

Baldr raised his mug, table mates following suit. “To whoring another night and knighting another whore!” The men roared along with him all grinning. Baldr drained the remainder of his ale, slammed the empty flagon into the table and pounded his chest. After the rest finished, the men gathered around him, slapping his back for goodbyes before shoving him stumbling out the door of the tavern and into the snow. He nearly slipped on an ice patch as he descended the several steps from the tavern’s porch and only managed to stay upright by throwing his arms out wildly, grabbing onto the hitching post by the stairs.

As he steadied himself he heard the group he had just left having a loud debate through the shuttered window.

“I never have understood what he means by that toast. Do you reckon he really puts his cock on both their shoulders before every fuck?”

Baldr laughed and pushed away from the post. He was beginning his shift at the gate and would be stuck there for the next five days. The snow was blinding, driven horizontally by the wind, but the ale kept him warm and he knew the path. He reached over his right shoulder and found the handle of his beloved Cleaver, the damn thing’s tip dug in the snow behind him when it was piled so high.

He started towards the gate, leaning into the wind, it stung the shaven sides of his head, and blew the collar of the large coat he wore into his face. To his annoyance the fur on the inside frequently caught the hairs of his thick blond beard, tugging it painfully every so often. After walking nearly half an hour north from Icefall, named after the huge sheets that fell from the Glacier Mountains its inhabitants were unlucky enough to find themselves at the foot of, he arrived at the base of the gate just as the wind broke and he took the chance to gaze upon it.

The gate soared over him, nearly a hundred feet of black iron, lanterns hung at the entryway, his destination. They said it was built even before the Rymae united Vara and settled the Crownhold some 1100 years prior. It had not opened in at least two centuries, the hinges were welded shut by the Lykos and boulders were piled against its bottom.

Above him the sky seemed just at the ends of his fingertips, extraordinarily clear, with a hint of the crescent moon visible. The dancing glow of the aurora stretched across the dark canvas seeming a green and blue wildfire burning the web of stars. He stood and stared. Seeing the sky this way made him feel as if his past had never happened and his future never would, the only moment he had ever lived was this one right now. Then the wind picked up flurries again and the spell was broken. All he could see was the white of snow and the orange of lantern glow.

Baldr cursed, his words snatched by the wind and lumbered his way into the gatehouse. While stamping the snow off his legs he greeted the men whose shift was ending as they passed him on their way back into town. A dozen soldiers were already lined up in the mess hall and Baldr fell in with them.

The Captain gave Baldr a stern look. "Now that we are finally all here I can begin. We will need to be at our best for this shift. A Volgan has been spotted on the other side of the gate." A murmur went through the assembled men, even Baldr was taken aback, rarely did they come close enough to be seen from the gate, even with an eyeglass. "So far it has just been sitting, watching, but we all know they travel in packs. Stay alert, I want no drinking or card games until it wanders off."

A soldier raised his hand, the Captain nodded to him, "Sir, shouldn't we call for reinforcements or put the town on alert?"

The Captain scoffed, “A panic is the last thing we need. I won’t bother the Clan with this. There’s never been an attack on the gate itself, even those beasts know to fear certain death. Keep your wits about you and tomorrow we’ll send out the rangers to put it down. Baldr, you have command.” He turned and swiftly exited.

With that they were dismissed, Baldr along with the other soldiers immediately headed to the battlements to see the Volgan for themselves. When he arrived two men from the previous shift were still atop the wall peering into the distance, periodically sharing an eyeglass between them. Baldr looked into the distance in the direction they were gazing and saw a dull red glow at least six hundred yards from the wall.

“Baldr,” the man currently waiting for his turn on the eyeglass, Magnus, nodded at his approach. “There’s your way to re-join the clan,” he continued as he elbowed Baldr in the side.

The second soldier turned at the words and handed over the eyeglass, Baldr brought it to his face and peered towards the glow. A Volgan sat next to a raging fire, from this distance it seemed small enough but Baldr knew it towered near eight feet tall. It had curved ram horns, leathery red skin, and the tusks of a boar. When they stood their backwards jointed knees caused them to lean forward unnaturally. The beast raised its head as if it could feel him watching and met his gaze. Baldr felt a chill run up his spine as if he had thrown open his coat to the driving chill. “It would seem that way, let us hope I never get the chance.”

Baldr was deeply troubled by the sight, looking through the eyeglass had sobered him up faster than a stiff slap. The two men went home, leaving the eyeglass with him, its metal tube chilled from the wind, feeling as if he held an icicle. For the next hour he didn't take his eyes off the Volgan except to blink. Finally, boredom got the best of him and he

headed to join the others who had all gone inside after taking their turn looking upon the beast.

The guard house was a squat brick hut built on top of the gate, nestled against the eastern end to try and tuck it away from the wind. As he stepped through the doorway he was met with the warmth of the hearth and the hiss of cold steel as every man leapt to their feet drawing their weapons.

“A little jumpy are we?” Baldr asked as the men sheathed their swords and took their seats, several having to pick up ones knocked over in their haste. Baldr walked over to the fire, held out his hands to warm for a moment before lifting Cleaver’s sling over his head, the leather had been digging into the dry skin of his neck, and leaning the greatsword against the wall. He cast his eye over the group, a solemn bunch, few he typically drank with. He hated being trapped in the small space, the smell of smoke, spilled ale, sweat and fear unsettling his stomach even further.

Rork, the oldest soldier present, nay the oldest in the entire guard, a grizzled stump of a man, blind in one eye and missing two fingers on his left hand, pounded the table in front of him causing the others to flinch again, before rasping out, “You lot have gone soft, when I was a lad the guard was full of real men, heroes. They fought Volgan with their bare hands and won! You milkmaids jump at your own shadows, the only time the lot of you used a blade was to shear your sheep. I can scarcely believe out of fifteen here Baldr and I are the only ones to have actually seen them before.”

Baldr scoffed, turning his palms up to warm the other side of his hands, “When you were a lad the gate hadn’t been built yet and the Volgan were just stories we told our babes.” He was met with silence from the group. Tough crowd.

“Har har, when these boys run home to their mothers and I’m the only man at your back you’ll appreciate me,” Rork announced as he stood and headed towards the door. “Might as well check on the fucker,” he muttered as he passed by Baldr who handed him the eyeglass on his way. The door was thrown open bringing in a flurry of snow. One flake landed on Baldr’s hand, a delicate crystal of diamond sheen, before melting and running off the side, the drops sizzling when they fell onto the hot stones of the hearth.

Before he closed the door, Rork shouted back one last jab, “And get a regular damn sword, the size of that fucking thing is ridiculous, it ain’t distracting nobody from that tiny lump in your trousers.” The door slammed shut, the mood in the room remarkably improved at Baldr’s expense.

A quiet voice behind him said, “I had hoped they were still stories. I always half believed the elders were teasing us and the truth was that the Ursi were banished here for some insult to the crown long ago.”

Baldr turned and looked at the soldier, a woman, her helm sat on the table next to her, blond hair bound tight to her scalp. She had a patch of soot on her cheek that a silent tear had blazed a trail through to her chin. Another Ursi bastard. “They’re real alright,” he answered, taking off his outer coat and sitting in the chair at the head of the table Rork had left empty.

“You’ve fought them sir? I never heard you talk about it before,” a young soldier, Monty, seated to Baldr’s right asked.

“Don’t call me sir. I’m the same as any of you. Just trying to live through the night.” He thought for a moment about Monty’s question. Leaning back in his chair, he checked the ties in his braid as he looked up at the ceiling before chuckling humorlessly. “Fought

them, no. I stood there, a statue, while good men were slaughtered around me. That's why you've never heard me talk about it." As he finished speaking he brought his face back down and met the soldiers' gazes.

"Will you talk about it now? Tell us the story sir," the woman soldier asked.

"What's your name bastard?" There was no reason for him to be indirect, he and every soldier knew the only way a woman found her way onto the gate was if she had power in her blood. Besides, it will make the men more at ease to have another sealed with us.

"Svana," she said, her cheeks slightly flushing at his remark.

"Well Svana, I'll tell you the story if you stop calling me sir and you pass that flask so I can loosen up my tongue."

"Yes, s...Baldr," she said with a smile as she unhooked the flask from her belt and tossed it to him.

After a quick sip and grimace at the horse piss he had been tricked into drinking he began. "It was fourteen years ago now, my magic had just been tested in the capital, the first Breaker born to an Ursi in six generations."

He took a moment to smile, remembering his little heart bursting with pride and the smile on his father's face as he tossed Baldr into the air again and again. "When we got back my training was to begin in earnest. My Swordlord was to arrive by month's end and until then I was sent on a ranging with my cousin Koris and twenty or so guard. A few bastards were among our number, a powerful fighting force to be sent on a ranging, all to keep me safe I assume." His chair creaked as he shifted in it, seeming to voice its pain for the story being told.

"Our purpose was to investigate sightings of a Volgan reported by some prospectors.

Miners often go beyond the gate as Magesteel clusters are found in the Waste much

more commonly than down south, at least until you get to the desert. I've heard it can be gathered among those blistering dunes as well."

The second mouthful of horse piss went down easier for him. "We reached the place the miners spoke of and found the remains of their caravan, men and women cleaved and strewn about, horses, oxen and children missing. Koris was convinced just from the sight of the attack that it was a Volgan, the scene was similar to ones he had seen before. He asked if anyone wanted to turn back but the men were not afraid. In those days the Volgan were solitary, apex predators that defended their territory from every incursion, even other Volgan."

He took a third drink, no longer concerned about the taste. "They get closer and closer to the gate, forced south to find new ground not claimed by their elders. That's why the rangers go out, to thin their numbers and push them north again. A squad our size could and had taken down isolated Volgan in the past without casualty, so we rode on."

Baldr looked down at the table, fingers drumming upon its ancient surface scratched by an untold number of mugs, hardening his heart for the next piece of the tale. "We could see smoke further north and eventually found it crouched in a shallow outcrop. It held a screaming babe over the fire just watching us ride closer. By the time we stopped outside its den the babe was silent, the Volgan took the babe's head off with one bite and roared at us." He shivered in his chair, re-living the terrible sound.

"Koris and the men dismounted to fight, most were armed with spears and a phalanx was formed with me in the center. The formation advanced, pinning the creature between the walls of the hollow and their spears. Then chaos broke loose, three more Volgan appeared and attacked the rear of our formation."

Baldr took another drink, the number forgotten. “It was the first time any had seen them wear armor or use weapons, their gear crudely forged but we were unprepared. Each of the three that came from behind swung a sword as long as Cleaver with one hand.” He pointed towards his sword leaned against the wall, from tip to handle it was as long as Monty was tall, the group enraptured by his words turned in unison, following his finger to the wall and then looking back to his face.

“They fell on us, cutting through men as the southerners reap their crop fields. Koris killed two himself but was gravely wounded, he cried out to me to fight, but I just stood there as the men’s blood splashed on me. I was blinded as it sprayed in my eyes and choked as it dripped down my throat, but I didn’t move. Before I knew it, the fight was over, our group slain nearly to a man. Koris bled out as I buried my face in his furs. After he passed, old man Rork closed his eyes, the stumps of his fingers bloodying Koris’ face. Our horses had fled so we walked back, just the two of us.”

Baldr took a final swig of the drink to wash the taste of despair from his mouth before finishing the story. “When we got back I told the truth of my cowardice. I was sent to the gate and here I remain. I’ve killed bandits, soldiers, Snowlions, Icebears, any foe in front me, but when I see one of those things...there I am, twelve years old again. That’s why I don’t talk about it.” He chuckled, “that old, one-eyed bastard practically raised me, we’re family, even with all the grief he gives me.” I never did get to train with that Swordlord.

Without warning something crashed against the door, it bowed and splintered inwards under the force of the blow. When the debris cleared Baldr could see that it was a mangled body that had buckled the door. Its head was missing but he saw only three fingers on the left hand.

Cleaver was leaned against the wall too far away for Baldr to reach so he drew a hunting knife from his belt as he found his feet. He heard the clatter of a soldier dropping their sword behind him and then silence. All was quiet except for the wind whistling from the open doorway, snowflakes floating stark against the black opening as if they were stars in the night.

Then they heard the sound of hoof beats on stone approaching the opening. Baldr was not naive enough to believe a horse was being ridden atop the gate and knew his worst fear had come to pass. They heard more cloven steps, this time from the roof above them. Dirt drifted down, dislodged from its resting place in the rafters. Baldr did not look up as he dared not take his eyes off the doorway.

A pale red hand, humanoid with unnatural proportions, and long black nails reached in the doorway and grasped the wooden frame. The nails drug against the stone wall causing sparks to fly and a hair raising drone to sound. Then came its head, the creature's face could have been mistaken for a woman if not for the pale pink skin and horns. Its tusks were smaller than any Volgan Baldr had seen, barely more than long fans extending from either side of its mouth. Head angled like a hawk it stared at them, huddled in the tiny room together, how a cat watches rats writhe in their nest.

Its mouth opened and Baldr heard a hideous, gurgling, rasping voice, blacker than the Mines of Hecton, begin to speak. The Volgan continued its unrecognizable noise for several moments until Baldr realized with horror, it was speaking the common tongue. "Hello...prey," the creature spoke slowly and with a strange rhythm. A heinous, profane imitation of Varan words. "We have...been watching you...learning...you...hunting you. Our king demands your leader come beyond your iron wall and meet him tomorrow at first dark. The place you saw our brother sit. If no one comes we will feast upon your

people.” The creature made a noise halfway between a pig squeal and a bears throaty rumble. “I hope no one comes.”

It brought the other arm into the room and raised the missing head to its mouth. The creature bit into the head as Baldr would an apple, and with a sickening crunch Rork’s face was gone, the creature bared its teeth, blood poured from its mouth and down its chest to the floor. It made the noise again, laughter.

The Volgan withdrew into the blackness, the sound of laughter grew quieter until all Baldr could hear was the wind once again. Rork’s ruined body the only trace of its presence.

No man dared to speak or move until light crested the battlements and they could see they were alone.