

PATHFINDER

TALES™



Winter Witch

Elaine Cunningham

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PATHFINDER TALES: WINTER WITCH

ELAINE CUNNINGHAM
WITH DAVE GROSS



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To Liz Courts, Crystal Frasier, Hugo Solis,
and all the creators of *Wayfinder*.



Prologue

The Dancing Hut

In the Lands of the Linnorm Kings, children seldom weep, and the hardy northern women scream on in the rage of battle. Cursing, however, is a celebrated art mastered only once a woman approaches the moment of childbirth.

Marit perfected her art while writhing on her bed, the sheets already sodden with the sweat of her agony. Her only attendant sat hunched on a chair nearby. Ellasif had just entered her tenth winter. Her small face furrowed in concentration as she committed some of her mother's more inventive phrases to memory.

When the waves of pain ebbed and Marit lay limp and panting, Ellasif dipped a cloth into a infusion of soothing herbs. She wrung it nearly dry and draped it over her mother's forehead. It was bad fortune that the child had decided to come tonight, when their mother was already weak with fever, but the midwife had not been surprised. Everyone knew that storms called to the unborn.

And such a storm! Wind howled as it stalked through the village, scrabbling at the cottage and snatching away handfuls of thatching. Shards of ice clattered against the shuttered windows. Hailstones tumbled down the chimney to die hissing in the hearth fire. The candle on the bedside table trembled as yet another peal of thunder rolled in from the forest separating the village of White Rook from the eternally wintry land of Irrisen.

It occurred to Ellasif that the distant booming she'd heard since nightfall might not be thunder. The possibility of what else the sound might be stole her breath, and her lips silently shaped one of the curses she'd just learned.

Ellasif had never given much thought to the stories village children whispered of the winterfolk, to the maze of living fences that kept those fabled horrors at bay. But then, she had never imagined that the fences might fall.

She ran to the window and unlatched the shutter. Standing on tiptoe, she peered out into the clearing.

Rain and sleet fell steadily, a frigid downpour that clung to the roofs and trees in ever-thickening sheets of ice. Undeterred, the people of White Rook continued their work. The bonfire blazing in the village center cast a broad circle of light and—so it seemed to Ellasif—far more shadows than could be accounted for by the human inhabitants alone. There were restless spirits among the houses, large and small.

Most of the village women tended the birch grove, a natural palisade stretching north-south from the cliffs to the river. A lattice of vines connected the trees in an intricate pattern that was both maze and fence. The women went from one groaning tree to another, shaking ice from the drooping limbs.

An elder birch faltered under its burden and broke with a sound like a thousand shattered mead jugs. The women scattered as the tree crashed to the ground, bringing with it several of its small neighbors and the web of interlaced vines connecting them.

The clatter had not yet died away when another deep report rolled across the village. It was much closer than any previous boom, and there was no mistaking the sound that followed: the slow scream of a falling tree.

Ellasif braced for the impact, her breath frozen as she counted off the moments. The ground-shaking crash signaled the death of an ancient pine, one of the pillars supporting the fence of tree-thick vines White Rook's people had shaped and tended for generations.

The outer perimeter was coming down.

They could expect no assistance from any king. Opir Eightfingers had shown little interest in defending the border with Irrisen, despite the proximity of his capital, and there were those who said he was no true king for this and other reasons. There had been a time when Trollheim declared the village part of its territory, but Castellan Freyr Darkwine had not sent his Blackravens so far south since the start of the interregnum. The men and women of White Rook stood alone against the invaders.

The village women abandoned the birch grove to guard against whatever might come through the breach. Ellasif's hands itched for the grip of a weapon as she watched the women scramble into a new position. She scrubbed her palms against the rough wool of her skirt and tried to push the battle-lust aside. She knew her place was here. Soon she would be an elder sister, with all the responsibility that role entailed.

But the frenzy of battle preparations proved too tempting to resist. Ellasif lingered at the window, watching as men rolled barrels of vjarik, a distilled spirit strong enough to blind a linnorm, into the stone-paved trench that formed a barrier around the village. Warriors took up positions a hundred paces behind the fire moat, weapons in hand and tall wooden shields lying ready on the ground before them. Ellasif's eyes brightened with anticipation. She'd never seen a shield wall in battle. According to the bards' tales, few foes could overcome a barrier formed of Ulfen warriors.

Spear warriors formed up a dozen paces behind the front line of warriors, weapons in hand. Several of the older boys dragged bundles of spears from the weapon huts. One had already taken his place beside his warrior, four weapons held ready to pass: two slim throwing spears, a sturdy pike, and a short spear for hand-to-hand fighting.

In the center of the village clearing, behind the warriors and their boys, three old men fed the bonfire. The storm fought them with wind-driven sleet and sudden gusts that dove down to throttle the leaping flames or hurl them up onto the thatched roofs of the surrounding houses. But the huge fire pit contained the blaze, and the circle of stone pillars supporting the conical roof and chimney of the village center kept the wood dry enough to burn. Buckets of pitch stood near the fire pit, bristling with the shafts of fire arrows.

Behind the pit, more warriors gathered, readying weapons ranging from swords to pitchforks

long-handled torches. Any child-stealing winterfolk who came through the sundered fences would have to run a gauntlet of fire and iron before they reached any of the vulnerable children or mothers. Everyone else in the village, spearman or shield maiden, would die before they let that happen.

Nor would those who survived the ordeal find the village children easy to capture. Atop every house was a loft with narrow windows nestled in the gables of each steep roof. The shutters had been flung open to reveal boys and maidens too young to wield sword or spear or battleaxe, but no less deadly with a bow.

Ellasif glanced toward the ladder that led to her family's loft. A sturdy bow of well-seasoned yew awaited her there. Her gaze shifted to the maidensword over the hearth. A sigh of longing and frustration sang through her teeth. Her mother's first weapon, despite village custom, would never leave hers. Ulfen warriors were famously tall and strong, but Ellasif had always been small for her age, and seemed destined to remain so. No one of her stature would ever become a shield maiden. Never mind that the only boy who'd ever dared to taunt her about it had walked with a limp from full moon to waning past new moon.

"Ellasif, come away—"

A pained gasp cut the admonition short. Ellasif spun toward the bed.

Her mother's night robe, already damp with sweat, was drenched with more ominous stains. Young as she was, Ellasif knew what this meant. The babe must come soon, or mother and child would both perish.

Ellasif knelt at the foot of her mother's bed. "I will catch the babe, and I will care for it," she said. "This I swear. Now do your part."

The ceremonial words were meant for a sister or a close midwife, but Ellasif spoke them with the assurance and conviction of a grown woman. Marit did as her daughter bade her, propping herself up on her elbows and roaring a wordless battle cry as she fought to urge her child out of the warm cave of her body and into the cold world.

Marit's pains stopped short of their purpose. She fell back onto the bed, pale as a wraith. She clutched the damp sheets and regarded her bloody fingers. A shadow of despair crossed her face.

"Go, Sif," she groaned. "Fetch Agithra."

Ellasif shook her head. "She will not come. She cannot. Midwife or not, if she left her place now, Red Ochme would skewer her with her own spear and roast her over the fire pit."

"You, my daughter, should not have to watch—" Marit's voice broke on a ragged cough. She cleared her throat. "You should not have to watch with me, or deliver this babe."

"Who better?" said Ellasif. "Who tended the goats last summer when they dropped their kids? I lost none of them, not even the white nanny and her tangle of twins! This babe will have fewer legs, and, gods willing, no sharp hooves."

A weak laugh escaped Marit's chapped lips. "Gods willing," she said. She lifted one hand to her rounded belly and traced over her babe an ancient rune of protection: a deep crescent bisected by a straight line, the footprint symbol of She Who Watches, the white raven. Most of the villagers would

have called the gesture superstition or even witchcraft, but Ellasif nodded her approval. The other villagers might pray only to Torag or Desna, Gorum or Erastil, and that was well. Life would be simpler if gods were the only powers to be appeased, but when was life simple? A thousand spirits interfered with human life every year.

A blast of wind rocked the cottage. The shutter Ellasif had unlatched flew open and cracked against the outer wall. The candle flame jumped like a startled cat and vanished into the dark.

Ellasif ran outside. Sleet stung her face, and the wind whipped her skirts around her legs as she wrestled the shutter back into place. She shot the outer bolt to hold it closed and turned just in time to witness the birch grove's destruction.

Already bent low under their weight of ice, the slender white trees could bear no more. Icy gusts ripped away limbs and sent them spinning across the hard ground between grove and village. Whole trees came crashing down, leaving splintered stumps or holes clawed up by their roots. Only the strongest remained, including the enormous birch whose white trunk had been carved with the image of the bird that gave the village its name.

"The fire moat!" cried a village man. "Light the fire moat!"

Ellasif's gaze darted toward the man who'd shouted the warning. Beyond the birch grove, the forest was alive with pairs of gleaming eyes. Someone threw a torch into the moat. Blue flame leaped toward the sky and raced along the stone trench—a firewall meant to frighten the wolf pack into retreat.

"Those are no mere forest wolves," Ellasif whispered to herself. Ordinary wolves came singing to the moon. These creatures attacked as silently as they'd gathered. Great white monsters as big as ice bears, they broke from the shadows and charged the fire moat in a double line formation as ordered by any Ulfen shield wall.

"Spears away!" bellowed a female voice.

Ellasif's heart lifted at the sound. Red Ochme's command soared above the storm as surely as his raiding ships had once crested the wild waves. Nothing could vanquish the old warrior.

The warriors in the front line dropped to one knee and snapped their shields into position, edges overlapping to form a solid wall. Behind them the warriors raised their spears, ran three steps, and unleashed a thicket of death.

Ellasif's gaze followed Agithra's spear as it soared over the kneeling warriors and flew straight toward the fire moat. Twenty spears or more followed it, and all disappeared through the fire. Sharp yelps from behind the fiery barrier proved the truth of their aim.

The first rank of winter wolves leaped through the flames, fangs bared and eyes glowing with eldritch blue light. Ellasif held her breath at the sight of them. They were as beautiful as they were terrible, and for an instant she wondered how it would feel to plunge her hand into that dense white fur.

Bowstrings sang in twanging chorus from the cottage lofts. A storm of arrows swept toward the fire moat. Most bounced off thick pelts, but three of the winter wolves stumbled and went down. Two

rose and ran again despite the arrows protruding from their bodies. The third wolf lay twitching, white shaft protruding from its eye socket.

Ellasif's heart triumphed as the children of White Rook made good their first volley. There would not be time for a second.

"Brace!" howled Red Ochme.

The warriors ran forward and set their pikes against the shield wall, iron points angled toward the charging pack. All the warriors, shields and spears, braced for impact.

But the wolves did not challenge the wall. To Ellasif's astonishment, the first rank slid to a stop and reared up on their hind legs. They set their forepaws on the upper edges of the shields, and at last they sang, but not to the moon. They sang to winter.

Crystalline clouds poured from the wolves' jaws, shimmering in the firelight as they spread out into icy fog. The frost riming the creatures' mouths whitened the faces of the warriors who crashed backward to the ground, rigid as felled trees.

The second wave of winter wolves struck, hurling themselves against the shields before the surviving warriors could recover from the freezing blast. The wall jolted back, slamming into the swords the warriors raised. Savage jaws snatched away the warriors' weapons, many tearing flesh that icy breath had welded to frozen metal. The disarmed warriors reached with ruined hands for their daggers in their boot sheaths.

But the winter wolves had already retreated. As they loped away, Ellasif prayed the creatures would disappear into the forest. Defying her hope, they stopped just short of the guttering vjarik flames and wheeled about for another attack.

Ellasif caught her breath. The fallen spearfighters left gaps above the shield wall, breaches that winter wolves could easily leap through. The enemy saw their chance. On they came in a chaotic rush.

"Shields up!" shrieked Red Ochme.

The surviving spear throwers fell back, and the warriors in the shield wall stood as one, raising the wall to meet the charge.

Not all of the wolves leaped. Some came in low to attack the warriors' booted shins, while others worried the edges of the shield wall with their enormous jaws. One of the smaller wolves scrambled up the steep cliff on the village's north border, only to fall back among the pack.

In the chaos that followed, Ulfen battle cries mingled with the snarls of the monsters, but they were not simple beasts. The sound of human voices emerging from the slavering jaws of the winter wolves sent a cold drop of fear oozing through Ellasif's guts. A huge wolf bitch hung off to one side, adding to the confusion by shouting commands in mimicry of Red Ochme's voice. Ellasif had never seen the winter wolf before, but she had heard its legend. If this were the dread wolf huntress of the winter witches, then this night could surely be the doom of White Rook.

The shield wall held. Warriors stabbed at the wolves who reared over the shields. They reached down to fend off snapping jaws from below. When one warrior fell, others shifted to close the gap. The villagers dragged away those of their wounded whom the wolves had not yet torn from the

reach. Ellasif tried desperately to ignore the horrible rending sounds from the far side of the shield wall as the enemy desecrated the village defenders.

But the shield wall was shrinking, and soon it would no longer fill the gap between the cliff and the river. The warriors behind the shield wall readied weapons for the inevitable breach.

Ellasif's friend Jadrek ran past clutching a cut-off bill in his hand. Its broad head curved in a hook to one side, a perfect weapon for cutting the hamstrings of foes across a shield wall. Jadrek jolted to stop and spun back toward Ellasif. His expression was so fierce that for a moment Ellasif expected him to throw the weapon in her face.

"Attend your task," he growled, reciting Red Ochme's first rule of battle.

A wave of shame swept Ellasif. Everyone in White Rook knew what to do in case of an attack. She was expected to be in the loft, greeting anything that crossed the fire moat with an arrow to the throat. Nothing, not even tending her mother, should have kept her from her battle task. Everyone in the village had already obeyed his or her duty.

Everyone but Ellasif.

She acknowledged Jadrek's reproof with a curt nod and ran back into the house. She barred the door behind her. Straight to the bed she strode, pausing only briefly when she heard Red Ochme call for fire arrows. She longed to be in the battle, not on its edge.

Marit bowed her back in another fit of agony. Her breath came in faint gasps. Ellasif hurried to the foot of the bed and saw that the babe was finally emerging. She cradled the crowning head and slipped her fingers around the tiny neck to make sure the cord wasn't entangled. All seemed well. There was no reason the child could not be born now.

"Once more," she urged.

Marit's eyes fluttered open. Her gaze focused on her daughter's face. Ellasif smiled with more confidence than she felt and gave her mother an encouraging nod.

Her mother gave one final effort, and the newborn slid into her sister's waiting hands.

"A girl," Ellasif exulted, holding the infant up for their mother to see.

Marit smiled and fainted dead away.

And so it happened that Ellasif was the only witness to her infant sister's first breath. What followed was not a newborn's wail but merry peals of laughter.

Shock froze Ellasif's limbs, and dread gripped her heart with fingers of ice. Everyone knew that first-breath laughter was the sign of a tiren'kii.

She stared at the bloody infant still tethered by its birth cord, still laughing. She wondered how this could be her newborn sister, this tiny creature so new to life and so soon fated to die. She was cursed.

The folk of White Rook would sooner carry a haunch of venison through a sow bear's den than allow so dangerous a child to live. No one knew exactly what the tiren'kii were, nor why they occasionally possessed Ulfen newborns, but understanding such mysteries held little allure for Ellasif's people. What they did understand was that such children were dangerous, their spirits tainted by the fey powers harbored in nearby Irrisen. No such child could be suffered to live among the Ulfen.

And yet, Ellasif thought, this was her sister. She had sworn to protect this child.

A new voice joined the chaos of storm and battle, a sound born of the unholy marriage of a beast's roar and an eagle's cry. It reverberated in the deepest recesses of Ellasif's body, chilling her liver and paralyzing her lungs. It was a sound she had heard before only from a great distance, a sound that had made her huddle under her blankets and recite the three prayers she remembered over and over until dawn.

It was the shriek of an ice troll.

Marit's eyes snapped open, the reflex of a warrior coming fully awake at the sound of danger.

"Ellasif, to the loft," she croaked. She sounded even worse than Ellasif had feared earlier.

Ellasif laid the infant down on her mother's belly. Marit gripped her eldest daughter's wrist with startling strength. Her fever-bright eyes burned.

"Take the babe to the loft," she commanded. "You swore to care for her. I hold you to your oath."

Before Ellasif could respond, her mother slipped back into unconsciousness.

Ellasif set her jaw and went to work with sure hands. Everything lay ready: a knife to cut the cord, a clean linen thread to tie it off, a soft blanket in which to wrap the babe. Moments later, Ellasif climbed the ladder to the loft, one hand holding the rungs, the other clasping the bundled infant to her shoulder.

She laid the baby on the straw mattress to free her hands and dragged the ladder up into the loft. A rope and pulley attached to the ceiling secured a heavy wooden door. It was scant protection from trolls and invaders, but it was the best Ellasif could offer her sister.

The boards beneath her feet shuddered as the crash of another doomed tree shook the village. A moment later, the door burst open.

Ellasif's father, Kjell, lurched into the house. Blood streaked his yellow beard, and his wild gaze swept the room. At the sight of his empty hands, Ellasif knew true fear.

Her father had left his place. He'd put aside his axe before battle's end. Ellasif could imagine no surer proof that White Rook was defeated.

Kjell ran to the bed and swept his wife into his arms, blankets and all. He whirled toward the loft.

"Hurry, Ellasif!" he shouted. "The north pine is falling."

Their house stood at the northern end of the village crescent, closest to the forest. The groaning creak of a falling tree grew louder. There was no time to push the ladder back down. She could jump and roll, but not with the baby in her arms.

For the first time, Ellasif noticed the bleating of her goats outside. The byre stood separate from the cottage, but the roof and loft ran over both buildings. A second, smaller hatch led down into the pen.

She was reaching for the baby when her father's shout drew her attention back to the cottage floor. A huge winter wolf crouched in the doorway, blocking her parents' escape.

"You slew my mate," the beast said in the rough female voice so like Red Ochme's. "Now watch me kill yours."

A defiant curse bubbled to Ellasif's lips, but the oath she'd sworn forced her to silence. She

clutched the baby tight to her breast and ran.

Ellasif slid down the ladder into the goat byre and waded through the milling herd. She unlatched the door and burst into the clearing amid a small stampede of panicked animals. The north pine had broken free of its halter of vines and tilted swiftly. Wind shrieked through its branches as it plummeted toward the house.

Ellasif ran through the storm, ducking under the swing of an ice troll's club as she headed for the weapon shack closest to the hot spring. It was stone-built and solid, and it would be warm inside. The baby would be as safe there as she could be anywhere in White Rook.

The tree crashed with an impact Ellasif felt in her bones. She chanced a quick look back to see if her parents had escaped.

One glance told the tale. She heard herself whimper, but was too heartbroken to be ashamed of the sound.

"I'll take that bundle, bitch cub," growled a familiar voice.

Ellasif had not heard the wolf approach. She stumbled and fell hard on one knee.

Steel swept over her head, and the wolf yelped in pain. Ellasif scrambled aside and rose in time to see Red Ochme bury her sword in the hump of the winter wolf's shoulder. The tough old warrior jerked the weapon free and held it at guard, but the sword's task was finished. The wolf's legs folded and she fell heavily on one side. The blood pouring from the wound stopped when the wolf drew breath. She had suffered a sucking wound, and soon her own lungs would drown her.

Bloody froth spilled from the creature's jaws and froze on her muzzle. She fixed her strange blue eyes to her killer's face.

"Die, old woman," she cursed. "Drown in a pool of your own piss. Perish, forgotten by your pack." The wolf turned her head to Ellasif, and her lips curled in a canine sneer. "Die weaponless, like the bitch cub's sire."

Something deep within Ellasif cracked, and something else slipped free. She snatched a dagger from Red Ochme's belt, thrust the baby into the warrior's arms, and leaped upon the dying wolf. With one blow she severed the plummy white tail, not caring that no one in the village, not even Red Ochme herself, had ever dared to take a winter wolf trophy. Ellasif brandished the grisly talisman at the wolf that had killed her parents.

"Die, you miserable old bitch," she snarled. "Die and know your tail hangs from this cub's belt."

"Ellasif!"

Ochme's tone told Ellasif that she'd uttered the girl's name more than once before Ellasif heard it. Ochme took her knife back and pressed the baby into Ellasif's arms. The expression on the battle leader's face was impossible for Ellasif to read.

"Go, child," she said. "Take that babe to shelter."

Ellasif ran, the wailing baby clasped to her chest. Hail pelted them as she wove a path through the ruins of the battle. Most of the winter wolves had fallen. A steaming puddle of gore told of ice troll and fire arrows, but two of the monsters still lumbered through the village. Small packs of ice goblins

ran here and there, singing cheerful obscenities as they swarmed cottage after cottage.

Ellasif darted between two of the small houses and skidded to a stop. An eight-foot-tall troll blocked her path, the monster facing off against Agithra and her spear. The creature swung its club in a pendulous arc. The blow snapped Agithra's weapon like an autumn twig and lifted the midwife off her feet. She bent in half and dropped to the ground like a rag doll.

Three axe-wielding warriors pushed past Ellasif and converged on the troll, hacking it limb from limb. Behind them came children who picked up the smaller troll pieces and ran them to the fire pit. Not every piece of a dismembered troll would grow back into another monster, but the villagers of White Rook had learned to be thorough. Ellasif darted off to find another path.

A hand clutched at her feet. She stumbled but ran on. Her stomach clenched when she realized the hand still gripped her ankle, fingers digging into her boot leather. She set her jaw and kept going, dragging along the huge blue hand and its severed arm. The armory was just ahead.

She tucked the baby into a wooden bin and closed and bolted the hut door. Her charge secured, she looked around for a weapon. A woman's corpse lay nearby, so mangled that only her long red braids identified her as Tanja, mother of Ellasif's friend Olenka. The woman's short sword was buried to the hilt in the body of the winter wolf she'd died slaying.

Ellasif braced her free foot on the wolf's bloodied white pelt and tugged the sword free. She dragged her burden closer to the fire pit, where the battle-churned ground was as soft as summer loam, and stabbed through the blue hand. She leaned on the sword to thoroughly impale the troll limb before jerking her foot free. Lifting the skewered arm and hurling it into the fire took every bit of strength she could muster.

Oily flame leaped up around the severed arm. Perhaps twenty paces away, a blue head screamed in agony, still attached to one arm and a mangled chunk of shoulder, but little else.

Ellasif caught a passing lad by the arm and pointed at the troll's head. "Missed one," she said. The severed head had already begun regenerating a windpipe and a dark pulsing bud that would become a heart. The boy nodded and hurried to dispose of the head.

For a moment Ellasif simply stood by the pit, at a loss for what to do next. Everyone else seemed to know his task and place. Two children with pitchforks stabbed a troll hand and ran it back to the fire pit, where elders ensured every scrap of their enemies was destroyed.

Ellasif's gaze fell on Jadrek. He stood with his back to a cottage wall, knife and bill whirling as he fended off a pair of goblins. A surge of feral joy filled her heart. Ellasif hauled the sword up high over one shoulder and charged toward her friend.

Jadrek's eyes widened as he saw her approach. One of the goblins turned toward Ellasif. Her first wild thrust cut his startled cry short as she stabbed the little monster directly in the mouth. Then she turned her body and directed her momentum and the weight of the sword into a leg-slashing cut. Bright blood sprayed from his severed artery. The goblin's disbelieving expression would have been comical in other circumstances. It looked down at its wound, then up into Ellasif's face with an expression of supreme pique. Then it died and fell to the cold ground.

The second goblin wailed and crumpled, Jadrek's bill stuck deep in its craw. Jadrek knelt on the goblin's narrow chest and slit its throat with his knife.

A goblin pack boiled toward them as he rose. Jadrek offered his bloody knife to Ellasif. "Want to trade?"

Ellasif scoffed and kept her sword.

She ran to meet the foremost goblin. Her first strike knocked aside its pike, giving her an opening to kick the creature between the legs. The goblin squealed and doubled over. Ellasif's backswing missed its head but sliced the leather jerkin of the next goblin. The creature jumped back, tripping the three behind it.

Ellasif lunged, sword thrusting deep between a goblin's ribs. She was dimly aware of a knife scoring her arm, of filthy claws and fetid breath and horrible high-pitched curses, and Jadrek fighting at her side, his knife flashing again and again.

She felt as though she were in paradise. There were no troubling thoughts, no doubts, no uncertainties. She wanted to live, and to live she had to kill. Nothing in the wide world was more glorious.

When the pile of goblins lay silent—and perhaps more thoroughly slain than necessity demanded—the young warriors rose and regarded each other for a timeless moment. Jadrek's lean body shook with the exertion of his own breath. There was terror in his heart to be sure, but he radiated even more power and courage, and Ellasif felt something within her stir and move toward him. She hesitated, and their gazes locked for a moment. Ellasif licked her dry lips. Jadrek glanced away, his shoulder slumped. The moment was gone.

"It's over," said Jadrek. His voice was mingled relief and regret.

Ellasif wasn't so sure it was over. The night was filled with the muted groans of the dying, the rattle of hail against the roof thatching, the indignant demands of a toddler who could not understand why his mother would not rise to hold him. Beneath it all lay a silent, trembling energy that Ellasif could not name.

A deep thump resounded through the forest, then another. By the time Ellasif could identify the sound as footsteps, they had accelerated into a charge. She looked up at a shadow upon the snowy trees and saw a thatched hovel flying incongruously above the ground.

No, she realized. It was not flying. Rather, the hut was perched upon two enormous scaled legs. Ellasif's first impression was that they were the limbs of some emaciated golden dragon, but then she recognized the avian angle of the joints and the black talons of a chicken. This was no mere monster.

The walking hut stepped over a fallen birch and strutted into the village. No one uttered a command. No one raised a weapon. None dared defy Baba Yaga, the mother of the Irrisen queens, or whatever dread emissary the great witch had commanded to direct her dancing hut.

At the southern edge of the village, a baby wailed. The hut whirled toward the sound. Its sudden movement broke the spell. Warriors forgot their injuries and rushed to attack.

Fire arrows streaked toward the hut and bounced away without touching the shingled walls.

white-braided old warrior charged with battleaxe raised high. One enormous talon flicked him away with no more effort than Ellasif might expend on a gnat. The hut crushed two spear warriors underfoot as it stalked toward the house containing the child whose cries had alerted it.

The infant was quiet now, no doubt hushed by its siblings. The hut stopped beside the house and tilted to one side like a bird listening for worms. Faster than thought, it lifted one clawed foot and tore away half the roof.

More axe-wielding warriors closed in. A lump rose in Ellasif's throat as she recognized her father's weapon in another man's hands. The hut trampled the men into bloody ruins with its scything-like talons as it strode to the next cottage.

A dark square on the ground caught Ellasif's eye. She stooped to pick up a wooden shingle, larger than those on the village homes. She sniffed it. It smelled of cooking smoke and herbs, old blood and the skin of reptiles. It smelled exactly how Ellasif imagined a witch's hut to smell.

She broke it in two and tossed one half onto a smoldering wolf carcass. The shingle flared in light, just as any ordinary bit of dry kindling might do.

Ellasif ran to Jadrek, who was stitching a deep gash across the face of Ivanick, his father. Waving the shingle as she ran, she shouted, "It's wood! Baba Yaga's hut is wood!"

The boy scowled and reached for a flask of vjarik. He poured some onto a rag to clean the wound. "It's wood," Ellasif repeated. She threw the shingle at Jadrek.

He batted it away. "So? What else would it be?"

"Woods burns," she persisted. "The fire arrows can't get past Baba Yaga's magic. None of our attacks can get past. But if we send fire into the hut in a different way, we might surprise it."

Ivanick considered her for a moment, his blue eyes peering out from a mask of blood and matted pale hair. Then he took the flask from his son and removed the cork with his teeth. "I will try."

The warrior snatched a torch from a nearby stand and strode toward the walking hut. Before he could get close enough to throw the torch, the hut snatched him up in one mighty talon and flung him atop the nearest cottage. The hut tilted precipitously at the motion, and through the flapping shutter of a window, Ellasif glimpsed a strange sight. In the center of the hut, bound to a plain wooden chair, sat a tiny white-haired doll. Silver-blue eyes and a porcelain face were all the detail Ellasif saw before the hut righted itself, scratching up deep furrows in the frozen ground with its gargantuan chicken talons.

Dry thatch exposed by the hut's explorations caught fire. Ivanick staggered to his feet, limned with blue vjarik flame. He ran along the wooden roof ridge, flaming brighter with each step, and hurled himself at the hut.

He caught the edge of a shuttered window, lost his grip, and slid down the shingled wall. Somehow he found a handhold, and then another. How, Ellasif could not say. The fire surrounding him blazed furiously, its greedy flames devouring his clothes and gnawing at the flesh beneath.

The hut whirled and spun, trying to throw the man off, but Ivanick clung like a burr despite the flames surrounding him. The wood beneath his burning body blackened in the shape of his shadow.

Ellasif reached for Jadrek's hand and gripped it hard. "He'll fall," she cried, half hoping that it would.

The burning man pulled a dagger from his belt and drove it through the sleeve of his other arm, pinning himself through flesh and bone to the smoldering wall. Almost immediately he slumped, overcome by flame and smoke.

Still the hut did not burn.

Ellasif ran to Red Ochme and seized her arm. "Lamp oil!"

Understanding widened the old warrior's eyes. She shouted the order. Several women came running with vessels and hurled them at the hut. The pottery shattered against the hut's magic shields, but some of the oil splashed through. Flames licked at the hut's shingles and sped upward toward the thatch. The hut twisted away and ran, flaming, toward the river. It plunged over the steep bank and disappeared with a great splash, then bobbed to the surface, a halo of flame around the crests of its roof.

It disappeared again. A flicker of orange light touched the surface a moment later and then vanished. The villagers watched for another emergence.

It felt to Ellasif that the entire world held its breath.

Vapor burst from the gulley in a hut-shaped cloud and soared off toward the east. The storm clouds fell in behind it like obedient hounds following their master home. Hail and darkness surrendered to a silver sky crowned with a wisp of rosy sunrise.

In the silence that followed, villagers stood blinking, unable able to comprehend that the terrible night was finally over, that they had survived.

Ellasif ran to the armory, her throat tight with dread. The baby's cries brought a smile of relief to her face. She unlatched the door and swept up the red-faced infant.

"I'll milk the white nanny as soon as I can catch her," she promised the babe. "You can drink as much as you like."

She kept crooning to the baby as she joined the knot of children gathered near the fire pit. The sight of her sister—her ward now, her child—soothed some of the anguish of the loss of her parents. Some of the other children were already being led away to new homes by villagers all too accustomed to the orphaning of their neighbors' children, but there were more orphans than families to take them. To Ellasif's surprise, Red Ochme walked along the line of children, inspecting them as a war leader might eye recruits. She paused before Olenka, tall and flame-haired like her warrior mother.

Of course, Ellasif thought. Olenka is the very image of a shield maiden, everything I am not.

But Red Ochme moved on. She strode directly to Ellasif and looked her up and down. Ellasif's face flushed. She was afraid she had shamed herself before the village's greatest hero when she mutilated the corpse of the defeated winter wolf commander. Still, Ochme's gaze lingered on Ellasif's dry eyes and bloody hands, which clutched her swaddled sister.

"If you work hard, I will take you into my home. I will train you. You will become strong."

Ellasif could only stare. The dream taking shape before her was too large for any words she knew.

Red Ochme saw the answer in Ellasif's eyes and sealed the deal with a curt nod. Then she added, "First you must find a home for that child."

"No." The word burst from Ellasif's throat unbidden. "You must take both of us, Liv and me together."

And just like that, her sister had a name.

The warrior frowned and shook her head. "Anngard has a babe at breast. She can feed another."

"Liv drinks goat's milk," Ellsaif said firmly. "She will not be the first warrior of White Rook to be raised on it."

"And who will tend those goats and raise this baby?" Ochme demanded. "A warrior's training is nothing easy, and you will have many chores."

Ellasif lifted her chin stubbornly. "I will do it all."

A long moment of silence passed as the two warriors, the old and the young, took each other's measure. Red Ochme shrugged. "We'll see."

Emotions too powerful to name tore at Ellasif's heart as she followed Red Ochme to the cottage they would share. She would become a warrior, trained by the village war leader. She would claim her mother's maidensword, and someday she would temper a sword of her own in the blood of her enemies. As a sword maiden of the Lands of the Linnorm Kings, she would be respected and feared. She could claim the place that was written in her nature, as much a part of her as a nestling bird yearning for the sky. But how could she be glad of this—of anything—when her parents lay dead in the ruin of their home?

And what of the uncanny storm and the attack that followed? All the stories Ellasif had heard about Baba Yaga's hut suggested that its purposes might be unknowable, but not capricious. It had come to White Rook for a reason. It seemed to be looking for a baby.

She knew then with certainty that it had been looking for Liv, now her daughter as much as her sister. Liv, the child who'd laughed to welcome the tiren'kii.

Try as she might, Ellasif could find no other explanation. The tiren'kii had drawn the winterfolk's attention. They would come again, for everyone knew that once a tiren'kii possessed a child it did not leave as long as the child lived. For the safety of everyone in White Rook, Ellasif should tell the village elders what she had seen and heard at Liv's birth.

Even as the thought formed, Ellasif's arms tightened around her tiny sister. She'd sworn an oath. Her duty to Liv came before anything else, anyone else, even her own ambition.

Silence, Ellasif decided as she padded along behind the old warrior. Silence would protect her sister today.

Fifteen Years Later ...

The Ice Sculptures

Declan Avari squinted into the oversized spyglass mounted on the north edge of the rooftop observatory, rolling one dial after another to adjust the focus. One final tweak, and the black turrets of Castle Korvosa came sharply into view.

It was an imposing sight. Torchlight gleamed against black marble, casting long shadows down the ancient pyramid upon which the castle stood. From this distance the imps that wheeled around the towers resembled a swarm of gnats, black specks silhouetted against the rising moon.

The soft thump of wings drew Declan's attention to the grape-covered pergola on the southern edge of the roof. A pale blue house drake, a recent addition to the clutch that inhabited the turret of the Frisky Unicorn, his family's inn, often followed him to the observatory. The little creature settled down amid the grapevines, folded his wings, and turned tiny golden eyes toward the castle.

My cousins are in spring flight.

This thought projected directly into Declan's mind, along with an image of small flocks of migrating dragons.

"Ah." He nodded. A flock of randy drakes near the imp nests would mean only one thing. "So the skies of Korvosa will be one big tavern brawl tonight?"

Yes. The telepathic voice sounded wistful to Declan's mind. Enmity between the imps and the tiny dragons ran hot and deep. With the possible exception of a plump mouse or a dollop of fresh butter, there was nothing a house drake enjoyed more than smiting imp-shaped evil.

"Plan on joining the fun?"

Maybe later.

The drake burrowed into the vines. Leaves rustled, and a tiny squeak, abruptly ended, announced a successful hunt. Since the little dragon would be happily occupied with his meal, Declan turned his attention back to the castle.

Now that he thought about it, he noted more activity in the night sky than usual. Imps and dragons in battle was a sight so familiar it seldom drew a second glance in Korvosa. Declan was not entirely certain what this said about the city.

He went to the astrolabe, a flat metal disk covered with intricate markings and mounted on an iron plinth. A series of dials and levers allowed Declan to set its measure upon the Grand Mastaba. The sandstone pyramid provided a foundation for Castle Korvosa and, more importantly for Declan's purposes, a known measure against which to test his skills.

After several moments of fiddling with the dials, he jotted down his figures and frowned at the result. His calculation of the Grand Mastaba's height was off by more than ten yards. If he were ever going to become a credible mapmaker, he'd need to do better.

With a sigh, Declan turned to the shallow basin of water that dominated the roof, a round reflecting pool in which tiny star-shadows glimmered. The markings along the edges of the pool, similar to those on the astrolabe, provided a second, simpler means of calculating angle and distance.

A thick book lay open on a pedestal nearby, revealing figures arranged in three columns. Declan's apprenticeship to the famed astronomer Majeed Nores had been devoted primarily to taking measurements of the stars, repeating each computation with the reflecting pool, and comparing the difference. Majeed expected him to fill the book before the next new moon.

"The nights aren't long enough for all this work," he muttered. "And I suspect there aren't enough stars in the sky to fill a book that size."

"Hello, the roof!"

Declan turned toward the stairs, glad of the interruption. His smile dimmed when he recognized Jamang Kira, a childhood nemesis he'd not seen in years.

While Declan was no more than average height and build, he stood nearly a head taller than his visitor and probably outweighed him by half. Jamang had always been small and scrawny, with a disposition that reminded Declan of the overbred lapdogs favored by the matrons of Korvosa. Some men might have rued such a small stature, but not Jamang. Declan knew that, from boyhood, Jamang had learned that when someone was busy guarding his ankles against a nip, it was easier to slip a knife between his ribs.

Jamang strutted toward Declan like a bantam cock, and his confident smile proclaimed he was sure of his welcome, not just here but anywhere in Korvosa. Jamang wore the city's colors from the red velvet slouch hat perched on his raven-black hair to his fine crimson jacket to the gleaming ebony of his boots. Riding proudly on his chest was a silver amulet proclaiming his graduation from the Acadamae, Korvosa's most famous school of magic.

They exchanged one of the back-thumping embraces common to young men and quickly drew apart. After a moment's study, Jamang offered, "You're looking well."

Declan did not miss the faint note of surprise in Jamang's voice. He nodded toward Jamang's new Acadamae amulet. "It would appear that congratulations are due."

"For many reasons," Jamang said smugly. "I have recently acquired a position with Somar Nevinoff. I trust you know the name?"

A reply was neither necessary nor expected. Everyone in Korvosa who had a passing interest in magic—and that included nearly everyone in Korvosa—knew the name Somar Nevinoff. The man was a powerful necromancer with more imagination than scruples.

"I can think of few situations better suited to developing your ... natural inclinations," Declan said. He barely concealed a smirk.

Jamang's face brightened, and he made a little bow. "How gracious of you to say so."

Declan inclined his head politely to cover his wasted mockery. "To what do I owe the honor of your visit?"

The young necromancer's countenance settled into more serious lines, an effort at gravitas.

studious that Declan suspected Jamang had practiced it before a mirror.

“Concern,” Jamang said. “I’m deeply concerned about you, Avari. As one of your oldest friends, I felt a duty to speak out.”

Declan gritted his teeth. Jamang’s pompous intonations foreshadowed a conversation Declan did not wish to have. Still, there was courtesy to be observed.

“Speak out about what?”

Jamang swept one hand in an arc that took in Declan, the rooftop observatory, and the not-quite-fashionable Cliffside neighborhood Majeed Nores’s manor occupied. He sniffed. “This is no place for a wizard of your talents.”

Alarms chimed in Declan’s brain. Flattery had never been among the weapons in Jamang’s arsenal, and Declan doubted it was a skill he had learned at the Acadamae. Whatever had brought Jamang here was something he wanted badly enough to overcome his scorn for the innkeeper’s son.

“I’m afraid my master shares your opinion of my ability,” Declan said, deliberately misunderstanding the compliment, “but since my apprentice fee is paid in full and he is not inclined to return it, he bears with me.”

“My point precisely,” Jamang said. He stabbed a finger in Declan’s direction for emphasis. “You are still an apprentice, and to an astronomer.”

“It’s an interesting study,” said Declan.

The necromancer shook his head sadly. “Such a waste! You, who set out on a wizard’s path—although why you chose to study magic at the Theumanexus confounds me, considering that the Acadamae holds thrice the prestige and many times the opportunities...” He frowned, seeming to have lost his train of thought.

“I’m not interested in fame and fortune,” suggested Declan.

Jamang’s laugh was as sharp as a dog’s yap. He shook his head as if he’d just heard the most ridiculous joke. Of course, Declan thought. In Korvosa, avowing one’s disinclination toward fame, wealth, or power would almost certainly be perceived as a deliberate absurdity.

“You could almost persuade me of that,” Jamang said. “The Theumanexus was bad enough, but why you would leave it in favor of the university is beyond my comprehension.”

“The University of Korvosa has a fine art school.”

The necromancer pursed his lips. “I suppose I can see your attraction to art, all things considered, but why astronomy?”

“Why do you care?” Declan said.

“Perhaps I presume upon our friendship,” said Jamang. “That alone would not excuse my curiosity, but something your brother said preys upon my mind.”

“What about my brother?” growled Declan.

Jamang was oblivious to Declan’s mood, or pretended so. “Asmonde took the study of magic seriously. He once told me that you both swore to pursue the art—swore at your mother’s deathbed, no less.”

Declan clamped his mouth shut. That was not a subject he wished to discuss with anyone, least of all Jamang.

Undeterred, Jamang pressed on. "You are not the sort to abandon an oath, I think. Where have you been studying, and with whom?"

Declan folded his arms. "My situation is exactly as it appears. I'm learning the entirely unmagical art of reading the night skies."

"But why? Art? Astronomy? What on earth do they have in common?"

"Maps," Declan said.

Jamang frowned in puzzlement.

"Korvosans are known across Avistan as an adventurous breed. Adventurers require maps, and I intend to provide them. Knowledge of the stars is a necessary part of my training in cartography."

"Cartography!" said Jamang. "You're learning a *trade*?" He blanched at the last word, as if he had bitten into an apple and found half of a wriggling grub.

Declan shrugged.

He watched in silence as Jamang's face contorted in a struggle between disbelief and distaste. Declan noted the soft rustle of vines and glanced toward the pergola. The house drake perched on the edge of the lattice roof, his eyes bright with avarice as he studied the newcomer.

Declan knew what the little creature wanted. Dairy farmers had cats, and Korvosan innkeepers had house drakes. His family ran the Frisky Unicorn, a small inn famous for its tall, slim turret and the drakes that nested there. More curious than cats and more acquisitive than ravens, the tiny dragons gathered in places frequented by strangers, where jewels were worn and coins exchanged. For the most part, the Unicorn's winged residents left the guests in peace, but some of the creatures were accomplished thieves. This little blue dragon, a relative newcomer, could make the slickest pickpockets weep with envy.

Declan brought to mind an image of Jamang's silver amulet and gave the little drake a subtle shake of his head.

The drake's whimper of disappointment echoed through Declan's thoughts.

Want, he said emphatically.

Can't have, Declan sent back. *It is unwise to steal from a necromancer.*

Nasty necromancers.

Declan could not dispute the assessment.

"It's about your brother's death, isn't it?" said Jamang at last. Before Declan could answer, Jamang placed a ring-laden hand on his shoulder. "There's no stigma attached to you, if that's what concerns you. Many of the students who begin at the Acadamae don't survive to graduation. This is not only inevitable but necessary."

Declan stepped back. "I certainly hope you don't intend to assure me that Asmonde's body was prepared to use in the necromantic laboratories."

The necromancer raised both hands in a placating gesture. "You know how things are done."

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