted her easily into the saddle.

Gulping, Ingifrith stared at the ground below. "What if I can't pay the fine?" she asked against the guardsman's back. He smelled like a goose. And a barnyard.

He turned his head. "Then it's the gaol, I'm afraid." He said it lightly, as if it was no big deal that she would be locked up like a criminal.

The other man mounted his horse and headed off into the trees. "Hold on," said Ingifrith's rider, prompting her to cling onto him as the animal beneath them began to move.

All for the scorn of a Fylking warlord.



## High Commander of the Third Sun

It was nearly dark when Ingifrith and the guardsmen reached Rivergate, a township three leagues north of the tower, situated between the Ash River and a sprawling wood battered by the Sie War. The wood was a grim place, tangled and silent but for the ghosts of fallen warriors. There was a marked absence of Otherworld impressions, as if the place had been cursed. Nearer the town, Ingifrith noticed a woven net of bones and feathers hanging in a tree. Chimes cried softly in the wind.

The guardsmen brought her to a tall stone building near the center of town. Above the large oak doors was a carving of the standard for the King's Guard, a crenelated fortress tower with a tall pine tree on each side and two swords crossed beneath. Large cressets burned on either side of the door. Still hurting from being blasted over the rocky plain, Ingifrith caught her breath as the guardsman reached up, lifted her off the horse and set her on her feet.

The interior of the guardhouse was bleak and dark but for a common room with a hearth, thick rugs and comfortable chairs. The second guardsman said farewell to the first and went in, but Ingifrith's remaining captor wasn't taking her to that cheery place. She ignored the stares of soldiers as she went down a wide, torchlit hall. The guardsman turned down a smaller corridor lined with doors with barred windows in them. At the end, he stopped.

"Captain Eklin will hear your case in the morning," he said, opening the door to a cold, musty draft. He entered, crossed the room and lit a candle. Golden light leapt up and danced over the walls. There was a cot with a dingy pallet, a small table built onto

the wall, a chair that looked like it was made for a child, a piss pot and a jug. The soldier lifted the jug, sloshed around the contents, and put it down. He moved to a small hearth, grabbed a tinderbox from the floor and started a fire using a small stack of wood piled on the floor. Ingifrith went to the cot and sat down. It creaked under her weight, scant as that was. She leaned over, grabbed a tattered wool blanket folded on the edge of the cot and wrapped it around her. It smelled like mold.

When the guardsman had coaxed forth a smoking flame, he stood. "Someone will bring you food shortly. There'll be a guard posted at the end of the hall if you need anything else." With a short nod he left, closing the door behind him.

Ingifrith gazed at the candle flame. The silence was unnerving, mostly because it was interior, as if the doors to the Veil were buried under pond muck. Above her head, higher than a man could reach, was a small window enclosed by thick iron bars. She wished she could open it and feel the outside air.

The candle burned with a long, steady flame. It was beautiful, somehow. Ingifrith left the cot, grabbed the chair and sat by the table. Leaning forward, she moved her fingers near the flame. Her forehead tingled. In a rush, the conscious impression of a fire spirit filled the light.

"Hail," Ingifrith said softly.

*Hail*, the salamander replied. Its voice was startlingly booming, deep and powerful for a spirit in a candle flame. *What misdeed brings you hither?*

Ingifrith scowled. "Well, if you must know, I approached a Fylking by the gatetower, yonder. He blasted me. A warden saw it and reported me to the King's Guard."

The flame leapt up and flickered as the salamander laughed. *Aren't you a brave one.*

Ingifrith hung her head. There were other words she would have used, none of them as flattering. Short of telling the salamander about her thwarted desire to be warden, she said, "I'd never seen a Fylking. I was curious."

The salamander made a rumbling sound that could have been a chuckle or an expression of thought. Warm air stirred in the



room, like a breeze on a hot summer's day. *The Warlords of Oeoros have no patience for mortal curiosity, Brave One. Grim as hungry wolves they've become, since their enemy breached their defense and closed the Gate.*

"You mean the Second Gate War?" The candle flame wavered there, bright and saying nothing. Ingifrith had to admit, despite her broken plan, that this interested her. "What is 'Oeoros?'" She had never heard Leofwine use that term before.

*That is what the Fylking call their world,* the salamander replied. *Oeoros is deep within the heart of Sleipnir.*

Sleipnir, the Allfather's Horse. Ingifrith recalled her father's lessons on the constellations when she was a child. The Allfather's Horse dominated the northern horizon in winter and was often cloaked in frozen mists. It was said that Sleipnir, the steed ridden by Othin, the Allfather, was wintry gray and had eight legs. Leofwine had once told her the Fylking came from a world much like Math, and he had pointed to the sky, but Ingifrith had never thought to ask where in the sky their homeworld was.

She jumped as a knock hit the door. She cleared her throat. "Enter."

An older man came in carrying a plate. "Evening," he grumbled. He had a limp. He came to the table and set her meal there, gave her a wooden spoon from a pocket in his apron, and wiped his hands on his shirt. He nodded before limping back to the door. Ingifrith thanked him as he went through.

She leaned forward. A small river fish baked and browned stiff, a pile of white beans and some black bread. She plucked up the fish and bit into it. Cold, but good. She dipped the spoon into the beans and took a big mouthful.

Swallowing, she gathered up her nerve from a sea of futility. "Any chance you can get me out of this place?" she asked the candle.

The flame brightened, causing her to squint. At that moment she sensed this spirit was old, as old as stars. *I can destroy it, it purred.*

Ingifrith stopped chewing, tilted her head and glowered with skepticism. "Indeed. A salamander in a candle?"

As the room changed, she dropped her spoon. The candle snuffed out. The salamander's presence expanded into a raging fire that did not burn, a fire of the unseen, a window into another world where the forces of destruction and transformation reigned. From the depths of the flames he stepped forth, a giant with hair the color of pitch, eyes burning white and flesh as pale as bones. He was clad in mail, dark, intricately embossed leather and tall boots with iron straps. As he moved, muscles rippling like those of the guardsman's horse, he changed until he was the height of a human warrior.

He was beautiful. And awful.

"You're no salamander," she observed, her heart racing.

He stepped up to her and held out his hand. His presence filled the entire world, the expanse of the heavens. It was tangible, something more than unseen. She lifted her fingers with mortal trepidation and brushed them over his. Intense, tingling heat spread into her hand. Solid, yet not quite. Then she had a thought.

"You're a demon!" Power, heat and war. Leofwine had once told her that demons lived in a place called the Severed Kingdoms, a vast, Otherworld dominion cloaked in shadows and flames. She had thought it was merely a scary tale, but she still remembered how softly her brother spoke, as if he feared the words.

Holding her fingers, the demon lifted her hand to his lips, sending a wild rush through her heart and down into her thighs. *Halogi, High Commander of the Third Sun, at your service.* His pale eyes bored into her. The irises were black and vertical, like a cat's.

Ingifrith pulled her hand away. Aside from the fact she didn't want to destroy anything or anyone, she shuddered to think what manner of exchange she'd have to make for the "service" of such a one as this. "Please don't burn anything down," she said, lifting her brow in hope. "I'll settle for your company."

His lips curled into a smile as he turned, the edges of his smoke-gray cloak moving around his body like a careless breeze. *Granted, Brave One.*

"My name is Ingifrith," she informed him. "May I ask, why are you here?"

He cast her a glance that felt like a chasm in Hel. *Ten suns past, I was summoned by a warlock. He looked up the ceiling, held by rows of blackened timbers. I burned this town at his command, and then I defied him. He banished me to this very building. I've been living in candles and hearths ever since.* He clenched a fist and opened it again, long nails glinting in the light. The struggling fire erupted in the hearth.

Ingifrith got up, went to the hearth and sat before it. It was blessedly warm. She placed a piece of wood on it but suspected the flame would burn regardless. As a girl, she remembered hearing about a great fire in the south, near the tower. No cause was ever given for it. A fallen cresset, a careless stablehand in a dusty barn—no one knew. “This warlock, what was his name?”

*Vargn. He said the name in the back of his throat, like a growl. “Why did he command you to burn the town?”*

*He was testing me. From the smoking ruins, he told me to burn the Fylking's tower. This, I refused. I had no wish to make an enemy of the Fylking. But I was bound, so Vargn banished me.*

The Rule of Exchange. Ingifrith put her arms over her knees and leaned her chin on them. “My brother is a Fenrir sorcerer. Even their Masters would need great skill to summon you, I think. What kind of warlock has that power?”

The demon's gaze settled on her. *A warlock who had help. Vargn was being guided by the Fylking's enemy, a Niflsekt warlord who was hiding in this world like an adder beneath a stone. That foul one acquired my price and gave it to Vargn. I had not expected him to pay it.*

“What was it?”

*A talisman forged in the great dwarven hall of Nidavellir. It grants power over all the elements.*

Ingifrith nodded. That would be attractive to a demon, she supposed. Creasing her brow, she asked, “Why would a Niflsekt bother tossing about with a mortal warlock?”

*He was using him. A mortal has power over the Otherworld that a High Immortal does not. High Immortals must abide Free Code, which forbids them to summon an Other and command it against its will. Mortals are under no such restrictions, as it is usually impossible for them to meet the Rule of Exchange for a being such as myself.*

“So the Niflsekt used Vargn to get around Free Code.”

*Just so. The Niflsekt sought to compromise the Gate without the Fylking knowing who was behind it and thought to use me to that end. Failing that, he taught Vargn great sorcery so he could accomplish his goals another way. Which he very nearly did. The Niflsekt promised him a place on the Fylking homeworld and freedom from Hel’s domain.*

He breathed a laugh that send a chill over Ingifrith’s scalp.

*Vargn was deceived. He died at the hands of a warrior in the Second Gate War, as you call it, and went to Hel regardless. Now, from the Otherworld, he holds me out of spite.*

The Second Gate War. As the stories went, a powerful warlock gathered a fearsome army of draugr, which he used to set Fjorgin against Dyrregin as a distraction from his purposes. Ingifrith would never forget the day that something—she never saw it, but had dreamed of it for months—had come through the Veil over the Apex of the Gate in the far north of Dyrregin and nearly destroyed the world of Math. She heard it roar; everyone had. It crushed a mountain range and turned the tower to rubble. They called it a demon, and in every story she had heard, it was described differently.

Halogi drew near, caressing her with light. “Why would Vargn summon a fire demon?” Ingifrith said. “An earth demon would be able to shake a tower to the ground.”

For a moment, he said nothing. He wavered a little, like a weak flame threatened by a gust of wind. *The demons of water and earth were of sound resolve, for they did not come. I did.*

“Why?”

He flared his nostrils. *Arrogance.*

The sadness in his voice made Ingifrith want to pity him, but his ancient nobility wouldn’t bear that. “My mother used to say there’s no such thing as a trap without a spring. That every situation has chaos built into it, like a crack in a fortress wall. Surely, there’s a way you can escape this place.”

He moved away and paced the floor like a mountain cat. He cast her a glance. *You are wise, Brave One.*

Ingifrith gazed into the fire as irony darkened her heart. Nothing had sprung the trap Grimar and his friend had set for

Ingfrith in the meadow that day. Chaos had destroyed her worth like a knife cutting a weed at the root. Yet here she was giving her mother's advice to an arrogant demon.

He stopped pacing. When Ingfrith looked up, he was standing there, smoldering, regarding her curiously. *Wisdom oft comes with pain, Brave One.*

"Stop calling me that." She felt about as brave as a barn cat mauled by a farmer's hounds. She pulled her blanket close and returned her attention to the fire. "What would happen if you just left? What holds you?"

*That would give Vargn the power to destroy me.*

"After he tricked you into defying him? Are there no rules or codes against that?"

The demon rumbled with laughter. *Brave...and innocent. Vargn paid my price, and that bound me to him. It was a trap.*

Ingfrith studied the dirt under her nails. "You said the Niflsekt acquired the talisman for him. Doesn't that mean Vargn did *not* pay the price? What's an exchange if it isn't something we get by our own effort?"

Halogi fell so quiet behind her that she thought he had left, tired of her foolish questions. She twisted around. He hovered in the air, flames beating around him, his face luminous. As he grinned, she noticed fangs.

He hissed like a snake and vanished, leaving the room in cold silence.



Ingfrith awoke as gray light crept through the window in her cell. She closed her eyes and groaned as she tried to move. The creaky cot had done nothing good for the hurts the Fylking had put on her. She had dreamed over and over of being thrown across the plain. In one dream, the plain was burning; in another, it was flooded. In all of them, the beautiful Fylking warlord stared down at her in scorn.

The candle had burned to a hardened puddle and the hearth was cold. Halogi had not returned, and she had a feeling he wouldn't. Her heart turned cold as she recalled what she had told

him. What if she was wrong? He might have tried to break Vargn's spell and been destroyed.

As someone knocked on the door, she prepared to face the day.

A short time later, she followed the guardsman who had brought her here. He spoke to her briefly about what to expect, but she hardly heard him. She had eaten a bowl of bland porridge that upset her stomach. And her thoughts of Halogi weighed on her heavily.

The guardsman brought her up a flight of stairs and into a chamber with a dais on one end. There, sitting before an ornate table, was a man with long gray hair combed back from his face, dark eyes and an aged, tired countenance. He wore the habit of the King's Guard with a symbol of rank on his collar. Ingfrith stopped before him.

"Captain Eklin of the King's Guard," the guardsman announced.

The captain looked up with an unreadable stare. "What is your name?"

"Ingfrith Klemet, House Earticael."

His brow lifted slightly at the title. Only Ingfrith's father was a royal, but it was enough. "You were seen breaking the king's law by approaching Tower Sie. Do you deny this?"

"No, milord." She wondered why that rat warden wasn't here at this inglorious trial to state his case. She added, "The Fylking made their displeasure clear."

He appeared to study her. "You might have been killed. If other fools hear you survived it, they might follow suit. Did you think of that?"

"No, milord."

He leaned back with official deliberation. "By my authority as captain of the King's Guard, I hereby charge you ten pieces of silver or six moons in gaol." His expression wasn't much different than the one the Fylking had worn when he had sheathed his sword and left Ingfrith lying on the ground.

Ten pieces of silver. Ingfrith could almost hear the laughter of Leofwine's god, the Prince of Trickery. She had only just over that amount, which she had barely touched since her father's solicitor

handed her the purse. Even if she had wanted to seek her fortune in Faersc, she wouldn't be able to now. She would have no way to buy passage over the sea and the things she would need to get there. She would have to return to Earticael.

But six moons in gaol? That was unimaginable. For one thing, it would put her back on the road in winter. Her stomach turned at the thought. Even if she could deal with that, she couldn't deal with being trapped. She thought of Halogi, fleeing at the mere notion of escape even if it meant his destruction.

Then she thought of the silver flute. That might be worth the journey back to Earticael. She didn't want to sell it; it was all she had, save Leofwine's bow and quiver. But it was something.

She stepped forward and drew her pack around. She pulled forth her purse, a plain leather pouch that had belonged to her father, and emptied its contents onto the captain's desk. She plucked out the extra, smaller coins that exceeded the amount, returned them to her now empty purse and stepped back, choking down the lump in her throat. "May I go now?"

The guardsman behind her stirred. The captain leaned forward in his chair and stared at the coins, then at her. Clearly, he had not expected her to have such a sum. "Where did you come by this?"

Heat flooded her cheeks. "My father was Nichlaes Klemet, House Earticael, Commissioner of the King's Archive. He died in the spring and left this to me. My brother got his house in the royal district."

The captain's eyes narrowed. "What is your brother's name?"

"Leofwine Klemet. He was a scribe in the King's Archive and seneschal to the High Constable of the King's Rangers in Dyrregin. Now he serves Fjorgin as an Adept of Fenrir."

Ingifrith had thought that stating her brother's accomplishments might convince the captain to take her seriously. Instead, his expression changed. He lifted his gaze to the guardsman and said, "Take her back to her room. I must send for Moust."

"What?" Ingifrith choked. "You're taking my coin and not letting me go? The king will hear of this!" An absurd claim, but at this point it hardly mattered.

Captain Eklin nodded to the guardsman and began gathering up the coins.

As they reached the door of her cell, the guardsman opened it and turned to her. "You must understand, milady. If the punishment weren't steep, everyone would be doing what you did."

Ingifrith pushed past him. "I paid your fine and am held here still. You think I stole the coin, is that it?"

"No, milady."

"Then who is Moust?"

He hesitated as if he were about to claim ignorance. Then he said, "Adept Moust is of the Fenrir Brotherhood."

Ingifrith lowered herself onto the cot. Fenrir Brotherhood? Why would they want to talk to her? But the soldier was finished answering questions. He closed the door and locked it, leaving her there for the second time. Without her father's coin.

She had mentioned Leo. Was Eklin looking to verify her story? That had to be it. They thought she stole the coin. It couldn't be anything else. Leo wouldn't be looking for her. He had never cared where she was.

She clenched her fists and slammed them onto the cot. A scream would accomplish nothing, but it rose from her throat anyway. She went to the table and slung everything on it to the floor. Ripped the pallet from the cot and hurled it across the room. Kicked the coals in the hearth and threw the last of the wood into it, sending dust billowing into the air.

Would that the Rule of Exchange applied to humans as it did to the Otherworld! Humans were crooks, thieves and deceivers. She seriously regretted not taking Halogi up on his offer to destroy this place.

She sank down onto the floor by the hearth and put her head in her hands. She missed the forests and fields and the open air, where the wild things lived. This place was cursed.

Thanks to her, Halogi had probably been vaporized by a warlock.

It was afternoon before she heard the rattle of a key in the lock. She had dragged the pallet back onto the cot and tried to sleep amid intense efforts to penetrate the sludge cast over the



Veil in this place. She had started a fire with what was left of the mess she had made, but no spirits or demons came into the weak flame she had coaxed forth.

She expected to be taken back to the room where Captain Eklin had sentenced her, but instead, a man in a black cloak with the hood drawn entered. He gave what sounded like instructions to someone in the hall and then closed the door behind him. As he turned, Ingifrith stiffened with chills. He pushed back his hood.

He was an ordinary man with plain features and black hair graying at the temples, but power whispered around him. Pursing his lips, he glanced around the room at the mess. Ingifrith didn't care. She sat on her flimsy cot, hair tangled around her face, and glowered at him like a cornered animal.

As he walked toward her, he moved his hand in an odd circular motion. At once, the cloud over the Veil cleared. Impressive. Ingifrith wanted more than anything to reach past the Veil and find a friend, but she decided not to try her luck against a sorcerer—at least until she knew what he wanted.

He reached out, moved the hair from her face and lifted her chin. As he studied her, she pulled away, disliking everything about him. His presence prickled on her nerves like a nightmare she couldn't recall.

“What do you want?” she said.

“The whereabouts of your brother, for a start.”

Ingifrith broke into laughter. “He could be in Loki's bed for all I know. I haven't seen him in suns.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “I find that unlikely.”

Ignoring his implied threat, Ingifrith leaned forward. “You're an Adept and you can't find one of your own?”

His mouth twitched with a cold smile. “Leofwine is gifted. As are you.” His gaze darkened. “Had you not been brought here, I wouldn't have found you so easily.”

*Good to know*, Ingifrith thought dryly.

“What are you hiding from?” he asked. A strange smile touched the corner of his mouth.

Her heart skipped a beat as she sensed him probing her, like a wandering eye moving over her body and near the edge of a

chasm where her innocence had died horribly. He knew where it was, as if he had a map.

“You dare,” she said, but there was nothing she could do. Her heart started to race. *Sun on the grass*. She tried to move, thinking to hit him in the face, knock him down, scatter his focus, but he had her in some kind of hold. *Wildflowers, trembling in the wind*. Now desperate as a cat in a cage, she focused on the Veil. It was as dark as a winter’s night; only death waited there, death without fire.

Something settled in the hearth. A spark flew onto the floor.

“Where is Adept Klemet?” the sorcerer repeated.

Ingifrith could all but feel his fingers on her now, searching for secrets, taking a pulse, cutting off her air.

*Halogi, if you still live—* she pleaded in the dark.

As the sorcerer turned to look behind him, she sagged as if dropped. Fire burned in the hearth. He walked to it, held out a hand and turned to Ingifrith with a sneer. “Foolish woman. I am not so easily distracted.”

He stepped back as the fire rushed out into the room and rose into the most beautiful thing Ingifrith had ever seen, her wild and arrogant demon friend. He towered over the sorcerer in his giant form, his war gear shining, his flesh luminous and his eerie, pale eyes filled with such black wrath that Moust dropped to his knees and began to mutter like an imbecile.

The demon rushed down in a smoking rage, clutched Moust by the throat and lifted him into the air. *You sniveling worm*, he said in a voice that sounded like a cavern flood. Clutching at the beast’s clawed, burning hand, the sorcerer tried to scream.

“Halogi, please don’t kill him,” Ingifrith said.

With a roar, the demon hurled Moust aside. The sorcerer hit the table, smashing it and the little chair to pieces. Holding his throat, he choked, “Ha—Halogi—” He half laughed, half cried with astonishment.

“Oh, you know each other?” Ingifrith said. If not for the fact she would get blamed for his death, she’d have let Halogi do whatever he pleased with this wicked man. She rose, picked up her pack and slung it over her shoulder. “You lot think you can

just go around and bully people? Because your order is ancient, that gives you permission, is that it? Leofwine once told me Fenrir was a venerable order. Whatever he did, I'm sure you had it coming."

The sorcerer cowered there, not taking his eyes from the spiraling, breathing flames of the demon filling the room. His gaze darted to her and back.

"I approached the tower and I paid my fine," Ingifrith said. "I did not steal that coin, I don't know where Leo is, and my personal business is none of yours. Come near me again and I won't protect you."

She didn't wait for the Adept's response. She went out into the hall, ignoring the guardsman who had no doubt been listening but had strict orders not to interfere. As Ingifrith moved around him, he ran into the room, not seeing Halogi as the demon vanished into a smoking presence that filled the hall, the building, the sky and the heavens beyond.

*Why did you not call me sooner?* Halogi said softly, near her ear.

Ingifrith strode down the hall. "I didn't feel you here anymore. I feared you'd been destroyed."

He rumbled with laughter. *No indeed, Brave One. I am free, and in your debt.*

"Consider it paid." Ingifrith wondered what the demon had done to gain his freedom, but she doubted the answer would be nice. Based on Leofwine's harrowing tales, an entity like this, unfettered by the Rule of Exchange, would be capable of anything.

As she rounded the corner and headed for the front door, someone shouted behind her. Captain Eklin strode down the hall, his cloak billowing around him. He didn't look pleased. "You've not been given permission to leave," he informed her.

"By whom?" Ingifrith returned. "Moust? What kind of honor do you have, taking my coin and then allowing that horrid snake to use sorcery to interrogate me?"

The captain scowled in irritation. "I didn't know he was going to do that."

A sudden gust of wind blew down the hall, ripping at the

torches. The captain looked around him, puzzled.

“You summoned him quickly enough when I told you who I was,” Ingifrith reminded him. “What did you think he was going to do? Serve me tea?”

The captain started to speak but jumped back as the big doors exploded open and slammed onto the stone outside, splintering the oak to pieces. One of the doors creaked and sagged on a bending hinge. Pale as wax, Eklin swung around as Moust staggered into the hall behind him. “Let her go!” the sorcerer commanded.

Ingifrith didn’t wait for permission. She went through the doors hanging like Hel’s sacrifices on their frames, stepped over the shards of oak and twisted iron, down the steps and into the street.

*Where will you go, Brave One?* Halogi asked her, now a warm breeze on the air.

She had no idea. “Away from here.”

*I suggest east.*

“Why?”

But the demon was gone. After that sank into her, she decided her best course for the moment was to get out of this accursed town and into the woods. She set her sights on the trees beyond Rivergate, quickening her pace.



Smoke spiraled up through the boughs of a dense thicket near Falon, a small village five leagues west of Rivergate. The wind was restless, damp and colder than usual for the season. Ingifrith sat close to a small fire, her knees propped up and her arms folded over them. Her belly growled with hunger and her flesh tingled with the presence of sylphs draping her in the silence of stars.

She had found some beautiful stones in a nearby stream and left them on a stump. One of them had moss growing on it in an interesting pattern. A naiad had drawn near and touched it, then snatched it up and flowed away. Ingifrith no longer knew if her small gestures were needed; the spirits of the land seemed to surround her regardless, as if her attention were enough to

appease them. But after a small company of guardsmen had ridden by earlier in the evening, following the stream, Ingifrith decided not to assume that.

The flames wavered, sending forth an occasional mundane spark. No spirits stirred there. She hadn't sensed Halogi in the two days since he had given her the ridiculous suggestion to travel east.

Thanks to the demon she was free, but broke, and could think of nowhere to go but back to Earticael like a hound with its tail between its legs. Perhaps Cevin at the Witch's Tree would take pity on her and give her work, but in all likelihood he would also expect her to spread her thighs to him again, and she had lost her enthusiasm for that. As for the miller, her father's friend, he would surely have let his loft out to another tenant by now, which meant she'd have to find somewhere else to live. And she no longer had her father to help her.

Perhaps Leofwine had returned and taken up residence in their father's house. Unlikely. Considering that the Fenrir Brotherhood was so bent on finding Leo that they would detain and question his sister, Ingifrith knew he wouldn't possibly go to ground in a high-profile place like that. Their father's solicitor had made it clear that Ingifrith couldn't live in the house without Leo's consent, and at the time she hadn't cared. Now, she didn't dare to go near the royal district. The Brotherhood probably had spies watching it.

Then there was the run-down, musty heap of her mother's cottage, which had been looted by boys, cursed by their mothers, and left to weeds, weather and wildlife. Ingifrith had no desire to reclaim that place. It wasn't safe. For all she knew, bored farm hands were watching it with the same vigilance as the sorcerers watching for Leo.

That left the wilds. Ingifrith drew a deep breath of wood smoke, pine and the fertile compost of the forest floor, and her heart sank. *What are you hiding from?* Adept Moust had demanded. Everything, now. Thanks to the Fylking of Tower Sie, the warden who had reported her and then Moust, she was exposed and weakened on both sides of the Veil. Her previous life of making soup for old men, concocting remedies for common ailments and

gathering berries and flowers for woodland spirits seemed as cold as bedding a barman in the cellar of a common tavern.

She had so desperately wanted a change.

Ingifrith leaned over, picked up a piece of wood and put it on the fire. The light ebbed for a moment, crackling. A stiff chill crept over her scalp. Beyond the glow, two red eyes shone in the inky shadows of the surrounding trees. In a blink, they were gone.

“Phooka?” Ingifrith said softly. She had never known what else to call it. The beast was one of those old earth creatures that didn’t have a name—not that anyone knew, anyway. Something snorted like a horse. It could have been the wind, and the red eyes, sparks from the fire. Ingifrith drew a deep breath and returned her attention to the flames.

She started as the woods stirred and a beast appeared, a heavy, pitch-black horse, one heavy hoof stomping the ground. Absorbing the light, the phooka lifted its head, red eyes glowing.

*Are you afraid?*

Ingifrith started to speak, but her breath caught as the horse spooked, muscles rippling as it fled across the Veil. The sylphs vanished like breath and the dryads withdrew into the bark of trees. Some kind of animal scuttled off into the brush. Ingifrith jumped back as her fire leapt up with a roar, sending smoke and sparks into the sky. In the center of the flames rose Halogi in a whirlwind of red and black. He stepped forth with cavalier poise, the height of a mighty warlord, his shining cloak caressing the flames. His eyes were pale as moons slitted with black. He moved an elegant hand, firelight shining on his long, curved nails.

Ingifrith could have run into his arms and hugged him. “You’ve sent my friends to flight,” she said with a smile.

The demon folded his arms over his chest and gazed down at her with smoldering regard, as if to inform her that he had been sending things to flight since the beginning of time. His nostrils flared as he said, *You are troubled, Brave One.*

Ingifrith pulled her knees back up to her chest. Wondering how this magnificent being could possibly care about her state of mind, she shrugged.

The demon began to pace. If anyone was troubled, he was. Casting her a sidelong glance that slid into her heart like a blade,

he said, *I did not come to you in your cell in the warriors' keep to pass the time.*

Clearly, the demon was irritated. Whirlwinds of smoke and ash spun at his feet and drifted like hornets over the ground into the woods. Was it because she had ignored his suggestion to travel east? Not looking at him, she stared hard into the flames. "You came to me in the cell because you were trapped, and I could see you."

His laughter caused the fire to turn white and flash on the metal of his gear. He continued to pace in a strong, determined stride, his jaw flexing beneath the twining lengths of his hair. *Few mortals see me, Brave One. Those who do make sacrifices so great they are twisted and hardened like old trees groaning under the weight of stone. Do you think such masters powerless without the ones they summon?*

"You have power. I don't. I am nothing." She looked up. Halogi's expression could've destroyed worlds. He could flay her alive if he wanted. Look right into her soul and see everything. There was no hiding from him.

He appeared by her side in a flash, causing her to jump. His voice was smooth as a still, blue flame. *Your deepest wound holds your power,* he said, his pale eyes unwavering. *The unseen realms are not protecting you for flowers and milk.* Clipping the last word in derision, he withdrew and began to pace again, holding a hand over the fire. The flames threaded up and caressed his fingers like a silken scarf. *Tell me, Brave One. Where will you go?*

"Back to my father's city."

*That was not your original destination.*

Ingifrith glowered at him. "Why ask if you already know everything?"

The demon stepped forward into the fire and knelt before her, flames moving around him without touching. *I do not know everything. I cannot take what you choose to hide.*

Ingifrith looked away, slapped in the face by irony. *The wicked farm hands did,* she thought. "I wanted to become a Warden of Dyrregin." She picked up a stick and stabbed it into the dirt. "But they don't take just anyone," she added, hating Leofwine for being right.

*The Warlords of Oeoros will welcome you*, the demon countered.

Ingifrith set her jaw as she recalled the beautiful Fylking sheathing his sword and leaving her on the plain like a scrap. "Tripe, they will. Anyway, I've changed my mind."

Halogi lifted a finger and pointed, one long nail leveled at her chest. *I would advise against abandoning your quest to seek the Fylking. You have made an enemy.*

Ingifrith stared at the demon's finger hanging in the air like a curse. "You mean Moust? Why, because I couldn't tell him where Leo was?"

A smile curled on his lips. *The one you call Moust is no trifling man. You did not see him truly.* He rose and towered over her. Her throat dry, Ingifrith couldn't help but notice the bulge in his crotch, laced tightly in black. Heat filled her cheeks as he said:

*The Wolf Lords know you now, Brave One. They will not suffer one with your power outside of their control. You might work against them.*

Ingifrith breathed a laugh. "Doing what, pray?"

*What you have already done*, the demon informed her, smoke curling from his nostrils.

"But you did that. I had no power over Moust. He could've stripped me bare."

*You summoned me from the waste and shadow of the Dark Realms. You saw me, opened your heart and freed me from my prison. The Masters of Ýr could not do such a thing; and yet, in your innocence, you did.*

"All I did was say that Vargh had no control over you because the Nifsekt paid your price, not him. Anyone could've seen that."

The demon flashed his fangs in a grin that passed quickly. *I did not see that. You reached into Elivag like the One-eyed God and fetched me the key to my trap. Moust is no fool. He knew I was free, and he knew I was serving you. He reached the obvious conclusion.*

Elivag. The primeval void, the matrix of creation, the ebb and flow of life force in all things. Ingifrith frowned. She knew nothing of that whatsoever. "All I did was make an observation," she protested. "How can that possibly satisfy the Rule of Exchange? I've made no sacrifices that twisted me like a tree."

His gaze settled on her like frost. *Have you not?* As her mind



raced with the implications of that question, the demon continued, *Adept Moust has returned to his lords. They will hunt you.*

“And do what?” she said in disbelief. But as she said the words, she remembered there were fiendish exceptions to the laws of the land. No justice ever came to the wicked farm hands. And the sorcerers of Fenrir had their own laws.

“You protected me from Moust before,” she ventured. “Can’t you now?”

*That balance has been paid, the demon said, his mood as hard as a sword. I must leave you. Fear not. Your darkness cloaks you, drives you to the unseen. It is that power you must use now, Brave One. You must journey east to the domain of the Warlords of Oeoros, and learn to serve them. They will protect you.*

Finally, the seriousness of Ingifrith’s situation began to dawn on her. She had crossed an Adept of Fenrir and now the Brotherhood would hunt her down unless she sought the protection of the Fylking—cruel, arrogant warlords in their cold towers. Desperate for another way, she said, “But I have no coin. The King’s Guard took it all. I couldn’t get to Faersc now even if I wanted to.”

*No trap without a spring, he whispered, echoing her mother’s advice. No fortress without a crack. Be so guided, Brave One.*

His presence sighed from her nerves like a dream. He was gone.

For good, this time.

As the hedge witch’s daughter huddled by her fire beneath the whispering trees, she felt as exposed as she had on the day her innocence died.



