

Nithing

By Alexander Saxton

She pulled over at my usual cafe and put on the blinkers. Leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. Ruffled my hair as she looked me in the eyes.

"I love you," she told me. "You're a good person."

She always felt the need to tell me that because deep down I knew I wasn't.

I kissed her back. Held her tight. Warm & firm, her hair soft & spiky as new pine needles.

"I love you too, Dana. Forever."

"Have a good day, okay?"

"You too."

A moment later I was standing at the curb, ankle-deep in high-piled grey toronto slush, watching her taillights mingle with the flow of traffic, into thinly falling snow & freezing rain.

Feeling something somehow changed.

#

When I walked inside I found my usual seat taken by a man I hated on sight.

Big guy, with a scruffy greying jaw and reddish wind-seared cheeks. Oversized shirt jacket in blue-white scruffy plaid. Hands like huge clods of dirt and heavy steeltoes half-tied on his feet, leaving clods of slushy mud all over the floor. Inconsiderate by his very existence. Looked like he worked construction or something like that. Just sitting there drinking a big cup of black coffee and staring down everyone in the shop.

Myself included. I'd barely stepped in the door before he was eyeing me up and down with a smug calculating look on his big ugly face. I didn't make eye-contact. I'd met his kind before and had more important things to do that day than wander into some asshole's orbit.

So I got my coffee, left a decent tip, and found an open chair by the door where it got cold from people walking in and out. Fine enough. Opened my computer and got to work.

And that should have been that.

But every few minutes out of the corner of my eye I could see the big guy watching me. I minded my own business even harder. But after about a quarter-hour he made up his mind,

stood and clumped over with heavy, dirty, ostentatious footsteps. Pulled out the chair across from me. Sat himself down.

At this point I didn't have much choice but to look up. He gave me a scraggly, underbite kind of grin.

"You Owen Sturlason?"

I was.

"Do I know you?"

He put out a meaty hand.

"Rob Grimson."

Said it with a kind of 'yes, me, *that* Rob Grimson' look on his face. But I'd never heard the name in my life, and didn't accept the offered hand.

"What can I do for you Rob."

He found this condescending, but deciding to be the bigger man, he just sat back and shook his head at my ignorance. Gestured to himself.

"Rob Grimson. *Grimsson*. From Langbrok? Saskatchewan."

That name rang a distant bell. Something written under a sepia photograph your great aunt finds important: a faded photo of people you don't know standing out front of some forgotten farmhouse somewhere.

"Langbrok... Alright. I think I know it... So what are you then, like some sort of second cousin?"

Not that I could see any resemblance. But he smiled and shook his head. On his face a mix of pity & disgust.

"Nah bud. I aint yer fucken cousin."

[Still politely] "Then... okay, I don't mean to be rude but who the hell are you? Why are you talking to me?"

He folded his arms and narrowed his eyes. Squinted into my face for a long moment.

"Can't tell if you're fuckin with me, Sturlason."

“What d’you mean?”

“What do *you* think I mean?”

[beginning to get heated] “I don’t have a clue what you mean. *You* came up to me. I’m in the middle of work over here. So could you please get to the point?”

His smile rotted away. Left only the bottom teeth showing.

“Typical fucken Sturlasons. Eh? Think you’re so much better’n the rest of us. I tell ya, you may be a thousand fucken miles from home, but the birdshit aint fallen far from the family tree. I think you *know*, Sturlason. I think you know god damn *well* why I’m here.”

“Alright. Well, I don’t, I promise you that, and moreover, I’m about to walk out this door.”

He sneered.

“Chickenshit.”

I spread my arms.

“Who the fuck are you?”

This was loud enough that half the cafe turned to look. Rob’s eyes narrowed. A couple rusty gears thunked into place in his head.

“You really *don’t* know, do you? You really don’t *know*.” He laughed and shook his head in disbelief at the look of confusion on my face. “Have you ever even *heard* the name of Grimson before?”

“That’s what I’ve been telling you for five minutes.”

The tension seemed to have defused for a moment. People turned slowly back to their drinks. The murmur of background conversation was renewed. Rob shook his head again, sighing this time as he wiped his face with his hands.

“Well isn’t that just somethin’. Jesus Christ. Never even *thought* they wouldn’t a told ya. What a crock of shit. What a fuckin crock. Really, it’s not fair to you, is it? Eh? Even if you are some shitty downtown whiner.”

He leaned forward before I could protest.

“I’m talkin about the *feud*, Owen.”

That last word hung in the air for a moment.

Then I said,

“The what?”

He sighed, took a big swig of coffee, and settled in.

“Aalright. Well, let’s get on down to it then. Eh? Alright. *Here’s* how it first came about. You see, your great-great grandfather was a thieving son of a bitch, sorry to say. And he took it on himself to use some fucken city lawyer to get a hold of *my* great-great grandfather’s inheritance, on account of the lie that my great great grandfather’s dad had been the one to get his mom pregnant in a way she didn’t approve of. Yeah? All bullshit of course, but he pulls it off with the lawyer’s help, and that’s where it all starts, yeah? Because after that, your and my great-great granddads *hated* each other. For *years* after wouldn’t even go to church at the risk of seein one another. And then one day they happen to cross paths out in the bush and one thing leads to another and they end up into a fistfight and it’s a fair fight and all, but at the end of it your great-great granddad winds up dead. Oops. Oh well. That’s just how things was in those days. So maybe you’d think after that things’d be settled and it’d all be The End & good riddance, right? Well, not so fast. Because even though *my* great-great granddad goes away for *fifteen years* for a fistfight, and *serves* his time, *your great* granddad, unreasonable sonofabitch that he is, decides to hold a grudge. And *he* starts spreading rumours round the town. ‘The Grimsons are no good, you cant’ trust ‘em, exetra, exetra.’ Which obviously leads to some hard feelings. So when *our* great-great granddad comes home and then a few months later has a mysterious so-called ‘fall’ that leaves him a fucken vegetable, we all know who’s really to blame, right? *Your* murderin’ great-granddad *obviously* did it to get back at him. Even though it was just a fistfight fair & square. Well. That’s when things really take off. Cause *your* great-granddad, lyin’ pieca a shit that he is, *denies* the murder, addin’ insult to injury cause that means he clearly thinks we’re all stupid. So we do what any reasonable group of people would, and one night we all head out and jump him. And you know what, even though we shoulda *killed* him for what he done, we’re reasonable fucken people so, we just clip his nuts. And *plenty* of folks live a full life with clipped nuts. So you can’t have anymore kids: so what? He already had kids. And it’s way better’n being a vegetable, if you ask me. Well, try tellin *that* to your great *uncle*. He *completely* overreacts. Comes up to *my* great-granddad in the middle of the town square, broad daylight *blam*, blows him away. Right there in the street. Brains in the Sunday afternoon dust, like none of us is fuckin Lutherans. What the fuck. So then *he* goes to jail, and at some point in the next few years *my* great-granddad’s brother picks up his, your great uncle’s, sister and locks her in the barn for a few days as a joke. But *she*, bein’ a lying Sturlason, says he did something to her he *didn’t* and then a week later *my* great-great-uncle’s twistin from a rope at the edge of town. Okay: so after that it’s war. Straight-up war: plain & simple, down & dirty. We’re talkin’ fights & beatings. Murders, houses burning down, people goin to prison for killin each other outside, and then goin on to kill each other inside. I’m guessing this’d be about the time your granddad upped stakes like a dickless chickenshit and headed East. Anyway. So things didn’t simmer down until after ‘45. Bunch of both families got wiped out in Normandy, and the ones who came back were

mostly cripples. Tough to hand someone from the box maple when you're stuck in an old wheelchair. So around that time the women of both families patched things up, a bit, and things slowed down. But slow don't mean stopped, and none of that stopped stop your second cousin from poppin' my dad in the head with a tire iron when I was a kid, or his bitch wife from makin it the whole town's problem when their house burned down with the bastard inside it a few months after that. Things of that nature. You followin' me so far?"

I blinked.

"Jesus Christ."

"Oh yah." Rob shook his head sadly. "Sturlasons got a lot t'answer for alright. Anyway, flashforward to a couple months ago, and your, I dunno, what he was, third cousin? Not really sure how it works with the 'removeds' and all that. But anyway, a couple months ago old Burton Sturlason kicks it from the emphysema, and we're left with a problem. Problem being, there's no more Sturlasons left livin in Langbrok."

I covered my face with my hands.

"How is that a problem. It's over: you won. The town's yours."

But Rob shook his head, squinting regretfully.

"Well, it *would* be. *But*. Y'see *we* have reason t'believe a couple winters back y'r man Burton drugged my cousin Jonah, then dropped him off to freeze to death in the back country. 'Death by misadventure' said the RCMP. But come on. Right? I mean, evr'yone knows whats up. So we did the sensible thing an' let it lie for a few years. Let the heat die away so we can get our own justice in our own time, right? *But* then y'r man Burt up and dies before we've got a chance to make things square."

He looked at me expectantly, like I could put the rest together from there. Something about him reminded me of a large dog waiting to be fed. When I didn't say anything, he prompted me with:

"And that's where *you* come in,"

"Me."

"That's right."

"What... you want me to pay some kind of blood money or something? Wergild? Even if this was any of my business, I spend all my money on rent and groceries. I've got like 600 bucks in savings."

Rob put up his hands, reasonably.

“Okay well don’t worry about that. We’re not askin’ any money.”

But then he gestured frankly at me.

“But all due respect it *is* somethin to do with you. Blood thicker’n water an all that. Ya know maybe your granddad wanted to spare you all this, but it’s still Sturlasons. Sturlasons is Sturlasons, as they say. But we’re not askin any money, and since we’re reasonable folks, we’re not askin any payback for the generations went before. Just for Jonah. And since we *are* reasonable, we’re not here for nothin’ underhanded. Just a fair fight, that’s all. You ‘n me, man to man, at a time ‘n place of your choosin.”

“What,” I said. “The fuck are you talking about.”

He stared evenly in my direction.

“Well there’s no need t’be rude.”

I closed my laptop decisively. Started packing away my things.

“Rob, it’s been interesting to meet you. Not pleasant, but interesting. I hope you enjoy the rest of your day.”

“Aw come on now.” He leaned back in the chair, spreading his arms as I stood. “Don’t be a little bitch like your granddad.”

And you know what? In spite of myself, that last part got under my skin. Because sure, Rob was a big guy, and I’m sure he was used to pushing people around. But I was big enough to match him pound-for-pound, and I’m *not used* to being pushed. And you know what, I would have *gladly* kicked his ass for him right then and there except that I’m a *civilized fucking human being*.

[A deep, slow breath]

But anyway.

That was the end of it.

Until the next morning Dana opened our living room curtains and screamed and fell backwards, almost going through the glasstop coffee table.

“Dana, what is it?”

I was already there with my arms around her, but she just stared out the window and pointed.

Blinding daylight shining white-and-golden on the new white snow. And in the midst of our shared front yard, aimed straight at our apartment's ground floor front-window was something horrible.

A horse's head: I shit you not the severed head of a horse impaled on an eight-foot pole.

Not sure how long I stared.

White sunlight in the creature's blank, dead eyes. Shining softly off its velvet fur. A slow wind playing listless with the tattered mane. A horse's head is big, you know, and that head came from a big horse. The thing was nearly as large as my torso, and the hardwood pole was thicker than my wrist. Dribbles of black blood frozen to the haft. The snow all cherry-crimson at its base. No tracks leading to or from. As if the whole thing had appeared on its own, by witchcraft.

Gazing straight toward us.

And as I stared into those flat dead eyes it was like they saw something inside of me, something they recognized. And as I stared back into them with Dana clutched tightly to my chest, all the horror and revulsion hardened inside me, into a feeling I thought I'd known before but never truly had.

Hatred.

If you've ever known, you'll know how good it feels.

#

The police showed up a few hours later. A couple pigs who didn't even give their names. Didn't even come to the door. When they pulled up out front they rang me and I had to throw on my coat and walk out to stand by their car window in the cold.

"Sir, why do you have this on your lawn?"

"Because someone put it there, that's why I called you."

The cop in the window had a filthy spiral notepad about the size of a credit card. He was making illegible notes with a blunt golf pencil.

"Do you know who it was?"

"Yes. A man named 'Rob Grimson'. He's from Langbrok, Saskatchewan. Maybe six-one, white, heavy build, grey hair."

“Ah-huh, ah-huh. And uh. What did you do to this Mr. Grimson.”

“Do? Nothing. He’s crazy.”

“Sir,” the second officer leaned over his identical partner. “Have you tried talking to him?”

“Yeah I tried talking to him: then he went and did this.”

The two looked at one another.

“So, what do you want us to do about it?”

“Find him! Arrest him!”

The officers shrugged.

“I mean, we could. And he’d get a fine maybe. That would be that.”

“You don’t understand: this guy’s *dangerous*. This is a threat. He thinks we’re in this feud that goes back decades and—“

“Oh, so you *did* do something to Mr. Grimson.”

“*No. I didn’t.*”

“Sir,” said the second officer. “I’m going to need you to calm down.”

I cannot tell you how apoplectic this made me.

“I am calm,” I managed to say.

“Look sir,” said the cop in the window. “This really seems like a private issue to me. Whatever problem you have with this Grissom guy, it’s really best if you just talk things out instead of wasting police time.”

“Great,” I said. “Thank you for your help.”

“Just doing our job sir. And uh,” He pointed to the horse-head. “You’re gonna have to clean that up. It’s a public health problem”

I held things together until I was back inside.

Then I kept myself, barely, from putting a fist through the wall. Which was good, seeing as how our building has brick walls.

"Maybe we should stay with my parents for a while," Dana suggested.

"Yeah," Though I hated the idea of being forced from my own home. "Yeah maybe we should."

#

We were there for a week. Up in the Halton Hills, overlooking dry cold woods and the frozen boardwalks down in Hungry Hollow. Not a lot to do up there in winter, but at least I was able to get some work done. On the third day I was down I was down for a walk by silver creek when I got a call. Private number. Thinking it might be work, I picked up.

And immediately knew the voice on the other end.

"You know, it's a fucked up thing you're doing, Owen."

"What the fuck? That *I'm* doing? That *I'm* doing, you son of a bitch?"

"Yeah, that's right." An aggrieved reasonableness to Rob's voice. "I came here offering to put an end to everything. Once and for all, like Christians. Like fuckin Lutherans. And you turned me down."

"I offered to let it already *be* done, and then you—" I held my phone in front of my face and screamed at the top of my lungs. "*Put a fucking horse head on my lawn.*"

"A 'Nithing Pole'" he corrected.

"*What?*"

"It's called a 'Nithing Pole'. It's a thing from the old country. Curse. Way of calling ya out."

"Oh, so now you're using magic against me, you dumb fuck?"

"Ya know, you sound pretty upset there Owen," I could hear him grinning. "Sounds like maybe you kinda *do* want to fight me."

"How bout I do you one better you Redneck trash. If you ever come near me or my family again, I'll fucking *kill* you."

"Well now," Rob said. "That's what I like to hear. Where and when?"

"*Fuck you.*"

"Aalright." A sigh in his voice. "Guess you're not quite ready yet. Well, hope you get those results you're looking for this week."

Then he hung up, and I realized I was red in the face, doubled over my phone in the middle of a public trail, and that there was a family with two young children staring at me.

"S-sorry," I told them, wiping damp hair from my face. "Business call."

It wasn't until later that I began to feel a creeping unease about Rob's final words. 'The results you're looking for.'

How could he have known?

#

On the fifth day, those same results came. Dana sat on them all day until her parents had gone to bed. Then she came up behind me in the kitchen as I was making tea and put her arms around my shoulders, rested her head on my back.

She said,

"We're going to have a baby."

For an entire day and two entire nights the earth was golden clouds beneath our feet.

Then the morning of the seventh day we woke to find a horse-head staked into Dana's parents' lawn.

#

I was silent all the way as Dana drove us back to the city. Paying attention to the tint-windowed silver F-150 that haunted our rearview down the 401. Exactly the kind of car Rob Grimson would drive. Dana looking a little pale beside me as she drove, glancing in my direction from time to time.

"How are you doing?" She asked.

"I'm okay."

"How are you really doing?"

"How *should* I be doing? I'm outraged. Furious."

She hesitated a long time before speaking.

“Look, Owen. I know this is... new for you. But it’s not... that different from the sort of thing a lot of women have to live with. All the time. And don’t get me wrong: it shouldn’t be like that and I’m not saying it’s good or normal or okay in any way. But it’s the sort of thing people can manage to get through. You’re careful, you rely on a community to stay safe and... you get by. This... obsession this guy has: it’s really hard to keep something like that up. Like, how much is he spending to travel across the country and stay here and, I don’t know, hire a PI to track us? It’s not sustainable. Sooner or later, people like that... they either give up and move on to something else, or they end up destroying themselves.”

I said, “Or they kill you, first.”

She hesitated. Couldn’t deny that.

“...My point is,” she began. “There are ways for us to get through this that don’t involve anything... drastic.”

“You mean, that don’t involve me going to jail for murder.”

“Yes.” She took a hand off the wheel for one moment to squeeze my knee. Shot me a quick glance. “I love you. You’re a good person. I want you to stay with me.”

Every time she called me a good person I almost believed it. Because when I was with her I *was* a good person. Because *she* was a good person.

Which was why, you understand, I had to take steps to keep her safe.

I noted the exit in the rearview as the F150 turned off. Then I shot Dana a glance, a quick smile.

“I promise you,” I said. “I want to stay with you as well.”

#

When we arrived home to our apartment a picture of a horsehead had been slid under our door. We packed up some fresh things and headed back out. An aunt of mine in Markham who could take us in for a week or two. Back on the highway, past the Scarborough exit where the F150 had turned down. All the way out. Parked the car in her garage and closed the door. Ate a meal of my Aunt’s questionable broccoli casserole. Went to bed in the dusty 1970s guest room. Dana fell asleep almost immediately. She was holding up well, but it had been a stressful couple of days for her, I think even more so than for me. I lay awake for a long time watching her sleep, like a small animal, loving her so, so much that it made my chest hurt.

Then I heard the soft latch of a truck door outside the guestroom window. The slow unsticking of tires from the damp tarmac. A large vehicle pulling away.

I slowly untangled myself from her and drifted to the window. Already knew what I would see when I parted the blinds with two fingers.

A horse-head, staring from its spit. A nothing pole. Its black eyes locked on mine.

I let the blind fall shut and hung my head. Stood for a long moment in the dark, listening to Dana breathe. We were going to have a baby. The best of me, and the best of her together. I could picture it so clearly: the sort of family we would be together. The birthdays and the school plays and the lazy movie nights together on the couch. And then at some point, five, fifteen or thirty years down the line, I'd come home and something terrible would have happened to this child, to this life of ours. I'd come home and sitting on the front step with their grin and their underbite and their filthy plaid shirt-jacked would be someone with the last name Grimson to spell out all the brutal details. My heart started to pump, and I felt that seductive clarity: that great, false clarity that hatred brings. I thought I was quite calm, at the time. I went over to a chair in the corner of the room and began putting on my socks.

"Mm?" Dana's mumble, questioning, three-fourths asleep.

"It's okay, go back to sleep," I went to the edge of the bed and stroked her hair and tucked the blanket over her shoulder. "Just going out for a bit to clear my head. I love you."

"I love you," she murmured.

I looked at her for a long, long time, for the last time, and not for long enough.

#

Then I was out on the road with the radio off, driving in total silence down to the 404. Wearing an old blue-black coat I'd inherited from my grandfather. Orange lights drifting past in lurid quiet as I tumbled south. Stopped for black coffee and drank three cups by the side of the road. Feeling raw & wired by the time I hit the 401. Something in my brain knew exactly where to go: like the stone in a goose's skull that always points for the north pole.

I hit the exit I'd remembered and turned down. Found a stretch of motels: honest to god motels in this, the devil's 21st century. Grimy, rundown hour ones, three or four blocks of them. Trafficking motels.

And there, on the last block, lit up lurid orange by the sodium light like a sign from above, a tint-windowed silver F-150, parked diagonal.

God. It was so easy, wasn't it? Almost seems too easy now, like fate, inverted providence. Well: I guess it's not so mysterious, after all. I guess Rob Grimson wanted to be found.

I unbundled something from the trunk. Unwrapped blue tarpaulin to meet a frozen stare. Dragged it out into the parking lot outside the motelroom window. Dim blue light was showing through the curtains of that room. A TV still on. Night owl Rob. I bent and threw a pebble of crumbled asphalt at the window. Then another and another. A shadow gathered at the curtain and I stood tall.

There'd been one or two warm days in the past week, and the horse's eyes were beginning to go milky, beginning to water with decay. I aimed them right at the motel room door. Then the door swung open and out into the orange light stepped Rob Grimson.

He was wearing boxers and a grimy t-shirt, and over that a brand new bright red bathrobe, swinging open.

He was carrying a couple of heavy, medieval-looking weapons in his arms. Halberds. Their blades of blunt & rusty farming steel, their hafts of weathered, sturdy oak. His heavy jaw was unhinged in a smile: his big square teeth glinting at me as he tossed one of the weapons at my feet. A weighty clang on the tarmac.

"Well well well, look who the hell it is. Owen Sturlason. Was starting to think ya didn't have it in ya."

"Well here I am." I stamped the Nithing Pole on the pavement. "Brought you your little present back. Thought I might shove it up your ass."

"Haha! That's more like it!" Rob laughed. Gave his halberd a couple experimental hefts, then shouldered it. Orange light creasing against its blade, its spiked point. "Quite the change from mister uppity-coffee shop-last week. What changed. Y'get some bad test results?"

"Good ones."

"Oh I see. So you decided you to take care of this now, in case one of these days uncle Rob showed up at school and picked up your child for ya."

That made my heart pump bile.

"There isn't going to be any uncle Rob."

His smile only widened.

"Well if not me, some other member of the clan. There is a lot of us, you know. And unlike you: we don't forget. We don't just run off east when things get tough."

And suddenly I could see them all, stretching back and forward in time, all of them the same, with their low-slung jaws and sneering Grimson smile. All of them awful, and every one a threat.

He saw the horror on my face; mistook it for fear; stepped close, until only a few feet separated us, until the clouds of our breath mingled in the orange light.

"Hah. Well there it is, then," he whispered. "The chickenshit branch of the Sturlason family shows its true face. Always so proud of yourselves, and for what? In the end, we got the town. In the end, we won." He jerked his chin down toward the weapon at my feet. "Pick that up. Let's end this, man-to-man."

I looked down.

"I... I don't want to use that."

He mistook my meaning. Sneered.

"I said pick it up, you chickensh-

He was just a shade too slow. I swung the Nithing pole overhand, and the frozen horse-head crunched into his face. As he fell back streaming blood and trying to get the halberd in front of him I drew back and slammed the head into his ribs, shouting as I drove forward and rammed him back into the splintering glass of the motel-room window. Then he had one arm around the head trying to wrestle it away from him while with the other hand he tried to drive the halberd's blunt spike through my winter jacket. I pulled back, twisting the pole. It came free from the horse's head and I was able to swing it like a baseball bat. So easy, so natural. It came like breathing. I could put the force of it anywhere I liked. First I broke his halberd-arm. A clean, hard strike that I knew had pulverized the bone by how far *in* it went. Then two-hand smashed him through the window. Home run. This all felt surreal to me. Like I was watching it on TV. I stepped up to the window, looked down at my work. For a moment Rob lay like a bloody ragdoll on the grey, stained motelroom carpet, and I thought he was dead. Then his eyes flickered and he came to with a sort of twitching, body-wide spasm that made me think I'd damaged his brain. I dropped the pole and picked up something else. When I came through the motel door a moment later, footsteps crunching in the broken glass, it was with the horse head in my arms.

By now Rob was trying to scramble back through the shards, wheezing from what must have been at least one broken rib. He leered up at me as I came to stand over him, his face a mess of blood shining orange with the sodium light outside, blue from the TV glow within. Speckled white with flecks of broken tooth.

"Isn't gonna matter, Sturl," his voice thick with blood and punch-drunkenness and swollen tongue. "Put me down the rest'll come. Your kid'll never live in peace."

“That’s why I’m going west,” It’s funny, you know. It wasn’t until right at that moment I realized I’d already made up my mind to do that. “The world just stinks too much with Grimsons in it.”

His face changed as I raised the horsehead in both hands.

“You fucking—“

Didn’t hear the rest of that sentence, though, because before he could finish I’d brought that thirty-five pound half-frozen horsehead down on his face, then picked it up and hurled it down again, and then again, so many times his head was just a crater by the end of it.

Took a moment to gather up my breath.

“You could have let this be,” I told the corpse. “But I guess you wanted this too much. I guess we both did.”

A small crowd had gathered outside. They looked on in silence as I crunched back out through the glass, covered in Grimson’s blood, lugging the horsehead before me by the mane. All stood back, just silent, watching. None of them decent folk: not in a place like this. And though all of them were shocked, not one of them seemed all too surprised.

I stopped for a moment. Looked around at them with a nod. Then bent and collected the pole. It back into the horse’s neck with a cold squelch. Then I rested the red assembly on my shoulder and slouched back toward the car. They parted before me as I crossed the parking lot. That Nothing Pole was heavy, but I felt very strong. You see, hatred is the greatest feeling in the world. I climbed into Dana’s little teal car and wrestled the horsehead onto the passenger seat beside me.

It stained the seats, but I’d need it where I was going.

Three thousand clicks to Langbrok. Call it three days’ drive.