

It came in this darkest of years, this winter of bitterest cold, when dire wolves loped feverish-mad through the city, marauding, laying slaughter and waste upon man, woman, and child. When finally they retreated, it was believed to be a miracle from God. It was not.

—*Journal of Sir Myron Chalstain*

Chapter 1.

IN THE COLD dark lands I dreamt of death and black murder.

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

“*Jesus Christ*—” I snorted awake to the hammer-slam of a gauntleted fist pounding against the wagon’s side. Fast. Metallic. Urgent. I lurched up from the creaking planks of my wagon-bed, groping blind for my blade but smashing my head against one of the stacked crates instead, nearly knocking myself senseless. At first I thought we were under attack. Again. With my blade fumbled into hand, finally, I poked my head out the rear of the wagon, looked around, trying to focus, blinked, and met only cold winter silence.

My head was pounding, like on a bender, but no such luck. I felt the stitches along my forehead. Still intact.

Nothing moved in our little camp. The lion’s share of snow we’d dug out from the burnt-out ruins of an old Roman waystation built atop a small rise. A thousand years old. A thousand years dead. Only two walls still stood intact, forming a corner eight feet high, the rest just a ghost, a shell; scattered brick lay across tile, across foundation. A cozy little camp, except for the carnage, a God damned raven-feast come sunup. Long slashes of black splatter fouled the winter white. Tents lay torn, the ground strewn with arrows and weapons. Bodies lay next to my wagon. Five. All lined up in a neat row. A small cooking fire smoldered by the wall. I made to settle back into my makeshift bed, pull my blanket back over my head and die when I noticed him standing there in the dark, a shadow, gazing off east.

Karl.

“What the hell are you doing?” I managed.

“Get up, asshole,” Karl rumbled low, turning. Shorter than me by at least a head, he was a squat-grizzled bulldog of a man. The kind of bulldog you hide from the book-men and bettors so he doesn’t screw the odds. Ruin the bets. The one the pit-bear looks at with a kind of fear in his war-weary eyes, knows that maybe this is the one. “We’ve visitors, wolves,” he pointed off down the road, “the two-legged kind.”

The night was old, the air dead, dead and cold and dead. The kind of cold that just sits there and doesn’t move, soaking into your bones, settling on your chest, in your soul, becoming part of you. Hot soup and grog and August sun might stave it off, but they’re far off, long gone. Always. I pushed a crate back into some semblance of order, rubbed my pounding head. I could barely see straight.

“You alright?” he asked, peering in. “Took a couple shots. Good one to yer back. Another to yer kisser. Reckoned you for a goner.”

“Am I still pretty?” I asked.

Karl stifled a laugh.

“Is it Stephan?” I asked.

“Don’t know.” Karl reached in, setting a bulls-eye lantern on the floor of the wagon. He cracked the lantern’s eye open, its soft slitted-orange orb casting a dim wavering glow on the grim edifice of boxes stacked beneath the canvas roof of the wagon. Our goods.

“Got it?” Karl jiggled the lantern a bit, tin squeaking, orange eye dancing, burning, glaring.

“Yeah...” With eyes squeezed near shut and hands shivering, and not just from the cold, I took up the tin housing, my fingers wrapping around the warm metal. I pressed the lantern against my cheek, closed my eyes, let out a soft groan.

“Maybe I should leave you two alone.” Karl reached under his cloak and pulled out his flask. “Here.” He set it inside the wagon then shouldered his axe. “I’ll take a gander.” He disappeared into the dark and trees while I scrambled drooling for his flask and tore the cap off. I took a tight pull, relaxing almost instantly, and felt it, felt that delicious burn slide all the way down, searing my insides. But then something went wrong. Nausea struck, torquing my guts. I waited for it to pass, head swirling, pounding, gorge rising. I couldn’t hold it and let loose a torrent of puke. Fierce. Heaving. Prolonged.

Hanging half out of the wagon then, soiled, senseless, I remained like that for a while, the hanged man of some pathetic tarot deck, drooling, dripping, staring down. I blinked. Our horse lay beneath the wagon, feathered shafts sticking out of its neck, its flank, its eyes wide, glazed in ice, frozen over with terror. Beside the horse carcass lay the five human ones. My men. Michael was riddled with arrows; Aaron had a spear sticking out of his chest, butt-end aimed up at the stars. The others had been smashed, hacked with axes or swords or something. It didn’t matter. Not now. And not ever again. Hanging there, breathing, feeling disgusted, feeling the cold, blood rushing to my head, I just stared. What a waste. What a fucking waste.

“Sorry fellas,” I muttered lamely. Not much else to say. Wiping my mouth on a corner of my cloak, I hauled myself back into the wagon. Bones creaked. I glared at the stacked boxes of wool and waited, watching for Karl. That flask, it was still practically full. If at first you don’t succeed ... I bent it back, feeling the cool smooth against my lips and drank my venom, my mass, my sacrament. It stayed down this time. *Victory.*

Beyond, the Hellwood lay silent, still. No wind. No nothing. Even the wolves, the four-legged ones, dogging our heels the past few days, nothing but eyes, twin yellow moons flashing by in the dark, were silent. I reached over for my blade, Yolanda, her ugly brass hilt worn, pitted, her ragged sharkskin grip rough but reassuring. Comfortable. Mine. Sheathed, she’s not so pretty; it’s true. But you draw her out, singing her sad slow song, revealing all that’s gleaming, cold, merciless sharp? Beauty incarnate. Crucible steel. And I know it’s juvenile to name your sword, but I stick to my strengths. I wrestled my mail shirt on, tightened my belt and leaned back, settling in. Pulling my blanket up over my shoulders, I took another swig, felt the warmth from within spread out from my belly, down my arms and legs to my fingers and toes, spreading out up to my eyeballs, my head, numbing the pain. My stomach rumbled.

Karl came trudging back, his mail shirt rustling, weapons clinking, his breath steaming, heavy. He knocked snow from his shoulder, pulled a slender tree branch from the top of his boot, tossed it aside with a grimace, and pointed off down the road. “Riders,” he growled. “Coming up the road. Some afoot, too.”

“See who it is?” I asked.

“Naw.”

“How many?”

“Twelve, give or take. One’s leading a draft horse.” Karl raised an eyebrow at our own draft horse, lying dead in the snow. An unspoken question sat on his lips. He tugged his beard, his tell for worry. “And there’s a woman.”

“Oh?” I brushed my hair down and smoothed my goatee reflexively.

Karl muttered profanities not fit to repeat.

“Sigils?” I asked. “Anything?”

“Naw, too fucking dark. Scouts coming up first. On foot. Two of them.” Karl pointed with the head of that axe out through the trees. “North side of the road. Uphill. Through thick underbrush. Deep snow. We’ve a moment or two.”

“Moving to flank?”

“*Flank?*” Karl leaned back, a grin splitting his face, fierce, wicked as a knife. “Well, look at you, using that trove of war-words.” He slapped me on the back. I nearly died. Right there. Karl paused, then sniffed, straightening back. “You puke?”

“You’re standing in it.” I glanced down at his feet. Smirking.

“Odin’s teeth,” Karl grumbled, stepping back, scraping the sole of his boot on the frozen horse carcass. He glared up at me. “What in hell you want to do?”

I glared down at the dead in the snow, all five staring back up at me, all five blue as ice. I shook my head. In my furor, after he’d dressed my wounds, I’d argued with Stephan, my baby brother, telling him it was a waste of time, a fool’s errand, him riding off into the old night in some quest to save them, to save me, but I’d never stopped him before. Me konking out hadn’t aided my cause. Stubborn bastard, Stephan. Stupid, too. And where the hell was he? I looked Karl in the eye. “I want to live.”

“Run-live? Or fight-live?”

“Too drunk to run-live.” I shook my head. “Too sober to fight-live.”

“You ain’t never been too sober to do nothing.”

“I don’t know what that means,” I deadpanned. Tentatively, I clambered to my knees, wincing, leaned out the back of the wagon and scanned our camp. From between snowdrifts, a section of tiled fresco peeked up from the ground, untouched by murder, a Roman cavalryman in full regalia down on one knee, offering a rose to a red-haired lady, a lady of somber beauty. “Where’d you stash the bad guys?” I asked, looking around.

“*We’re* the bad guys,” Karl sneered.

“Right. Where’d you stash those dumb dead fuckers tried killing us?”

Karl grunted, nodding in the direction of a drift of snow where the two intact sections of wall met. The snow was deep there. “Covered ‘em.” What before I had took as a gnarled stick I could now make out as a hand crippled into a rictus sticking out of the snow. “Sick of looking at them.”

“Any get away?”

“Yar.”

“How many, you guess?”

Karl counted on his fingers. “Some,” he answered.

I clambered out of the wagon, barely, and managed not to fall, surprisingly. Staggering to the wall, using it for support, I looked out over the Hellwood. Trees lay for leagues every which way except north. North lay the sea. The road paralleled the sea, west to east. Using the wall to steady myself, I imagined I could see a glow, coming up it. Far away. Not far enough. But I wasn’t sure. Eleven men at least. Damn. Fighting men, most like. A lady? And a draft horse? *Strange*. “Alright,” I turned to Karl, my decision made, “you go. Hide. Close, though. Take the crossbow. Keep watch, yeah? I’ll stay. Do some dealing. See who they are. What they want. Put this silver tongue to use.” I nodded to myself. “We ain’t losing the goods.” My head was clearing, by necessity. “Sound sharp?”

“They ain’t coming to dice at hazard, lad.”

“They’re lugging a horse.” I shook my head, convinced now. “Has to be Stephan. Has to.” Probably true. It was too late for someone to be coming for anything on the level. That was plain. But highwaymen? Twice in one night? Even *my* luck’s not that bad. Usually. Or was I wrong? Was it

the rest of them? Raiders. Regrouped. Come back to finish us. No. It was a different group. They had a woman with them, which was strange enough, and they were coming openly. They knew we were here. Knew we were stuck. One of the wagon wheels was busted, and in the back were ten crates stocked full of the best wool on the continent. Flanders wool. Not as good as old English, but fairly close, at least that's what they told me. A pretty penny. I'd kill me for ten crates in this economy, or any economy, truth be bare. And they had the wherewithal to bring a draft horse. It had to be Stephan.

"Don't have to be no one, lad," Karl cautioned.

A stone of doubt fell in my gut. "I'll signal if I need you."

"Signal how?"

"I'll scream like a little girl."

"And then?" he asked. "Gonna take the rest on yourself?"

"Alright, so maybe we *are* gonna lose the goods," I conceded. "Still, I ain't leaving."

"Your funeral." He hefted his crossbow, loaded it, set it on the wall, turned. Somewhere to the north, toward the sea, a wolf suddenly howled, breaking the long silence.

"Always a good omen," I said.

The forest sat as black and heavy as a lead shroud, so heavy it robbed me of breath, as though it were caving in my chest. Karl was naught but a charcoal silhouette against the cathedral of pine and fir all etched upon a canvas of grim, grey snow. I could smell the scent of pine, the iron of blood, the oiled steel clutched in Karl's hand, could hear him fingering the blade of his thane-axe, testing its edge. It would be sharp. These old woods, a thousand years ago the Romans had come here with their centurions and scorpions. Thousands of them. To conquer. To take. Karl's pagan ancestors had slaughtered them. The unstoppable Roman war machine, murdered to a man. But the Romans had returned, eventually, as they always did and repaid their debt, and then repaid it some more.

"Still can't see shit." I squinted.

"Further to the east."

"Yeah." I shuffled further right, and beyond the skeletal cover of a bare-branched copse of wood I finally caught a glimmer of light flickering on and off. Distant. Disappearing. A torch. Then another. They slid in and out behind trees, will o' the wisps beckoning, fishing for souls. Lucky me, sold mine ages ago.

"Ain't Stephan," Karl spat. "Stephan'd warn us. Knowed he might get shot."

I grunted, noncommittally. "Can you make them out?"

"Naw." Karl watched like a hawk; his eyesight was comparable. "Got to be one of them knights. Or a lord. Horses, men, armor, the ruckus and all."

"Hell." I didn't even have to think. "The Cyclops, then."

"Naw, even Stephan wouldn't trust that one."

"No, he wouldn't," I conceded. I hoped. But a sliver of doubt swelled in my rock of resolve, of certitude. *Crack*. "But he's the only one has a keep between here and the city. Only one that's near. Got the men. The means." I straightened, gripping Yolanda tight. "Well, I'll find out soon enough." The entourage rounded a bend in the road. "They're not exactly sneaking. That's a good sign, yeah?"

They came in a line of ten, three astride horses, seven walking, trudging, the last one leading a draft horse. As they neared, I could see the woman, slender, cloaked, an elegant figure seated upright in her saddle. Except for her and the man leading the horse, they were all armed, well-armed.

"Scouts coming on strong." Karl glared north at something beyond the road.

I followed his gaze. "Best get moving, then."

Karl hung there for a moment, poised. "Sure a wagon of wool's worth it?"

I clenched a fist to my mouth as a tidal wave of nausea passed. “It ain’t,” I took a deep breath, “but this ain’t about a wagonload of wool, now is it?”