

Cold From The North
An Onyxborn Chronicle
by
D.W. Ross

A heartfelt note from D.W. Ross

Welcome, and thank you for joining my mailing list.

The pages ahead contain a preview of *Cold From The North*, the first novel in *The Onyxborn Chronicles*. The fact that you've chosen to spend some of your time exploring a world I've created genuinely means a great deal to me, and I hope you enjoy the journey ahead.

Writing has always been a way for me to give life to the stories, characters and worlds that occupy my imagination. *The Onyxborn Chronicles* began as a single idea (a D&D character backstory if truth be told) and grew into a complete trilogy filled with war, magic, loyalty, sacrifice and the kind of characters who refuse to leave you alone once you've met them.

In recent years, much of my time has been devoted to my two wonderful daughters and helping a friend tell the remarkable story of his life in his book *Just South of Boston*. With both of those adventures well underway, I've returned to creating new fantasy worlds. I'm currently in advanced stages of a new series inspired by Scotland's history, folklore and landscapes. Readers can expect many of the things I love most about fantasy: epic battles, dangerous and mysterious magic, rebellion against impossible odds, larger-than-life characters, and stories that aim to entertain, surprise and occasionally break your heart.

I'm ecstatic to be writing again.

For now, though, I invite you to step into the world of the *Onyxborn* and see where the story begins.

I hope you enjoy the sample.

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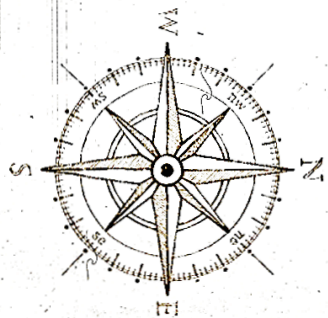
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Eleneia



Chapter 1

The mud was as hard as stone. Ogulf Harlsbane cursed as he tried in vain to break through the glistening top layer with his shovel. He looked along the field, where once there had been row upon row of carrots, cabbages and turnips. Now there was only barren, frozen soil.

He thrust the shovel down again, feeling his braid flip round and brush his face. The rest of his wavy locks followed, tickling at his sore skin.

His latest strike with the shovel proved just as futile as the one before it. Ogulf's eyes wandered from the frustrating grey of the soil and scanned around him again. He could see his hometown, where he would live and die if the cold had its way.

Keltbran had always been cold, but this particular winter had lasted two whole years, completely shattering the traditional running of the four seasons as spring, summer or autumn had been nowhere to be seen for some time.

Ogulf and his people relied on hunting for survival, the deer and boar were harder to find now. And so he missed the hunt. Not so much because he missed the food but more that he missed the thrill of it. Out in the woods and lands that surrounded his hometown it was him against the elements, him against the game he hunted, and— most of all— him against himself. Now the elements always won, the cold subdued him and made the fight against himself even harder.

Life in Keltbran was simple – too simple, perhaps, for Ogulf. He missed the life he had become used to, one that didn't see him constrained by the invisible walls that wrapped the town that he called home; he missed scouring the land with Wildar, trading in the citadels, drinking the wines of foreign lands and occasionally fighting. The last three years had broadened his shoulders and toughened his skin, but if he had known it was to prepare him for this new frigid existence he found himself in, he would have set off for the Far Isles when he had the chance.

That was before the cold. Now he was just another citizen of Broadheim, trapped by the biting cold that was sucking the very life from the land that previously gave so much. In all of his twenty-three years he had never known such unfriendly, bitter weather as this. He would cast his mind back to the last real warmth he could remember, a time when his bones didn't ache, and a time he took for granted.

‘Bastard,’ Ogulf said as the point of the shovel ricocheted off the solidified, sparkling earth. He may as well have been striking a stone. Beside him, offering Ogulf only his company, was his dear friend Melcun, who was blowing air into his cupped hands. Ogulf felt the fur from his cloak tickle the nape of his neck as a chilly gust of wind swept by. Melcun’s cropped hair was frozen at the tips. Cold vapours trailed up from every breath and the sun shone brightly overhead without giving off a hint of warmth, taunting them.

‘It’s useless. The old lot are going to have us here until we die,’ Melcun said, shivering as he spoke. ‘Hunger or the cold... which would you prefer to take you?’

‘That’s a horrible thought,’ Ogulf said with one final strike of the spade, he looked at Melcun. His friend’s handsome face and pointed features were brushed red and looked sore and they hadn’t even been outside that long. Melcun’s vibrant grey eyes looked like flint next to the colour of his rosy skin. ‘Cold, because at least then I would be numb. Come on, let’s go back.’

They walked through the formerly lush fields, the ground crunched beneath their feet with every step they took towards Keltbran.

‘Can’t you do the fire thing?’ Ogulf asked Melcun. ‘Seems like it could be quite handy just now.’

‘If I could, I would. You know how it works as well as I do – plus imagine the look on the face of old Grolan if I were to magically produce fire from my hands,’ Melcun chuckled. ‘He’d put me to the rope before I could make any difference.’

Melcun had a point. Magic had disappeared in Broadheim years ago. Rarer still, there had never been anyone with magic abilities born among the people in Keltbran until Melcun came along. His magical talent was the ability to produce fire, and though he never quite understood it or managed to control it despite a near constant barrage of questions about it from Ogulf. The ability came and went as it pleased, and Ogulf hated that it didn’t seem to work now, when it would be most advantageous. On the other hand, he was glad it didn’t; no mercy was shown to those who practiced magic in their country.

‘I know. I’m just getting desperate.’ Ogulf stopped short of his home and faced Melcun. ‘I thought it would be over by now. This has been well over a year.’

‘Closer to two,’ Melcun said, blowing into his hands again. ‘You must be itching to get away from here. Can’t remember you being here this long since we were just boys.’

‘Funny you should say that. Wildar was talking about leaving, saying he can get us on a boat at Port Saker and head for the Shingal before heading to Esselon and the Far Isles and coming back. I was reluctant at first, but the idea is tempting. The only issue is he expects my

father to be difficult. Can't imagine he will be happy with his son and his chieftain leaving at a time like this.' Ogulf hushed his tone slightly even though there was no one around them. 'He wants to wait for word from the capital on what we should do next.'

'Esselonia? Oh, not again,' Melcun said and Ogulf looked at his friend just in time to see his eyes rolling. 'He's obsessed with that bloody island.'

'You would be too if you knew more about it. The cold can't touch Esselonia, it's so far south that it is permanently basking in the warm glory of all the gods. Not a frostbitten finger or a pair of rosy red cheeks to be seen there,' Ogulf said, reaching up to pinch Melcun's skin just under the eye.

'You would follow him to the ends of the earth, wouldn't you?' Melcun said.

'Twice and back again.'

'Rowden will never let you leave Keltbran,' Melcun said, 'You're his heir, and at a time like this, he needs you more than ever.' Ogulf felt a sour taste fill his mouth. He loved his father dearly, and he respected him as a leader and as a warrior, but Rowden Harlsbane had been so caught up in grief and responsibility for the last ten years that he had played little part in Ogulf's journey from boy to man. Wildar had stepped into that role, ensuring Ogulf knew how to hunt, scout, fight, and be a man of Broadheim. 'Has your father spoken to the council in Jargmire?'

'All he gets is silence from the capital. The last rider he sent returned saying the gates were barred. Who bars the gates to their own people? Some of the travellers in the inn had a few stories – they say Jargmire and Tran are running out of provisions, haven't got enough to share or even keep their own citizens properly fed,' Ogulf said. 'My father has all but accused them of abandonment.'

'Officially?' Melcun said.

'Of course not, he's not a fool.'

'You think they'll hunker down and wait until it passes?' Melcun's hands dropped.

'Without official word it's hard to know what they'll do,' Ogulf said. 'Look around us, Melcun.' He opened his arms and circled around. 'Tran and Jargmire have closed their gates, we can't rely on them for anything, and we don't know how long this will last. We can't make it over the Sea of Blades without a fleet,' Ogulf said. 'Soon this will all be just as barren as the Throws and I won't wait here until it gets that bad.'

'What would I do if you left?'

'You would be coming with me.'

'You expect Wildar to want the orphan boy on his journey?'

‘He was the one who told me to ask you,’ Ogulf said, turning to his friend to offer a reassuring smile. ‘Might be good for you to get out and see the world. Maybe even learn some more about whatever this talent of yours is.’ He motioned to his friend’s hands. ‘You’ll think about it?’

Melcun nodded and the two men wandered towards the border of Keltbran across the bitter, lifeless black dirt. The main road was all but deserted. In normal times, this road would have been bustling: people would be setting up carts, travellers would be using the road as a pass between the east and the west, most likely heading for Tran, Jargmire, or the coast; children would be playing, wives would be chattering and every fibre of the town would be alive.

Empty streets replaced that – gone was the life, now there was quiet. Smoke rose from each chimney as the people of Keltbran huddled in their homes trying to keep warm, many of them believing they could wait out the cold, some foolishly believing they would be saved or supported by the capital.

Ogulf pulled his fur-lined cloak tighter around his neck as they walked towards the sparring yard just past the main square. Every day since the cold had come, the House of the Guided had held a ceremony outside their temple, and today was no different. Ogulf presumed it was their way of praying for help or repenting but he could never tell because they just stood there with their eyes closed and their arms stretched up to the sky. He had seen them do it for minutes or even hours at a time, their robes dancing eerily in the wind while they stood in the abandoned street.

The temple was unlike any other structure in Keltbran. Four stairs led up from the street to a wide doorway, the bricks that held the sanctuary together painted were black, and a sharp spire rose from the thatched roof that towered over the town, coming to an acute point like an arrowhead.

Today as he passed, he pitied them and their ritual. Grolan, Keltbran’s resident priest stood above his followers at the top of the steps. The old man’s heavily lidded eyes were skyward, his frail arms shook slightly as they reached upwards to the Gods. In front of him were the acolytes of his faith, ten women of varying ages all mimicking his position, facing one another in rows just beyond the temple stairs. Their numbers had grown since the last time Ogulf noticed them.

‘Do you think the gods listen to them?’ Melcun whispered.

‘I hope so,’ Ogulf said.

The pair made their way past the tavern. The alley next to it reeked of stale piss like always. Soon the quiet was replaced by the sound of wooden swords colliding as they turned into the sparring yard.

Standing at the fence next to the pit was a burly man with shoulder length hair, his grey beard perfectly straight, flowing down to rest on his chest. Blue eyes of steel and promise sat above chiselled cheekbones, and below them shone an honest smile. His leathers were thick, the strands that bound them woven carefully to create a crossing pattern on each shoulder. He had shoulders so wide he looked like two men across, and a great, rounded gut thanks to his penchant for long mugs of ale. From his hip dangled a single golden hand axe, gleaming in the morning light. It was the most fearsome weapon Ogulf had ever seen.

The broad man was watching two younger men battle with training swords in the circular pit. The dull crack of the wooden weapons took Ogulf to his youth, to times spent under the same tutoring eyes of the man with the axe. A time he cherished.

‘Good, right, yes- that’s it,’ Wildar said. ‘Next time, step to the left and strike down at the knee joint to bring him down, then finish him. You’ll be a fighter in no time, lad.’

‘When can I get an axe like yours, Wildar?’ one of the boys said.

‘When you get a serious pouch of gold, young Crian,’ Wildar said with a slight chuckle, before turning to see Ogulf and Melcun approaching. ‘Now, same time tomorrow, lads, okay?’ The two young men exited the sparring square, smiling at Ogulf as they passed him. ‘Do you miss it?’ Wildar said.

‘Always,’ Ogulf said.

‘Well, the things you learnt in here made you the man you are today. We can only hope that the next few turn out to be as able as you, even if we’re not here to see it.’ Wildar turned to Melcun, ‘And you, will you be joining us?’

‘I’m thinking about it,’ Melcun said, cracking his knuckles, a nervous trait Ogulf had observed in him for years.

‘Well, don’t take too long to decide, we need to be in Port Saker in a week. Runa won’t be joining us so it would be good to have some more familiar faces around.’

‘Runa is staying?’ Ogulf said, unable to hide the shock from his tone.

‘Yes. She’s not willing to leave Keltbran when it’s like this. She’s a good lass, too good. It might make it a bit easier for your father to support you going if he knows someone like her will be staying, though.’

Wildar had a point, but Ogulf knew it pained Wildar to leave Runa here – she was practically his daughter. They always journeyed together, the three of them. Her not being with them wouldn't feel right, but if anyone could fill the void it would be Melcun.

‘I'll speak with him tonight,’ Ogulf said.

Footsteps crunched from behind drawing Ogulf's attention. Runa was walking down the narrow path, hugged by the climbing walls of the buildings that lined the way.

‘We were just speaking about you,’ Wildar said.

‘Good things, I hope?’ Runa said. Her smile was crooked, left that way by a scar she obtained when she fought alongside Ogulf and Wildar in the battles of the Summer of Rebellion. She was beautiful, Ogulf thought, the scar only made her more so; the way she wore it told you so much about her. Well, that and the sword she always carried on her hip. Auburn hair tied in tight braids sat like a crown on her head, and her heavy furs flowed free and long, hiding her body from the cold.

‘Always good things,’ Wildar said, smiling at the woman.

‘Are you here to spar, Runa?’ Ogulf said. ‘I could do with warming up.’

‘You haven't beaten me since before the Rebellion.’

‘I guess I'll have to stop letting you win.’

‘Ha, the gods know it's me and my spear that leave you on your back in the dirt, you're at my mercy when we're in there,’ Runa said, flashing the wicked, pretty smile at Ogulf. ‘Actually, I was sent to fetch you; your father has received a scroll from the capital. He has requested all four captains and his chieftain to go to his home so he can update us all.’

‘Now?’ Ogulf said. Runa nodded. The smile Ogulf loved to see was nowhere to be found. Her eyes were serious now.

‘Very well, let's be off then.’ Wildar said, walking towards Runa up the path.

‘Are you coming?’ Ogulf said, turning back briefly as he began to follow when he realised Melcun had stayed still. His short hair had begun to thaw since they left the fields; the ends of it danced in the wind.

‘I'm not a captain, and Prundan Marsk won't want the pitied little orphan boy hanging around serious meetings. You go on ahead, I have some things I need to do anyway.’

Ogulf nodded and turned back to catch up with Wildar and Runa, his stomach tightening more and more with each step; word from the capital had never felt so crucial.

Chapter 2

The living quarters in the Harlsbane homestead were colder than ever before, the lack of cloud cover in the previous night's sky meant for a night of shivering and a cold home in the morning. You would need ten fires to bring heat to this room.

The upholstery gave off a damp, musty smell that had grown more pungent since the last time Ogulf was in the house. As he walked through the open door of his father's study, with Wildar and Runa in tow, he went straight to the fire pit and let the warmth take the stinging bite of outside out of his hands.

Ogulf's father was sitting silently behind his table. Stress had turned most of his hair grey and his beard looked like a rough collection of dry straw. Ogulf couldn't bear to look at his sunken eyes for too long; they were windows into Rowden's grief and only caused pain whenever he lingered on them. Despite his weathered facial features, Rowden Harlsbane was still well-built, owing to his years of fighting for the King before Ogulf's birth, the muscles he developed then had stayed with him through all the years since like they were some kind of reward for the harrowing experiences he had faced and would go on to endure. On his right shoulder, he wore a steel bracer. On the shoulder panel, there was a carving of a tall tree. It was the only thing he cherished.

In front of him, sprawled across the rough wooden top was a partially rolled scroll, a flattened piece of parchment, next to that a quill with wet ink on its tip and a glass of a dark brown liquid which Ogulf assumed was whisky. The sight of the whisky was enough to make Ogulf nervous; his father only drank it if the pressure and stress was getting too much. The whole way through the winter, the stopper had always been on his whisky bottle, the seal remaining tight and true, waiting to be opened in Rowden's time of need. The fact he had opened it suggested that the contents of the letter from the capital were dire or worse.

In front of him, sitting slouched in the only other chair in the study, was Prundan Marsk, a Captain of Keltbran, and the man responsible for hunting and scouting. His skin was pockmarked and he wore a scowl like a badge of honour, only showing his malicious smile if

he was mocking someone. If he hadn't been from Keltbran, Ogulf would not have been fond of the man. In truth, he probably would have wanted to kill him for some of his views, most of which were centred around making Melcun's life difficult.

'You're looking a bit podgy there, Wildar. You've been managing to get more of that ale, I see.' Prundan said. His tone was jovial but there was a seriousness to his question, as there always was.

'I am not sure what you mean,' Wildar replied confidently. He glanced down at his gut, which was more round than usual. 'Ale, and for that matter, any other fermented spirits, work wonders in keeping some of the cold away. You should try it, Prundan; you're looking a bit skinny.'

'Easier for me to hide when I'm this size,' Prundan said. 'I could spot you a mile off, and probably hit you with an arrow from the same distance, with that gut.'

'Feel free to pour a whisky for yourselves,' Rowden said, disregarding what Prundan and Wildar were speaking about. Ogulf, Runa, and Wildar perched where they could. 'The North Hold has fallen.' Silence followed, lingering long enough to make Ogulf's skin crawl.

'What do you mean fallen?' Prundan asked Rowden, sitting up from his slouched position. His trademark scowl had broken to reveal genuine worry.

'A swarm of fighting men are making their way south from beyond the Chasm in the Throws. The fact they took the North Hold rather than just passing through, out of its reach, to raid tells us everything we need to know about their intentions. Either they see us weak or they're also running from the cold and want our fortresses to shelter themselves.'

The flames in the firepit crackled and jumped as Rowden moved from his seat behind the table and threw some dry logs onto the pile. Ashes shot up from the flames as the fresh fuel popped to life.

'How do we know this?' Ogulf asked.

'A letter from the king himself. His advisors expect the horde to move south towards Tran and then on to Jargmire.'

'They'll be crushed on the first day of the siege if they do that. The prince commands a force of ten thousand men at Tran, and Jargmire is impenetrable, how would a horde of raiders ever scale those walls? And if, by some miracle, they did, they'd soon be slaughtered and flung into the moat to rot in the hot springs.'

'The king believes this army moving south dwarfs our numbers. If the scouting reports are true, they took the North Hold, slaughtered everyone stationed there, and are in the process of moving over fifty thousand men further into Broadheim.'

‘Reports can be inaccurate,’ Wildar said.

‘It’s all we have to go by. If they have taken the North Hold and they keep moving south, they could be at the walls of the capital within a week.’

‘A horde of raiders wouldn’t come south in those numbers. Gods, there can’t be that many raiders in The Throws,’ Wildar said.

‘What are you saying, chieftain?’ Prundan turned to ask.

‘An invasion?’ Ogulf interjected.

‘I can’t see it being anything else. And, if it is, then we’re being attacked by Visser.’

‘Ha, the Old North?’ Prundan said, ‘Rising from the ashes of their fallen empire to come and attack us? Don’t make me laugh.’

‘It’s the only thing that makes sense,’ Ogulf said.

‘None of this makes sense,’ said Runa.

‘So, what are we to do?’ Ogulf asked.

‘The letter says we’re to wait on further reports from the king. He will be deciding whether or not he needs to call his banners,’ Wildar said, stroking his beard.

‘The old fool will be reluctant to overreact after doing so during the Rebellion. Won’t want to piss off the rich earls if he doesn’t have to,’ Prundan said.

‘Seems more reasonable to do it now. With that many men, this won’t be easy to overcome. He should be calling the banners now and meeting them in the field,’ Ogulf said.

‘That’s easy for you to say. Might be the case, too, if you had accepted the post as his advisor. You could have had a knighthood, but instead, you chose to stay here. The gods probably sent the cold our way as thanks for your stupidity,’ Prundan said. ‘Never in my life have I heard of a man turning down a knighthood, and then we have Ogulf Harlsbane, the man too proud to serve his king.’

‘Enough,’ Wildar said. Ogulf would have given anything for Prundan to continue; the man had goaded Ogulf like this before, one time it would be too much and Ogulf would reach his limit. But not today. He had his own reasons for turning down the knighthood, and that was all that mattered. ‘Rowden, what will we do?’

‘Wait on the word from the king. If he calls the banners, we will answer,’ Rowden said.

‘And if he doesn’t?’ Runa asked.

‘Then we wait here until we’re instructed otherwise.’

‘Supposing this army takes the capital and comes further south, what would we do then?’ Ogulf asked. When he looked at his father, he saw the muscles around the earl’s jaw flex.

‘That won’t happen. The capital will not fall to a horde.’

Ogulf appreciated his father's optimism but his brain worked differently; the king was clearly worried, and if the numbers were to be believed, then this would not be the kind of attack that could be quashed and forgotten about so easily.

'I will call for you all tomorrow so that we can start making arrangements,' Rowden said. 'That will be all for now.'

With a scrape of wood against the stone floor, Prundan pushed his chair back and walked out of the study. Ogulf turned to do the same with Wildar beside him and Runa behind him. He pulled his furs tighter around his neck as he prepared to venture out into the freezing streets once more.

'Well, I guess our trip is on hold for now,' Wildar said.

'I would have to agree with you,' Ogulf said. The sharp, biting wind caught at the back of his throat, causing him to cough as he wandered out onto the bleak streets of his hometown.

Chapter 3

Ogulf rose the next morning, and as usual, he felt stiff from the cold. Even under multiple blankets, the chill managed to seep through and plunge into his bones, making them throb in a way that was now far too familiar for his liking. There was no doubt that it was getting brisker by the week. He thought about Jargmire and Tran and how helpless the people there must feel. Would they even know an army was coming their way? The walls would surely keep them out, though, Ogulf thought.

The citadels wouldn't fall. They couldn't fall. Tran commanded the biggest force in the whole country, and Jargmire was the most fortified city in all of Broadheim; they would suppress the attacking forces and restore order to the North Hold.

Ogulf made his way outside and began walking down the main stretch of road in Keltbran. He was to meet Wildar in his home, where they would discuss the trip they had planned. If he had any luck, he would also see Runa there. He was keen to know her feelings now that she had had time to sleep on yesterday's revelations, and he hoped she would be pleased to hear that Wildar and Ogulf planned to stay a little longer.

Runa was five years older than Ogulf and had always been like a sister to him and Melcun.

She was most unlike the other warriors of the clan. She was hardy, determined, strong, and most of all, reliable. She had come from the city of Shingal to Broadheim when she was just a girl. Almost fifteen years had passed since then. Her father was an emissary for the Kingdom of Shingal and he'd frequented Keltbran to discuss trade relations at a time when the town produced enough crops to barter with. A sickness took him during a spell in Keltbran, leaving Runa orphaned in a foreign land. She was well liked by the people of Keltbran, especially Wildar. He took Runa in when she was twelve. Her family in Shingal agreed that she could stay for the winter that year, but she never ended up leaving, even when men came to collect her and take her to her homeland. She refused to leave Wildar or her friends, and eventually, her wishes were respected by her family.

As Ogulf walked on, he noticed a man coming out of Wildar's home, a man he had never seen before. He was smaller than Ogulf, a muscular shape sculpted his thick furs, and he walked fast and light across Ogulf's path and into one of the side streets that wound its way towards the outskirts of Keltbran. The furs he wore were black, as was the large hood that hid most of his face. His mouth and stubble-coated chin were the only visible features jutting out from the shadow of his dark hood. The man wore only one glove. A leather one on his right hand. His left palm jutted from his sleeve and on his wrist was an angry red wound.

Ogulf started and hurried off towards Wildar's home. As he pushed the door open, he was met by Wildar immediately in front of him, and the two men clashed shoulders. 'I suppose you should come in, then,' Wildar said, a vein in his forehead bulging, suggested his annoyance.

'Who was that that just left?'

'A messenger, bringing word of a death in the family,' Wildar said, moving sideways to let Ogulf into his home. It was only slightly smaller than Ogulf's own home, but Wildar's abode was much better suited to Ogulf's liking; it was practical, and because of its size, it was much easier to keep warm. The comforting warmth of the place took over Ogulf's body and he felt the same calm he always did when he entered.

'Someone on the Paleways?' Ogulf asked.

'No, more distant than that. A relative of mine died in Esselonia,' Wildar said. Ogulf watched the chieftain as his shoulders slumped and his voice went flat, almost monotone.

'I had no idea you had family over there.'

'Haven't seen them for decades, but we were close at a time, so it still stings to know they're not with us anymore,' Wildar said. The life had gone from his eyes; they were dull, and he kept blinking to try and suppress the tears that were building up behind them. 'Anyway, I sent a letter back to my family there, offering condolences. Hopefully, we can get moving once this army is defeated at the capital and I can pay my respects in person.'

'I was hoping I would catch Runa this morning as well,' Ogulf said, keen to take Wildar's lead and change the subject to save the chieftain from becoming more upset.

'She's in the sparring yard with two of her underlings. I think she wants to make sure they're ready if the banners are called,' Wildar said with a sigh. He walked over to a hanging pot and poured tea into two delicate cups with markings around the rim, handing one to Ogulf. He looked into the cup as steam flowed up from his tea, taking a deep breath in through his nose and basking in the aroma of the drink. 'I do hope she's able to fight like she used to. She's not been tested since the rebellion, and she's lucky she made it out alive with just that scar as a

reminder.' Wildar sighed, then he took a deep breath as he began to stir the tea. He looked like he was trying to stay busy.

'She will be fine, Wildar. You've taught her well,' Ogulf said, trying to reassure the chieftain. 'And, if I know Runa, she will be as ready as anyone else to fight if she has to.'

The large man gave Ogulf a strained smile and sipped his tea. As Ogulf sipped the warm tea, the brittle chill in his bones he had since waking seemed to dissipate slightly as the hot liquid flowed down the back of his throat. Ogulf allowed himself to be comforted by it for only a moment before pushing the pleasant sensations aside.

'If the banners are called, do you think we can win?' Ogulf said, noticing the older man's jaw tense slightly. He knew Wildar liked a straightforward question as much as he did, so he chose not to creep around the subject.

'I'm not sure. I would think we've got a good chance, but this far away from it all it would be hard to say.' Something about Wildar's eyes told Ogulf that he was too distracted for real conversation.

'You're right, here's hoping the king does his best and we get to go back to our travels and get away from this cold,' Ogulf said.

'If only it were that simple. The journey is going to be a bit more complicated now, and I don't mean because of the invasion.'

'What are you talking about, Wildar?'

'It's complicated.' Finally, Ogulf felt like he was getting somewhere but just then, he heard a loud thud, followed by the screeching of a door hinge as someone burst into Wildar's home. The hot air was cruelly sucked from the space and was replaced by the cutting breeze of cool air, and the tranquillity of Wildar's humble dwelling was gone. It was Melcun. His hair looked like a bird's nest and he was panting, trying to catch his breath.

'With me, *now*.'

Each heavy step Ogulf took crunched on the glistening path as he ran. He was still trailing behind Melcun, heading north through the streets of Keltbran. Whatever commotion had sent Melcun sprinting for Wildar's was great enough to draw people away from their hearths and out into the bitter streets. Ogulf tried to pay them no mind as he ran to the main square. He was now only a few steps behind Melcun, but Wildar had fallen slightly behind, unable to keep up with the sprint pace of his younger companions. Ogulf noticed a group huddled around something in the square. Men and women tiptoed to see more, and the ones closest to the middle of the group gasped or covered their mouths.

As they reached the square, Ogulf noticed there was a gap in the group near the communal well, the contents of which had long since frozen. On the edges of the group, a citizen was trying to calm a saddled horse as it reared violently back onto its hind legs. Ogulf knew the horse did not belong to the man trying to subdue it. The steed was huge. Its perfectly kept mane was matted with a spattering of dried blood, and its harness was fashioned from hardened leather with well-polished fastenings and sturdy bronze stirrups. No one in Keltbran had a horse like it; this animal was owned by someone wealthy.

Moving forward, Ogulf gently pushed through the crowds of people and found his father crouched next to a young man, whose eyes were glazed but whose lips were moving. Ogulf moved closer, noticing the man's blood-stained clothes. There were dried red flecks on his pink cheeks, and his jaw was puffy.

'What happened? Were you injured on the road?' Rowden asked the young man. He was motionless other than shivering and Rowden supported the wounded man's head with his hand.

'Ja ... Jarg ... Jargmi—' The man's words were faint.

'You came from Jargmire. What happened?'

'Jargmire has ... fallen,' he said.

'Fallen?' Rowden asked. 'Impossible. The invaders have taken Jargmire?'

The young man's eyes came alive at the last word. He gave a brief nod. 'They slaughtered ever- everyone.' The vigour in his eyes started to fade again. 'You ... must ...' Rowden listened closer as the man faded, as did Ogulf. '... Run.' The last part was said like a whisper. There was a slight commotion as Wildar pushed through the crowd, breathing heavily. As the man's body went limp, Ogulf noticed there was a large gash on the back of his head where Rowden's hand had been.

A chattering grew behind Ogulf as the people gathered realised the young man was dead. Ogulf rose as the murmuring grew to a panic. He felt his chest start to tingle and not because of the cold. Jargmire had fallen. Quickly. The North Hold had fallen only a few days before. Jargmire couldn't have fallen. Not that fast. Its walls could hold a siege at bay for years.

Ogulf's usually undisturbed inner peace was now completely at odds with something he hadn't felt in years—complete and utter terror. Over and over in his head, he played out the worst possible scenario; he saw Jargmire in his mind, and it was burning. He couldn't shake the sight. He knew it wasn't real, but he felt it, so much so that he could swear his cheeks began to get warmer when he thought about it. The sounds of the people's panic were drowned out, replaced by the heavy thuds of his own heartbeat inside his ears.

Aggressively, his father had risen and was making his way to the House of the Guided. Ogulf stumbled to his feet and pushed through the crowd to follow. The people seemed to part for Rowden like water, but as they turned to see where the earl was headed, they blocked Ogulf's path, meaning he had to wade through limbs as if they were a heavy current pushing against him.

He finally managed to push through the multitude of bodies and saw his father climbing the steps to enter the House of the Guided. Shivers crawled up Ogulf's spine as Rowden disappeared into the dark mouth of the doorway. Black smoke rose from a single chimney which jutted out of the intimidating, cone-shaped roof. From the outside, this did not look like a place where those closest to the gods would choose to live or worship; it looked more like something out of a nightmare. Ogulf took the stairs at a rapid clip and followed his father into the temple.

Ogulf knew from experience that, just beyond the door to the House of the Guided, was a tunnel which led down to their main lair. It was vast and cavernous. In the past, the path to the room had been illuminated by glowing plants draped along the walls. They were called Sanlarta roots. In the two years since the ice had taken hold, roots like that had become hard to find, so now the open space just beyond the door and the tunnel were in almost complete darkness, lit only by the flickering glow of a few dying candles.

'No, you should not come down here, Ogulf.' Rowden stopped as the door shut. 'Wait outside, this is no place for you.'

'I'm going with you. They need to understand how bad this is, and you know how difficult they can be.'

Rowden flexed his hand and then stroked his beard. 'Fine, come with me.' They made their way down a winding tunnel which went on for much longer than Ogulf remembered. Roots sprang from the wall where the illuminating plants once hung. They were withered and dead now, and the ends of the branches did not produce light. The stale air made Ogulf feel like he was surrounded by something thick and sinister.

As the father and son continued, a slightly brighter light flickered ahead of them. When they reached the end of the tunnel, they were met with a wide room, vastly different to how Ogulf remembered it. Before, this place had been a shrine to the gods, full of light and life, whereas now it was dark and stank of old, dead leaves. The effigies of the gods were hidden in the shadows of the sparsely lit room.

In the centre of the space was an altar. Behind it was Grolan, the priest, flanked by his female disciples, who stood in perfect symmetry as if they had been waiting for this moment. He wore

a dirt marked robe and his hair was matted down, stuck to his forehead in places. His pupils were only just visible through the narrow slits between his heavy eyelids. Black stains crept across his teeth like veins.

Rowden took a step closer to the altar. 'Jargmire has—'

'—Fallen, yes, I am aware,' Grolan said. 'Or perhaps you were going to mention the North Hold. Or even the pending invasion of the whole of Broadheim. The gods had already chosen to bestow such knowledge on The Guided.'

Rowden looked to the dirt floor and stroked his beard. Ogulf had seen his father do this many times so he knew what was coming; Rowden was getting frustrated, the visible parts of his hairy cheeks were flushed red, and most of all, his eyes were dark, quietly contradicting the calm demeanour he tried to show. The sorrow was gone from them for now.

'What do you mean you know?' Rowden asked, his tone tense like his shoulders.

'The gods have told us that the time has come for darkness to reign.'

'Stop talking in riddles, Grolan,' Ogulf said.

'If you knew of these things, then why would you not warn us?' Rowden said to Grolan.

'The gods had not permitted me to tell you. It was not the time. The words had to come from the rider; his blood will lead them here, and the power of the ones who watch over us will protect us.' Rowden's eyes changed as Grolan replied. The acolytes on either side of Grolan stared blankly ahead. They all looked frozen in place, so pale and still.

'They come for Keltbran?' Rowden said.

'Yes, they come with might and purpose as they seek the one that was promised. But they will be struck down by the power of the gods and cast into the void of the Plains of Agony forever. We must wait and be the final stand, the hands and blades of the gods.'

'You mean we are to wait and be slaughtered?' Ogulf said. 'Father, why did we come here? We have no time for nonsense.'

'Because if we have to leave, I need his blessing. Otherwise, half the town will stay and believe that his word is that of the gods. Grolan, give me your blessing to leave Keltbran and take our people to safety.'

Grolan grumbled. 'The will of the go—'

'—The will of the gods should not be to let people who worship them die. Your inaction will be the catalyst of those deaths,' Rowden shouted, cutting Grolan off. 'A boy has just died in our square. He came from Jargmire. They've taken *Jargmire*. Why didn't the gods stop them? Are those in the citadels exempt from the mercy of our gods? At most, this force is a three-day

ride from here. We can only hope they take time to regroup before they advance to give us more time to make for the Trail.'

'We will not support your journey south, Rowden,' Grolan said, his voice echoing throughout the chamber.

'If you don't, then those faithful to you will remain here. This is not about power or influence. There will be no Keltbran to have power over once this army gets here. If the gods didn't save the capital, what can they do here? I just want to give the people a chance. Why would you stand in the way of this?'

Grolan's eyes were usually at least half closed. Now, though, they opened wide as if unlocked by a key, the whites of them glowing dully in the darkness of the room. The air behind Ogulf felt like it was being dragged away.

'We can see all, Rowden Harlsbane. What we see is another will going against that of the gods. You are free to leave Keltbran and take those who wish to follow, but the Guided and the faithful will remain to receive our blessings from the ones we pray to. May the gods have mercy on you for your sacrilege and bless your journey so that one day you will recognise the error of your ways.' His voice sounded much more powerful now, as if every word was amplified tenfold. Each word rumbled around Ogulf's ears like war drums, and dirt tumbled from the cavern ceiling in response.

Rowden said nothing, he only grunted. Grolan's eyes returned to their heavily lidded, half-closed norm. The ancient stuffiness returned to the room.

Rowden turned to Ogulf. 'There is nothing more we can do. Come on.' Ogulf and Rowden made their way back up the tunnel towards the entrance. Rowden's steps were filled with anger. 'You make sure that when it is your time to lead our people, you don't rely on the bastard Guided for anything. Bloody heretics. Make sure to always keep your own interpretation of the gods in your heart and follow that, let it take you where it pleases and don't follow any path that doesn't feel right.'

Ogulf's father hadn't said anything like this to him for a long time. He knew his father was a man of the gods, but he also understood how conflicted Rowden had been in recent years, especially since Ogulf's mother had died. He was seeing flashes of the father he remembered and the man he would need to be if they were to survive whatever came next.

As they passed through the door and into the square of the town, they were greeted by the faces of the townspeople. Some looked on concerned, women clutched scarves to their mouths, sharp whispers hid amongst the swarm of gathered people.

Ogulf walked down the steps and into the light of the main square. The bright sunshine made him squint as his eyes adjusted, and the fresh air filling his lungs took away the acrid smell from the lair of The Guided. Rowden came into focus in front of him, bounding ahead through the crowd towards his home, cursing under his breath as every step thumped down. Some of the people reached out to Rowden as he passed them, they asked him questions that Ogulf couldn't make out, but the Earl of Keltbran didn't break a stride.

There was a small gap in the crowd. The lifeless body of the young rider from Jargmire was being tended to by some of the townspeople. They carefully and respectfully laid him on a sheet almost as pale as his dead skin. Nausea coursed through Ogulf like a wave, forcing him to look away from the corpse. The same fate could be waiting for people in Keltbran if they didn't act soon. Who would be there to bathe and burn the dead if everyone was slaughtered? Their flesh and bones would be left to rot in the dirt, their final horrified expressions would be frozen for eternity on their faces, perfectly preserved by the biting cold as a reminder for all of the agony that death brought them.

How could anyone wish to give chance to such a fate? The Guided had always claimed to act in a way that was best for their people, but as far as Ogulf was concerned, it seemed they no longer cared.

Rowden was almost past the crowds when Ogulf felt the urge to call out. 'People of Keltbran,' he said, as loud as he could. The words caught in the back of his throat as the cold wind tried to sweep the words away. His voice wasn't loud enough; he had to repeat himself a few times to cut through the droning noise of panicked conversation. With ease, he vaulted onto an empty cart next to him and scanned the crowd. They began to turn towards him as he shouted, his voice clear this time, and he even noticed his father turn as he reached the edge of the assembled group of townspeople.

'This,' Ogulf said, extending a finger in the direction of the people moving the boy's body, 'Is what you can expect if you stay here.' People tiptoed and turned their heads toward those tending to the dead rider. His skin was translucent; his wide eyes, staring skyward, were still full of horror. 'An army is invading Broadheim.' The people looked at Ogulf, and then at one another, clearly confused. 'The North Hold fell a week ago. This rider came from Jargmire, where he said an army took the citadel and left no one alive. That means Tran will be next, and then there is nothing stopping this army from getting to us. We might not be a citadel, but it doesn't mean we won't be targeted. And if you think we stand a chance when the fight comes... Well, then I call you Brait's Fools.'

‘If we stay here, we will die. We cannot wait this out. It won’t be slow or something we can put up with like the cold. We will be butchered, so in simple terms, if we wait... we die,’ Ogulf continued. ‘Grolan and The Guided know this. And yet, he will not tell you to leave, because that would be against the so-called will of the gods. If that is the case, well then, the gods will be Brait’s Fools also.’ Gasps circulated from the crowd as Ogulf said this. He knew it was blasphemy, but he also knew it was true. The gods who led Ogulf on his path would never leave him to be slaughtered, nor would they allow him to succumb to the cold; they would want him to fight for his survival.

Some of the crowd shouted out, and although Ogulf couldn’t understand them, he felt sure that they were countering his comments with insults of their own.

‘You may not want to leave Broadheim. I understand this. I don’t want to leave our homeland either, my very roots are here, but it’s our only chance if we mean to survive.’

‘How will we get South when we have no boats?’ a voice called out from just in front of Ogulf.

‘We take the Widow’s Trail.’

A sea of voices crashed upon Ogulf. He made out only a few shouts. ‘You lead us to our death on that mountain.’

‘How will my children make it round the pass?’

‘We would be better off dying freezing and starving in our own beds!’ All of these among a verbal peppering of shouts, including, ‘lunatic,’ ‘heretic,’ and, ‘Brait’s Fool.’

‘This will be suicide!’ One final shout cut through the rest.

‘It would be suicide to stay!’ Ogulf shouted back, no longer able to mask his frustrations. He took a deep breath in before releasing it to alleviate some of the tightness in his chest.

Ogulf noticed Rowden starting to wade back through the crowd towards him. With a nimble hop up onto the cart, he stood shoulder to shoulder with Ogulf. The wooden slats creaked under the weight of them both.

‘My son is right. Now that you know what is truly coming for us, you should understand our predicament. If you wish to join us as we head South, we will be leaving at high sun tomorrow.’ Rowden’s words left some people in a frenzy, moving towards their homes. Others pushed past them and began to pound on the door to the House of the Guided. ‘Ogulf, with me.’ Rowden motioned to his son to follow him, and together, they made their back way to his home.

Chapter 4

The evening was young, but already, it was proving itself to be an unpleasant one. So far, it had been filled with heated discussions, half-hearted plans and two separate instances where Ogulf thought a fist fight might break out in his father's home. Tensions were calmed slightly when Yadlin, the town's former priest, showed up to offer his own thoughts on the plans.

Now Ogulf, Runa, Prundan, Wildar, Rowden, and Yadlin were all crammed into Rowden's study. The hermit priest was hunched in an uncomfortable-looking position. His spine was like the wood of a bow, his bald head was a patchwork of discoloured skin, and the only hair on his body seemed to be the grey wisps that sprouted above his eyes. When he spoke, his voice wobbled slightly with age.

'And he said they seek the one who was promised?' Yadlin said, his fore and middle fingers tapping lightly on the table next to him as he talked. 'What else did he say?'

'That the power of the gods would protect us,' Ogulf said.

'He talks in riddles that man,' Yadlin said. 'One of the main reasons I left the temple and never returned. It was like talking to a child, and for someone who says so much, in fact, he says nothing at all. That being said, if you want my interpretation of what he said, there are a few lines which may be of interest.'

Everyone in the room looked on. Wildar was fidgeting, Runa leaned closer to the old former priest, Rowden and Prundan exchanged a glance, while Ogulf found it impossible to concentrate on anything other than the rhythmic tapping of Yadlin's fingers.

'If they come from Visser, they may seek to fulfil the prophecy linked to the ways they followed for years; it's one based on the foundations of the darkest magic known. If fulfilled, it will bring them back to prominence.' Yadlin said, 'The text is very, very old. And it is likely that Grolan has read it too. Rather than being an insight from the gods, it is most likely his own prophecy, one he uses to keep his flock close by in the hope that, by taking their souls to the afterlife with him, he is granted better favour with the gods. If only he knew, our gods don't work like that. Regardless, I fully support your choice to leave. It's no use waiting to die by a

blade you can escape. If this is the case, they won't stop at our borders, the prophecy will lead them to attack all Gelenea. They will be headed for—'

'—Enough of this bull about prophecies. Where would we go?' Prundan asked, cutting Yadlin off and leaving the old priest with a bemused smile, his thin eyebrows raised. 'Supposing we make it round the Trail, then what? Just wait at the border and hope they don't make it any further South?'

'We could go to Luefmort,' Runa said.

'Ha, and do you suppose the Shingally's will just welcome us in, then?' Prundan said.

'My uncle is a lord there. I haven't seen him in years, but I am sure he would help us,' Runa said.

'That sounds like a good idea,' Ogulf said.

'I could ride ahead with a few of my scouts and warn them that you're coming.'

'Wildar, what do you think?' Rowden asked. 'Wildar?'

Ogulf looked round to see the chieftain staring out the window, in his own world far away from the conversation. His hands wouldn't stay still.

'Eh?' Wildar said.

'Runa is going to ride ahead to Luefmort and see if her uncle will give us shelter.'

'Oh, right, yes. Good idea.'

Wildar's response caused Ogulf to shiver. Something was bothering the chieftain, something more than these problems they all discussed. Ogulf had never seen the man this unnerved, and he had expected Wildar to put up at least some resistance to the plan to send Runa ahead with only a small group.

But, with Wildar's absent blessing, the plan was agreed, and the group spent the rest of the night discussing their next steps in detail.

The next morning when Ogulf was packing his bag, he noticed the light from the sunrise shorten his shadow. He wasn't planning on taking much on the journey South; the things he wanted to take weren't practical or small enough to carry without being a nuisance. So, he decided to take only his axe, his bedroll, a bunch of berries he picked a few days before, a skin for water, and an overshirt to wear while he slept.

His father tasked some of his captains with going around the doors of all those in the town to tell them to travel light and pack smart. Ogulf was one of them and he took Melcun with

him, getting him up to speed with all that he had been told at the captains' meeting. He hurried from door to door, met with a mixture of responses; some rubbed their necks anxiously as Ogulf told them what to do, others spat green phlegm at his feet and called him a coward before placing curses on the journey.

Rowden had told his captains that he was troubled by the need to move so quickly. He was forcing people who had spent most or all of their lives here to leave behind their whole existence in search of something new. In the process, he was turning the stagnant town of Keltbran into a flourishing pool of activity as the risks outweighed the comfort that came with staying.

The mood in the town was sombre given the circumstances, but it gave Ogulf a little hope to see his people getting ready to leave. The people here had always strived to prosper, not just survive, and this was no different. Ogulf's people were good people, even in their coldest, darkest hour, they would come through. *Well, some of them at least*, Ogulf thought.

A sudden jolt of panic rushed through Ogulf as he stuffed his crumpled overshirt into his pack. He searched for the trigger or cause. Leaving Keltbran. It wasn't like the times he had left before, knowing he was coming back. Leaving in those instances was easy. This was different. He would leave his home, the memories, the comfort, the roots of his very existence, and in almost all scenarios he played through in his head, he would never be able to return.

Now he wouldn't have a home to return to and had to allow his journey to take him to whatever the gods had fated for him next. As he strapped his bag shut, he tried to quell the emotion inside him. It was the roots he couldn't bear to leave, not the proverbial roots, but the literal ones.

Behind his home stood a huge oak tree, planted in memory of his mother, a place of solace and comfort that he relied on. The relief of knowing it was nearby had been enough to quell even his darkest worries in times gone by. Now it couldn't do that. If anything, it being static and vulnerable just made it worse.

He hadn't been ready for his mother to leave them when she did. Though, in truth, he doubted he would ever have been ready. His mother had been an incredible woman, not just an earl's wife, not just a trophy of beauty for the people to gaze at, she was a formidable woman with more flair and courage than half of Rowden's captains, old or new. Had she been alive, she would have supported the plans to leave, Ogulf just knew it.

His hands lingered on the harsh blade of his axe as he patted himself down. It was icy to touch and could do with being sharpened—something he would do on the journey to pass the time. Next, he reached into his bedside cabinet and retrieved a necklace, which he placed on

his bed. It was made with a small, smooth, jet-black stone, its ridged corners gave it shape, and it was no bigger than a thumb. Symbols were carved around it, these same symbols which Ogulf had stared at on many long cold nights in flickering candlelight as he struggled to find sleep.

The necklace had been his mother's. He still didn't know what it was or what the carvings meant, but in a way, he liked not knowing because it kept part of his mother alive, as if she still had things to teach him. It helped him wonder about his mother, about the things he might have learned if she stayed alive. Along with the tree, the stone kept a piece of her spirit with Ogulf, and having the necklace made leaving the tree behind easier, if only very slightly.

He always kept the necklace in his cabinet, but now he had decided to wear it. He had crafted a new leather strap for it, as the original had not fit around his neck.

For such a slight woman, there was no man who would feel confident if they were to face her with a blade in hand, those were Rowden's words. Ogulf wondered if his father had ever been faced by his mother wielding a weapon. The gods knew there would have been times he might have. Rowden once had a reputation for getting so inebriated that, when he returned home, he would wobble and fall into everything that could make a racket. Ogulf remembered being young and hearing pots clatter and plates shatter as his father returned from the inn. His mother would then storm from their bedchamber to meet him and ask what in the name of the gods did he think he was doing, and why was he making more noise than there was during the world's creation at such a late hour. This would lead to grovelling from his father, then tempered footsteps from his mother, and finally, snoring as his father put his head down wherever he lay to sleep, banished from his own bed by his wife all in thanks to his stupidity.

Tying the knot tight and giving the strap a few tugs to make sure it was secure, he smiled and pictured his mother wearing it. This had been a long time ago, but the image of her in his mind was still as clear.

As he walked along the frozen ground towards the tree, his eyes traced upwards from the roots, higher through the rigid bark and finally to the tallest tips of the highest branches. The tree had grown to be the largest anyone in Keltbran had ever seen, some even said it was among the largest in all of Broadheim. It shot from the ground over fifty feet high and grew quicker than any tree Ogulf had ever seen, dwarfing some of the oldest ones in Keltbran despite being much younger. Its long, smooth roots still seemed to suck plenty of life from the earth, and the tree looked healthy despite the lack of rain or real sun to nourish it. The cold had caused the branches and ends at the top of the tree to wither, but they did so in a way that still captured their grace.

Some people thought privately, and even whispered amongst themselves, that it would be great for firewood, especially with this weather, but no one was stupid enough to say such a thing in front of Rowden or Ogulf.

With the cold so prevalent now, many of the townspeople looked at the tree like it was a beacon of hope, saying while it was strong the people would be strong also. Standing in front of it, Ogulf felt panic flood him again; he didn't want this to be the last time he sought the comfort of the spirit of his mother. Whenever he was troubled and needed to find his way, he spent time at his mother's tree. He wasn't the type to think that trees could talk to people, and it had been years since he truly sought counsel here or even sucked in the calming aroma from the bark. It was just that, when he did, he always seemed to find a solution when he needed it most, all just by sitting and resting his body and mind against the now familiar runs of its roots.

Time was short, so he focused on trying to find the solace he was looking for. As he always did when he came to the tree, he ran his hands down the rough edges of bark, breathed in its familiar scent, and began to think of his mother. Ogulf always chose to rest his back against the tree as if he was leaning on his mother like he had done when he was a child. He never spoke when he was here; he just sat in silence and tried his best to think of his mother.

This time, he was also trying to justify his want to leave. He was a fighter, a proud man, and to leave felt like cowardice. The tactician knew that the odds were against him, though. That staying was tantamount to giving up. For the first time since his first fight, he was faced with a fight he knew he couldn't win. So, there was no other choice but to search for safety and then work out a new plan. The only issue he had was not knowing what that plan was. Usually, he had Wildar to rely on for his next steps or, at the very least, the directions of them. But now, all he knew was that they were headed South, and to get South they would have to make their way around a trail which had claimed the lives of so many men.

It was the same trail that Wildar had attempted before and turned back from. Something Wildar never did, but whatever he had experienced on that trail had been enough to make him vow never to try again.

Seeking the calm reassurance he always looked for from the tree, Ogulf closed his eyes and took a deep breath, adjusting his shoulders to find comfort as the freezing ground began to chill his backside.

His eyes opened as he felt something disrupting his peace. His father's home was ten paces away, but it looked more like a mile, and the solid ground had begun to look more like flowing water. He tried to think of his mother, but he couldn't clear his mind. A dull ache quickly spread to a sharp pain in his temples and his eyes burned, making them feel as if they were balls of

fire embedded in his skull and cooking his brain like a roast hog. He tried to call out, but the words never came. The world in front of him disappeared into a black void of nothing, and then suddenly he could see again.

This world was different from his. He was seeing it, but he knew he was not there. He saw a huge mountain with a city built into its walls and sprawled all around it. A huge waterfall spewed out of the mountainside, landing in a pool near the city gate below and trickling through the city limits, giving life to a flowing river of winding blue.

He looked down to realise he was suspended in mid-air. He couldn't see what was stopping him from falling.

By the time he looked back at the cavernous city, he noticed that from every opening, window, or balcony, flames crept out angrily as if they were trying to burn the rest of the world. The entire citadel was ablaze. The waterfall no longer produced water; pouring from the crevice now was a wash of crimson. Blood. The longer he stared at the blaze, the clearer the row of voices became inside his head.

'Death comes for you with the might of fifty thousand swords and more. The power will leave no one but the wicked alive. The world will fall to eternal darkness if it is not stopped.'

The voice was female. It was filled with panic and urgency. 'Do whatever you can. You must not let them have it,' the voice continued, this time it sounded sterner. 'Death is among you. They seek the one born to the call of the black gem. It is near you. They seek it. They seek the one. The one who lures them. They follow her power; they can sense it.'

The voice filled his whole mind, but from his right, he heard the mighty crash of wood being destroyed.

'It must be stopped. Let the gods flight your feet to find your saviour. Be wary of even those closest to you, trust in your will. Only light can stop the Onyxborn and the cold from the north. See this, this death is what awaits if you do not hurry. Stones are cast and motion is underway, this is only the beginning, but you can stop it if you find haste.' More crashes and then footsteps. Ogulf couldn't take his eyes from the blaze of the citadel as he hung in the air. Suddenly, there was a gap in the blaze from a large opening.

From the smoke, an apparition flew towards him, going as fast as anything he had ever seen move. As it got closer to him, it shrieked. The noise was evil and thundered through Ogulf's ears. They ached to the point he thought his head would explode. The apparition got close enough for Ogulf to be sure it was the human form of a woman wearing a headdress of spikes. The pain from the creature's shriek became too much and Ogulf felt himself begin to fall.

He plummeted fast and felt the cool air rushing past him, causing his clothes to flap and his hair to wrap around his face. The shrieking sound began to dissipate. Ogulf couldn't turn fast enough to see if the apparition was following him. His body spun violently as he dropped, and he noticed the blaze was spread right across the mountainous walls of the huge citadel. Outside the walls was a band of dark figures dressed in dark red robes, all watching the destruction unfold.

When he finally stabilised, he saw the ground rushing towards him. He felt his bones crack upon impact. The crushing feeling accompanied by a sickening pop and a chorus of snaps. With a whimper and a bloodcurdling cough, he was in the darkness once again.

Chapter 5

Ogulf's eyes burned in the brightness. His back was freezing from where he lay, no longer leaning against his mother's tree, but rather on the earth a few paces from its roots. The ground was solid, gritty, and uncomfortable. He groaned and noticed how the upper branches were hanging over him, peering over him, as if checking on his condition.

'What are you doing down there?' Melcun asked as he rushed towards Ogulf. 'I've been looking for you. Everyone is in the square, they're all ready to leave – there are hundreds of them,' he said, helping Ogulf to his feet. Ogulf leaned closer to his friend as his legs began to come back to life, his mind racing in its search for answers as to what he had just experienced. 'Far more than I thought there would be, that's for sure.'

Ogulf felt slightly disoriented as he took his first few steps free from the support of Melcun's arm. A wincing burn lingered in his temples. He dusted himself off as best he could and tucked his mother's necklace under the collar of his shirt. Only half of Ogulf's body seemed to be working, so Melcun grabbed his arm again, dragging him forward. Ogulf accepted the help and let his feet flop on the hard ground one after the other in a thudding, but oddly calming, cadence.

Ogulf started to remember parts of the vision he just had. He assumed he got overwhelmed and then he collapsed. That dream was the most vivid one he had ever experienced. Nothing like that had ever happened to him before. His head was still throbbing as Melcun heaved him along, but his feet were beginning to feel more like they belonged to his body again.

The grogginess wore off as they rushed through his father's home, Ogulf taking a second to glance at it for what he was sure would be the very last time. 'How many people, Melcun?' he asked.

'At least eight hundred want to make the journey South,' Melcun said. 'Maybe more. Some of them seem to have taken a liking to your speech the other day.'

'As good as that is, the Trail will be deadly with that amount of people trying to pass. I guess we need to make sure as many people get through as safely as possible.' As they passed through the other side and out the door into the main street of Keltbran, Ogulf felt that ever more

familiar feeling of his stomach turning upside down – the number of people waiting to depart was almost as many as when they celebrated a new year – far too many to make a pass around the Trail. This was a development that would undoubtedly complicate things.

One thing Ogulf noticed as they approached the gathered group was that the mood was different to before. The people who were willing to leave had an eagerness about them, one that was dashed with anxiety and impatience. They wanted to put as much land between them and the invading army as possible. Keltbran felt alive again, only it was for all the wrong reasons.

The two made their way through the people to the main square where Rowden was waiting alongside Wildar and his other captains. As Ogulf approached, he thought he heard a mention of Runa's name, though nothing specific made it through the collective murmurings of the crowd.

'Ogulf, why were you lying in the dirt back there?' Melcun asked.

'I was sitting by my mother's tree when everything just wen—'

'—There he is. Ogulf! Come on, we have leave.' It was Rowden who bellowed from the front of the crowd. 'Grolan is trying to convince people to stay; we can't linger.' Ogulf followed his father's gaze to see Grolan and his disciples on platforms above the crowd. Grolan was particularly animated in a way Ogulf had never seen before.

With the signal of a horn, the group began to move to the path that led south of Keltbran. Ogulf marched at the front with Wildar and Melcun, his father and Prundan just behind them.

On the outskirts of Keltbran, Ogulf noticed a familiar figure in the road ahead. Yadlin was standing there with a thick cloak on. The wise old man wore a pleasant smile as Ogulf approached.

'You won't come with us then?' Ogulf asked the old man.

'I doubt I would even make it to the Trail, never mind around it, my young friend,' Yadlin replied with a chuckle. 'Fear not, I won't be staying in Keltbran.'

'Then where will you go, Yadlin?' Ogulf asked, stopping along with Melcun and Rowden as the rest of the group plodded past them. Ogulf noticed Wildar was still preoccupied by whatever it was that was plaguing him as he moved by, his shoulders were high and full of stress.

'Of that I am unsure. I may make for Saker, and from there, try to find a boat to the Shingal and start a new life. Perhaps incorporate a vice or two here or there this time around,' he said with a wicked smile.

Despite his position as a man of the gods, Yadlin had always hinted that he regretted not taking part in some of the frowned upon but pleasurable experiences the world had to offer. Rowden let out a hearty laugh at his comment while Ogulf looked at the ground.

‘If that’s the case, then I pray to the gods you get to enjoy your debauchery,’ Rowden said. ‘We will meet again, I feel it. Stay safe, Yadlin.’

The priest’s smile crept a little wider and he nodded at Rowden. ‘One day. Some place. Yes, you’re right,’ Yadlin replied. ‘Follow your will, all of you, for that is the true will of the gods. And know in your souls that the gods you and I follow would never want for a person to give up, so keep fighting, striving, and believing until your last breath. Only then can you overcome the darkness. And you—’ He motioned to Ogulf. ‘—I was eager to see you at the helm, I have no doubt you will do great things, young man.’

Ogulf felt the corners of his mouth curl upwards in reaction to Yadlin’s words. It wasn’t forced; it was a sincere reaction to a sincere compliment. Power or influence were never accolades that Ogulf had ever sought, but a statement like this, coming from a man of the stature of Yadlin, was one of the greatest pieces of praise he had ever received.

Yadlin turned, placed his hands in the pockets of his hooded robe, and began to walk across a rock-peppered brush away from the path. He moved methodically as if every step had a purpose, eyes down and forward without so much as a glance at the people moving behind him. Rowden sighed and re-joined those walking, while Ogulf’s gaze lingered for some time on Yadlin as he walked off across the rugged field towards the treeline of the forest. He had wanted to ask the old priest about the vision he’d had, but that would have to wait until the next time they saw one another.

‘Let’s get moving, Ogulf,’ said Melcun, removing Ogulf from his daze. He turned to Melcun before stealing one glance back at Yadlin, who had disappeared past the boundary into the dark of the forest.

The beginnings of the journey south passed without much notice. Ogulf and Melcun were given the responsibility of making sure the pace was kept at the rear of the fleeing group. Prundan sent a group of his best scouts ahead to make sure the path they took was clear. He didn’t expect trouble, but there was no harm in employing some extra caution.

They passed a few abandoned villages between Keltbran and the Widow’s Trail. The citizens of those villages were the first to head for the citadels and they passed through Keltbran to get to them, telling stories of the cold and despair and how all of the fish in the Blades had died off.

Some of the fleeing townsfolk were naturally slower than others. As Ogulf grew frustrated at keeping the rear, he had an urge to push ahead, but his responsibility was clear, so he had to be as slow as the slowest man. He had seen snails move faster than some of these people as they trudged through the desolate frozen landscape. Before long, some became disheartened, and turned back towards Keltbran. At first, Ogulf and Melcun tried to stop them, but after the first few instances, realised their efforts were futile. The people had made their decisions to turn back, so they pressed ahead with those willing to do the same.

On the second day of their journey, the trekking band of townspeople trailed along a wide path which used to be used for transporting goods from the eastern shores to the citadels. It was a flat expanse of grey dirt which made Ogulf think of death. Broadheim was dead, there was no reason to stay if this was all that there was. The flat plain rose up to a small hill, and at the top of it, he finally got a glimpse of the Widow's Trail. He had seen it before when he used this road, but never like this.

Do these invaders know that they are taking a land that is ripe only with despair? he thought as he let his eyes run up the dead crop lines to his right.

The Widow's Trail was a formidable beacon of terror which people knew not to attempt. They looked at it as the journey to death itself, and so most people avoided it, instead seeking passage by ship if they had to journey to other parts of the Gelenea. The Trail was seen as a hopeless option, and now the bleakness of the mountain seemed to have enveloped the entire country. Everything looked like it had been kissed by death. Hopeless mud, hopeless people, and a hopeless country.

The path disappeared, going from clear and carved to lost in a grey stretch of dirt as Ogulf came over the brow of a hill. The people traversing down the other side had lost the uniform lines of their marching order and now looked like a disjointed swarm as they carefully placed their feet in the icy mud of the steep slopes in front of them.

'I knew it would be bleak,' Melcun said, placing his feet meticulously as he navigated the sharp side of the hill. 'But I at least hoped we would be able to feel a bit of warmth by now. Wishful thinking is for Brait, I suppose.'

'Hope is good. Hope only exists on the other side of that mountain.'

'Aye, you're right,' Melcun said, stopping for a moment to squint at the mountain in the distance. Ogulf did the same as some of the slower travellers moved past them, stumbling on the uneven surface of the hillside.

Ogulf had never seen the Widow's Trail this close. There were bigger mountains in Broadheim, that was for sure, but there were none quite as daunting as this one, which was their only viable path to safety.

The mountain looked steeper than anything he could comprehend. Somehow smooth and rugged at the same time. The peak climbed to a dizzying height before descending harshly to meet the rise of another smaller mountain behind it, and the land around it was sucked in at the base, making the flat path around it incredibly narrow. Waves crashed along what looked like a jagged bed of rocks where the mountain met the water. It was clear why people died trying to pass this mountain. Ogulf felt his stomach drop, and for a brief moment, he considered swimming across the Blades, feeling it might be less terrifying than the Trail.

The two friends made their way across and down the hills, carefully placing each step on the ground before bearing weight down on it, and in this fashion, they edged towards the foot of the trail. As they did, the group in front began to congregate atop a long, flat ledge ahead.

The wind began to howl. It was much colder on the hilltops than it had been on the low ground. *And this is probably warm compared to what it's like up there*, he thought as he looked up at the mountain pass again, shivering as he bundled his cloak tighter around his neck, pressing on towards the group.

The people of Keltbran set up a makeshift camp in a lightly forested area. The dead trees offered no shelter, but Prundan said that was better than sleeping in the open and Ogulf agreed, as much as it pained him. It was late afternoon by the time the camp was set up. By now the sun was setting, and the light of the day was fading. The biting wind swept through fiercely, an enemy to those trying to light fires, snuffing out every spark that almost caught in the flint and dried bark with ridiculing gusts. Some people resorted to huddling together for warmth, entire families were clustered under blankets and all linked at the arm, staring on as the unlucky member of their brood tried in vain to start a fire.

At least one, maybe even two, hundred had turned back towards Keltbran. Ogulf was glad in a way; the ones less willing would be the ones who could make the Trail harder. When they got onto the Trail, there was no going back.

Eventually the wind calmed slightly, and fires were lit, just in time to counter the darkness that was beginning to take over. The hopes of a warmer air to the south had not yet come to fruition. Ogulf found this disheartening but tried his best not to show it. Spirits were lifted slightly when the scouts came back to the forest camp with three deer and a brace of rabbits. There wasn't much, but the meat was shared as much as it could be among those without sufficient rations. Ogulf refused his share and stuck to the berries he had. They were frozen

solid, bitter, and had a chance of giving him stomach cramps, but it wouldn't feel right taking rations from people who had nothing.

Once people had had the chance to rest, to let the warmth from the fire take the ache from their bones and have something to eat, Rowden called a meeting of his captains.

'We go in groups tomorrow. The scouts have said the Trail won't take all of us going at once and we can't take that risk. I'll be leading the first group, Prundan you lead the second, I'll ask Melcun to take the third, and Ogulf and Wildar take the fourth group.'

'You are going to let the orphan boy lead a group?' Prundan asked.

'Yes. Without Runa, Zemin, and Pelta, I need to try and find some new leaders among us. Think of this as a test for him.'

'Brave time for you to try such a thing, Rowden,' Prundan said.

'Well, if this doesn't show us what he's capable of then I don't know what will. What else could challenge him like this?' Rowden said. 'Ogulf and Wildar, you go together as the path will likely be degraded by the time you set off. I need my two best, my very best, to get that group around the Trail to safety.' There was annoyance in Prundan's eyes as Rowden spoke. 'Getting groups of ten around this trail would have been hard enough, but we're taking at least a hundred each. It sounds impossible, I know, but it's better than dying by cold, blade, or bellyache.'

Ogulf hadn't heard his father speak like this in a long time. It was almost as if being away from the decay of Keltbran, now in search of hope or prosperity, he was becoming the Rowden that his people needed him to be, the Rowden that Ogulf remembered. There was a collective nod from the group of captains. Wildar gave Ogulf a reassuring smile, the first notable expression change since his mood had dropped the day before.

Having Wildar with him would instil a level of confidence in his group; they were two of the most experienced scouts and fighters in Keltbran and they both knew how to lead.

Rowden continued. 'Is it as bad as they say, Wildar?'

'It could be worse. There are two ways you can go up the mountain, one is the Hard Way and the other is the Long Way. The Long Way around is the only way we can consider. The Trail we take will run up the hard side of the mountain at first, then it wraps around the face and then spirals down from the peak. It's deceptive; some parts look like a leisurely walk, others you've got about an inch of rock between life and death, so... be warned and tread with as much caution as you can,' Wildar said. 'The peak was as far as I made it last time. You could see the South Hold from there it was so clear.'

‘Why didn’t you keep going?’ Ogulf asked. He tried to make the question sound as innocent as he could.

‘Fear. The slope to the peak was hard, but I was younger, fitter, then, and I knew I had more in me. But when we passed the peak and saw what was below, the sight rattled me in a way I have never quite got over.’ Wildar’s voice sounded uncharacteristically unsteady as he ran a hand through his beard. The group around him leant in closer, listening intently, even Prundan.

‘The whole path down was littered with bones and ragged garments. The bones stood out the worst; the rock on the mountain is so dark, except for the peak with the snow covering, so the frozen white bone was unmistakable. I didn’t try to count, but the whole face leading down that slope was peppered with jutting joints. So, we turned back.’

Prundan laughed. ‘And you lot expect us to make it through this Trail with all these people.’ He threw a wood chip into the fire aggressively. ‘Should have stayed in Keltbran with The Guided and avoided this Brait’s quest.’

Wildar attempted to respond but was cut off by Ogulf. ‘It would be a Brait’s quest to stay in Keltbran and be slaughtered, Prundan. We have to take the risk.’

‘Well, I should expect that kind of talk from a man of your stature, but make no mistake, young Harlsbane, this isn’t a battle, not in the sense of the ones you’ve fought and won before. Even the ones when you were outnumbered five to one had better odds than this,’ Prundan said.

Melcun arrived just as Ogulf was about to reply. ‘You sent for me, Earl Harlsbane?’

‘Yes, I need you to lead a group around the Trail tomorrow, can you do that?’ Rowden said. Ogulf watched Melcun’s eyes widen and his shoulders pull back.

‘I’d be honoured, I’ll do my best,’ Melcun said, letting a proud smile pull over his face.

‘Heh, your best probably won’t be good enough, orphan boy,’ Prundan said. He walked over to Melcun and gave him a soft, open-handed slap to the face. The sound of skin hitting skin was quiet, but the mocking intent of it was clear for all to see.

Melcun’s eyes went wild with fury but his body remained placid. Ogulf swore he saw a spark jolt from Melcun’s hand, but as he did, the group were distracted by the whinnying of a horse drawing closer to them. People began to shout, and all of the captains reached for the weapons at their hips as they spun to face the noise. The horse drew closer. It was a Keltbran scout, returning to camp. When they saw this the captains began to sheath their weapons, but they continued to scan the tree lines for some minutes afterwards. Ogulf let out a sigh of relief as his breathing began to settle again.

‘Earl Harlsbane—’ The rider dismounted and approached the captains. He was out of breath, despite having been on horseback. ‘—I got here as quickly as I could.’

Prundan went to the man and motioned for him to sit down. He handed him his skin of water. 'I've rode a full day from Port Saker.' The rider gulped water.

'Saker? I thought it was abandoned,' Prundan said.

'So did I,' the rider said. 'You said to go to Skargholm.' He looked at Prundan. 'The road was unpassable, the ice was too much, so I made to go around Yales Lake and turn back toward Skargholm at The Split, but when I got to Port Saker...' The rider's demeanour changed and fear crept into his eyes. He gulped more water and stared at the fire. Prundan was looking on at him, concerned.

'What did you see, lad?' Rowden asked.

'An army.' The rider was staring into the dancing flames as if reliving the memory in the shapes that they made. 'Countless soldiers. Drove. Thousands. They were all dressed in plated armour, dark red and evil looking. They had horrible weapons – not normal blades or axes – brutal ones like I've never seen.' His gaze broke and he looked at Rowden. 'They must be the horde.'

Wildar was stroking his beard as he glanced sideways at Ogulf. The once deflating feeling of alarm coursed through Ogulf again. He'd never felt fear like this. He searched his mind for more worrisome situations, and in truth, there were none. If the invaders were at Saker, they had come across the border at multiple points. The old East Hold had to have fallen. 'If they're in Saker, they must have come around the Long Peaks,' Ogulf said, loud enough for all to hear but directing the words at his father. 'That can't be possible.'

'Unless they split their force before attacking the citadels?' Wildar said.

'Perhaps,' Rowden said. 'I wouldn't say much sounds impossible anymore given what's happened over the last week.'

Ogulf knew his father was right; it was absolutely possible for all of these things to happen, it was just that no one imagined they would come to pass or that an army or anyone would actually manage feats like this. It was cold, Broadheim was fortified, and the world was at peace.

'If the East Hold has fallen there is no doubt that this is an invasion,' Prundan said. 'But from where? Surely it cannot be from beyond the Chasm?'

Frigid weather and winters in the continent of Gelenea tended to spread from the worst hit parts in the north before tapering off in severity in the warmer climates of the South. For the past two years, almost everyone in Broadheim had assumed anyone situated to the north of their border must have had the cold a lot worse than they did.

'Were there ships in the port?' Ogulf asked. 'Could they have come from Shingal?'

If this was the case then the most peaceful realm in all of the known world had decided to change their focus, so Ogulf thought it unlikely. The Kingdom of Shingal had always prided itself on being an ally to all, and it prospered like no other country could, but a change of tactics may have meant that the Shingally's had noticed the weakness in Broadheim – the cold would have presented a ripe opportunity for a force to invade. They would have to cross the Sea of Blades to reach the East Hold – a treacherous task, even for the most advanced fleet. Not only that, but the invasion came from the north and the Shingally Empire only bordered Broadheim from the South. Furthermore, for a wealthy and powerful kingdom like the Shingal, an invasion of Broadheim would be a fruitless endeavour, unless they had an interest in taking the barren, dying land or their goal was simply to enslave the population. As the stories went, the horde were slaughtering all who stood in their way, so this couldn't be the case either. Ogulf didn't give the idea more than a glancing thought.

'No boats. Only men on foot and some on horseback.'

'We haven't heard from Prath or Ridmir in over five years, and even then, that was an unofficial word – they must have got the cold worse than us. And when we did hear from them, we were on peaceful terms,' Wildar said.

Prath and Ridmir were the twin capitals of Visser, a country that was sometimes called The Old North. It was a vast and formerly populous land which used to rival the Shingally Empire for power, but was now effectively cut off from the rest of the world. Visser lay beyond The Chasm and The Throws to the north of Broadheim. They had been placed in the annals of history as a country constantly struggling to regain their past successes. It was widely accepted the country collapsed before the cold came. No proof of the breakdown ever came, and when the cold didn't go away, the news became unimportant anyway. Ogulf longed to go there if he ever got the chance, to see the fallen empire with his own eyes.

'Terms change,' Wildar said. 'Speculation takes time. We don't have that luxury. We now know this is an invasion; it cannot be anything else. If the citadels and the Holds have fallen, then six hundred Keltbran people aren't going to stop an invading army. The sooner we can get around that pass to the South, the better.'

'Agreed,' Rowden said, supporting his chieftain's theory. 'We go on as planned. The further South we get, the better, and we will know soon enough if this is the Shingal, though I can't see that being the case.'

'The lack of ships makes me agree with you. It won't have been the Shingal. They would gain nothing taking Broadheim. We don't even have grain anymore,' Wildar said to the group, trying to quash the theory once and for all.

‘Did you notice anything else, lad?’ Prundan asked.

‘Their standards. I’ve never seen them before, not in any texts or in all the time I’ve travelled. Dark red like fresh blood with black gemstones in the middle, no words, no house names, all the flags were the same.’

Rowden helped the rider to his feet and called on one of his men to make sure he was fed and given somewhere to rest. Prundan followed Rowden and his scout. Ogulf, Wildar, and Melcun remained at the fire.

‘Better hope the south is safe. What if this army follows us there?’ Melcun said.

‘Don’t worry. If we make it where I want to go, we will be safe,’ Wildar said, his eyes steely and full of resolve as he stared into the fire.

‘Esselonia?’ Ogulf said.

‘Yes, we need to get there. We need to put as much land and sea between us and this army as we can.’

‘I’ve never seen you this worried, Wildar.’

‘If I could put into words how my gut feels right now, it would give you nightmares. This prophecy that Yadlin mentioned, if it’s what I think it is, worry is only the beginning; soon it will be dread, then it will be terror, and then death. We need to be fast.’

‘I didn’t take you for one to believe in tales, Wildar.’

‘Just because you were told fables as children to tire your eyes and your minds, it doesn’t mean there isn’t some truth in them. And I know this one has more weight than others. One can only hope that the worst parts are myth and the best parts never come to fulfilment. No use dwelling on it, both of you try to get some sleep before tomorrow,’ Wildar said before rising up and walking into the dark of the forests, away from the fire.

Ogulf untucked the leather necklace and began looking at his mother’s black gemstone, rolling it from side to side in his hand as light from the fire danced in the dark body of the gem, filling the carvings with brilliance.

By now he was used to the sting of the wind. He resigned himself to the fact he wouldn’t get much sleep, so he would try to get as much rest as he could, even if it was just to take the throbbing from his feet for as long as possible. Ogulf bid Melcun goodnight and reluctantly walked away from the dwindling fire towards his pack. By the time he was five paces from its warmth, he was shivering.

Just as he set his thoughts on the south and getting away from the cold, his mind rushed back to what happened at his mother’s tree as he willed the stone to give him the answers he sought now. But it wasn’t the same and it never would be.

Eventually his mind became overwhelmed and sleep began to creep over him like a calm embrace. He tried to repeat the words he heard in the dream. It must have meant something. He began to say them, but the words tapered off, his aches dulled, and he rested.

Chapter 6

Ogulf woke, shivering from his restless sleep. It was plagued by the jarring sounds of howling animals, constant snoring, and dull aches that made his body tingle whenever he tried to find comfort.

When he did find brief bouts of sleep, his mind rushed between the different parts of the vision he'd had at his mother's tree. The apparition, the huge, cavernous structure in the mountains, and the words spoken by the disembodied voice. His mind was like a chest full of questions, each one trying desperately to escape and find the answers it craved. He still struggled to make sense of it all and spent most of his night staring at the dead, black branches above him, willing them with all of his being to give him some insights or answers even as he cursed himself, for those were not wise trees and their roots could not give him answers.

It was just a vision, a dream, nothing more; it was purely coincidental that it had happened at his mother's tree. Nevertheless, he couldn't keep it from claiming his thoughts, no matter how hard he tried to stave them off. If it had happened anywhere else other than that tree, then he may have been able to discard it. It hadn't, though, it had happened in a place which historically gave him guidance when he sought it most, so he could not dismiss this vision yet. His mind raced as he scoured for answers; this didn't seem like the guidance the tree had offered before, it felt more like a warning. One he couldn't yet understand.

'Today's the day, then,' Melcun said. He was lighting a fire between their two bedrolls. Ogulf had been focused so much on the workings of his mind that he had shut off the sounds of what was going on around him. Scattered around the pair in the forest, people were preparing their packs and eating breakfast.

'I suppose it is. How are you feeling?' Ogulf asked, rolling onto his elbow and propping himself up with an uncomfortable groan. He had gotten so used to sleeping in a bed that the last two nights with just the cold ground to lie on had been some of the most uncomfortable nights of his life.

'Does it matter?' Melcun said, focusing on the fire.

‘Of course it matters.’ Ogulf pushed himself up more, rolling his neck, trying to loosen the stiffness that clung to it from the failed attempts at sleep. ‘I, for one, am shitting myself. And you’re leading a group today.’

‘Fine, I am scared. And I am angry. That Prundan is always getting at me, Ogulf. He knows how to press me – for the life of me I don’t know why he does, though. What have I done to him?’

‘I know. But you did almost... How do I put it?’ Ogulf said.

‘I almost set his beard on fire. I know. It was rash,’ Melcun said. ‘The further south I am going the more I can feel this ... energy.’ He continued in a whisper. ‘You saw how it used to be; it would take me hours to conjure so much as a spark sometimes. And now, for some reason, I have *it* right at the ends of my fingertips. I can feel it.’ Melcun looked at his hand as he tried to have a spark from two striking stones catch on some tinder. Ogulf looked at his friend getting frustrated as he clattered the rocks together. Melcun dropped them and then looked up at Ogulf, as if he was waiting for permission to do something he had every intention of doing anyway.

‘Don’t,’ Ogulf said, his eyes wide with worry.

Melcun made the slightest circular movement with his hand towards the tinder and dried sticks in the fuel pile, and from nowhere, a flame began to flicker underneath and a few thin wisps of smoke trickled up as it came to life. Melcun gave an awkward, surprised smile when he realised what he’d done. Ogulf had seen Melcun do things like this when he had to, or occasionally when he was angry, but he had never seen him do it this easily. The flames grew, consuming the branches to form a hearty fire. Ogulf was still dumbstruck. He let his hands trail near to the edge of the flame. The warmth sunk in his fingertips and crept up his arms. It was a feeling he loved, the cold loosening its grip, bit by bit. Giving way to the soothing comfort from the fire made him remember what hope felt like.

‘You need to be careful, Melcun,’ he said, sitting up and letting the rest of his body feel the comforting heat from the fire. His eyes scanned the people nearby to check if anyone had noticed what had just happened. Since everyone around them seemed too busy focusing on their own tasks, Ogulf let go of the unpleasant worry in his chest. ‘No use getting labelled a spellbinder by your own people; they won’t accept it, circumstances be damned.’

Melcun was still gazing at his hand. He looked like he was about to try and create another flame so Ogulf reached out and struck him on the thigh. ‘I mean it, Melcun.’ His friend recoiled when he was hit and nodded nervously. ‘We have to prioritise getting south. You throwing hexes or spells around or whatever it is you’re doing will only cause problems, especially if

one of *them* sees you do it.' He gestured with a nod of his head towards the group of travellers nearby, tone still somewhat hushed so that the crackles of the fire were louder than the words.

Ogulf didn't know much about magic and Melcun was the only person he knew who could wield it. Melcun knew next to nothing about magic either, other than that he could use it sometimes. In Broadheim, the majority of the population took a severe disliking to mages, but that hadn't stopped Ogulf's curiosity about the arcane, especially given the fact that his closest friend was able to call on the powers of magicka. Abilities like that scared Ogulf in a way, because using them was nothing like brandishing a weapon, but at the same time, that's exactly what they were, weapons of death and destruction according to the old stories. These stories were tall tales of great heroes, the kinds that fathers told their sons at bedtime to prepare their minds for a peaceful night's sleep. *Melcun wouldn't want to wield death in his hands*, Ogulf thought.

'You're right, I'm sorry, Ogulf,' Melcun said.

As the two friends sat by the fire, they saw some of the people start to move towards the edge of the forest with bags slung over their shoulders and determination in their eyes.

'Looks like the first group will be leaving soon,' Melcun said. Ogulf noticed his father approaching them, passing sideways between the people in the crowd heading for the treeline.

'Thirty or so left in the night. Some of those on watch tried to stop them but they wouldn't listen. They said a vision told them to come home,' Rowden said. 'Prundan calls them cowards,' he said to Ogulf.

'I suppose they are cowards in a way. Then again, they have courage by going back to what is surely an inevitable death, which must amount to something, but I'm not sure if it's stupidity or cowardice.'

Rowden was smiling at Ogulf. 'If we run into any problems on the southern side of the Trail, we will be going back to the old ways, sticking to the trees and the dark, just like you've both been taught. We're not cowards, we fight smart, smart people live, stupid people die, and always remember, there is no need for us to fight unless we absolutely have to.'

It pleased Ogulf to hear his father talking this way again. Beyond the Trail, they didn't know what awaited them, so they had to be more cautious; anyone could and should be considered an enemy. Even though the land past there was still technically Broadheim, it was not inhabited the way the main body of the country was. It was all but abandoned after the cold came and the citizens there were shut off from the citadels. Other than a few villages and the old South Hold, there wasn't much between the Widow's Trail and the border with the Shingally Empire.

'Have we heard anything of Runa?' Melcun said.

‘Nothing. I expected that would be the case,’ Rowden said. ‘Not even a trace of her group on the track as far as the scouts could see, which means they never made it this far or ...’

‘Or Runa covered her tracks?’ Melcun said.

‘Unlikely, but yes,’ Rowden said with a sigh. ‘My group is about to leave. Prundan’s will leave in two hours’ time, Melcun at high sun, and you with Wildar two hours later. That should give us enough time to clear the narrow parts and take our time. We’ll wait at the foot of the mountain on the south side; don’t worry, you will spot us.’

Rowden walked closer to his son and embraced him. Ogulf was taken aback. His father was a loving man but displays of affection like this were not something he’d offered easily in recent years. As they parted, Ogulf noticed a coating of tears in his father’s eyes. They looked ready to spill onto his face at any second. Just as he was about to leave, Ogulf stopped him.

‘It’s good to see you like this again.’ The statement clearly threw Rowden off and he looked on at his son, puzzled. ‘You seem like you again.’

With a final squeeze of his son’s shoulder and a nod to Melcun, Rowden Harlsbane turned and made his way back through the scattered crowd on the edge of the forest.

Chapter 7

Assembled on the edge of the tree line with the treacherous mountain in front of him, Ogulf glanced at the group he was to lead around the Trail. He recognised most of them. Among the group was Evy, the blacksmith; Cohl, the butcher; Marcas and Manas, the twin brothers of Bharra farm; Sadie, the innkeeper; and a man Ogulf recognised only because he played the lute in the tavern. The majority of his group looked able-bodied, and while their most recent lines of work might not have prepared them for a journey like this, they had all suffered the same hardships in Keltbran. They were hardy people, and if they had come this far, then they wouldn't turn back now.

The previous groups had left a line of heavy footsteps, making it easy for Ogulf, Wildar, and their group to follow their route to the base of the mountain where the path began to narrow. The wind was kind to them as they set off; the bitterness eased off slightly, and wisps of warmth touched Ogulf's skin as he marched in the sunlight. There was plenty of daylight left to make their trip before nightfall. Wildar had guessed it would take them around five hours to get around, if they kept a steady pace, and if the Trail was good to them. Ogulf was not in a place to argue.

The closer they got, the more daunting the Widow's Trail became. Ogulf looked at his group as they came to a path up the side of the ridge, their eyes went wide, their necks craned, and jaws dropped. On either side was a sheer, deathly drop down to the sea below, with jagged rock ridges shooting from the slopes like the teeth of a dark beast. The craggy edges of the cliff face went down for hundreds of feet, their rocks as black as the night, and the white foam of the water danced around the base of the mountain as the waves of the Sea of Blades crashed into it.

On a particularly narrow part of the path, Ogulf noticed severe degradation in the dirt where the other groups had walked. When he placed his feet even very lightly on the path, the dirt crumbled under his boot, a combination of frozen slush and loose rock causing him to slip. He managed to steady himself, then warned the group to take care. This was the kind of obstruction

he had worried about; all those boots that had already stomped around the Trail meant that the final group would be met with severely deteriorated walkways, already battered by the fists of time and the weather.

‘If the rest of the Trail is like this, it will take more than five hours to get ’round, even with a good pace,’ Wildar said in a hushed tone, for only Ogulf to hear. ‘We’ll be making a descent at nightfall.’

Ogulf didn't protest; he knew that Wildar was right. But what choice did they have? Ogulf had to keep the group moving forward. ‘Like you said before, speculation costs time. We keep moving.’

‘Aye,’ Wildar said with a playful smile and a nod. Despite the fact that he outranked him, Wildar had given Ogulf command of this journey. While they were in the forest, waiting to set off, he told him this was because a fresh pair of eyes would look at the Trail differently; he had seen it before and turned back and he did not want his past experience to get in the way of his judgement now. Ogulf would have liked to decline, but then what kind of man would he be? *I need to do it, for them and not for me*, he told himself, thinking of his people. Wildar was also still preoccupied with something that he would not disclose to Ogulf. Every so often, Ogulf would look at the chieftain and see him fidgeting, shaking his head, or frowning as if he was at odds with a question in his mind. This in turn sent a quiver of unrest down Ogulf’s spine; he had never seen Wildar so uneasy in all his life.

Ogulf looked back at the line of people all carefully making their way across the narrow path, which was no wider than a doorway, with a precipitous drop on either side. The next person who wanted to attempt the Trail after the Keltbran people would have a very difficult time getting past as every step seemed to knock a spec of dirt down towards the raging waves, making the track taper even further.

The higher up the mountain the group climbed, the more biting the wind became. The path they were following was steep. It climbed the mountainside at a punishing angle, occasionally turning back on itself, but always, always heading up. Ogulf’s thighs burned and stretched more with every step as he pushed forward on the constant incline.

Ogulf could see the remains of what must have been the old footpath as they trudged on. It had once been a well-maintained road which connected North and South Broadheim, and despite the years of decay, the well-trekked road was still partially visible. At the same time the deterioration of the old path was substantial. At some points, stone edges jutted from the ground where there used to be carved steps. Ogulf could see the centre of each was worn away to a dip, showing him where the boots of long-dead travellers had once climbed.

The constant elevation of the mountain meant that the group's progress slowed, and Ogulf reckoned that the ones who passed before them must have struggled here too as he'd noticed marks in the dirt where boots had slid free from the solid ground. Even with footholds becoming harder to access, the group proved resilient under Ogulf's encouragement, and they powered on as the sun began its descent for the day. The winding path led them up and around the peak of the highest mountain on the Trail. Wind stung Ogulf's eyes as he tried to catch a glimpse of the world below. It was like looking at the world through the eyes of the gods. Such a sight should be appreciated. Before he got the chance, the cold became too much. It was almost unbearable for Ogulf. The blue sky and shining sun taunted him again. This time, he thought they were luring him towards warmth. Ogulf grunted, tucked his chin to his chest, fixed his eyes back on the path, and began to move again.

He worked his legs cautiously through the dirt ahead as he began to make the slow, gradual descent down the other face of the mountain, glancing back occasionally to make sure the group were still following behind him.

Now a little further down and away from the harsh torment of the cold, he finally got a view of the lands to the south, and he was struck by the incredible clarity of it. From here, he could see for miles and miles in front of him, and to his amazement, much of the land looked clear of frost and ice. Fields of greens, yellows, browns – fields full of life – were clearly visible. He could see the South Hold far in the distance, its grey hue looming like a shadow beside the vibrant colours all around it.

A smile crept over Ogulf's face. He made no efforts to contain it, just let the tingle of warmth it brought ignite in his chest. *This is what hope looks like*, he thought. Just as he was getting used to the serenity in front of him, he was bumped in the back by one of the people in his group who was still pressing ahead with their eyes focused on the uneven ground in front of them.

Ogulf forced his eyes back to the path and refocused. *Hope was still quite a few paces away yet*, he thought. Something moved on the slope to his left. It was only a flicker but it was enough to catch Ogulf's well-trained eyes. He remembered Wildar's story of the bones littered on the mountainside, but bones didn't move. Ogulf looked properly and noticed no bones, instead he could see the dead bodies of his people scattered down the side of the rock face. Some still had red in their cheeks, others had the grey-white coating of frost on their clothes, and some looked unrecognisable as their mangled bodies lay in horrendous, unnatural shapes in the snow. He counted at least twenty of them, his countrymen, his friends all now wrecked and lifeless.

A scream cut from behind drew his attention. It was louder than the baying cry of the wind. Ogulf turned to see that more of the group were making their way around the bend he had just passed. All of their eyes were lured to the source of the scream, and then to what the woman was looking at; the horrors of the slope were now clear for them all to see. Some began to sob as they looked on. Given that Keltbran was a small place, they must have recognised at least some of the glazed eyes staring back at them. Ogulf hoped they didn't linger too long; they had to keep moving.

The hysterical reactions caused a number of people to lose their footing and stumble. They clung on to those around them, desperately trying to stop themselves from joining the array of empty vessels scattered below them. Ogulf, Wildar, and others near the front called out for the group to calm down, but the panic spread quicker than their shouts could ever have hoped to. Before Ogulf could cry out a second time, he saw a rock at the edge of the cliffside break away and two members plummet down the side of the mountain. As their bodies tumbled down the decline, blood sprayed from newly opened wounds as the sharp rocks punctured their skin. Their souls departed after the first impact, and their bodies became fresh additions to the barbaric collage of death on the side of the Widow's Trail.

'We must be careful!' Ogulf shouted to the group. He couldn't let them slow down, not over two deaths. He couldn't even justify slowing down if they all died. They had to keep moving, and they had to be heedful, if they were to get to their people on the other side. Ogulf had to lead. He looked to Wildar. The chieftain's face was flushed and red, but his eyes were filled with determination. He gave Ogulf an assuring nod.

At the front of the group, Ogulf began to make slow, steady movements onto the next part of the Trail, but his eyes kept betraying him as he stole glances at the south. It was so captivating that was it really any wonder so many people fell off of the edge here? They were lured by a land that looked like the land they used to prosper in, but it was a land they would never reach because they were too entranced by what could be to keep an eye on their footing. *Here is the world that awaits you, it will steal you from the minute you lay eyes on it*, Ogulf thought. He had to calm himself. He could hear people behind him hyperventilating and crying and he ached to give them strength, but it was all he could do to move forward and hope his path was tempting enough for the others to follow. Breathing deeply and studying the rocks in front of him, he took another few steps, each more mindful than the one before.

The path had narrowed significantly. In some places, he had to shuffle sideways with his back against the rough rock. Ogulf noticed the chunks of rock below him on some of the short, flat outlays of the mountainside. This pathway was decaying with every step and they had no

other choice but to use it. The fact there were only a few dozen bodies now scattered down the side of the cliff meant that others had made it past this treacherous part of the Trail. Ogulf assumed the path must have been shoulder width wide just this morning and now it was half that at a push, worn away by fleeing feet with heavy hearts.

He felt along the wall to find handholds. The rugged rock felt harsh in Ogulf's palms, their shape made them difficult and uncomfortable to grip. He tested his weight against them and they seemed firm enough to allow some support

The sun began to approach its last phase before setting, letting Ogulf know that time was running out.

Wildar was just behind Ogulf, navigating his way along the ledge in a similarly careful manner. 'We must press ahead, Ogulf,' Wildar said calmly, as if they were not on the edge of a sheer drop down the side of a mountain. 'No matter what.'

Ogulf nodded, pressing his back to the rock face and beginning to shimmy sideways along the narrow path again, this time with more pace. The part he reached now was a foot wide at most. When a pang of bravery filled him, he looked down and noticed that his boots jutted out beyond the ledge at some points. As he stared at his feet, a bead of sweat rolled off his forehead, his clammy hands felt unsure as they gripped at the rocks and he tried to swallow what felt like a brick in his throat.

Another piercing scream came from his left. This time, he didn't look. He didn't have to. Thuds rang out as the falling body rattled against the side of the mountain, with a final, distant crack letting Ogulf know whoever had fallen had landed far below. He edged himself further along the narrow pathway. It felt as though it was going on for miles.

The ledge finally ended and welcomed those who passed it to a flat clearing which looked more like the previous parts of the path on the way up the mountain. The familiar steps with the worn dips in the middle were an encouraging sight. Ogulf and Wildar waited at the edge where the ledge met the clearing and helped others around on to it. Some people stopped before they reached the end, frozen with fear or suddenly looking down and realising the reality of their situation, but a few reassuring words from Ogulf and Wildar seemed to be enough to entice them to move forward.

As the last five travellers were making their way across, the man closest to the clearing stopped. He closed his eyes and refused to move. The others still on the ledge began to shout at the man as he stalled, but he did not move, despite how frantic the people behind him were. Ogulf watched helplessly, then tried to be as encouraging as he could, willing the man to move slowly towards the clearing, but his pleas fell on deaf ears. The others on the ledge behind the

frightened man became louder and more agitated as he remained still. Ogulf could hear Wildar's soothing voice trying to calm them as he watched the man on the ledge. His eyes were pursed tightly, and he was uttering something, the same four words over and over again.

A loud crack cut through the commotion as part of the narrow rock ledge gave way. Ogulf watched as the person furthest from him began to plummet from the protrusion, the falling man's body becoming one with a mess of shattered rock from the side of the mountain, which for a brief instant, made it look like he had extra limbs. Letting out a yell as his body dropped, he'd instinctively grabbed onto the person who had been next to him on the ledge. His weight dragged her down as she plummeted too. *They were so close to the doorway to hope*, Ogulf thought.

As if seeing this and hearing the screams of the fallen had given him a rush of adrenaline, the man at the front began to move along the ledge at pace. Ogulf was sure the man had his eyes closed even as he made the last few steps. An angered squabble broke out as the man finally made it to the clearing.

'Enough!' Wildar roared, cutting through the noise. 'We cannot waste any time.'

'Wildar is right,' Ogulf said. 'Come.' He moved through the clearing and back onto the Trail. There were visible footsteps in the slushy mud leading down a more manageable section of the path, which for the most part, looked sturdy and wide enough for two people to make it down at a time.

As he began to move on the path, he heard the familiar whirr of an arrow getting closer. He felt it flow straight past him and watched a spark fly from a rock in front of him as it ricocheted off the side of the mountain. Instinctively, Ogulf clambered for the cover of the rock face that sloped down the Trail away from the clearing. Others did the same and landed on Ogulf as he crashed into the safety of the space.

'Where is it coming from?' Ogulf cried out to anyone who would listen. He edged to the corner of the turn they had just taken; bodies were still darting around the edge and behind Ogulf for cover. He watched as some of those trying to make it from the clearing were struck in the back, shoulders, and legs with arrows. As he frantically scanned the unforgiving mountainside, he noticed where the arrows were coming from; on an impossibly tight, rugged platform just beyond the ledge stood two soldiers dressed in dark red armour. Their faces were covered by incredibly intricate helmets with only the narrowest of eye slits. They fired and then knocked again as quickly as they could. To the left of them, Ogulf could see some other movement, more men in the same armour attempting to work their way along the ledge, paying particular attention to the crude gap left where the last of his group had fallen.

‘We must move,’ Wildar said to Ogulf. The older man had shimmied along to hide next to him. ‘They mean to pin us here. Trap us.’ Wildar’s eyes darted around and so did Ogulf’s. The arrows were still coming, most never struck anything other than the side of the mountain, but as the frightened people moved to make more room in the sheltered corner, some of them exposed themselves to the attackers. Like sharpshooters, they would loose arrows at their targets, hitting anyone that slipped out of cover with precise strikes.

‘This way,’ Ogulf said, pointing further down the path in front of them at a gap in the clearing that led back to what resembled a path. ‘All of you, with me.’ Ogulf began to run towards the space, thinking it should offer enough cover and let them begin their descent away from the arrows. In doing so, those running for the new cover would expose themselves to a chance encounter with an arrow for a few seconds.

Ogulf was sprinting as fast as he could. His feet were light, so he didn’t notice if the ground was firm or not. Whistles flew by his ears and yelps and screams came from behind him as he ran. A sharp burning sensation ripped at his left shoulder; he knew what it was, but it wasn’t sure if the arrow was still lodged inside him. Diving forwards, he came to a crash on the hard floor and found himself in cover around a bend from the clearing. There would be plenty of room for his people, and to his right was another path down the Trail, one out of the line of the sight of their attackers.

It had only been fifteen feet away, but he felt he’d been running for minutes as he choked to catch his breath. Blood thumped in his ears and he was sure his heart had never beat so fast. Wildar came crashing towards Ogulf, landing hard on his knees and sliding along the rock surface into the safety of their position. Ogulf and the chieftain huddled tight to the wall again to make room for others.

Ogulf could not count fast enough as the bodies blurred past him and round the corner, but it looked like there were about seventy or so people huddled around in the space. Ogulf’s heart sank. He couldn’t be sure exactly how many had been caught by the arrows, but he felt like a failure as he realised that under half of his group had made it this far and they still had a ways to go before they could reach safety. That was if there even was such a thing anymore, now that they were being pursued by these assailants.

His shoulder burned again. Looking round, Ogulf saw that Wildar was wrapping a makeshift bandage around his arm. Blood was trickling from a deep slash where an arrow must have caught him as he ran, passing through the flesh.

As the commotion began to settle and people caught their breaths, the moans of their wounded companions came to them from the exposed area of the clearing.

‘Crian!’ someone shouted out from the clearing. ‘Crian, help me.’

A young boy, he was perhaps fifteen, made to run back to the clearing from the safety of their position, but Wildar grabbed him around the waist and held on tight. The boy flailed to get free but to no avail. ‘That’s my father ... Let me ... I must help him.’

‘No, lad, they’ll get you too,’ Wildar said, trying to restrain the boy as his father’s groans continued. A familiar whistle came through the air, followed by a sickening thud, then the groans stopped. The young boy began to shout obscenities in the direction of his father’s attackers; he was filled with pure rage and trying to wrestle out of Wildar’s grasp.

‘If they make it round that ledge we are finished,’ Ogulf said. ‘We need to keep going.’ He began to run. Wildar followed with the young boy, Crian, still screaming and pounding on his shoulder. The cadence of the steps of the others let Ogulf know they were behind him. The thud of boots against stone became their marching song.

Chapter 8

Thankfully, the path around the other side of the Trail was less difficult to traverse. It was not easy by any means, but it was wider, and the footing seemed firmer, meaning Ogulf was able to run at a comfortable pace now, taking the confidence in his steps and letting them push him as far and as fast as they could, safe in the knowledge that his group was not far behind. Most ran at a similar pace, but others lagged further behind. As much as Ogulf wanted to protect the ones at the rear, it would make no sense to rally with the slowest in the group; now was the time in which Ogulf had to move quickly and decisively to get to the other side of the Trail.

He could only hope the progress of their attackers would be marred by the damage to the ledge. Then he remembered what he recently realised about hope: it had meant nothing.

Part of the path wound down at a sharp angle near the base of the highest peak and flowing from a crevice in the side of the mountain, Ogulf saw a huge waterfall. It was so powerful that mist started to gather in damp patches on his face, even though the gaping exit of the cascade was at least ten feet below him. The water fell for what looked like an eternity before meeting the choppy waters of the Sea of Blades in a perfect ripple of foam. The roar of the fall was thunderous as the frothy water spewed over the edge. Ogulf slowed and started to stare at it; the way the water spewed from the mountain like that reminded him of the vision he'd had, only without the fire. Wildar nudged him to keep moving.

The winding path eventually came to a long flat of land which was peppered with snow. He checked behind him again, and to his relief, the group had congregated so they were now running as a pack only a few paces behind him. Even with their dwindled numbers they looked focused, a mixture of fear and determination keeping them going. With a final check of the path above them for their attackers, he called out to the group that they must sprint the rest of the way if they could. No one protested. Instead, they dug the balls of their feet into the ground and opened their strides.

'If we make it that far, the Eternal Overpass is just over this ridge,' Wildar said, panting slightly as he tried to keep up with Ogulf. The Overpass was an incredible structure. Ogulf had heard of it countless times from Yadlin, who occasionally daydreamed about its design and

structure out loud during his lessons. The old priest said it was a bridge of wood, steel, and iron chains, and if the stories were to be believed, it was kept in place by magic. The kind of magic that was wound into its very foundations and made it strong enough to stand the test of time; it would not allow the iron or steel to rust nor the wood to wither. Ogulf remembered how Yadlin would peer out of his window during those seminars. His eyes would glaze and his head and hands would move as if he were dissecting the very smallest parts of the bridge in his mind, trying in vain to understand it.

Ogulf could still recall the lecture even though it had been delivered over ten years ago now. The Eternal Overpass had been built one thousand years ago by Fryzer The Red – an adventurer, one of the first people to ever pass the Widow’s Trail. Before Fryzer, no one had succeeded in passing the Trail, so the adventurer made it his life’s ambition to make the journey easy enough that even the town fool could traverse its steep paths with relative ease. A key cog in his efforts was building a bridge that would let people pass over the Banespit, a gaping hole in the ground with an infinite plunge into the very depths of the earth. So he set about building one which would stand the test of time. Fryzer called upon some of the finest Shingally builders, engineers, and mages to help him build the bridge, they all worked tirelessly for months to construct it, and since its creation, the Eternal Overpass had been true to its purpose without a hint of falter.

Ogulf remembered a time when the Banespit had haunted his dreams night after night. There wasn’t much to see according to the books, just a dark void where no life could possibly ever come back from. Fryzer himself always said the Banespit was the most difficult and terrifying part of his journey, and even on his deathbed, he wouldn’t reveal how he got over it before the bridge existed. Many theories existed but none held any more weight than the others.

‘You’re right, and if we haven’t seen any other groups, they must have made it across,’ Ogulf said, coming out of his daydream. *Or they’ve fallen into the Banespit*, he thought to himself.

They continued running for a few minutes until Ogulf could just about make out the spine of the ridge in the distance. Just as he felt comforted by the sight, he heard a scream from behind, followed almost instantly by another.

‘Those shits have made it down the Trail, Ogulf,’ Wildar said, turning to glance behind him but trying not to break stride. As Ogulf turned to look, he saw an arrow slam into the ground between two members of his group, their pace quickened by the terror in the screams behind them. When he glanced over his other shoulder, he saw three armour-clad soldiers with their weapons drawn closing in upon the fleeing group. Despite their heavy armour, they moved

with ease and kept to a near sprint the whole time as they bounded forward. Ogulf could see one of the men's eyes through the slit in his helmet and they were wide, white, and full of hatred.

‘Over the ridge, quickly,’ Ogulf said as he reached the brow of the hill. He stopped and let the others stream past him. Wildar did the same as arrows fell short of them, sinking into the hard mud only feet away. The three chasing soldiers were gaining ground fast. ‘We might have to fight them,’ Ogulf said, turning to follow the group across the ridge. He looked at the faces of his people, who were pale and panting for breath. Fighting wouldn’t work this time, even with the clear advantage in numbers.

The way down to the bridge was steep but passable and the quickest among the group were already approaching the bridge, which to Ogulf’s amazement, looked as robust as the stories had said it would be.

Weaved from metal chains, it was wide enough for three men to pass abreast, and when the first runners made their way onto it, a clanging, metallic thud echoed underneath their boots. Their pursuers were now close enough that Ogulf could hear them speaking. Pushing through the burning sensation in his muscles, he kept running as fast as he could.

‘Kill the boy. Take the old bastard,’ one of them said. Just as he was about to reach the bridge, he noticed Wildar draw his gleaming, golden axe from its sheath. It glistened in the dusky sun, and the reflection glinted in Ogulf’s eyes as he looked upon it. For the first time in almost a year, he thumbed the fastening hook off the sheath for his own axe. His right hand and arm felt as if they were independent of the rest of his body as he calmly took the weapon from its holder and gripped its familiar hilt, while his legs were racing, his lungs were on fire, and sweat was pouring down his temples.

As Ogulf’s thundering steps finally thudded down on the bridge, he spared a quick glance behind him. ‘Once we get to the other side we turn and fight,’ Ogulf said, Wildar nodded in agreement. He was panting more heavily now, but Ogulf could see the determination of a chieftain in his eyes.

An unpleasant tinny sound close behind him let Ogulf know that the dark red men were on the bridge and gaining fast. Preparing to make his stand, Ogulf began to look at the ground on the other side of the bridge; it was flat and looked dry, as good a place as any to fight. Becoming aware of his breathing, he sent the last of his energy into his legs to make a final sprint to hopefully gain some ground and give them an advantage on the other side. As Ogulf planted his foot hard for the final few steps on the bridge, an immense light appeared in front of him.

A deafening, crash that seemed to be an entity in itself flew past his head. It gave off more heat than Ogulf could truly comprehend. It was like being trapped in a furnace. Each breath burnt his lungs, his skin prickled, the earth smelt like it was on fire, and his eyes were enveloped by a wall of pure white.

He tried to keep his focus on running as the noise went past, but then he heard a huge crash behind him that disorientated him further. The bridge began to shake just as Ogulf neared the other side. Wildar was a pace or two behind him when the bridge started to disappear from beneath his feet. Ogulf used this last sturdy step to leap and managed to catch onto the solid edge where the bridge met the other side of the Banespit, slamming chest first on the rocky cliffside with a winding thud.

‘Ogulf... Ogulf...’ Ogulf’s eyes were drawn to the source of the sound coming from below him. It was Wildar. The older man was clinging onto the steel slats of the collapsed bridge as it draped its broken walkway into the Banespit. The chieftain was dangling a few feet below Ogulf, his body wavering over the huge black hole. It looked like the beginning of the end of the world. A hopeless place.

Wildar was gripping onto the bridge with one hand, and in the other, he held his prized axe. The slats Ogulf hung onto began to shake. When he looked down, he saw that one of the soldiers in the crimson armour was holding on to Wildar’s leg with both hands, thrashing wildly in an attempt to pull the chieftain’s grasp loose. Wildar’s face was a picture of pain as he fought desperately to cling on, swinging his axe at the man dangling from his leg so hard that it seemed like he would lose his grip trying to strike him, but somehow, the chieftain managed to cling on by his fingertips.

‘Take it, please take it.’ Wildar was extending his axe towards Ogulf, blade first. The dangling soldier was now trying with all of his might to pull Wildar down into the darkness. He flailed and twisted his body, but to Ogulf’s amazement, Wildar hung on. Wildar called out to Ogulf and jabbed the axe closer. ‘Take it, boy!’

Just as Ogulf’s fingers grasped the cold edge of the axe, he felt a grip on his other arm. Melcun had appeared out of nowhere and was trying to hoist Ogulf over the ledge. Ogulf wanted to be saved, but he didn’t want to leave Wildar. Their eyes met as Ogulf took control of the axe, flipping it with one hand to catch a proper grip on the hilt. Wildar’s expression grew frustrated, but he looked determined to survive. It was as if he was funnelling every ounce of strength into his fingers just to keep a grasp on the dangling metal slats of the broken bridge. Wildar swung his other hand, trying to reach a higher gap and pull himself up, but the attempts were fruitless because he was compromising the strength of what little grip he did have with

every one of these small efforts. Ogulf looked down as Wildar's fingertips began to slide and his grip finally started to falter.

Ogulf had all but forgotten the dangling man until he caught glimpses of his armour jutting out from behind Wildar's shape. Wildar was still clinging on. He had tried to wrestle the red soldier off of his leg, but it was not working, and now only the tips of three of his fingers were clinging to the edge. Wildar looked up at Ogulf, his eyes protruding slightly from their sockets as he fought to hold himself up.

'Get it to Fedra. The axe, get it to her. She will know what to do. She can stop the prophecy,' Wildar said through gritted teeth as his grip fell to just the top knuckles of two fingers.

'No, hold on, Wildar,' Ogulf said, not paying attention to what the old chieftain said. He just wanted to help him to safety. 'Reach out, take my hand.'

'Gods be with you, Ogulf,' Wildar said. 'Gods be with all of us.'

Ogulf's hand was outstretched towards Wildar, his weight being supported by Melcun, whose body was half-draped over the edge of the pit.

Then Wildar's grip gave in, plunging him into the Banespit. Ogulf cried out as he watched Wildar's body falling. It was eventually swallowed by the darkness of the deep cavern. Body all but limp, Ogulf made no attempt to stop Melcun from hoisting him over the edge with the help of a few others. Shock took over every fibre of his body. He began to pant and grew breathless as his mind became clouded with panic. He was still clutching Wildar's axe when he felt a slap on his face to bring him back to reality.

'Come on,' Melcun said, pulling Ogulf to his feet. 'We need to get to the forest.' As they both rose, arrows began whirring past them from the other side of the bridge, thudding into the trees around them, miraculously, none hit their mark as Ogulf, Melcun, and a few others hurried down the hill and into the forest.

Everything flew past Ogulf in a blur. *Hope obviously doesn't bring clarity*, he thought as he sprinted. He wasn't sure who was in control of his body, but it certainly wasn't him. His legs moved him swiftly towards safety, the will of each movement entirely their own.

As he slowed and the panting intensified, Ogulf realised that, even in the weak light of dusk, there was colour all around him in this forest; the trees were green with life and leaves, the ground was firm and forgiving to run on, birds chirped nearby, and even the wind had softened to a calming rustle. They came to a halt as Melcun called out into the darkness.

'Ogulf's group returns!' Melcun shouted. Ogulf tried to normalise his breathing but his chest opened and closed rapidly. He could hear his own helpless gasps for air, like he was choking on something, but his throat was clear. After a few deep breaths, he dropped to one knee near

a small fire, the warmth of which calmed him. He let his eyes wander and found a number of lit fire pits around the forest, their bright light casting the people around them into shadow. One familiar shape was advancing towards him quickly, and even from the outline, Ogulf could tell it was his father.

With a wail, Ogulf fell to his knees, still clutching the golden weapon that Wildar had passed him. As he cried and his father embraced him, Ogulf's thoughts ran uncontrolled. If this was what life looked like in a place of hope and safety, he would take the cold and have Wildar back instead.

The shock of it all became too much. The shock of it all became too much. Breathing hard but unable to take in any oxygen, Ogulf's body fell limply into Rowden's arms.

Thank you for taking the time to read this sample of Cold From The North, the first novel in The Onyxborn Chronicles.

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Until next time, happy reading.