



ROBERT BISHOP
THE FLOOR ABOVE



The floor above

A novella by:
Robert Bishop

Act I

The snow had stopped falling, it was too cold for such things now. The sun had set and the sky above was dark and starry. The purple moon was out, bathing the entire mountainside in an amethystine glow. Up here in the mountains, it was so bright it hurt to look at. The man left heavy footprints in the frozen snow, a trail impossible to miss.

Even though streaks of white frost rose from his mouth with every labored breath, he was sweating. He mumbled and cursed his weight. Looking back, he could see an endless path stretching towards the edge, leading to nowhere. *Or to another ledge, and another ledge, and yet another.* He sighed and started walking again. *Eyes straight ahead!* He mumbled a few more curses.

It wasn't all his fault, though: he was carrying several hemp bags, filled to the brim with fruit, alcohol and tobacco. "These rich, pompous pricks better appreciate this." He spat into the snow, slightly surprised the ball of phlegm didn't freeze before it hit the ground.

Approaching the house, he could see people through the frosty windows, talking and dancing, a live band playing in one of the corners. Everything was perfect, just like the year before, and the year before that. Nelson could see sparkling dresses, red dresses and black dresses in there. And a lot of cleavage.

Winter parties in the Sogen Valley, where only the richest assholes can afford to go. Nelson had wondered time and time again what it took to be invited to one of these gatherings. He'd been delivering to the same cabin for seven years now, but hadn't once been invited to stay. When he thought about it, he really didn't want to either. He was only there for the delivery, after all. If he stayed, people would start asking questions. *Why more tobacco? Why come all the way up here just for a few bottles of brown? We don't need any more fruit!* No, they didn't – but that wasn't what he was there to deliver.

He knocked loudly two times, then entered. No one seemed to notice him, or care, at least.

The heat came against him in waves, a small fireplace in the corner pushing the temperature to choking levels. Of course, his wool overcoat did little to help.

A few women rushed past him, laughing and giggling, breasts and thighs all a blur in the warm room. He removed his wool cap and distributed the goods as best as he could, then he headed for a side corridor, the laughter and life subsiding almost immediately.

A crushing feeling of loneliness fell over him like a curtain, like all life had gone from the world. He felt an urge he couldn't quite explain, an urge to rush back to the party. He wanted to look upon all the beautiful, happy people. To dance, drink and have fun.

But he couldn't. He was headed somewhere else. Somewhere cold, and lonely.

He followed the pale, colorless hallway to its conclusion: a white and tired staircase, twisting and turning up to the floor above. The steps creaked under his big feet, alerting the man upstairs to his presence. *He won't come out, though.* Nelson thought. *He never does.* Seven years working

for this organization, and he'd never once seen him. He didn't even know what the notes said, nor did he want to. *Start asking questions, and that's that!*

He walked to the fourth wooden door on the right, producing one final item from his hemp bag. It was a white note, neatly folded in half and sealed with wax.

He slid it underneath the door, then turned on his heels and left with great haste. He cast one final glance at the guests, still dancing, laughing and drinking. He grabbed one of the cigarette packs he'd placed on the table minutes earlier and opened the door. *Just an extra bit of payment.* He took one cigarette and lit it, puffing merrily as he followed the same trail back towards the foot of the mountain.

It was done. And it would be a whole year until next time, hopefully.

Stefan could hear faint music downstairs, but there were no other signs of life. Up here, he was completely isolated, existing beside the world, in another realm completely.

He cast his gaze towards the window, looking at the cold night outside. Eerie purple light bathed the snow, cut by a trail of footprints vanishing into the blackness, heading away from the protecting light of the cabin in a straight and decisive line. He smiled. *Nelson always hated this place.*

Locked away from the world, Stefan wouldn't leave this room before he had a plan. He never did. It was strange how no one ever suspected a thing. Each year, someone vanished from the face of Noman at one of these parties. Some were found frozen in the snow, but most were never seen again.

A layer of snow had gathered on the windowsills, the warmth escaping the house forcing thin streaks of mist towards the clear night sky. The moon was up, glowing purple in the black sky, its brother casting a dim white light, nascent in the distance. *It will be a bright night . . . good for me, bad for him.* It wasn't necessarily a man, of course, but years of experience had taught Stefan it was seldom women. People didn't want women assassinated, no matter what they had done.

He turned back to face his typewriter, his fingers resting on the keys. He had an uneasy feeling about this one, a feeling he couldn't quite shake. Someday, someone had to suspect something, right? Maybe this would be that day. *Fifty guests in all . . . I suppose one of them vanishing, wandering into the cold abyss isn't so strange.* A huge part of the guest list changed from year to year as well, and Stefan hadn't killed any of the regulars yet. *Quit your worrying, Stefan. They don't know.*

He turned around, looking at the room. Everything was brown and eggshell, old and haggard. But it was built strong, he knew. A tiny fireplace with barely the space to keep a single log burned dimly in the corner. The embers were enough to keep the entire room warm, and Stefan was only wearing a thin linen shirt and brown canvas pants. He had his dagger belt loosely thrown about his waist, and two small flintlocks resting on his desk. He always had them, but never needed them.

The door was the sturdiest part of the room. Always locked, and plain in appearance. The guests never even knew there was a room there, let alone that someone actually stayed inside.

Two years back, someone had tried to enter, believing the unmarked door to be their own room. They had to give up eventually, when the door refused to budge.

In the corner next to the desk was a tiny bed made of fine materials. The room might look like a prison cell, but it was among the more comfortable arrangements Stefan knew. The pay was good, of course – killing people had always been a luxurious trade – but the room and the cold mountain air was the reason Stefan always said yes.

Sogen Valley . . . the ass end of nowhere. But Stefan rather thought the ass end was the absolute best end. *If this is the ass end of the world, the world is a fine woman. Perfect shape, and aged to perfection.* He closed his eyes. Damn, but he could go for an actual ass end, he realized. Maybe he would try his luck on one of the partygoers after the ‘vanishing’ had taken place.

It wasn’t that hard. Come midnight, he’d leave the room, blend in and find his mark. People were usually drunk and happy at this point, and no one had any questions as to who he was and where he came from. He’d then lure his prey outside, and the cold would take care of the rest. *Leave someone passed out in the snow in this cold, and death will find them all on his own.* Afterwards, he’d usually slip back into his room, but sometimes he felt lucky. He couldn’t always resist the flashing thighs and the dancing breasts; the red lipstick teasing him closer. *Some of these women are just begging for it . . . why not give it to them?* He’d make sure they’d end up in the woman’s room, and then quietly slip away when she fell asleep. *Which they always do, if you fuck them right.* He nodded to himself. Stefan always made sure they were satisfied.

His eyes fell on the white square resting by the door, neatly folded in half and sealed with wax. *Time to focus on the task at hand.* He could worry about his cock later.

Stefan grabbed the paper and unsealed it, a tiny hint of suspense rising to his chest. “Enra Vadir,” he read out loud. “Huh . . .” He’d never heard of the man, but that was nothing new.

He looked at the pocket watch resting next to the flintlock on the desk. *Nearing eleven . . . no point in waiting then.*

He unlocked the door and stepped outside.

No cure, no vaccine

Enra stared at his reflection in the mirror. Water was dripping from the tips of his hair – or ‘mane’ as his friends insisted on calling it – and from his clean shaven chin. He ran one hand through his hair, pulling it all back. *You need a haircut.*

It was resting against his shoulders now, framing his tan face. Soon, he wouldn’t even need a shroud when going into the desert winds, his hair would shield him. It looked rather great, though, he thought. It had a hazel sheen, and a lot of volume . . . *why are you even thinking about these things? Your hair is not fucking important right now!*

He was hesitant to go back. The others would laugh at him, for sure. Mock him, even. Not that Enra Vadir couldn’t take a good mocking, oh no! He was raised on that sort of stuff, and often placed himself smack in the middle of a good ridicule. It had made him a great many friends, and spared those who feared ridicule a good whipping. *That Robert, for instance.* Robert was a decent enough man, but if you laced your tone with mockery, you could see the sting. Enra had never seen anyone with a better poker face, but he wore his hurt like a crown of thorns.

But it was Anders and his friend Knud’sen who would lapse into a laughing fit. “Sogen Valley?! North of Steadwic? That’s a bloody world away! However will you get there?” He could already hear them now.

No matter, he couldn’t stay here and gaze at his own reflection forever. He was a handsome man, to be sure, but his deep hazel eyes offered no wisdom at the moment.

“There he is!” Robert said, raising his glass as Enra approached the table. “We were starting to think you’d fallen in.”

Enra shrugged. “What can I say? Chicken doesn’t really agree with me.”

Knud’sen laughed. “You must be the only westerner I’ve ever met who has an intolerance to spices. You’re more of a northerner than these assholes, tan skin be damned!”

Enra nodded. “Maybe I should start on a H’arian diet instead? What is it you people eat again? Bark, beetles and leaves? That sound about right?”

“I’ve never eaten a beetle in my life, you prick! And I eat eucalyptus leaves because it helps me . . . pass things.”

Enra took a deep bow. “I rest my case, your honor.”

Anders slid a glass of spiced ale across the table. “Never mind about all that. Tell us about this letter you received.”

“Nah, you’re just going to laugh.”

Robert smiled wide. “These two morons will laugh either way, Enra. They’re just jealous of our youth.”

Anders laughed. “Just you wait, Robert. In a few years, you’ll be twice as old as us. At least if you keep that drinking up.”

Robert shrugged. “What? I like my stuff strong!”

Knud’sen prodded his shoulder. “It’s not the ‘stuff’ that’ll kill you, it’s that you can’t afford it!”

“I have money . . .” Robert said solemnly.

“That’s because the three of us bought your book . . . out of pity.”

Robert didn’t respond.

There’s that hurt, Enra thought. He could see it on his face, the corners of his mouth dropping ever so slightly. “It’s true, though.” He finally said.

“What is?”

“We might grow as ancient as you lot one day, but you’ll never be as young as us again.” Enra smiled and slapped Robert’s hand in victory.

“Damn straight!” Robert mumbled, nursing his whiskey.

Anders took a swig of his own ale and slapped his hand down on the table. “The letter!”

“Alright, fine!” He sighed. “I was invited to the annual winter feast up in Sogen Valley.”

Absolute silence.

“And I’ve accepted.”

Even more silence, if such a thing was even possible. It was the most quiet Enra had ever heard these people.

“Do you even know where that is?” Robert finally asked.

“No . . .”

Anders started snickering. “When is this?”

“In two weeks.”

That was all it took. Knud’sen was the next to burst. “Sogen Valley is in Brend, north of Steadwic. North of *Old Steadwic*.” He roared in laughter.

“I figured it was just outside Friport.” Enra said, smiling at his own misfortune.

“Why the hell would you even go there?” Robert asked.

“The letter says I’ve been invited because of an extraordinary innovation. It’s a fancy dinner with lots of high-ranking people. Could be fun . . .”

“People who are nothing like you, in other words.”

“Hey!” Enra raised his arms, but promptly lowered them again. “That’s . . . true, I suppose.”

“How will you even get there?”

“If I get myself to Friport, I can join someone with a carriage from there.”

“That’s still half a world from here . . . and a detour of epic proportions!”

“I suppose.”

“Are you really considering this?” Robert asked, finishing his whiskey and immediately ordering another.

Another, which Anders or Knud’sen will end up paying for, no doubt. Enra shrugged. “I know some people in Crown who are going, as well as Ericka, from Neirana.”

Anders nodded and smiled wide. “Ericka! The redhead with the tits, right?”

“All women have tits, Anders.”

“Yeah! But this one has huge tits!” He leaned sideways and slapped Enra on the back. “Why didn’t you say you were going because of some floozy? That’s understandable, at least.”

“That’s not why I’m going, though.”

“You’ve never even been to the central continents before, Enra. How the hell will you get there?”

“By boat?”

“Yeah, no shit by boat! But what boat? And when, and how?”

Enra shrugged, and the trio laughed heartily. *They’re absolutely right, though. But I need to be there . . . I can feel it!*

“It’s good to know you’ve thought this through, at least!” Robert slapped Enra’s shoulder and vanished around the corner. Headed for the privy, no doubt.

But he had thought it through! Not how to get there, of course, or when. Just the rest of it. *Extraordinary innovation . . .* he thought to himself. He’d submitted and resubmitted those papers over and over. *Finally it might be paying off!* Here was a chance to mingle with other innovators, rich people and possibly even royalty. This might be his only chance to get out of the west and make a fortune for himself.

Knud’sen was laughing to himself, and Anders was staring intensely at Enra.

“What?”

“There’s something you’re not telling us.”

Knud’sen nodded in agreement. “You’ve always been full of surprises. What is it this time?”

“Extraordinary innovation, is that what you called it?” Anders leaned closer.

Suddenly, Enra felt paranoid. *Why are you interested now all of a sudden.* This innovation could revolutionize travel . . . he didn’t want anyone else knowing about it. Anders and Knud’sen weren’t stupid; if they had the schematics, they might be able to work it out themselves.

“They’re giving you shit again, aren’t they?” Robert came back.

“Calm that white knight shit down!” Knud’sen barked. “We were giving him shit long before you entered the mix.”

This time, it was Anders who nodded in agreement. “We’re just asking him about this innovation of his. You ever hear anything about it?”

Robert had, Enra knew. They’d been out and about more than once, the two of them. Once, on an especially drenched night, Enra had spilled the beans and told Robert everything. He might lack some of the technical know-how Anders and Knud’sen had, but he wasn’t stupid either. He might be the smartest of all four, actually, because he knew when to keep his mouth shut.

At least, Enra hoped he did.

As if reading Enra’s mind, Robert shrugged. “The only thing this man’s innovating, is how to land beautiful women . . . then ignore the shit out of them.”

Roars of laughter at that.

“They practically show up on his doorstep dripping!”

Anders slapped the table again, throwing his head back in laughter. “No cure, no vaccines!” He said, grinning. “Just you wait, my friend! You might have the mane of a lion and the attitude of a young stallion now . . . but soon!”

Knud’sen joined in. “You’ll be in it good with the rest of us!” He slapped Robert on the back.

Robert finished his whiskey, and then grabbed Enra’s ale. “Why drag me into this? I’m not ‘in it’ with anyone!”

Knud’sen giggled like a little girl, a strange sight on someone his age. “That’s because you need something they want first.”

Now Enra laughed as well, shooting Robert an apologetic glance.

“I’ll have you know there’s practically a queue outside my office!” Robert said, his face red.

“That broom closet?” Anders was almost bursting. “Yeah, right!”

“No . . . you’re right . . . I suck!” Robert’s mouth was rising now, the corners turning upwards. “It must be the hair.” He leaned over the table and ruffled Enra’s mane.

Everyone laughed at that.

Hours passed, and Enra’s impending trip was mentioned less and less. He looked at his friends, for a few seconds actually afraid what this trip could mean. From what they were telling him, getting there would consume weeks of his life, and he might not even make it back. He’d always wanted to see snow, but he had no idea what freezing temperatures did to a body. Knud’sen had some pretty specific scenarios from his days delivering up in the Shivering, and it didn’t sound pleasant, not in the least.

I’m not going there to fight or to explore, though. I’m going there to drink and be warm. He’d countered.

That’s when you get there! Knud’sen had replied. *What happens in between?*

Enra shrugged. He didn’t want to think about it anymore, not today. He’d decide tomorrow. Tomorrow was always good, it never interfered with today.

Knud’sen had fallen asleep now, forehead resting uneasy on the table. He was snoring like a wild boar, but no one, barkeep included, had the heart to wake him. Both him and Anders had been traders. Anders would celebrate his fiftieth next year, and no one knew how old Knud’sen was. He was full blooded H’arian, so he could’ve been far past his one hundredth for all Enra knew. He never really talked about himself.

Trader was a rather strange occupation for a H’arian though. Too . . . calm. Most H’arians were hunters or law enforcers or some such. Where they could find that kind of work, at least. Granted, Knud’sen looked the part, if nothing else. His hair was as white as the moon – the white moon, obviously – and his eyes gleamed emerald in the half-light. He had few scars, but his face looked seasoned nonetheless, as if he’d forgotten about more things than Enra – and Robert, for that matter – would ever even see.

Still, Enra had never seen his beast come out. Never seen him lose to his animal. Not even once in the five years he’d known the man had he seen him lose himself.

Knud’sen and Anders had known each other for almost thirty years, and had joined forces way back when. Eventually, as it always happened, according to both of them, they found love in Aevon – settling in the far west and conducting most of their trade from here. Anders seemed happy enough, but Knud’sen, once again, rarely mentioned his home life.

Yet here he is, blackout drunk. That might be a little unfair, actually, Enra realized. Anders and Robert were still holding on, but their eyes were narrow and their chins sagging. “Maybe we should call it a night,” Enra said, punctuating his sentence with a loud belch.

“That . . . that . . . sounds like a terrible idea.” Anders said, barely avoiding hitting the table with his head. “Terribly . . . good, that is.”

“Terrific, I believe is the word you’re looking for.” Robert smiled his ugliest smile.

“The writer has the right of it, again! A veritable wordsmith, y’are!”

Robert bowed, almost losing his balance. “Thank you, good sir!”

Anders stood up, grabbing the unconscious Knud'sen. "I'll just take this outside, then."

"Good idea," Enra laughed. "I'll see you all tomorrow, if you still draw breath."

"Oh, I'll draw breath alright, but it'll stink to high heaven!" Anders dragged Knud'sen with him and stepped outside. "Later!"

The very second the door closed, the drink seemed to leave Robert's face. He leaned closer, even though he and Enra were the only ones left in the bar. "Listen, Enra. Don't mind what these other fools say."

Enra shrugged. "I rarely do."

"I'll go with you!"

"What?!"

Robert nodded enthusiastically. "Think about it, huh? You and me, on the road!" He looked around, as if he was trying to spot something, but didn't. "There's nothing here for me, alright? Yeah, the desert sand is fucking beautiful, and the brown-orange view helped me finish my piece of shit book, but I need to get out of here, alright?"

"I read it, you know."

"What's that?"

"I read your book."

Robert tilted his head. "And?"

"It's not a piece of shit."

"I know! It's fucking brilliant, but apparently the tan beautiful people of the far west can't seem to figure that out."

Enra laughed. "Their loss."

"And mine, you dimwit!" Robert took another swig from Enra's glass. "You've got nothing to lose by taking me with you."

"But where?"

"All the way."

"All the way to Brend?"

Robert nodded. "I know where it is. I've heard of the cabin."

"So have Ericka. And she's actually invited."

"You can't go via Friport, Enra! You'd have to start last week in order to make it." He set his finger decidedly on the table. "I know you're a brilliant inventor, Enra, but you've yet to invent a device that can turn back time!"

Enra said nothing.

"Enra! Do you have such-"

"Of course not, idiot!"

Robert laughed. "We'll go to Pireus & Lethus by boat, then hitch a ride north on a steamer or something. From Derelict, we can go by caravan."

Enra frowned. "How come you know so much about this?" There was that paranoia again.

"Because I've been planning the trip ever since you mentioned Sogen Valley."

"Why?"

"Because it's the perfect place to find rich assholes willing to invest in me." He shrugged. "If I can land one biography or bloated 'account from the perspective of' or some shit, my career will be made. After that, I can write whatever I want."

“You’re still not invited, though.”

“I’ll be your plus one, sugar plum.” Robert gave him a wink.

Enra laughed. “It *is* a long way to go alone . . .”

“Yes, it is!” He leaned closer. “Listen, I have some money saved up. I’ve kept everything I earned, from every single sale-”

“So a quarter scorpion, then?”

“Very funny! It’s at least ten scorpions, and a slew of silvers and coppers.”

“I can’t let you pay for me.”

“I’m paying for *me*, asshole!”

“Oh . . .”

“So you won’t have to. So I won’t be a fucking money drain, at least.” He finished Enra’s glass.

Enra couldn’t help smiling. “Fine.” He said, punching Robert in the shoulder. “Let’s go to fucking Brend!”

Cordially invited

“I still can’t believe that you’re going through with this!” Anders said.

Enra shrugged. “I appreciate you coming with us, at least.”

“I’m not coming with you, I simply have a shipment that needs delivery.”

“And you absolutely have to be there personally?” Robert asked. He was holding a guitar in one hand, and a piece of paper in the other, struggling to get aboard the schooner.

Anders shrugged. “It’s a valuable shipment, and you’re broke as all hell, Robert. Better this way.”

Robert gave a sarcastic smile and vanished aboard the vessel.

The port of Aevon was one of the largest in the world. It was near impossible to navigate if you hadn’t been there a few times and knew exactly where you were going. Robert had this problem, but both Anders and Knud’sen had vessels docked here and knew their way around.

Enra had been here quite a few times himself, sailing with his friends or just sitting on the boat as it knocked against the wooden pier, drinking spirits and looking at the moons. He had a strange feeling he wouldn’t be doing that anymore. That after Brend, he would be changed somehow. That was the intention, after all, but he had an ill feeling he couldn’t quite explain. For all his faults and greediness, Enra was glad Robert was with him. *Not that I’ll ever tell him that, of course.*

The sun was hanging low in the horizon, the entire city red and brown in the afternoon glow. It wasn’t as dreary a city as many from the central or eastern continents thought. It was actually filled to the brim with vibrant colors and scenery. It had ponds, mosaic, art and greenery everywhere you turned, and was built laterally instead of vertically, unlike some of the more modern cities in Noman. This meant you could usually see for several miles in every direction.

But not when the sun was about to go down. Enra looked over his city one more time before stepping onto the boat. “I suppose we should start heading out.”

Robert came up to the gunwale again, this time without the guitar and the paper. “Whatever will you do without us, Knud’sen?” He asked.

Knud’sen was sitting on a pole on the other side of the docks. “I’ll think of something, don’t you worry about that.” He nodded towards Anders. “Besides, he’ll be back here after a few weeks, and then we can finally talk like adults again.”

“Aw, you’ll miss us, Knud’sen, admit it!”

Knud’sen slowly stood up, and left the docks.

“He’s an odd fellow, that one.” Robert said.

“No kidding! I’ve known him for some thirty odd years, and I don’t know shit about him. The man is a walking, talking mystery.”

“He seems content, though, at least.” Enra said. “His humor might be deep and dark, but his mood always seem . . . light, somehow.”

“He’s nonchalant, is what he is.” Robert said. “He doesn’t give a damn about anything or anyone, and I for one respect the hell out of him for it.”

Anders shrugged. “Yeesh, why don’t you just marry the man already?”

“Because he lacks what I adore the most in another person.”

“And what’s that?”

“Big, glorious tits!”

Both Anders and Enra laughed. “Such a way with words!”

“Writing lesson number one!” Robert raised a finger. “Don’t overcomplicate things!”

Anders groaned. “You’re not going to give us lessons the whole trip, are you?”

Robert pulled the wooden gangway onto the deck and helped Enra coil the final few ropes. “Lesson number two. Don’t ever fuck with a writer, for he will put you in his book, and give you a death most violent.”

“I’ll take mine right now, please.” Anders said, smiling as he found the push pole.

Shortly thereafter, they navigated through the narrow waters within the Aevon docks. The sun was dipping into the sea now, the air vibrating all around it. Enra found himself overcome with a desire to paint, but knew there was no point. Robert was the most artistically inclined of the three, but even his drawings looked like shit. “You ever wish you could paint, Robert?” Enra asked.

“Are you shitting me? More than anything!” He laughed. “That’s the worst part about your homeland, Enra, it’s so damn beautiful! Every day I see things I wish I could somehow record.”

“Practice makes perfect, though.”

“I don’t think that’s true in my case. More like, polish a turd and it’s still a turd.”

Enra shrugged.

They emerged from the port now, the sea opening up around them. Calm winds gently nudged their small vessel back and forth, until Anders lowered the main sails. The cloth immediately pulled taut, and rustled with the wind. The schooner shot forward, steadily heading towards the central continents, and Pireus & Lethus.

Here we go. Enra thought.

“But sittin’ out here ain’t not gonna do you much good,” Robert sang, strumming his guitar. “The pain still lingers in your mind.”

“He’s actually quite good.” Enra whispered. On his lap was a mostly blank page. After three beautiful sunsets on the open sea, he’d given in and finally attempted some sketches.

Anders nodded. “Don’t tell him, though.”

“Are you mad? We’d never hear the end of it!”

“The rain ain’t gonna wash your worries away, even though you wish it could.” Robert’s voice grew frail on some of the high notes, but he carried the song nonetheless. “So grab your boots, my son. And come inside.”

“What song is this?”

“Beats me.”

“Hey, Robert.”

Robert looked up, but kept strumming.

“What song is that?”

“It’s called ‘come inside’. I wrote it myself.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. I’m a writer, remember? It’s what I do.”

“Son of a bitch, I guess it *is* a good thing having a writer on the boat.”

Robert changed his grip and strummed a clumsy, happy melody. “Hey! What’s the worst that could happen?”

Enra smiled. “The worst that could happen is we have even *more* fun.”

“You’re damn right!” Robert smiled and put the guitar away. “Give me some of that paper, will you?”

“What, you’re going to woo us with your drawing skills as well?”

“Please, I’m good at a great many things, and great at a good many. Drawing is most certainly not one of them, and you know it.”

“Then why?”

“You’ll see, just give it here.”

The conversation lapsed into a lazy silence as the schooner drifted on the waves. The sun waned, and the final few red rays disappeared beyond the horizon. The weather had already started to grow noticeably chillier, but the trio stayed up on deck nonetheless. A few hours later, the purple moon was shining half-full over their heads.

Robert finished his work on the paper and studied it in the purple light. “Good enough!” He exclaimed.

“What is it?” Anders asked, snapping it from Robert’s hands. “Cordially invited . . .” He read, trailing off. “You forged an invitation?”

Robert shrugged. “Wouldn’t it be pretty moronic to go all the way up into the freezing mountains, just to be denied entry?”

“And what happens if you get caught with a badly forged invitation instead? They’ll probably just throw you off the damn mountainside.”

“I suppose we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

Anders laughed. “I’m just glad *we’re* not going anywhere.” He looked at Enra. “Are you really taking this bum with you?”

The question was laced with humor, but Enra could see the hurt in Robert’s face. Again. “Actually, the bum’s paying for himself. If he wants to risk his life to stay a few days in the Freeze, I’m not going to stop him.”

Anders shrugged. “Ain’t none of my business.” He gave the forged invitation back. “I just don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“Aw, that’s sweet.” Robert picked up the guitar again. “Don’t worry, pops, we’ll both be fine.”

“Just remember. The armor of youth is thick, but frail.”

“That’s mighty poetic of you, Anders.” He started strumming once more. “But sittin’ out here ain’t gonna do you much good . . .”

Enra ran a hand through his hair. *Shit, I completely forgot about that haircut.* It wouldn’t matter all that much, probably, but he only had one chance to make a good first impression. He let out a sigh as he watched the cloudy sky, trying to ignore the slight drizzle coming down around him. What was the plan anyway? How did these things normally go?

He wasn't going to hold any presentations, at least. That much he knew. This was a party, and it was meant to be a party. Yawning and droning were strictly forbidden. Which was just as well, because he didn't want to rave and rant about this invention of his, lest anyone else stole the idea. *The iron boon . . . it's a good name.* He looked at Robert, frowning. *Thanks, I suppose.* He knew Robert would keep his mouth shut through it all, but he still felt uneasy knowing that someone else knew.

Now that he thought about it, the entire situation was quite bizarre. He'd submitted plans and schematics every chance he got for four years now. He'd attached detailed reports and even parts for a small-scale replica of the metal contraption. Not once had he received an answer, and now he was suddenly invited to a prestigious party, as if he'd already built and completed the whole thing.

Which I obviously haven't. His only hope was therefore to woo some sort of higher-up at the party. Hopefully someone with all the right connections. *Steam power is the way of the future. Obviously, a kingdom as big and powerful as Steadwic has begun to embrace that . . . surely someone, somewhere has the ability to make this happen.*

With a little help from Enra, of course. That was the hardest part; making himself invaluable.

The schooner drifted towards the port of Pireus & Lethus, the city grey and dreary in the murky weather. Myriads of gulls were shrieking overhead, some perched on the rotted poles dotting the harbor. Clearly, this port had extended further into the water at some point, but had rotted away. At first glance, Pireus & Lethus looked like a poor man's city. *An oversized peasantry,* Enra thought.

And he loved it.

Aevon was in many ways like any other city. It had slums, poor districts, markets both black and legit, palaces and alleyways – but it was all so pompous. The run-down districts were hidden by the prosperous ones, the ugly buildings dwarfed by the magnificent ones. It was a gorgeous city in almost every aspect, but it was also apologetic and deceiving.

Pireus & Lethus made no attempts at apologizing for anything. It was exactly what you saw, and what you saw was what you got. The docks and the markets were bustling with life despite the weather. People were coming and going from every part of town to trade, drink, eat and unwind. The entire district rested on the water; meticulously suspended on wooden poles, stretching across the huge natural bay by the foot of the mountain. While its houses and people were quite modest, the city and its landscape was actually quite surreal.

"What a fascinating place!" Enra blurted out, an oversized hooded gull squawking in agreement.

"This city?" Anders said. "It's quite a vista with the mountains and the docks, I suppose. But it's basically just oversized farmland."

"It can't be that bad! I know Aevon is a political seat and all that nonsense, but this just seems so much more . . . honest!"

"You can tell that the town's honest, just from looking at it? What does that even mean?"

Enra laughed. "I don't know." He looked at the scattered houses on the mainland just west of the docks. All of them were white, brown or red, and none of them over two stories tall. "It just feels like this is all there is to it. When you arrive in Aevon, you can tell immediately that

the polished façade is a lie. If you even have a brain, you realize there must be more to the city. Here, you don't have that problem. This is how it is, always."

Anders shrugged. "I suppose." He looked at Enra. "Damn, son, you've got some wits after all. I've been here a thousand times and never even once considered that."

Enra shrugged. "Glad I could be of assistance."

"So when are you due north?" Anders steadied himself against the gunwale and prepared to jump ashore. "We have time for a drink or ten first, right?"

Enra shrugged again. "The worst that could happen is we have even more fun!"

Anders laughed. "That's my boy!"

"Sweet merciful Noman!" Came Robert's voice. He ran past the both of them and jumped from the boat, almost toppling over as he hit the wooden docks. "Land!"

"How are you doing there, Robert? You look a little pasty."

Robert doubled over and raised one hand. "I'll be fine . . . I just could've done without all the wind for the past four days." He heaved and coughed, but didn't lose his bowels.

"The wind carries the vessel forward. It's how most boats work, Robert." Anders moored the boat and started unloading the six crates he'd been transporting.

"Not when it blows us sideways, asshole!" Robert arched his back and scanned the city. "I need a drink."

Anders nodded. "That's the idea."

"Know anywhere good?"

Anders grinned. "Sure I do. Not only do they have good whiskey, they have lots of food as well."

"Enra calmly stepped ashore. "Seeing as Robert's been emptying his bowels into the sea for a few days now, that might be a good idea."

"Get bent!"

Anders tilted his head, weighing his thoughts. "That's also the general idea."

"So what's this place called?"

"MacGregor's establishment for rapid consumption."

The entrance to MacGregor's was an oversized slab of a wooden door. On the whole, the place looked rather unwelcoming. From what Enra could see, the door was supposed to be some kind of brown, but the purple moon was glowing bright and angry, distorting the color slightly.

Robert pulled the heavy door open, its hinges squealing. "After you, gentlemen."

Enra stepped inside, a cacophony of noise and ruckus crashing against him. The place was almost filled to the brim, with everything from farmers to guards, and everything in between. *Wow, the food and drink must be pretty great.* Enra leaped for the first available chair he saw, eventually shimmying enough so that the three of them could sit.

"Well, ain't this cozy!" Anders said, snuggling up against Enra.

Robert slapped the table and got up. "Alright, let me get the first round for once." He sidled towards the counter before anyone could protest.

"What's gotten into him?" Anders asked.

Enra shook his head. “I don’t know . . . I think we’ve given him a little too much grief. He broke his little piggy bank to join me on this trip.”

“Yeah, why *did* he do that anyway?”

“He sees the party as his big chance. Not only can he peddle his book there, but he can flaunt his talents and try to land a big fish.”

“What do you mean, big fish?”

“He made some good points, actually. Think of all the rich snobs up there in that mountain. Greased and impressionable. Dying to have someone write their biography or some such nonsense.”

Anders laughed. “Sounds like a fairytale if you ask me.”

“Yeah, well, he was pretty dead set on it, so . . .”

“Yeah . . . what’s the worst that could happen, right?”

Enra laughed and nodded. “Exactly.”

A few minutes later, Robert came back juggling three pints. “Alcohol first, food later, right?”

“Works for me!” Anders immediately raised his glass. “To Robert! May he land many a big fish!”

“Hear, hear!” Enra raised his glass as well.

“Nah, never mind about me! What about you, Enra? What’s the big plan?”

“I don’t know. Hadn’t really thought that much about it.”

“What are you even going to tell them?” Robert shrugged. “What do snooty, rich assholes even talk about to begin with?”

“Why don’t you just present yourself as a bartender? You did that once before, didn’t you?”

Robert started laughing. “Yeah, he did! He nailed three broads in one fucking afternoon!”

“Four . . . actually.” Enra smiled a little. “Bartender is a surefire hit with the ladies.”

Almost on instinct, all three of them turned towards the bartender. It was a heavysset man, somewhere in his late fortieth or early fiftieth, his head a curly mop resting on his scalp.

Robert smiled a sarcastic smile. “That’s . . . actually MacGregor himself, if anyone was wondering.”

Enra let out a snicker. “I don’t know what I’m going to say. Does it even matter? I’ve been invited, so I can pretty much say whatever I want, right?”

“I suppose.”

“You never told us *why*, though.” Anders said. “Extraordinary innovation, what does that even mean?”

Enra suddenly felt paranoid again. Hadn’t he known this man for years? Would it really be so bad telling him? *He wouldn’t even believe me, most likely. Just poke some fun, and then the conversation would move on to other things.* “I submitted some schematics, among other things. For a new sort of transportation.”

“Oh, for Noman’s sake! You didn’t attempt to build a flying machine, did you? Lars Clarke already did that . . . and fell to his death.”

“No, this will operate only on land. Or bridges, for that matter.”

“What is it?”

“It’s an iron carriage, powered by steam.”

Anders said nothing.

No one had heard him, and no one seemed to care about the trio sitting in the middle of the tavern, but Enra looked around nonetheless.

He first noticed a young girl sitting by the bar, probably in her fourteenth or so. Next to her was a woman who looked remarkably similar. *Mother and daughter, no doubt.* Before he could think anything else, both of them turned around, and he saw that they weren't all that similar after all. Both had the same dark blonde hair and both had narrow faces, but their eyes were completely different. The mother had blue eyes, while the daughter had green. The most piercing eyes Enra had ever seen. *She's H'arian, just like Knud'sen . . . even though her mother isn't.* There was so much sadness and anger in those eyes.

Yellow rings seamed to gleam around her pupils as her eyes met Enra's. Like the sun was eclipsed behind them.

Enra quickly looked away and scanned the rest of the crowd, and the girl eventually turned back, looking down at her hands.

"So . . . it's a cart that pushes itself? Like a steamer on land?"

"Yes, kind of."

"How?"

"Don't want to talk about it."

"Why, are you afraid I'll steal it?"

Enra shrugged. "Maybe."

Anders laughed. "Don't worry! I don't need to know more." He leaned forward. "But is there really an application for this? Can it be done? Or is this just another house of cards?"

"Another?" Robert asked. "Enra, you naughty boy, have you done this before?"

Enra just shrugged.

The evening turned to night as they ate and drank, the topic of Enra's exploits fluttering away. Robert shared some details about his exciting follow-up, which fell mostly on deaf ears, and Anders explained in some finer detail why he felt it necessary to deliver his shipment personally. Neither Enra or Robert were particularly surprised to learn it had something to do with a woman.

"And here I thought Tina was your only sun!" Enra said jokingly.

"She *is* my sun . . . but the world has more than one moon, doesn't it? Why can't I have more than one sun?"

Enra shrugged. "Clearly, you can."

"By that logic, she's more than welcome to have several moons as well, though." Robert butted in.

"Ah, you people are no fun."

A few more hours passed, and the tavern grew mostly empty in the purple moonlight.

"Maybe we should start heading out?" Robert said.

Enra nodded. "Yeah, I told Thor we'd be there around midnight."

"Thor?" Anders asked. "Who's that? And what the fuck kind of name is that?"

"That of a northerner." Enra replied. "I knew him a few years back, when he was just a deckhand. Now he's the captain of a steamer."

“A steamer?” Anders looked incredulous. “That’s quite an upgrade.”

“It’s safe to say he knew some people who knew some people. Either way, he’ll give us passage to Derelict.”

“And you’ll travel the rest by caravan?” Anders scratched his chin. “Damn, Enra, that’s cutting it a little close, don’t you think?”

Enra shrugged. “Fashionably five minutes late, right?”

Robert grinned. “That pretty much describes your entire fucking life, Enra!”

“Don’t hate me because I’m beautiful.”

“Don’t worry, that’s not why I hate you at all.”

They stepped outside, the city dark and eerie. A few streetlights were lit, but were reduced to small indistinct blobs in the thick fog. The rain had subsided, but still the air was heavy and moist. “Still fascinated by this city?” Robert asked.

“Absolutely!”

They walked past a few dark storefronts, and Robert almost jumped when he saw something move in the darkness. It was an elderly man, hair as white as snow. He was puffing on a pipe, the orange glow twisting his face. “It’s like a ghost town!” He said, shaking the adrenaline off.

They eventually crossed from the mainland to the part of the city resting on the water. The fog thickened and became almost choking. “Now that you mention it . . .” Anders mumbled.

There were more lights here, though, and soon voices started echoing in the whiteness around them. Most of the city might’ve been asleep at this time, but there was always someone drinking, brawling, fishing or doing some shady purchases. Enra had to jump sideways more than once to avoid being pushed into the water by drunkards. “So where the hell are we going?” He asked.

“I’m going north, up towards the memorial, at least.” Anders said. “Gotta go see a girl about that shipment.”

“Are you sure she’ll . . . bite?” Robert asked.

Anders slapped his hand down on Robert’s shoulder. “Gold, diamonds and everything that glitters will always, always, make them bite, Robert. Remember that! They’re easier than fish when it comes to jewelry.”

“Right . . . that doesn’t really help *us* at the moment, though.”

Anders swiveled Robert’s head south. “See the ocean? That’s usually where boats live. That means the boats will be in that general direction too.”

“Thank you, mister condescending.”

“It’s my pleasure! My pleasure entirely.” He stopped, looking north, trying to find a connecting square – the docks were more or less made up by myriads of squares of various shapes and sizes, some floating, some anchored and some fixed on poles. These were in turn connected by a web of bridges and walkways. “Well, this is my stop.” He gave them both a hug and slapped their backs. “You boys take care of yourselves, alright? It’s a hostile world out there.” He leaned closer. “And don’t stick your cocks where they don’t belong, you hear?”

Robert smiled as wide as he could. “Anywhere is home, Anders . . . I learned that from you.”

Anders tilted his head, laughing. “Well, shit. I take it all back, then!” His smile quickly vanished. “I’m serious! Be careful.”

“We will, Anders. And you as well.”

Act II

Stefan always forgot how hot these parties got. He appreciated glistening, half-naked bodies as much as the next man, but he had work to do. His shirt clinging to his body and his hair plastered to his scalp wasn't a great inconvenience, but it was enough to distract him from his search.

"Noman be damned! Where the hell are you?" He whispered.

"Is it me you're looking for, love?" A buxom redhead fell into his arms. Beads of sweat had formed in her substantial cleavage, and he could practically mirror himself. Her ginger hair cascaded down her bare shoulders in expensive corkscrews, her dark green dress shimmering in stark contrast.

He forced a smile. "I've been looking for you my whole life, sweetheart." He said. "You're a vision!" He looked around – which wasn't that hard, given that she reached him only to the chest – trying to find someone who matched the description he'd gotten. Even though he saw people with every face, body and attire conceivable, he couldn't spot a single person looking like Enra Vadir was supposed to. *Damnit.*

"Well, aren't you quite the charmer!" She said.

He noticed now that her face was more cute than aggressively sensual, in contrast to her body. That was alright, though. He quite liked that. The fact it was specked with freckles was another bonus. That the freckles also spread to her shoulders was the absolute cherry on top. *Focus, Stefan! Work first, play later!* "Yes I am!" He smiled. "Why don't we meet up in a bit, and I can ram my cock between those marvelous funbags of yours? Give you a little icing on that freckled face there?"

She took a step back and gawped in surprise.

Stefan tried to guess whether she'd throw her drink at him or slap him. He'd give it around a fifty-fifty chance.

In the end, she did neither. She just stormed off to find someone else to cling to.

Thank Noman that's over. He thought. Stefan wasn't much good at resisting temptation, but he'd found that being excessively lewd drove them away quicker than rats fleeing a sinking ship. It was a tough line to walk, though. More than once he'd had an angry husband or pissed off potential lover at his hands. Still, it was a risk he was willing to take. *A few broken bones is all too common at these parties anyway. No one pays any special kind of attention to the one who breaks them.*

Stefan moved further into the room, feeling like the walls crept closer and closer. There were flashes of orange, green, red, blue and pink dancing on his eyes, but he couldn't make out a single face. He was impressed with how graciously these drunks moved while they danced. Dresses fluttered, revealing thighs both firm and soft, their wearers twirling and stepping and

bowing at their partners' behest. White gloves were attached to the rigid arms of men dressed in black, blue and white, eyes locked ahead, their movements methodical and careful.

Why do rich people always know how to dance? Stefan thought. *No matter how drunk they are? And why can't they be this graceful afterwards?* The second the music stopped, these people would stumble across each other, the carpets and the furniture, slurring words and barking insults like animals. What was now a scintillating display, teasing a brief glimpse of a belly or a rear end, would soon turn into a vulgar flashing of body parts.

He snuck between two dancing couples and located a door leading to a large veranda. The place had been renovated since last year, so the layout was unfamiliar to him. It was a hurdle, to be sure, but nothing he couldn't deal with.

"Evening, sir!" A pleasant voice came as he opened the door, feeling the icy air wash over him.

"Evening." Stefan nodded curtly. The voice had, in fact, been so pleasant that he mistook it for that of a servant.

"Not one for dancing, eh?" The man continued.

"No, not really." Stefan tugged on his shirt, the air cooling his clammy skin.

"Smoke?" The man offered a wooden box, containing several brown, thinly rolled cigarettes.

"Thank you, that's very kind." Stefan snatched one out of the box and produced a box of matches with his other hand.

They stood in silence for a little while, sending stacks of grey smoke into the starry sky. It coupled with their misting breaths and seemed to hang in the air forever. In front of them, the mountains reached for the bloated purple moon, while the crescent white one struggled behind them.

The Freeze, Stefan thought, looking at those steep, snowy hills. Behind those hills was a seemingly endless expanse of snow and ice, permanently frozen to the core. Few men braved those icy plains, and fewer returned. Just standing here at the northernmost tip of the Steadwic kingdom, he thought he could feel the cold pulsating from beyond the mountain, coming at him in waves. He shivered beside himself.

"So, what brings you here to the northernmost part of the civilized world, son?" The man asked, Stefan suddenly remembering, with a certain appreciation, he wasn't alone up here.

"You do know that Crown is even farther north, right? On the other side of the Freeze?"

"Course I know, son. But they ain't nothing but a bunch of savage northerners up there." He waved his hand dismissively, the smoke from his cigarette creating waves in the air. "Descended from, anyway. Some even say it's their damn fault this place froze over to begin with!"

Stefan knew the legends. Crown and Steadwic had been at war before the Wrath happened – the natural disaster that almost destroyed the world – and what was now known as the Freeze served as the main battleground for most of the conflict. Then the Wrath came and leveled mountains, overran rivers and tore jagged holes in the very surface of Noman. During the 192 days of rain that followed – no one knew exactly when – the area froze over, swallowing barracks, bases and people from both sides alike. A large part of Steadwic fell to the cold, and was since abandoned. Now labelled Old Steadwic, it was the last stop on the route to the Freeze.

Except for Brend, of course, Stefan thought. Brend and Sogen Valley, where your piss turns to icicles in front of your very eyes. That wasn't entirely true, though. It wasn't that cold, compared to the area beyond those mountains. It wasn't really a stop on anyone's route, either. It was too far west to give any kind of practical route across or through the mountains. Anyone wanting to enter the Freeze, for whatever reason, needed to head east from Old Steadwic, not west.

Stefan took the last drag from his cigarette and looked at the cabin. He wanted to be inside, all of a sudden, where his surroundings were small and controllable. Then he saw the redheaded lady through the glass, narrowing her eyes at him. *Maybe not just yet . . .* He turned back towards the man. "I thought Noman brought on the Wrath. How can it be the northerners fault if it was *our* god that froze the damn thing?"

The man shrugged. "Hell if I know. Just making conversation, son."

Stefan nodded absentmindedly. "I'm George, by the way. Nice to meet you."

"You don't know that yet." The man offered his hand.

"Well, you gave me cigarettes." Stefan took it.

"Cigarettes, plural?"

Stefan nodded, sending the butt of his first one flying into the snow, then held his hand out for another.

"You got some nerve, son!" The man laughed and produced the box again. "Name's Maleric, by the way. Maleric Laitham."

"Thank you very much, sir." He lit his cigarette and peeked inside again. The dancing had stopped, but the volume was still just as high. People were stuffing their faces with whatever they could find, including other people's faces, and toasting loudly. He still saw no one looking even slightly western. "Say . . . I'm looking for a friend of mine." He mumbled.

"Yeah?"

"I can't seem to find him. His name is Enra Vadir."

"Ah, Enra!" The man smiled.

"Do you know him?" Stefan felt a pang of surprise. No one else had ever heard about this man, and he'd been asking around for hours. He was a newcomer to this party, Stefan knew, if Maleric started asking questions, Stefan wouldn't be able to answer them.

"I know *of* him. What's your relationship with him?"

Stefan swallowed hard and shrugged. "I met him once, long ago. We had a rather . . . epic night out gallivanting around Aevon."

"Ah! So you have been out west?"

"Just the once. I received a letter from Enra, saying he was headed up here, and was hoping for a . . . retread of that night."

Maleric looked at Stefan, long and hard. "You know, if you like to fuck other men, that's none of my concern. But be wary," and he pointed inside. "Many of these people frown upon those kind of shenanigans."

Stefan didn't bother explaining. It didn't really matter what this man thought. All that mattered was that he found Enra. "Thank you for your concern. It doesn't seem to matter anyway, though. Like I said, he's nowhere to be seen."

“I received word by raven from Steadwic a little while ago.” Maleric said. “Mister Vadir is running a little late.” He snatched a pocket watch from his vest. “He should be here in a few hours, though.”

Stefan nodded. “Thank you, Maleric.” He threw the cigarette butt close to the last one and walked back towards the cabin. As he opened the door, the redhead and two of her friends came stumbling out. “Milady!” He exclaimed, holding the door as he bowed.

“Fuck you!” She replied.

Maybe later . . . for now, I have a tardy businessman to kill.

“We’re gonna be late!”

Enra tried to keep his teeth from chattering, but it was extremely difficult. Next to him, Robert sat with his arms crossed like nothing was amiss. “Cold, Enra?” He asked, his tone smug.

“Are you shitting me?! It’s fucking freezing!” His teeth rattled as if to underscore his point.

“You do realize this is only the Thameside crossing, right? It might be getting a tad late in the year, but this cold is still nothing compared to what awaits up in Sogen Valley.”

Enra looked at Robert, and if not for his shivering face, the hatred in his half-closed eyes would’ve been palpable.

Robert raised his arms in defense. “Hey, don’t look at me like that! You’re the one who got invited to this crap, and you’re the one who decided on going!”

“Well . . . I’m starting to regret it.”

“Tough shit, kid. We’re far past the point of no return.”

“We’re going to be late anyway!”

The trip to Derelict had been smooth. Thor was always on schedule, preferably early if he could help it. That didn’t do them much good when they ended up spending an extra night in Derelict, though. Robert was pretty sure Anders and Knud’sen would never let them hear the end of it. “If everything goes smoothly from here, and we skip our planned night in the capital, we’ll only be late by a few hours.”

“And how will we get straight up the fucking mountain without help?”

“Enra fucking Vadir,” Robert said. “Do I detect naysaying from your sorry ass?” He pointed north, though the mountains weren’t visible on the horizon just yet. “Sogen Valley might be the one place Noman forgot about when he made this world, but when there’s a party up there, attended solely by rich assholes – and general assholes, such as yourself – you bet your ass people will carry you up there themselves if they have to.”

“Why?”

Robert held his hands out as if they were tiny people, and mimicked a conversation. “It’ll go like this: ‘Oh, hey misters, where can I take you?’ And you’ll be like: ‘Umm, straight up the mountain, past Sogen Valley?’ Which, of course, will yield the response, ‘fuck you!’”

Robert’s high pitch voice made Enra smile through the cold.

“But then! You’ll say: ‘You see, I’m invited to a very special party up there. A party where all the richest assholes of Noman go. A party littered with fruit, tobacco and alcohol, as far as your tiny eyes can see. But that’s fine, I’ll just find someone else to take up there, maybe invite them in . . .’ And at this point, you should already be halfway up the mountainside.”

Enra shrugged. “Maybe. Though I can’t imagine they have many latecomers up there.”

Robert laughed. “Please! Rich assholes are always late.”

“You really have a problem with rich people, don’t you?”

“Nah, it’s just good old jealousy. I’m only angry because I’m not one of them.”

Enra patted him on the back. “In time, my friend.”

The carriage slowed to a halt in the packed dirt. There was a thin layer of frost on the ground, but it wouldn't snow for a few months yet. Up in the sky, the white moon kept waxing, growing more bloated by the day. It would probably be waning long before they reached Aevon again. *If we're even going back.*

The purple one would be full and bloated in a few days, though, which would truly make for a spectacular view up on the mountain.

The carriage was loaded up on a huge barge alongside another wagon, this one containing only cargo. A few others stood waiting behind them, eagerly checking their pocket watches. *Looks like we're not the only ones running late,* Enra mused.

The Thameside crossing was one of the busiest on the central continents, and truly a spectacular example of coordination and innovation. It wasn't much to look at, that was true, but when it worked – which it mostly did, through every weather conceivable – it was extremely efficient.

With the Wrath growing ever more distant, the populations of Noman started spreading again. For such a large continent, there were still remarkably few cities here, but with all these trade routes and crossings established, they popped up at an ever growing rate. The Thameside crossing had been upgraded time and time again to accommodate all the traffic, and now it faced one of its biggest upgrades yet.

Not so much of an upgrade, Enra thought. *More like it's closing down and being replaced.* They were planning on building a bridge across, which, if successful, would become the largest bridge in the world. Not only that, but because of the nature of the crossing, they would need two:

The Thameside river forked somewhere to the east – it ran east to west – and flowed around a giant rock formation resting between Thameside and Lakrus, the settlement on the other side. For years and years, people had meticulously chopped, dug, picked and blown up this formation, until a cleft were finally made through it. However, it still meant the crossing would have to be made in two bouts. Which actually was the opposite of a problem, as it meant the barges had very short voyages, and could continually bring carriages back and forth.

"It used to be a simple ford, you know." Robert came trudging across the frosty ground, his boots making the surface creak and groan. He handed Enra a smoking cup. "Coffee," he grunted.

Enra gladly accepted, taking a huge sip, ignoring the burns on his tongue and mouth. He needed the warmth. "A ford, you say?"

Robert nodded. "Before the Wrath, the Thameside river ran calm and slow. It wasn't nearly as broad as this, and wading across was relatively easy."

"Then the Wrath came and fucked everything up."

Robert laughed. "Yeah, I suppose."

"Story of our lives, isn't it?"

"How do you mean?"

Enra shrugged. "It just seems like everywhere we go, there's some story about how the Wrath drastically changed the world for the worse. 'This was so much simpler before the Wrath. Oh yeah, it's only cold because of the Wrath. No one took up residence there because they're scared of another Wrath.' It's becoming tedious, is what it is."

“But things *are* happening, though. They’re building a bridge . . . or, two bridges I suppose. And there’s talk of resurrecting Old Steadwic and maybe-”

“It’s been hundreds of years, Robert! They should’ve done this way back when!”

“While I appreciate your can-do spirit, Enra, it’s impossible for us to understand what sort of impact the Wrath had on the world. I mean . . . it fucking ended, Enra! The world ended!”

Enra laughed. “Now you’re talking like a fucking writer, Robert! If you plan to inflate some wealthy man’s life story the same way, you *are* going to become rich.”

“Mean, Enra! Damn! That’s far below the belt. If my balls weren’t so massive, you’d miss them by inches. That’s how low you’re kicking me right now!”

“I’m sorry, Robert! It’s nothing personal, but you know as well as I do that the world didn’t end.”

“And how the fuck were they supposed to know that, huh?”

Robert was fired up now, Enra could hear it. *Best let him talk, get the poison out.* It was the best way to handle these writer types; let them say what they wanted to say, and be done with it.

“Imagine living through earthquake after earthquake, never ending crashes of rain and hail. Imagine Old Steadwic! Your city just freezing over like that. For those who lived through it, the world did, in fact, end, Enra!”

“I suppose. But if you woke up after something like that, surviving it all, wouldn’t you start building? Wouldn’t you push back? Would you really cower in fear for hundreds of years, afraid to go outside.”

Robert sighed. “Not with the knowledge I have now. But had I seen all the damage firsthand; had I seen rivers overflowing and mountains crumbling . . .”

“I suppose.” Enra grew quiet.

“Is that why you made this ‘Iron Boon’ of yours? To tie the world together? To expand?”

Enra nodded. “Just look around you, Robert! Look how beautiful it is! I was born in one of the most prosperous cities in the world. Sheer luck brought me here.”

Robert took a sip from his cup. The coffee was burnt, but did its job. He looked around, studying the carriages and caravans waiting their turn, the ground churned up all around them. “Really?” He asked. “You feel lucky to be *here*?”

“Don’t be facetious, Robert! It’s unbecoming!” Enra finished his coffee. “Think how many people will never leave Aevon, or Pireus & Lethus. Or Steadwic, Neirana and Balingstrad. And think about Crown, for fuck’s sake! Think how many people are still stuck up there, separated from the rest of the world by heaps of ice and snow. Punished by some ‘God’ that doesn’t exist.” He looked up to the sky. “Yeah, you hear that, Noman? I don’t fucking believe in you!”

“There are boats, though. Plenty of people go to Crown.” Robert finished his coffee as well, and they stepped aboard the barge. “They build the world’s largest snowman every year, for Noman’s . . . for fuck’s sake. I don’t think they have it so bad up there.”

Enra laughed. “No, I suppose you’re right.”

“As are you. Everything you say is true. It’s about time we took our world back. I know I’m just a writer, but if there’s anything I can do, let me know.”

Enra smiled wide as started leaving the Hale continent, headed for Steadwic. “Actually, there is.”

Enra's teeth rattled so bad he was sure they were going to fall out of his mouth. "W-w-w-well, you were r-r-right about this. If t-t-t-that makes you feel any b-b-b-better."

Robert smiled. "It does, actually."

"Fuck! It's so cold! How do people even survive up here?"

"Beats me. I'm native to Pireus & Lethus, remember? It gets cold in winter as well, but nowhere near this kind of bite."

"H-h-h-how are we doing on t-t-time?"

"We'll be late, all right. But by hours, not by days."

Enra nodded. His mouth was too cold to speak right now. *Looks like we'll have to bring some old shenanigans to the table, after all. Robert will be thrilled, at least.* It worried Enra a little though. In some ways, it was his own fault, he supposed. He was always joking around, always running late and being unapologetic about it. But deep down Enra was a very serious man. He just never let anyone see that.

"What's on your mind there, icicle?"

"Fuck you!" Enra tried smiling, but his lips were probably frozen shut. Robert was the same, in some ways, but he always made it a point trying to subvert everyone's expectations. To a fault. *If he feels people take him too seriously, he'll start acting childish, if people think him childlike, he'll act really serious. Oh, Robert. Who hurt you?* Enra let out a cloud of white mist.

"Something funny?"

"You are."

"Why, thank you, I merely-"

"Okay, shut up and listen!" It took everything Enra had to keep his lips from quivering. "When I said you could help me back there, I meant it."

Robert nodded. "I'm all ears."

"We'll do the old name-swap, but with a twist."

Robert smiled. "As funny as that is-"

"Didn't I t-t-tell you to shut the fuck up?"

Robert nodded again, his smile fading. "So you did."

"The twist will be that we both carry my name." Enra waited, watching Robert's face as the realization slowly dawned on him. *That's right . . . there will be no Robert at this party. Which means you won't land any rich whale, asshole or otherwise.*

"Why?"

"There won't be much time . . . and you're the only one I've told about this project. If we're to talk to every single guest up there, we need to split up."

"But if they bite, and somehow meet up with you later, that won't-"

"That won't m-m-m-matter! They'll be drunk and it'll be dark. Maybe they'll even be confused, but the papers are what's important."

"But if I'm only to hand them papers . . ."

Robert was being intentionally dense. Of this, Enra was certain. *He wants to spend the party drinking and talking about his book. I'll owe him for life if he pulls this off.*

“You need to make certain they read those papers. You need to sell the innovation. You need to make this shit all they think about when they sleep their drunk half-sleep. When they wake up, it needs to be all they think about next to voiding their bowels and who the fuck is sleeping next to them. Your face will be blurry, the entire night will, but the papers will be there, clear as day, with my name all over them.” Enra’s adrenaline was overpowering the cold now, and he found his mouth was thoroughly thawed.

Robert nodded slowly. “And when they start looking, the name will lead them to you, not me.” He smiled. If nothing else, he was a sucker for a challenge. “I’ll do it!”

Enra placed his hand on Robert’s shoulder. “Thank you, Robert. I won’t forget this.”

Robert smiled wider. “You better not!”

They had arrived in Steadwic late at night, desperately searching in the purple moonlight for someone who could take them to Brend. Neither of them were familiar with Steadwic, and the sheer size of the city was almost enough to put them off the thought altogether.

Geographically, Aevon was bigger than Steadwic, but that only meant the people were spread over a larger area. After the calm streets of Pireus & Lethus, and borderline non-existence of the smaller towns on their way, the sheer amount of people, buildings and clutter had been overwhelming. The biggest problem was the circles, Enra found. Steadwic was made up by nine circles, marking different districts and areas, some poor and some rich. As far as Enra could see, the system made no sense at all, and who inhabited the various circles, as well as what you could find in them, was completely random.

Still, they had managed to find a stable with some carriages scattered around. They had probably paid tenfold of what this journey usually cost, but at that point, they were just happy to be out of the city.

Though, there’s still the chance the driver will kill us and rob us, Enra thought as he drifted to sleep.

“Wake up!” A voice came.

Enra felt something sharp against his ribs. *A knife? Oh, dear! It’s finally happening, it’s-*

“Come on, sunshine! Up you go!”

It wasn’t a knife at all, it was just Robert’s elbow. “We’re here!”

Now Enra truly felt it. The cold was like nothing he’d ever felt before. It was like being slapped across the face with a spiked board. Again and again and again. In his sleep, he’d managed to drool all over himself as well, evident by the tiny frozen stream going down his chin and neck, pooling on the collar of his travel-stained shirt. “K-k-k-kill me.” He whispered.

Even Robert was shivering a little now. “Maybe later . . . let’s see if we can’t buy ourselves a thousand scarves first.”

“S-s-s-s-scarves would be good! And hats, and more blankets.”

Robert patted Enra on the back. “Don’t worry, you’ll be out of the cold soon enough.” He opened the carriage door, and an even worse bite crept into the small space.

I’m going to die up here, Enra thought, doing his best to make his freezing joints move. He climbed out of the carriage after Robert, jumping up and down to keep warm.

“How much do we owe you?” Robert asked the driver.

The driver turned and flashed them an ugly grin. “All ye have.”

And look at that! I am going to die up here. It won't be from the cold at least. He shuffled around nervously. He'd been in a few fights when he was younger – quite a lot of them, now that he thought about it – but never anything like this. *We are two against one, though. Maybe we can-*

“Fine.” Robert said.

Enra frowned. He didn't want any trouble, but would Robert really give up that easy? He was always talking about how tough he was when it came down to it. “Robert,” he begun.

“Now you get nothing.” Robert concluded, giving Enra a look.

Enra nodded. *I'm pretty sure my arms are frozen solid, but if it comes down to a fight, I've got your back.*

The driver then drew a rather large knife, altering Enra's disposition somewhat. “Don't be a silly cunt, huh?! Fork over your golds and your silvers, and live to see another day.”

There was a twitch in Robert's arm, and Enra could see him lose himself a little. He'd never seen him properly angry, but he'd always thought Robert was one of those people who got so mad he was just as likely to hit himself in the face as anyone else. *Steady now.*

“What the fuck are you going to do with that, you absolute moron?!” Robert asked. “Are you going to jump all the way from up there, and land your fat fucking ass on me?” Robert spat, and Enra was certain he saw the glob turn to ice before it hit the driver's shoe. “Get bent, you piece of shit!”

The driver started moving, but Robert took a decisive step towards him. “If you come down here, that knife ends up in your ass!” Robert raised his fists, ready to fight. It looked a little silly, but he got the point across. “I won't waste my time killing you, but you can be certain you'll never sit, shit or walk the same way ever again.”

“What the hell's wrong with ye?” The driver said, turning the carriage around with a sullen look on his face.

“That's what my mother always asked me, too. Up until I killed her!” He spat again, and the driver picked up his speed.

Enra started laughing. “Shit, my friend! That was pretty impressive. I didn't realize you had it in you!” Now, Enra saw that Robert was shaking like a leaf.

“Don't mention it.”

“What was all that shit about your mother, though? You love that woman!”

“So? He doesn't need to know that!”

Enra laughed again. “You are one surprising motherfucker, Robert!” He threw his arm around his friend. “Come on, let's find someone to take us the rest of the way.”

They wandered through the narrow streets as the sun set, the cold steadily growing worse. Enra knew this cold was by no means deadly, but it sure felt lethal against his tanned western skin. He found himself extremely thankful for forgetting about his haircut; any buffer between him and the cold was more than welcome at this point.

Find your way! Was emblazoned upon a large arch as they entered the main street. The town's motto, no doubt. *And a strange one, at that. Anyone ending up here surely must've lost their way.* Enra wondered if that was true for himself as well.

"If we'd travelled here during summer, like normal fucking people, we could've arrived by boat." Robert pointed down a narrow alley, a frozen river resting at the bottom. It was dotted with lights from the lanterns of various ice fishers.

Enra looked down at the docks. All the boats were either pulled ashore or frozen in the ice. Still, there were myriads of people down there, shopping at the markets, lighting lanterns and hanging up decorations. All in all, this seemed like a much more lively place than Pireus & Lethus. "Why is there so many people here?" He asked, barely dodging a smiling blonde woman. "And why are they all so damn happy?"

"Are you kidding me? Look around!" Robert waved one arm through the air. "Look how pretty and picturesque this place is! And untouched by most of the smoke-churning industry of Steadwic and Pireus & Lethus." They stopped next to a large fire pit in the middle of a square, warming themselves on the tall flames. "It's also home to one of the most prestigious schools in the north; 'the Sogen folk school'. People come from all over the world to attend."

"Really?"

"Really." Robert sighed. "For Noman's sake, Enra, didn't you even read up on a single thing when you were invited up here?"

Enra shrugged. "Nah . . ."

A man in a thick wool cap came trudging along with a big bag of firewood. He threw the whole stack on the flames, sending an explosion of sparks towards the sky. "Merry morn' and a happy third moon to ye!" He said.

Robert nodded immediately. "And to you!" He smiled.

Enra leaned closer. "What the fuck does that mean?"

Robert shrugged. "I have no idea." He looked up, the purple moon bloated and gleaming above. "Maybe they celebrate the third purple full-moon or something. It would explain the decorations." He scratched his chin. "And the date of the fucking party you're invited to!" He gave Enra a smack on the back of his head.

"Yeah, yeah. I should've done some research." He turned around, looking northwest, towards the rising peaks. "Is that where we're going?"

"Yeah. Up on the first slope, I think."

Enra nodded. "Maybe we should get going? It's probably already starting."

They left the square, and soon found a man standing next to a stable, yelling, "Dog sleds! Go for a ride on the snow! Best prices this side of the river Brend!"

"Excuse me?" Enra said. "Do you offer passage to the old cabin?"

The man started laughing, his thick beard dancing on his face. "There are hundreds of old cabins up here, boy. Which one?"

Enra struggled to retrieve his invitation. "It's probably written somewhere on this, I-"

"Ah! You're one of those rich, pompous snobs, eh?"

Enra started to protest, but Robert interrupted him. "Yeah, that's us!" He smiled. "Rich and pompous!"

The man looked at him for a long time, his eyes narrow. “All right. Get on the sled, and I’ll take you there.”

“Fair warning, though,” Enra said as they sat down. “The last man we hitched a ride with tried to rob us.”

“Did he succeed?”

“Um . . . no?”

“So you still have the money?”

“Yes.”

“Then it’s no problem. I charge five silvers, up front. Yes, that’s a lot, but if you don’t like it you’re free to walk up there instead.”

Robert sighed. “Five silvers will be fine.” He handed over the money.

“Good! Hang on, boys, it’s going to be a cold ride.”

I can’t believe we’re actually going on a sled . . . this whole trip is beyond unreal. Enra grit his teeth and tried to shield himself from the cold as best as he could. He wasn’t very well versed when it came to snow and ice, but he’d been through at least a dozen heavy sandstorms in his life. From what he could see as they zig-zagged up the narrow path to the plateau, the snow was acting very much like the sands of Aevon before a major storm.

“A storm’s coming!” Robert shouted, as if reading Enra’s mind. “How’s that for a premonition, huh?”

“We’ll be fine!” Enra said. “In an hour we’ll be inside, eating and drinking.”

As they crested the top of the first plateau, Enra could finally see the cabin. It was at the same just like he’d imagined it, and nothing as he’d imagined it. It was well and truly situated in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by only mountains and snow. Behind it was a frozen lake and a few solitary trees.

It looked smaller than he had anticipated, though. Just two floors, and not a whole lot of space. There was a veranda stretching around three of the sides, but apart from that, he couldn’t see anything of note. *No places to hide . . . just as well, I suppose.*

He shot Robert a glance. “Are you ready for this, Enra?”

“Yes I am, Enra.”

Act III

Stefan waved the torch in front of his face, making sure he got all of the cobwebs out of the way. There were few things in this world he hated more than cobwebs and their inhabitants. “Be gone with you, vile creatures!” From the sheer volume of dust and webs down here, he could safely assume no one had been here for a few years. And that it was he who was down here last, three years back.

He’d found this passage when he was just skulking around before anyone else arrived. It seemed a little silly, but murder was just like most other professions. The more you did it, the better you became, and the more relaxed you grew. His first two times, he’d been very nervous, and gone up to the cabin – by foot, as he didn’t want to be seen by *anyone* – hours before anyone else arrived. As he was snooping around, trying to decide how and where to do the deed, as it were, he discovered a hidden hatch underneath one of the rugs.

The hatch led to a passage, which in turn led to another passage. This last one ended up in another cabin, on the other side of the lake. From this cabin, a short trail snaked through a few massive rock formations and up to a third, very large cabin.

Stefan wasn’t particularly interested in history, but he knew the war between Crown and Steadwic lasted for many, many years, and included a host of destructive weapons. With Old Steadwic being smack in the middle of the northerner’s warpath – and from what little attention he’d paid to his grandmother prattling on about this and that, the northerner’s were winning – it made sense to relocate the king and queen, among other important people. *And where better than up on a mountain, in the middle of nowhere?*

That would explain all the hidden passages, at least, and why the cabins were interconnected like this. Should one of them be found, for some reason, whoever was hiding could escape to the next one.

Stefan arrived at a ladder and carefully ascended. He was fairly certain the adjacent cabin was still very much vacated – it was in no shape to hold people the last time he was here – but he needed to be absolutely sure. There appeared to be a storm brewing, so he wouldn’t be able to lure his mark out in the snow. Either way, coming to the party as late as this Enra did, he probably didn’t want to stay outside anyway.

He carefully lifted the hatch on top of the ladder, peering into the small cabin. He couldn’t see anything at all, the tiny room pitch black around him. He raised the hatch all the way and stepped into the room, listening for any sounds.

Silence.

“That settles that, then!” He said loudly. For a few seconds, the silence kept, but then a rat scurried from one corner to the other.

Stefan remained perfectly still, but inside his chest, his heart was beating wildly. *Damn it all to hell!* He raised his torch and illuminated the walls of the abandoned structure. Just as he

remembered it from three years ago, down to the skeleton hidden in what had once been the pantry.

The wind had picked up outside, and howled through the cracks in the walls and roof. He could feel tiny flakes of snow squeezing through the bigger holes, and see tiny mounds piling up in every corner. If anyone ever found the body – soon to be bodies – they would have no trouble believing someone had gotten lost in a storm and hunkered down in here for warmth. In a fiercer storm, this poor structure would do nothing to keep the cold out, and anyone stupid enough to hide inside would freeze to death anyway.

Besides, no one ever wants to suspect murder. It complicates things so horribly. He turned around again, looking through one of the windows. He could see the frozen lake just ahead, but not the other cabin. Even with all the lights and fires burning, it was invisible through the snow.

Normally, Stefan would take a little more pleasure in all of this. He didn't consider himself crazy, or even a psychopath, but he did like getting a little creative. Some he'd thrown off the cliff, a few he'd drowned in the lake, and most he'd just left out in the snow. He'd usually be searching for some creative, yet effective way to kill Enra now, but once again something felt off about this one. He sighed and walked back towards the hatch. "You stay put, little rat. You'll soon have a fresh corpse to feed on."

He stepped back into the passageway, not waving the torch this time. *Better to just play it safe. Bring Enra down here, kill him and drag his corpse up to the other cabin.* The trickiest part would be removing the blood. Or better yet, making sure there wasn't any to begin with. He had a variety of poisons with him as well, but poisoning someone's drink at a party like this was incredibly risky. Everyone was sipping from each other's glasses or spilling everywhere. And even if he poisoned the right person, there was no telling where he would succumb.

For the first time since he started this ugly business, Stefan considered backing out. Although, he knew that wasn't a real option either. Whoever ordered these assassinations, they were extremely well connected. He would need to move into one of those abandoned cabins for the rest of his life if he wanted to live.

"Well, Mister Vadir, it seems you will be my final victim. I doubt that's any consolation for you, but there it is." He climbed the ladder and snuck back to the party, drink in hand.

The band had stopped playing now, and were probably somewhere drinking and eating with the rest of the guests. The crowd had thinned out a little, but was still substantial. Stefan did his best to avoid any eye contact this time. He'd been wandering about for way too long already. Usually, he was only visible to the guests for an hour or two, but now he'd been down here looking for Enra since before midnight. According to the grandfather clock ticking away near the door to the veranda, it was now almost four in the morning.

You haven't given your name, and you've barely talked to anyone. You'll be fine. Stefan was surprised to learn his knees were weak and his palms sweaty.

"Ah! George!" An old man's voice came.

Stefan didn't react. He knew no one by that name.

"George!" This time, the man grabbed Stefan's shoulder.

"What?!" Stefan barked, a little louder than he intended. *That's the old man I was talking to earlier . . . I introduced myself as George. Focus, Stefan!*

"Your friend, Enra Vadir?"

“Yes?”

“He’s here now. I saw him appear five minutes ago, just as the storm picked up.” He laughed. “Hell of an entrance if I do say so myself.”

“Thank you.” He stepped away. *Hell of a premonition if you ask me.* He took a deep breath and sidled into a corner, keeping one eye on the entrance.

Not a minute later, it opened, and in came one man. His short-cropped hair was littered with snow, as was his relatively thin jacket.

He must’ve come from down south, all right. Stefan thought.

He looked around, almost disappointed no one noticed him or particularly cared that he’d arrived. He was probably looking for someone to show the invitation to. Almost all newcomers did that. It felt exclusive, being invited up here. But the truth was, those who didn’t have any business being here, never bothered. And why would they? They were in the absolute middle of nowhere. No one would be stupid enough to come all the way here just for a free party.

Or so Stefan thought, at least.

The man, Enra Vadir, looked around some more and finally decided on his first target; the alcohol. He poured himself a whiskey and tried to look as casual as he could, failing miserably.

Now’s your chance! Get him before anyone else does! Stefan thought. “Hi!” He said, his voice thin and strange. Damn, but he was nervous.

The man didn’t turn. Instead, he finished his whiskey and poured himself another.

Stefan took the bridge of his nose between thumb and index finger, closing his eyes. *Focus, for fuck’s sake!* He took a deep breath and approached Enra. “Blue Marble, eh? You’ve got good taste.”

The man looked startled, his pupils large in his dark brown eyes. “Yes!” He exclaimed. “Um . . . I like it.” He paused, composing himself. “Not my favorite, actually. But it’s a quality product, no doubt about that.”

Great. He’s a snob. That should make this a whole lot easier. Stefan smiled, looking at the man. His cropped hair was very atypical for a westerner, as was his skin. He was close to tan enough to pass for a resident of the far west, Stefan supposed, but he didn’t look like he was native. *Enra Vadir, Enra Vadir, Enra Vadir,* he kept repeating in his mind. *Why not just ask?* Stefan shot his hand out. “Name’s George! Nice to make your acquaintance.”

“Rob . . .” The man coughed and cleared his throat. “Sorry about that.” He grabbed Stefan’s hand. “I’m Enra Vadir.”

“Vadir?” Stefan said, looking thoughtful. “That sounds very western.”

“Yeah, my . . . mother is from the far west.” He took another sip from his whiskey, his hand trembling lightly. “My father is a trader from the central continents. Guess who named me?” He smiled.

That made sense, and alleviated some of Stefan’s worries. He’d always trusted his gut on these matters, and up until now, something had told him this man wasn’t Enra. The pieces were slowly falling into place though.

That’s right, Enra, drink your whiskey. You’ll be dead come sunrise.

The two Enras

“No, thank you. I don’t really like whiskey,” Enra said, looking over his shoulder. Robert had gone in the front, while Enra snuck around back. He figured that if anyone got caught, it should be the one with the real invitation.

No one had gotten caught, though. It was fast approaching early morning, and everyone was either drunk or gone to bed. *This is either going to be easier than expected, or a whole lot harder.*

“Ah, allow me to make you a pale peasant then!” The woman said.

Enra looked at her, bent over the drink table, black dress pulled taut across her rear end. All reservations had wafted away with the snowstorm outside. *It was a good choice, coming here.* He smiled. “I’ve never tried a pale peasant, but I can’t imagine ever saying no to you.” He wasn’t quite sure what that was supposed to mean, but as long as she took it to be flirtatious, he was good.

“Ah, aren’t you the charmer?” She mixed some liquor, sugar and pressed fruit, and presented Enra with a thick, white drink.

Enra took it and looked at her face. Her eyes were as blue as two sapphire studs, glowing in the dim light. Her hair was bright blonde and combed straight, draping her soft and flawless shoulders. Her arms, Enra thought, were just the perfect balance between soft and toned. “I’m Enra, by the way. Enra Vadir.” He took a sip. “And this is delicious!”

The woman laughed, flashing a set of perfect white teeth, framed by deep red lips. “I’m glad!” She leaned closer. “My name is Sif.”

“Sif?” Enra repeated. “That’s quite a unique name.”

“So is Enra.”

He nodded. “I suppose we come from each our extreme. You’re probably from Crown, right?”

“Yes,” she smiled wider. “And you’re from . . . Tirmas?”

He gave her a smug grin. “No.”

“Phyr?”

“Phyr?!” Enra asked. “Heavens no! Do people even live there?”

“Aevon, then!” she laughed. “The jewel of the west!”

“That’s right.” He leaned closer. *This is silly, but she’s just drunk enough that this might work.* “And you must be the jewel of the north.”

“Aw!” She pressed her head against his arm. “You’re so sweet!”

Enra placed his arm around her, stroking her soft shoulders. There was something about this woman he really, really liked. He wasn’t about to just waltz in here and fall in love, of course, but she wasn’t like his usual bedfellows. She seemed kind and caring, somehow. That spark in her eyes wasn’t lust or cruelty, it was . . . something else. “Sif . . .” He mumbled. “It has been an honor and a privilege to meet you. And each and every pale peasant I consume henceforth . . .” They both snickered at that. “Shall forever remind me of you.”

“You talk like you’re going away.” She looked outside. “I think you’re pretty much stuck here with me, at least until this all blows over.”

“Oh, I intend to stay. But I have some business to take care of. Isn’t that why we’re all here, in the end?”

“Business?” She scoffed. “People are here to drink and fuck.”

Enra sighed. “I see . . .” He liked drinking and fucking as much as the next person, but if he didn’t at least *try* to talk to someone, this trip would be a colossal waste of time and money. “May I ask what it is you do, Sif?” He raised his glass. “Apart from making delicious drinks, that is.”

Sif nodded. “I was a bookkeeper, up in Crown.”

“Was?”

“The man I worked for had other . . . designs for me.”

“I see.” Enra looked down. “Did he hurt you?”

Sif laughed. “Hurt me? No! He asked me to join him in the blessed union, and I said yes.”

Enra ran a hand through his thick hair, narrowing his hazel eyes at Sif. “And where is your husband now?”

Sif shrugged. “At home, in Steadwic, I suppose.”

There was sadness in Sif’s eyes. Just a glimmer, but Enra could sense it. “So why are you here?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I thought only people of . . . significance were invited.”

As much as Enra enjoyed his drink, it wasn’t as good going up his nose. Sif had chucked her pale peasant at his face with frightening speed, chunks of fruit bouncing off his chin and nose.

Note to myself: Never call a lady insignificant. He sighed and wiped a few bits of fruit from his face. When he opened his eyes, Sif was gone. *Shit . . . I need to talk to Robert.*

The cabin was bigger than it had appeared from outside, but it was by no means huge. Still, Robert had vanished like the early morning dew underneath the burning Aevon sun. Sif wasn’t what Enra would call a reliable source, but from what he’d gathered this party was nothing like what he’d been led to believe.

Robert tried to be discreet, but he still consumed most of his food in two bites or less. There wasn’t many people paying attention anymore, and the hot food had turned cold – and, vice versa. Still, he tried to look as dignified and distinguished as he could.

“This is your first time up here, isn’t it?”

Robert nodded. “Is it that easy to spot?”

“Well, right now you’re eating like a proper poor person, so that certainly doesn’t help. But what really gives you away is that you’re trying to act like you belong.”

That felt like a low blow to Robert. He didn’t belong, that much was true, but he could still look the part, couldn’t he?

“I meant no offence!” Stefan placed his hand on Robert’s shoulder and turned him in a semi-circle. “Look at these idiots.”

Robert got Stefan's point immediately. He didn't see a bunch of rich, pompous assholes. He just saw people. He saw people kissing and drunkenly groping each other. He saw people stuffing their face with food and drink. He saw someone try to dance, only to go head first into a table. And he saw women and men who probably started the evening looking like the most beautiful people on the face of Noman, but who now looked like a circus sideshow.

"Want to leave these assholes to their drunken shenanigans, and sample some real drink instead?"

Robert scanned the room. Whether presenting himself as Enra the inventor or Robert the writer, it wouldn't matter. None of these people would listen to what he had to say. None of them would accept documents, or books, or even information more complex than yes or no. He figured he might as well make the best of it. And this man did appear to have good taste in whiskey. "Lead the way, George."

Stefan smiled. "Follow me, Enra. I promise you'll like this."

Robert looked around as George led him towards the floor above, trying to spot the real Enra. He couldn't see him anywhere, but the beautiful blonde in the black dress he'd seen him talking to earlier was storming off towards the kitchen. *Did Enra finally fuck up? That'll be a first.*

There really was no point in this name-swapping business anymore, but seeing as Robert had introduced himself as Enra to begin with, he was stuck with that name for the remainder of the evening. He decided to just stash his documents in their room – *the room of the two Enras* – and try to have some fun while there was still some people awake. After sampling George's hidden stash, he could always come back and try his luck on someone of the female persuasion.

When Robert emerged in the hallway again, George was holding a tiny black piece of cloth. Robert didn't know why exactly, but it reminded him of some tool kits he'd seen fishermen and hunters use.

"Ready for some proper whiskey?" George asked.

"Ready," Robert smiled and followed George back down, past the kitchen and into a moldy back room. He paused and looked at George in the dim light. "Um . . . if you're trying to persuade me into doing something else . . . I don't really swing that way."

"Not to worry, Enra. I prefer women as well." He searched the ground with his hand, and eventually found a hatch. "This tunnel leads to another cabin, long abandoned. I keep everything there – that way I can just leave it for next year, and the year after that."

Robert climbed down the ladder and into the darkness. "How many times have you been up here?"

"This will be the seventh," Stefan replied, closing the hatch behind them.

Enra burst through the door leading to their room, yelling, "Robert!" But the room was completely empty, save for the documents Robert had carried. *He must've figured out he wouldn't need them either.* He looked out the window, seeing nothing but twirling snow and his own reflection. It was good to be out of the cold, but now another chill had penetrated his bones. *What the hell is going on?* He sat down on the bed, resting his face in his hands.

Clearly, this party wasn't to celebrate innovation, invention or anything else. The attendees were rich, no doubt about it, but that seemed about the only thing they had in common. After

having the pale peasant tossed in his face, Enra had taken a sweep of the cabin, looking for Robert. He'd talked to those still capable of replying, and none of them could really explain why they were there. "It's tradition!" Seemed the most standard response.

He leaned back, contemplating just falling asleep, when he heard footsteps in the hallway. *Heels, and a light build.* Someone tall, slim and pretty, no doubt.

Enra got up from the bed and walked back into the hallway. "Sif!" He exclaimed.

The woman took a step back, her sapphire eyes gleaming with surprise.

"I'm sorry about earlier!" He took her hands in his. *This shit always works, doesn't it?* "Please, Sif, you're my only hope."

Sif frowned, but didn't pull away. "What the hell is that supposed to mean."

"I was tricked into coming here. And so was my friend." Now that he said it aloud, it sounded so silly. But all at once, it also became clear to him: His invention had merit. It was the only explanation for all this trickery. *Someone wanted me to come here, so they could steal my designs.* There was that paranoia again, but this time it came as a relief. He'd been tired, cold and dizzy for two weeks now, his plans and designs the furthest thing from his mind. Now, it all came crashing back. Either that, or . . . *no, I don't even want to consider the alternative.*

"Tricked? How so?" Sif looked at him with suspicion in her eyes.

What if it's her? He thought. *What if she's the thief?* He looked in her eyes, almost losing himself in that calm and kind blue glow. She didn't seem interested in his room at all, and she hadn't noticed he wasn't holding his papers anymore. He decided to trust her, for now.

"I received an invitation, telling me I was eligible to attend this most prestigious party, or whatever, because of an extraordinary innovation on my part." He sighed. "That's why I was so brash earlier, I never meant to imply—"

Her lips were on his. He struggled for a few seconds, but soon found himself unable to resist. Her kiss was soft and sweet, just like her personality, and her body. Enra placed one hand around her neck and deepened the kiss, tasting her tongue.

After a little while, Sif broke the kiss, eyes still locked on his.

"What was that for?" He asked.

She shrugged. "Just wanted to see if your lips were as full and soft as your hair."

He smiled. "And?"

Sif turned sideways, leaning against the wall. "So, who is this friend of yours? And what's this innovation?"

Enra tried to still his beating heart, focusing on her face instead of her soft arms. "My friend's name is Robert . . . but, he . . . goes by Enra."

"Why?"

"We sometimes swap names when we're out drinking, just for fun." Though it sounded pretty stupid now. "This time, we decided to both go under my name."

"Because of the invitation?"

"Yes." *She catches on quick. Be on your guard, Enra. Don't let her fool you.* But in some ways, it was already too late for that. He was unable to keep his eyes off her body, and found himself wanting to see more. Pining, even. He wanted to see all of her.

"So you were duped . . . so what?"

“Who did it? Who invited me? And what possible reason could they have, other than to steal my designs?”

“What are the designs for?”

“Are you listening to me, Sif? Do you seriously think I’ll tell you that right now?”

She turned against him, leaning close. “If I really want you to, yes.” She kissed him again, but this time, he broke the kiss.

“No.” He said. “You’re toying with me!”

“And you aren’t toying with me?!” She laughed and rolled her eyes. “You introduced yourself as a bartender, but you can’t make drinks for shit! You told me some bullshit story about being robbed on the way here, and you-”

“We *were* robbed on the way here!” He interrupted. “But Robert stopped it!”

“Oh, Robert did! Not you, like you told me earlier?”

“Listen to me, Sif! Something is wrong! Can you at least believe *that*?” He looked around, searching for the magical words as if they were written somewhere nearby. “Even if you don’t believe me, you’ll get to do something a little more adventurous than talk to all these fucking drunkards.”

Sif sighed. “What do you need me to do?”

“Find Robert! I’ll make sure no one steals the documents.”

“You’re going to stand watch?”

“What? Of course not! I’m going to hide them, then come help you look.” He paused for a second, feeling cocky. “Then I should very much like to get you out of that dress.”

Sif blushed a little, then curtsied. “Why? Don’t you like it?”

She looked even more divine with her cheeks all rosy, and Enra was inclined to forget about both the documents and Robert. *He’d want me to. That’s the worst part. He’d want me to go get the girl instead.* He pushed the thoughts away. “I love the dress. It’s the prettiest fucking dress I’ve ever seen. But I have this slight suspicion that whatever is underneath is even prettier.”

She blushed more intensely and smiled. “Hide your precious documents, and I’ll go look for your friend . . . then we’ll see about the dress.”

Enra went back into his room and grabbed the documents, both his own and Robert’s copies. He looked at them for a long time. *They shouldn’t have been too difficult to snatch. Not from me, not from Robert.* And if someone had taken Robert without bothering with the documents, that meant Enra’s second and far worse suspicion might be true. *They’re not after the documents . . . they already have designs of their own and simply want to stop the competition.* He closed his eyes, his heart beating wildly within his chest. *They want to kill me.*

He opened a window and produced a box of matches. It was best to make sure, either way. He braced against the cold and the snow pouring into the room and set fire to the stack of papers. As the orange hue flared up, he chucked the whole stack out into the biting wind. He closed the window and sat down on the bed again.

They want to kill me . . . or someone who’s posing as me.

Robert was starting to suspect there was no whiskey to be had. It was clear from the looks of the passageway that no one had been down here for a while. If George had a stash, he could’ve

just placed it here, within easy reach. “Why bother carrying it all the way to the other cabin? Couldn’t you just stash it down here?” He asked.

“I could, but I don’t drink it at the party anyway.”

“Never?”

“No. It’s *my* stash, so I don’t want to share it with those assholes back there.”

Robert felt at once a little relieved and a little more frightened. *If nothing else, I can at least get some good stories out of this. The people love stories where the author himself is involved somehow.* “But you want to share it with me?”

“I’ll be honest with you, Enra. Usually, I bring a girl or two.”

“Really? Two?”

“Happened once, long ago. It was a clear night, and the cycles of all three moons overlapped. I’m told that only happens once every two thousand years or so. I told them I had a spot with both a roof and a fire pit, and, of course, expensive alcohol.”

“Sounds . . . romantic.”

“It was. Until one of them found her lover floating face down in the lake.”

Robert felt a lump in his throat. He’d shared a drink with many a colorful individual. Most had stories to tell, and many embellished these stories with fighting and sex and murder. But there was something extremely mundane and truthful about this man’s voice. As if everything he said was the absolute truth, but far from anything he himself found interesting or exciting. “You’re shitting me?!” He finally said.

“Nope! Like I said, it was a clear day and the air was warm.” He paused. “Well, as warm as it get up here, anyway. The ice was thin and the man was drunk . . . it happens.”

“I suppose.”

“Don’t underestimate how stupid people get when they drink, Enra. Every year someone bites it up here.”

“Every year?” The wind howled ominously in front of them. Wherever this passageway led, they were nearing the end of it.

“Some drown, some freeze to death and some just disappear, never to be heard from again.”

Robert swallowed hard. “You’re just trying to scare me, George.” That’s what Robert hoped he was doing, in any case.

“Maybe a little.” George placed his torch in a sconce on the right wall. “Is it working?” He grinned, his face glowing orange in the dim light.

Robert shrugged. “It is, actually. I don’t want to drown.”

George smiled wider, grabbing the rung of a ladder next to the flickering torch. “Don’t worry. You won’t.”

Robert followed him up the ladder. “You sound certain.”

“Oh, I am!”

They emerged in a cabin roughly one sixth of the one with the party. The cold came in waves against Robert’s skin, but was nowhere near as bad as the journey up the mountainside. *It’s a few hundred years past its prime, but it keeps some of the cold out nonetheless.* Robert had always wanted a cabin up on the mountains or in the woods. Just a tiny forlorn place where no one came and no one went. Just him and his writing, and Noman’s green, blue and grey nature surrounding him. “Nice!” He exclaimed. “So no one really owns this?”

George shrugged. “None that has laid claim, at least. I figure it’s some remnant from the great war.”

Robert nodded. “That makes sense. If Steadwic was ever taken, the king and queen could flee up here.”

“Damn it, Enra! I like you!” George said.

Robert frowned. “Is that a problem?”

“No, not really. I just . . . seldom meet people I like up here.” He walked into another room, but Robert could still see him through the cracks in the wall. He opened a chest, and produced two bottles of whiskey.

Robert rubbed his hands, looking around some more. It had three rooms, from what he could see. Probably a kitchen and a bedroom, plus the living room, which he gathered he was now standing in. There was an obtrusive *clunk, clunk, clunk* from a stony husk in the next room. A slab of stone Robert guessed had been the oven. *Just the wind down the chimney, you scaredy-cat.*

He could feel a few specks of snow hitting him in the face, but the cabin was surprisingly sturdy for such an old artefact. He could hear the rattle of paper coming from the wall facing the lake. *Strange, they didn’t isolate with paper that long ago . . . it was a whole lot more precious back then.* He took a few steps towards it, and soon discovered it was a document, pressed against the outer wall by the gale. *What the hell? Did this come from the party?* He reached through a large crevice in the wall and managed to yank the paper through. It’s edges were singed slightly, and the ink smudged, but he could read it easy enough.

It was a part of Enra’s designs.

“Shit! Enra’s in trouble!” Robert blurted out.

“Is he now?”

Robert spun. George was standing right behind him, holding two bottles of whiskey between the fingers of his left hand, and a knife in his right. Not thinking, Robert burst into motion. *I won’t die for you, Enra! I’m sorry, but there’s a limit.*

When Enra opened the door, Sif was outside, waiting. “It’s completely dead down there,” she said. “No sign of your friend.”

“Shit!”

“Enra . . . I have to tell you something.” Sif pushed him back into the room and sat him down.

“There’s no time, Sif! We can-”

She placed a finger across his lips. “It might concern your friend.”

Enra frowned. “What is it?”

“Two years ago, I lost my husband up here.”

Enra was quiet for a while, then sighed. “I’m very sorry, but what does that have to-”

“I’m pretty sure he was killed!” She stood up, looking out the window towards the lake. “He was found floating in the lake. It was a warm year, and the lake is deep, so it wasn’t completely frozen over. They said he must’ve been drunk and tried to walk across.”

Enra shrugged. *I empathize, Sif, but I’ve got problems of my own right now.*

“He didn’t drink, Enra! Not even once!”

“Once again, I’m truly sorry, but how does this help me? Or Robert?!”

“I think it’s happened before, and that it happened again last year.” She turned away from the window, the moonlight giving her a purple halo. “Someone is up here, Enra. Killing people! Every single year someone disappears, or drowns or freeze to death!”

“Just one?”

Sif nodded.

“I’ll admit it’s a little strange . . . drunk people doing stupid things often do it in pairs, or more.”

Sif nodded again. “And no one ever sees them die, they’re always found afterwards. Except, of course, those who no one saw again.”

Enra stood next to her, holding her close. *I have no idea how to do this, but . . .* “I’m sorry, Sif. I . . . you don’t deserve this.”

“Neither do you, or your friend. So we need to find this killer before he kills the wrong Enra.”

“Did you find any information about the killer? Do you have any idea where to start?”

“Yes, I do.” She looked down and wrestled away, as if reliving a particularly painful memory. “A man who called himself Frederick took me and a friend to a secluded cabin on the other side of the lake.”

Enra looked at her, not saying anything.

“Oh, shut up!” She frowned. “My friend was drunk out of her fucking mind! I tagged along to make sure she didn’t do something she’d regret!”

“And you think he might’ve taken Robert there? What are we waiting for?” Enra started for the door.

“Enra! This man is a killer! A very skilled one at that! I tried going back to that cabin last year, looking for him . . .” She trailed off.

“And?!”

“And I found a fresh corpse, stabbed right in the small of his back.”

“And you didn’t tell anyone?!”

“No . . . if I did, the killer wouldn’t be back this year.”

“You stupid bitch!” Enra barked, shocked to hear the words coming out of his mouth. “Robert could very well be dead now because of you!” He hadn’t really entertained the idea for real yet, but now it all crashed into his mind like an avalanche. *He wouldn’t even be up here if it wasn’t for me.*

“I did what I had to . . .” Sif’s voice grew cold and dark, her eyes purple and icy in the moonlight. “I won’t let him get away with this Enra. He needs to die!”

Enra saw surprisingly little emotion in her face, but he suspected she was telling the truth. This was too much to make up on the spot. Sif would stop at nothing to find this man. He grabbed a cigarette from Robert’s jacket on the bed. *If ever there was a time to start . . .* This was all too surreal. How could he even trust this woman? How had it all turned out like this? Enra’s paranoia had run amok once or twice before, but this was extreme. *Why would anyone want to kill me? Or Sif’s husband for that matter . . .* He went for the door again. “I’m not sitting here if Robert is in danger!”

“Enra-”

“No! He’s up here because of me, don’t you get that?! He accompanied me to make sure I got here, because this was supposed to be some kind of big fucking break for me!” Enra could feel the adrenaline rising. “He even agreed to *pose* as me for fuck’s sake! If anything happens to him, that’s on me!” He was screaming now. “Especially if it’s me they fucking want!” He tore the door open, tears welling in his eyes. “So you can either help me, or you can fuck off!”

Sif nodded. “I’ll show you the passageway.”

Act IV

Stefan dropped the two bottles and spun as Enra passed him. He was surprised by the explosiveness of Enra's movement. Sure, Stefan had a knife, but that was for the sealed bottles. How the hell had Enra suddenly deduced Stefan was going to kill him? *Doesn't matter, just stop him.*

Stefan flipped the knife in his hand and threw it. Enra let out a scream of pain, but the knife didn't stick; it wasn't made for throwing.

"Don't run, Enra! Don't make this harder on yourself!"

But Enra was already out the door, heading for the lake.

Another drowning? Stefan stopped, considering this. *No, the ice might not be thin enough, there's a small chance he might reach help.* He was just about to follow when he felt a tingle in the back of his head. It was impossible to hear anyone approaching from here, this he knew, but still . . .

The wind was still howling, gusts of snow coming through the open door of the cabin. This, combined with the heavy wooden hatch would surely drown out any noise coming from below, but still he swore he could hear voices down there. He'd survived this long by trusting his instincts, so he wasn't about to stop now. *Enra ran into the storm, Stefan . . . bleeding. There's time. Don't get caught red handed!*

He carefully approached the hatch, lifting it as quietly as he could. There was nothing, just the wind, now whistling through the crack he'd made with the hatch. *You saw the cobwebs, Stefan, people don't come down here.*

Unless they'd been there before, that was. He carefully opened the hatch completely and worked his way down the ladder. *I thought I saw that lady back there . . . the one whose husband I killed. Could she really be back?* He'd only seen her backside back at the party, and, as stunning as it was, it could've belonged to anyone.

The hatch closed above him, and he was now standing in pitch black darkness, listening. *I had a bad feeling about this one all along. I should've listened to my gut and just turned the whole thing down.* He wasn't too sure that was actually an option, though. The kind of people who kept assassins in their employ rarely took no for an answer.

He listened for a few more minutes and was just about to go back up when he heard a whisper. *Fuck!*

A few seconds later, another whisper came, and then he could hear footsteps approaching. Whoever it was, Stefan had the element of surprise on his side, and was probably the better fighter. *But if more than one guest disappears, this whole operation goes sideways.* If he was to have any chance escaping this job, he at least needed to make sure someone else could continue when he was gone.

The whispers increased in volume, creeping towards the corner he was leaning against. He peered towards the sound, but saw nothing. *They didn't even light torches . . . do they know I'm*

here? He looked back towards the smaller cabin. It was probably too late to go back now, the sound of the hatch would carry, and whoever the whispers belonged to would find him.

He pressed himself up against the corner. The hallway was narrow, but maybe he could just hide and let them pass him, then run the other way, back to the main cabin?

No, that'll make too much noise as well. Besides, they'll find what's up there, and then it'll be over for both me and my employers. Double fuck! Stefan realized there was only one option left: confronting these people right here, and pray to Noman they were just a couple of partygoers looking for a secluded place to do their business.

"Excuse me!" He cleared his throat.

Silence.

"I can hear you, over there in the darkness." He continued.

More silence.

"I'm going to light a torch now, all right?" He could hear a whisper, and when he lit the torch, two frightened faces revealed themselves. It was a tan man, probably from somewhere west, and a beautiful woman in a black dress.

"H-h-hi!" The man said.

"Hello yourself." Stefan waved the torch. "Such beautiful people! Come down here to do some nasty-business, have we?"

The two of them looked at each other. "Umm, yeah. Something like that," the woman said. Her hair was bright blonde, her eyes blue as ice and her legs as long as the passageway they were standing in.

Stefan suddenly felt a pang of recognition. "You!" He said.

"What about me?" She swallowed nervously.

"You've been here before, with me! You and that . . . brunette!" He tried to fake an empathic look as best as he could. "Your husband . . . oh, I'm so sorry!"

Her face twitched a little, and she leaned close to her friend and whispered something in his ear.

She was a tiny thing, but he had no doubt she was capable. There were muscles in those arms, and breasts and asses didn't stay upright like that on weak bodies. *Still, I could take her. She looks unarmed and she's not much of a fighter, I think.* She could maybe outrun him, or take one extra blow to go down, but she couldn't defeat him in single combat. Not many could.

"Look, mister." The man said. "We're not looking to intrude on your personal . . ." He looked around. "Space . . . so maybe we'll just look for another place to do . . ." He turned towards the woman – Sif, her name was. Stefan remembered now – and shrugged apologetically. "Our business."

Stefan looked him over. He was tall and thin, probably more of a runner than a fighter. His hair was cascading down and around his face much like the mane of a lion, but Stefan didn't see much of a predator in those brown eyes of his. *A handsome devil, to be sure, but nothing even resembling a problem.* But he couldn't attack them. Not while other options lingered, anyway. "Why are you here?" He looked at Sif. "Really?"

She leaned towards the man and kissed him on the corner of his mouth. He seemed as surprised as Stefan was, but went along easily enough. "Come on, handsome, let's find someplace else." They started moving slowly out of the circle of light.

If Stefan sent them on their way now, would they be back again? Why were they even here in the first place? *Maybe she wants to avenge her husband?* No, that wasn't possible. Stefan had taken every precaution. He was even there when the man was found, and Sif gave no clue she suspected anything. *And she doesn't appear to have that much of a poker face.*

A few more steps. They were mere silhouettes now, vanishing from sight.

There was something about the man she was with, though. Stefan's instincts flared up like he'd eaten bad meat, his stomach almost rumbling. *Something is off . . .* What was it Enra had said back there? *'Enra's in trouble.'* *Who talks like that?* He took a few steps forward, bringing the two supposed lovers into his halo again. "Sif!" He said. "Who's your friend?" *The one who looks more western than the man bleeding in the snow.* Had they really managed to pull the wool over Stefan's eyes like this? Had he grown complacent from doing this too long?

The man pointed at himself, looking sheepish. "Me?" He asked. "My name is . . . umm . . . Robert." He paused. "I'm a writer."

My name is . . . umm . . . Stefan thought. *I've heard that once before. That man back there is Robert isn't he? And you're Enra, you fucking cunt!* Stefan's mind was working overtime. *Just kill them all!* His baser instincts said. *Murder everyone and let Noman sort them out later!*

"He knows!" Sif said. "Run!"

But Enra – the real Enra – stood his ground. "Not without Robert!" He pointed at Stefan, trying his best to look threatening. "What did you do to him?"

Stefan grinned now, slowly losing himself to his animal. He wasn't H'arian, true enough, but he had an animal nonetheless. Everyone had. "The same thing I'm going to do to you!"

But before Stefan could do anything, Sif was on him, dress, skin and blonde hair all a blur. Damn, but she was fast that one. Her nails dug into his skin and tore at his clothes. "Run, Enra! Find your friend!" She turned back towards the befuddled Stefan. "This is for my husband, asshole." Her fist found his face.

Although little, her fist felt like a rock against Stefan's face. But he knew something Sif apparently didn't. The human face was harder than a fist. Sif reeled, cradling her hand. With any luck, she'd broken her own wrist. Stefan had seen it plenty of times. He'd even broken his own a few times, when the bloody mists of adrenaline overtook him.

But not now. Now he was as cool as the snow above. *There's a time to rage, and this isn't it.* He jumped to his feet and delivered a solid kick to Sif's midsection. She doubled over and retched onto the cold dirt floor. *A few broken ribs, perhaps. You'll grow to be whole again. Or, however whole you can be without your husband.* He ran back towards the main cabin. It would be safer going through the party and try to intersect Enra – or Robert, or both – that way. He felt a tug, and was surprised to see that Sif had grabbed his jacket. "You've got to let it go!" He screamed. "I'm just an assassin! I'm no more complicit in your husband's murder than the water who drowned him." He shrugged out of his jacket and ran for the cabin, leaving Sif coughing and heaving in the lonely halo of the torch.

The race for Robert

Enra burst through the hatch, the cold slamming against him again. The door to the run-down cabin was wide open, the wind howling through in angry gusts, slowly filling the decrepit structure with snow.

Enra could barely feel the snow whipping against his face, the adrenaline pumping hard. He immediately saw footsteps going through the door. And blood. “No!” He screamed. “You’re not dying for me, Robert!”

He made for the door, the cold and the wind intensifying as he entered the snowy landscape. The trails were hard to see in the wind, but the specks of blood here and there shone bright in the purple moonlight. *This is a nightmare*, Enra thought. *This is nothing but a terrible, terrible nightmare.*

His heart was racing and his blood boiling in his veins, but he was starting to really feel the cold now. *It’s snowing, though, that means it can’t be too cold around here, right?* But at that point Enra wasn’t sure if the snow was falling from the sky, or just rising from the ground with the cold gusts. “Robert!” He screamed.

No matter what happened, Enra somehow knew he would never be the same after this. He could feel a part of himself vanishing up there in the cold. The playful, unserious, bantering Enra was writhing in the freezing snow. From here on out, he would apply himself. No more drinking or name swapping or bedding random women. *I have a fucking job to do! And I have an idea the world needs to hear!* He could feel a tiny spark inside, allowing him to push a little further and a little harder.

The snow reached him to his knees now, and he was no longer certain he was following any kind of trail. *The wind has probably blown over Robert’s tracks anyway.* Every inch hurt as he pressed forward, his thighs and abdomen burning from the effort. “Robert!” He shrieked. “Robert! Answer me you piece of shit!” He struggled to fill his lungs and roared again: “Robert! I read your book! Let’s discuss it!” That ought to get his attention if he was still alive, at least.

“Please! Oh, Noman above, please be alright.” Enra whimpered, falling and getting up again. *I’ll read every last letter of that book of yours! I’ll discuss it with you every day and even read the draft for the next one . . . I’ll do anything! Just please don’t be dead because of-*

He fell straight on his face, the icy crystals digging into his lips and chin. “Damnit!” He looked around, seeing nothing but whirling snow. He tried screaming for Robert again, but his throat was raw and hoarse. He struggled back on his feet and took a few more stumbling steps forward. *It’s no use . . . I don’t know where he is, or even where he went.*

He closed his eyes and focused on the sounds surrounding him. He could hear the wind rustling through a few lone trees nearby, and the snow beating against his body. Somewhere, a crow was cawing in dismay, but apart from that, the world was dead – or, somewhere else.

Suddenly, Enra felt more alone than he ever had in his life. For a brief moment of time, he was the last living soul.

Enra's father had never been in the picture, and his mother had abandoned him at an early age, gone away on a spirit walk never to return. That was the story his uncle had given him, at least. Enra had always been an exceptional tinkerer though, and his uncle's tendency for hoarding had granted him a steady supply to tinker with. When Enra grew competent enough to mend things his uncle could sell, he quickly earned his first job, his payment being food, shelter and the occasional swig of booze.

But his uncle was drunk more than he was sober, and he was a mean one. He was never a picture of kindness, that much was true, but when he drank . . . Enra shivered at the memory, and at the cold that was now seeping into his bones. Yet he remained; alone, listening, waiting.

Enra escaped in his twelfth year, hiding away on a carriage heading through his little town. The carriage took him to Aevon, the great jewel of the west. Here, he kept tinkering, eventually finding work with many of the plantations scattered throughout the sands. Much of the west had taken to farming coffee, a brew who's popularity had exploded further east. A boy who could mend just about anything – and invent some new things while he was at it – was quite something to have on hand when you ran a plantation.

Years later he met Knud'sen and Anders. A transport they were carrying had been waylaid by harriers out in the dunes, and, not being very valuable for the common thief, the transport had been broken. Where Knud'sen and Anders had seen major losses, Enra had seen potential. He had repaired every last crate of the shipment, and been rewarded handsomely. Ever since, he'd been seeing those two whenever they came to port in Aevon. Almost every day after they settled there.

A particularly nasty gust came against Enra's face and almost knocked him over. He allowed the shiver to pass through his spine, and kept his eyes firmly screwed shut. Even the crow had given up now, the wind all that remained. *Come on, Robert! Give me a sign!*

Robert had come into Enra's life after trying – and failing – to seduce one of Enra's friends. While Robert was a handsome enough man, he wasn't nearly as handsome as he liked to think. As a result, his attempts at flirting and seductions could become a little brazen. Social etiquette – the one Enra had loosely observed throughout the years, at least – required Enra to help his female friend dispose of this man, but Enra took pity instead.

As it turned out, Robert did have some tricks up his sleeve, which brought him into the pants of another acquaintance of Enra. In the end, the two of them had broken it off, but by then, Enra and Robert – and, in turn, Anders and Knud'sen – had become fast friends. Strange and eccentric, and never ever willing to shut up about his latest written masterpiece, Robert had inserted himself into Enra's life as if he'd always belonged there. He was a pain at times, but mostly funny, charismatic and fiercely loyal.

And now, maybe dead. Enra opened his eyes, a few rays of light shining through the whirling snow. The storm was finally breaking, and the sun was starting to rise. One miserable day had ended, and another was about to start. "Robert!" Enra screamed. "Robert, for fuck's sake!"

There was a sound.

That wasn't a crow! That was a fucking voice! Enra started running, forgetting how stiff his legs were, ignoring the cold in his bones. "Robert!"

He could hear the voice again, coming from somewhere ahead.

“Robert! Just hold on, I’m coming for you!” Then there was a dreadful *crack*.

Enra stopped dead and looked down. The snow was still up to his knees, but there was water in his shoes. *I’m standing on the lake*, He realized. He tried a few more steps, the ice holding.

“Help!” The voice came again.

Enra breathed a sigh of relief. The voice belonged to Robert. As the wind calmed further, he could see more blood up ahead, next to a figure in the snow.

“I think the ice is breaking!” Robert said, his body barely moving.

Enra kept moving, hearing a cacophony of strange sounds underneath him. “Nonsense!” He yelled. “You’ll be fine.” He set his jaw and started running towards Robert.

The distance between the two cabins wasn’t that great, but Robert – not Enra – might still prove difficult to intercept. Not only was he wounded and confused, the wind was kicking up snow everywhere and there was almost zero visibility.

He was hardly the first person he’d lured into the cold up here, though. Stefan had seen close to every kind of behavior play out. Sometimes they clung to the walls of the cabin they had come from, trying to get around Stefan and back inside - one actually made it, and was still a pile of bones inside the pantry – other times they ran around in circles until they died from the cold or Stefan caught up.

So far, none had made it back to the cabin with the rest of the party, and Stefan would make sure this one wouldn’t either. *But did he circle back, or is he headed up here?* In hindsight, taking this route might be a bad idea, but following Enra would’ve given him a unique chance to ambush Stefan, and Stefan didn’t much care for being ambushed. Besides, he’d locked the hatch behind him, so if Enra and Robert went back inside the passageway, they’d be trapped there. *Along with that husbandless shrew.*

If that happened, he’d kill them all. He was cold and tired, and the bloodlust was on him now.

But Stefan didn’t think Robert had gone back. *No . . . he seemed assertive enough. He’ll probably run as fast as he can in a straight line, until he collapses.* It was the most popular choice, and in many ways the smartest. *Run straight away from your troubles, and you only need to outrun them to lose them.*

He walked down towards the lake, the wind slowly dissipating around him. It was still dark, but the sun was looming somewhere behind the mountains, struggling to cast its rays down between the peaks. *This whole ordeal has gone on long enough*, Stefan thought. *I need to end it now, before people start waking up.* This would be his last trip up here, he decided. He’d had just about enough of the cold and the dark.

He took a few more steps, and saw a shape hunched over. It was hard to see with all the snow and the wind, but Stefan estimated it was somewhere close to the middle of the lake. *He didn’t fall through, then.* The cold hadn’t been that hard this year, so the ice might be weak underneath all that snow. Stefan stepped a little closer, sitting down. *Should’ve brought my pistol and finished him from up here. Nobody would hear the blast anyway.*

Stefan pulled a knife from behind his coat – a thick coat he’d stolen from the entre – and was just about to move in to finish the job when another silhouette appeared in the snow, on the opposite side of the lake. The sun was creeping over the mountains now, and the storm was beginning to break. *They’ll see me coming, but at least I get to kill both of them without further trouble.* He rose to his feet and started running towards the lake. It was rough going, but Stefan was both light and strong, able to keep his feet from sinking too far.

He reached the edge of the lake before the pair spotted him, and by then it would be too late. The knife was his own, and it was perfectly balanced for the job. He raised his hand, and surveyed the situation for a few seconds. Robert was already wounded, probably critically, with the cold and all; Enra would be his target. “Goodbye!” He said.

Then he heard a dreadful *crack!*

Robert clutched Enra’s hand, holding on so hard their knuckles turned white, frozen veins lighting up in the thin, morning sunlight like blue rivers. Robert’s arm was streaked with blood, as was his face and his chest. He’d been clutching his wound, Enra realized, doubled over in the snow, praying for survival.

A prospect that seemed pretty bleak right about now.

Enra pulled as hard as he could, trying to stay on his feet, but it was hopeless. Robert weighed a ton, his blank eyes gazing into the next world. He was clutching Enra’s arm, trying not to slip and go under the water, but that was the only sign he was alive.

Enra threw a look back towards where he assumed the lake began, and felt a tiny sliver of hope emerge. It had been slow going, but they’d actually made some progress. “I’m going to get you out of here, Robert . . . I promise!”

“W-w-w-where is he?” Robert asked in a low drone.

Enra looked up, seeing hands flailing on the other side of the lake. The assassin had gone through the ice, but he hadn’t gone under the water yet. “He’s in the same predicament we are!” But Enra knew it wouldn’t last. He was faster and stronger than them, and he would probably make it ashore first. *And he’s used to this fucking climate, too.*

“I-I-I’m slowing you d-d-down.” Robert continued.

“You think?!” Enra pulled again, inching another feet. “But it’s my fault you’re up here, so shut up and let me save you.”

“You c-c-c-can’t.”

The words felt like a knife through Enra’s guts. He wouldn’t leave Robert up here. He *could* save him. He didn’t have a choice.

“I c-c-c-could’ve said I w-w-was Robert.” His voice was shaking and growing even more intelligible. “I could’ve t-t-told him myself.”

“But you didn’t!” Enra was crying now, the energy leaving his body. His arms were shaking from the effort, his body trembling from the icy water. “You protected me.”

“And n-n-now you need to . . . protect . . .” Robert’s grip slacked around Enra’s arm. “Yourself . . .”

Enra tried to get a better grip on Robert, but he was impossibly stiff and heavy. “No!” He screamed. “I won’t let you go!” Enra could feel himself slipping, his feet sliding between the

sheets of ice underneath the snow. Pinpricks climbed to his legs, then his knees. He was going under. Slowly.

“You have to.” Robert’s voice was a mere whisper, escaping from pale blue lips. His brown eyes were wide in shock, still staring into the beyond.

“I’m sorry . . .” Enra whispered back, warm tears streaming down his face. He released Robert and struggled backwards, trying to claw his way onto the snow before the ice burst completely and sent everything under. He could barely feel his legs, but his hands felt like they were being sliced with a knife every time he shoved them into the powdery surface to get a better grip.

Robert sank slowly out of view behind him, eyes closed now.

“I’ll bring you home,” Enra said. “I’ll make sure you don’t spend eternity up here.” He could no longer see where he was going, his eyes glued shut by tears and snow. He clawed, hissed, spat and cried, struggling to keep himself out of the water. “I’m so sorry, Robert. I’m so very-”

Another dreadful *crack*, and the ice gave completely.

Stefan struggled to get his coat off. Of course, he’d chosen the biggest, warmest piece of fur he could before going outside. He wasn’t planning on a swim, after all. *And I’m not about to get one, either!* He was pretty close to the edge of the lake, so the ice hadn’t broken too badly here, just a few holes and rifts to watch out for. If he could get this cumbersome fabric off, he’d be alright.

“Fucking, piece of shit, motherfucking hell!” He screamed. Shrugging his arm free and struggling away from the coat. “I must be the worst butt-fucking assassin in the world!” He kept trudging forward, the splashing underneath his shoes slowly diminishing.

How had this happened? How could he have been blindsided like this? He almost gave a little laugh. *Enra fucking Vadir showed up too late for his own assassination, and almost walked away with his life. Almost!* And it would stop at almost. This whole assignment had been a major fuck-up from beginning to end, there was no denying that, but Stefan would at least make sure it ended with the proper death of his target. *And his friend, I suppose.*

“I don’t care how much noise it makes or who sees it. As soon as I’m out of this hole I’ll-”

Suddenly, the ground seemed to shift underneath him. The snow behind him seemed to pull away from the edge of the lake, threatening to drag him away. The mound of snow he’d been trying desperately to climb disintegrated in front of him, turning opaque before it slid between the shattered ice.

Stefan fell forward, cutting his arms on the ice, thrusting his palms into the icy water. His feet slid backwards, making him feel weightless for a second. “Shit!” He screamed, clawing on the coarse bottom of the lake, slowly pulling himself back on his feet. He was close enough to the edge that the water only reached his chest, but with the ice and the snow, it was almost impossible to move.

He turned and looked back towards the other side, seeing neither Enra or Robert. *They must’ve gone under!* He allowed himself a brief smile. Maybe he’d have some luck today after all. With Robert’s wounds and Enra’s clothing, they wouldn’t last long in this lake. He shook some of the water from his clothes and gave a shiver. *Neither will I, for that matter.*

He tried to take a few deep breaths, then started working his way towards land. It was slow going, but he got there eventually, fighting through the ice and snow. He looked back one last time, still not seeing anyone else. There was still a little wind, but the sun was now shining bright, the snow glowing for miles in every direction. Enra and Robert were gone, and would stay gone. *My work here is done . . . finally.*

He'd need to stick around for a while to clean out the hidden room and make absolutely sure those two were gone, but after that, he would never return here. As far as Stefan was concerned, this whole ordeal had been a sign, he thought, that it was time to leave Brend and Sogen Valley behind. It had paid extremely well, but Stefan was sick and tired of the cold, and the deception, and the sneaking around. *Farewell, Enra. You were my last.*

If Enra thought he'd experienced cold before, he'd really have to reconsider after this. His senses were completely overloaded as he plunged into the icy water; assaulted by panic and freezing needles. All at once he forgot where he was and what he was doing, his arms flailing instinctively to keep him afloat.

His eyes were wide open as he tumbled and rolled amidst disintegrating chunks of snow, not knowing which way was up or down. He could see the sun reflected over and over, finally breaking free of the mountains and bathing the snowy slopes all around the lake.

Follow the light! A voice inside seemed to tell him. *Follow the light, and you will be fine! Reach for the sun, Enra!* Was that Robert?

Enra kicked and squirmed, but only sank further into the lake. It wasn't all that deep, but men had drowned in shallower – and warmer – waters than these. *Fight, Enra! Get to the light!*

Was it Anders or Knud'sen, trying to guide him? No, they wouldn't have been so encouraging. Enra almost smiled. *Self-made suffering deserve no pity. No pity at all.* That was Anders' motto, and that was exactly what this was: self-made suffering.

But not for Robert . . . you owe him this. Reach for the light, Enra.

Then he realized, it was his own voice. A tiny sliver of conscience, of awareness. Somewhere inside, he was still awake. He only needed to fight to stay that way. To stay alive.

He had no feeling in his arms or legs anymore, and he couldn't quite trust that what he saw was real, and not some strange vision on the edge of death. Still, he kicked away from the bottom of the lake, reaching for the floating shards of ice above, reaching for the burning sun. His arms seemed to move without his involvement, as did his feet. *Reach for the light.*

His vision grew white, and the tiny thrum inside his chest subsided. All noise faded into obscurity around him. For a few more seconds, he kept rising towards the surface, but then his arms stopped moving.

Then his feet.

The whiteness slowly turned grey, then black. *I'm not going to make it.*

Then, someone grabbed his wrist.

* * *

Sif pulled with all of her might, which was considerable given the size of her. Enra floated neatly to the surface, his body completely limp. Sif clenched her teeth and waded back towards the broken cabin, her feet stabbed by thousands of pinpricks.

“Come on Enra! Don’t you die on me!” She gave him another tug, forcing him out of the water and onto the snow.

Every inch of her was aching and throbbing. Her ribs were bruised for sure, but they might still be whole in there. “Here’s hoping.” Her wrist was another story entirely, though. She’d hit a few people before, but mostly with her hand open, and mostly without too much force. Sif didn’t know much about medicine and broken bones, but her wrist both looked and felt wrong: flaring with pain as she tried to move Enra across the snow.

Enra’s mouth was moving up and down, and every now and then, a sound escaped.

“Don’t you worry, alright? I’ll get you out of here.” She looked up at the sun, not quite understanding how it could be so very cold even though it burned so very bright. Her dress was completely askew, riding high on her thighs. She’d pulled the assassin’s jacket over her shoulders in an attempt to both contain her breasts and keep her warm, but it was a fancy jacket, made more for decoration than heat.

She pulled Enra a few more feet, looking down at her arms and thighs. They were both a mix of blue and purple, her skin almost translucent. “I can’t . . .” She said, pulling harder. Her wrist was a nightmare of pain and flames, her body cold as ice. She looked back, seeing the rundown cabin in the distance, lazing in the morning sun. “It’s too far.”

“Help . . .” Enra mumbled.

“I’m trying!” She screamed, tempted to kick him.

“Help . . .” He said again.

“I fucking can’t!” She was on the verge of crying.

“Help . . . you . . .” Enra said, his voice frail and ghostly.

“Help me?” Sif asked.

Enra tried nodding, but just shivered uncontrollably instead. Then, his feet started moving, his knees bending, his heels making grooves in the snow.

“You’ll help me move you!” Sif grabbed him underneath his shoulders again, and pulled as hard as she could. With Enra pushing slightly with his feet, it was much easier.

“Help . . .”

“Yes! You’re doing great Enra! Keep moving those feet!” Sif was sure her wrist would never heal at this point, and her ribs made it hard to breathe, but she kept going, cursing and growling.

Eventually, they made it back to the broken little structure. Sif was close to sweating now, after all that effort, but it mattered little to her hands and feet. She had almost no feeling in either, and she was starting to suspect she wouldn’t ever again.

She released Enra and started rummaging through the chest the assassin – Frederick, he’d called himself that fateful night – had kept his booze in. There were a few blankets there as well, and quite a few candles, matches and knives. “A hopeless romantic, that one.” She grabbed the blankets and a bottle of whiskey and started undressing Enra. “Your clothes are soaking wet, we’d best get you out of them.”

“Pretty . . . lady . . . pants . . .” Enra mumbled, and to Sif, it looked like he was smiling a little.

“I don’t want to get *in* your pants as much as I want you *out* of them . . . but I suppose that’s all the same to you, huh?” After taking off his shoes, she got the rest away by using one of the knives. She covered him with all the blankets she could find and placed the bottle of whiskey in his hand. “I don’t know if this actually helps, but it will surely make you feel better.” She grabbed another bottle for herself and took a huge swig.

“Thank . . .” Enra raised the bottle to his face, spilling a little, but pouring most into his mouth. “Thank . . . you.” He coughed and dropped the bottle.

Sif grabbed it before it spilled. “Don’t thank me just yet. There’s still work to be done.” She nodded towards the lake. “The assassin went back towards the other cabin, but he might still come down here to be sure.”

“Really?”

“Really . . . I have to go make sure that doesn’t happen.”

“Sif . . .” Enra raised his hand and meekly placed it in Sif’s.

“Don’t worry about it, I don’t plan to go after him. All I need to do is get someone else down here first. He won’t try anything if people are watching.” She placed her other hand on top and kissed him on the cheek. He was shivering now, which was a good thing as far as Sif knew. *It means he can feel something, at least.* “Try to stay warm, okay? And keep drinking. I’ll be right back.”

Enra watched her go, tears welling in his eyes. *Robert . . . you gave your life for me. I won’t soon forget it.* He tried to move, but his body felt like it was frozen solid. He remembered hearing that was good, though. *It’s when you start feeling warm you’re in danger.* No worries there, at least. Enra felt like he would never be warm again. He was shaking uncontrollably, and his hands and feet were throbbing in pain.

He clumsily raised the bottle, taking another swig of whiskey. He’d never been too fond of the stuff, but the warm glow spreading throughout his chest made it more than worth it. He squinted against the burning sun, willing some warmth into his body.

He soon drifted off, fading in and out of consciousness. It felt like hours passed, waiting for warmth underneath the thick blankets. The sun shone on relentlessly, glowing red through his eyelids. *I might escape freezing to death, but I’ll go blind instead . . .* He tried to move again, but he was too fatigued. That, and his hands hurt like hell when he tried to push himself up.

Then, as if reading his thoughts, a shadow fell across Enra’s face. A silhouette appeared in the broken doorway, backlit by the sun. “Sif . . .” No, it wasn’t a woman. The silhouette had broader shoulders. Enra felt a lump in his throat. “R-R-Robert?!”

The silhouette came closer, one hand fiddling in the pocket of his large coat.

Not Robert . . . Enra’s heart sank a little again. He’d been hoping against hope, but it just wasn’t possible. *And he wasn’t wearing a coat.* “W-w-w-who . . . ?” Enra felt a surge of panic. *Could it be . . . him?* Maybe the assassin had waited them out? He could’ve killed Sif as she was on her way back, and come down here to finish the job.

The silhouette knelt down next to him, pulling something shiny out of his coat.

Enra felt his heart beating wildly in his chest. A cruel reminder that he was still alive, but couldn’t really defend himself.

“You look cold, son.”

Enra blinked, but still the man was just blackness backlit by the winter sun. “W-w-w-what?”

The man put the shiny object in front of his eyes and leaned closer, placing a hand on Enra’s forehead. “I said you look cold.” The man gave a snort. “Which isn’t that strange, really. Taking a bath up here ain’t exactly a recipe for warmth.” He was an older gentleman with a round face. The shiny object was a pair of spectacles.

“S-s-s-self made . . . sufferings deserve no . . . n-n-n-no sympathy.” Enra stuttered.

The man threw his head back, giving a burly laugh. “Right you are, son. But I think I’m gonna give you a sliver of it anyway.” He patted Enra on the shoulder. “Name’s Maleric, by the way.”

Enra nodded. “M-m-m-much appreciated. I’m Enra.” He blinked again, a few tears escaping. “M-m-my friend . . . he went through with me. He-”

“I know, son.” The man nodded. “That pretty blonde thing told me . . . I’m sorry.”

“W-w-what did she say?” *And where is she?*

“She told me the two of you and your friend had a little too much of the good stuff, and decided to go night swimming.” He shrugged. “It went about as well as one could expect.” He looked Enra over. “Hell, better than expected, I’d say.”

Why? Why had she lied? Didn’t she want this man found and brought to justice? Didn’t she-

The revelation hit Enra as clear as the water had just hours ago: *She’s going after him herself. I have to stop her!* He tried getting up again, but this time he was stopped by Maleric. “You ain’t leaving this cabin, son. Not until I can be certain it ain’t gonna kill you.”

“I n-n-need to see her!”

“I understand; she was very pretty. But she’s gone, son.”

“G-g-gone?”

“She told me to tell you she was sorry, and all that. She had business of her own to tend to.”

Business of her own, huh? Enra sighed. So did he, when he thought about it. There was nothing to be gained from trying to find Sif. She seemed more than capable of taking care of herself. Besides, she had saved him, not the other way around. *I’d just get in the way again.* He smiled a bitter smile and blinked a few more tears onto the blankets.

“We’ve all been there, son. Don’t fret about it; you’ll find another chosen one.” He shrugged. “Maybe not with those thighs and those icy blue eyes . . . but someone.”

“Someone . . .” Enra repeated. Starting with the one who ordered this hit . . . Enra’s life had been disintegrated up here, but at least he’d learned one important thing. His invention had value, and someone desperately wanted to stop him from getting it built. That meant he needed to work twice as hard to make sure that happened. *For Robert.*

He didn’t realize it for a few years yet, but Enra Vadir died up there in the cold. His goofy, friendly demeanor was frozen in that lake, replaced by new determination and zeal. “Maleric?” He said, doing his best to still the shaking. “Get me to Steadwic. I have something that will change your life.”

Epilogue

Sif rounded the corner, struggling to see in the poor light. She raised her flintlock and squinted against a lamp burning bright in one of the windows.

Steadwic was a strange city, she thought. Crown, where she was born and raised, wasn't small by any stretch of the word, but it was manageable, somehow. If someone hid in Crown, they would be found the following day, a fortnight later by the most. In Steadwic, people came to disappear. *It's not just one city, it's dozens of small towns and communities circling one another.*

But Stefan hadn't disappeared, he'd been found. Sif wasn't sure if this was a sign of *his* arrogance, or *her* skills. She set her jaw and went around the next corner, the pistol almost slipping from her sweaty palms.

No one there, either.

She was in the fourth circle, somewhere deep within a residential area. The buildings were all two or three stories high, and built one atop the other. She was told Stefan was held up somewhere in one of these buildings – one with a green door – and that he was a very dangerous man, always on guard. Still, Sif had hunted more dangerous people than him before, though she much preferred pulling the strings. *But this time I'm on my own.*

Above, the white moon shone brightly, casting all manners of strange shadows into the narrow alleys she was navigating. Some of them were moving, others were still. Some were laundry, or curtains, or even strange decorations, and some where probably people. She had no idea how to tell everything apart, so she just focused on moving forward.

Voices cried out from some of the windows, a cacophony of screams and shouts, some in terror, some in pleasure and others in pain. Every inch of Sif wanted to leave this place behind, to throw the pistol on the ground and find someone else. But she needed him. He was the only one who knew how to do this without months of training. She went around the next corner.

And there he was.

The narrow alley opened up into a little courtyard, much like a clearing in a forest. Four storied houses rose on all sides, dotted with windows, some alight, some not. In the middle was a fire pit, a few benches and various pots and pans. And Stefan.

Sif raised the pistol with a steady hand.

"Hello, Sif." Stefan turned around, slowly. "It took you a while." He smiled. "I guess good looks can't get you everything, huh?"

"How did you know?"

He laughed. "Please. I botched my last assassination attempt and quite possibly gave my cover away. I had a very, very rich and powerful man funding my operations in Sogen Valley, and he's extremely disappointed in me right now. I have eyes and ears everywhere." He took one step closer, the pistol rattling in Sif's hand. "Needless to say, there ain't that many gorgeous women out looking for me."

Sif had always known she was pretty. She'd heard it from her parents first. Then her friends, then potential lovers, then actual lovers and a husband. Then from pigs, and older men, and drunkards. She was getting tired of hearing it now, but she supposed that was the way it needed to be. *If all they see is a pretty blonde thing, they'll be blind to everything else.* She smiled.

"I say something funny, beautiful?"

She raised her pistol slightly, aiming to the right of Stefan's head. Then she squeezed the trigger, just like her father had taught her.

Stefan gasped and threw himself to the ground as the gunpowder in the priming pan flared up. Half a second later, a boom thundered throughout the tiny square and a scream could be heard from a nearby window.

Stefan was taken off guard, but he immediately realized what Sif already knew. She'd used her shot, and reloading would take some time. He screamed and burst forward.

"Not so fast!" Sif commanded, pulling a second gun from a holster on her lower back. "I've still got one bullet here. It has someone else's name on it, but you're welcome to it if you're really that desperate."

Stefan hissed, like an animal. He was defeated now, and he didn't much like being defeated. "What do you want, bitch?"

Sif smiled again. *Not just a pretty face anymore, am I?* "You."

"What?!"

"Granted, you blew your last attempt. Apart from a few missing fingers, I hear Enra's doing alright-

"Few toes, too."

Sif shrugged. "Good for you."

Stefan kept his hands in the air, but took a few steps back and sat down on a stone bench by the fire. "What do you want me to do?"

"Apart from that ordeal a few months ago, you're a good assassin, Stefan. I would like to hire you."

"Why?"

"Not why, Stefan. Who."

"Who?"

"Your former employer. The one who ordered the hit on Enra."

"That's impossible."

"Far from it. I have the keys to his house and his address."

Stefan looked at her, mouth slack in surprise.

"Don't look so stupid, Stefan. These things always have a twist at the end of them, you know that."

"I . . . I just pull the trigger, mostly."

"Good, because that's exactly what I need you to do."

"But . . . why?"

Sif sighed. "Because he's my employer as well. I was at that cabin to oversee the hit on Enra, but when I got a look at his designs, I realized he was much, much further along than our friend Thomas."

"But your husband, and the-

“Wake up you fucking idiot! Who do you think ordered the hit? Who do you think made sure he was at the right place at the right time? I was there to make sure he died, just like I was with Enra.”

“But you were mortified at his death! You-”

“I faked it. Something you should know a thing or two about as well.”

Stefan took a deep breath. “I’m gonna need a minute.”

“Several, from the looks of you.”

Stefan stood up and paced back and forth, kicking a loose brick into the darkness. “Why did you kill my guard?” He looked towards the window, at the slumped body hanging over the windowsill. He didn’t seem all that upset over his death.

“Because this is between you and me.”

Stefan took a few more steps, still contemplating. “I thought I was out of this game.”

Sif shook her head. “You’re never out of this game, unless you’re exceptionally smart or dead, and right now you’re neither.”

Stefan made a face. “Thanks for the vote of confidence, at least.”

“Just take the job, Stefan. You’ll be rewarded handsomely, and you’ll get to see your old pal Enra build one of the greatest innovations Noman has ever seen.”

“How could I possibly turn that down?” Stefan smiled a false and ugly smile. “When and where?”

Sif turned around and started walking away. “You’ll get the name as usual.”

Stefan frowned. “Usual?”

“Yes, we’ll have Nelson deliver it to your room.”

“What?! No!”

Sif looked back one final time. “Don’t worry, Stefan. I hear Sogen Valley is much nicer this time of year.”