

THE PIGBOY AFFAIR

CASSANDRA BYRNE



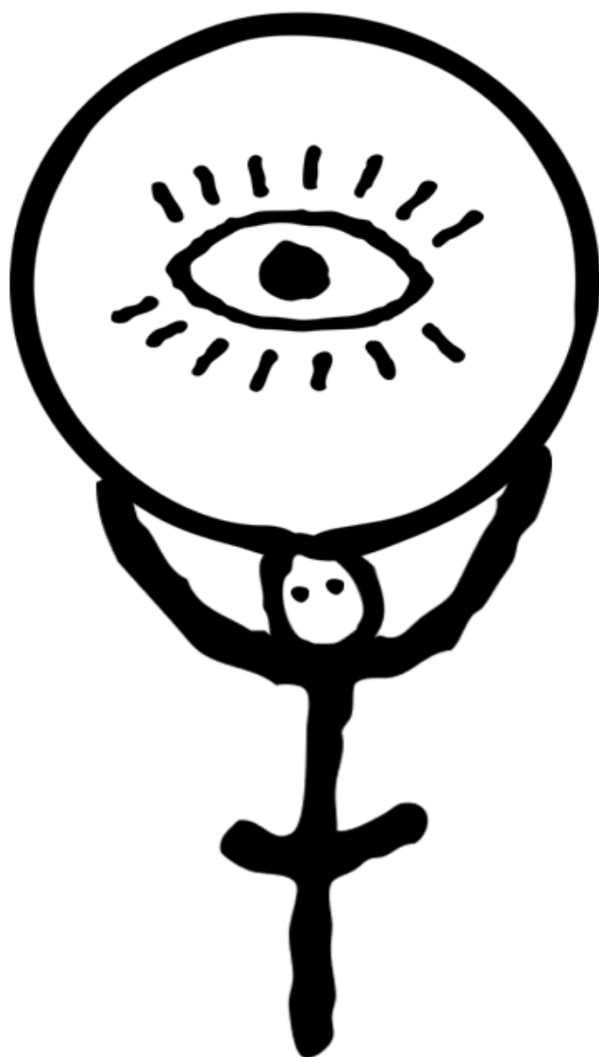
THE PIGBOY AFFAIR

BY

CASSANDRA BYRNE

COVER ART

PARRIS RYAN



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With a winter storm howling in from the east and essentials in short supply, uncertainty gripped the city of Volgstadt. The city's wealthiest families hoarded grain and oil in secret whilst food riots raged in the Penny Markets. It felt as if the storm loomed over the city like some great shadow, its hand on every heart and teeth at every throat. A sense of impending doom permeated everything. So it was that when Aloysius Wulf received a letter from his old friend, Lieutenant Alfred Pellender, he suspected the old man wanted to get his affairs in order.

They met at the Kochenbrau Grubbery, a quiet shop on the Rue Ste. Aichstricht. Even in such desperate times, the grubbery could be relied on for the scent of fresh-baked goods, exotic coffees and teas, and of course, most important of all, the tawny beers for which Volgstadt was so famed. Wulf did not want to keep Lieutenant Pellender waiting, so he made it a point to arrive early and claim a table for the two of them by the fire. The old man rarely got out from what Wulf knew, and the chill would do his health no favors.

Pellender arrived only a few minutes after Wulf. His valet was with him and helped him to the door, where Pellender paused to catch his breath. The old man's shoes were polished to a shine, his clothes were clean and crisp, and his handlebar moustache was trimmed to perfection—but the man's famous mop of flaming red hair was thin and gray, and when Pellender grinned at Wulf, it was impossible not to notice how many of his teeth had fallen away, like all the friends they'd buried.

A proper military man, Wulf thought approvingly.

As Pellender approached, Wulf jumped to his feet and pulled a chair out for him. He was the old man's junior by twenty years, still broad-shouldered and vital, even if he could feel his body slowing down.

Each day brought new aches and pains, and it was impossible not to look at Pellender and know that old age was coming for him too.

“Sergeant Wulf,” the Lieutenant rumbled through his moustache, “thank you for agreeing to meet with me.”

“Not at all, Lieutenant,” Wulf replied. “Lord Grimsby and I were bound for the crows before you saved us with your charge at Sigmund’s Folly. I owe you my life.”

The old man shook his head, “We all did our part that day. You boys may have been bloodied and bent, but you didn’t break.”

“No, Sir, we did not. Lord Grimsby made sure of that—but it was you and your light cavalry that fished our asses out of the fire.”

A bittersweet silence passed between them. With war, it was often impossible to separate the best memories from the worst. Lieutenant Pellender reached forward and took up his cup, offering it for a toast. Wulf returned the gesture.

“Lord Grimsby was a good man,” Pellender said. “Melancholic, at times, but I suspect that’s why he kept you around.”

Wulf chuckled, “He was always worrying about the things he’d forgotten to worry about.”

“As I recall, you were mostly concerned with where your next meal was coming from.”

“I’ve always said I’ll die happy as long as I die well-fed.”

Pellender stirred his tea and spoke carefully. “You’re still working for the witch?”

Wulf's shaggy brow furrowed with disapproval. "You mean Lord Grimsby's *daughter*, Evelyn."

"A wild creature, for all her manners."

It was difficult to hear the old man talk about her like that. She was not merely Wulf's employer, but likely the closest he himself would ever come to a child of his own. He'd watched her grow from a knobby-kneed girl to a ferocious young woman. People called her witch because she frightened them—but she only frightened them because she read books and studied medicine, plants, and herbs. Because she took what she wanted and did not lower her eyes for those who considered themselves her better.

She'd have made a fine son by any man's measure, but because she was a woman, they called her a witch.

"You spoke against the adoption, as I recall."

Pellender hesitated, and gave the table a nervous tap. "Yes. Does she hold that against me?"

Wulf knew for a fact that she did not. While Lady Grimsby did not tolerate insults, and her fury was swift and terrible, she did not nurse grudges. "No, she's not like that."

"I'm glad to hear it," the old man said, "I worried she might harbor some ill will toward me. I wouldn't have blamed her. I was a young man, full of foolish ideas about the noble purity of Volgvarran blood."

"Most young men are full of foolish ideas, at least you figured out that's what they were."

"Younger, perhaps, but old enough to know better. And it makes this that much harder."

"Ah," said Wulf. "There it is. You need a favor."

"My son is missing, Sergeant Wulf. I need you and Lady Grimsby to find him."

"Sam? Missing?"

He could not hide his skepticism. Sam Pellender was every bit as brave and dashing as his father, but with a reputation for vice and gambling to boot. Wulf remembered young Sam as a small boy, a ball of red-haired mischief constantly mucking about and making trouble, too good-natured and full of joy to stay mad at, even when he'd made a proper mess of things.

"I know what you're thinking, but Sam's changed. He stopped the drinking and carousing and started working security for a merchant concern out of Istlenberg, guarding one of their grain caravans. He said he'd met a girl in Vastengrad and was ready to settle down. Said he loved her, and finally understood how I felt about his mother. Why I never remarried."

"What's the girl's name?"

"Alina."

"What makes you think he's missing?"

"The caravan's route took him from Volgstadt to Vastengrad, and from there to Streissberg. We have family in Streissberg. He'd planned to winter there. Two days ago I received a letter from my sister. The caravan completed its delivery, but it arrived *without* Sam. When she asked after him, the caravan guards acted as if they'd never heard of him."

“Perhaps he fell back on old habits,” Wulf ventured. “Plenty of men walk the straight and narrow for a time, only to wander off. He could have lied about the job.”

“I thought the same thing, but I spoke with a quartermaster at the concern. He confirmed Sam was working with them.”

“Perhaps—”

Pellender slammed his fist on the table, rattling the silverware.

“There is no *perhaps*, Sergeant Wulf! I know what Sam is, but this is different. There is something *wrong* about all this.”

“Why come to us? You’ve no love for Lady Grimsby.”

“I will admit I find her studies unnatural and her methods distasteful,” Pellender growled, easing back into his chair, “but only a fool would deny her effectiveness.”

“This isn’t her usual sort of work,” Wulf said. “She prefers the work to be weird.”

“There’s more to it than there appears, Sergeant. I’m sure of it. My boy’s mixed up in something bad. I can feel it in my gut. Whatever she wants, I’ll pay.”

“Alfred—”

“I don’t care what it costs. I don’t want charity. I require her services.”

“I’ll talk to her,” Wulf muttered. “We’ll find your boy. We’ll bring him home.”



With the storm fast approaching, there was little time for preparations. Mr. Wulf and Lady Grimsby met Pellender's valet at Westgate in the morning. Mr. Wulf wore a cloak and leathers, with a gray balaclava drawn up over his face, while Lady Grimsby was in a dark green dress with a black satin waist. Although Lady Grimsby was now in her mid-30s, Mr. Wulf often found it hard to see her for the woman she was, and not as his Evie, the little girl he'd helped raise from the time she was eight. The savage temper of her youth still simmered beneath her stern facade, hidden by the neatness of her dress and the tight black bun she wore her hair in. She gave her smiles grudgingly, if at all.

The valet brought them a gift from the lieutenant; a pair of long haired horses from Old Suram, of a breed built to survive harsh winters. Wulf took the shaggy black, Evelyn, the dappled gray. They packed only the essentials, and were well-armed for the road: Evelyn with her pistols and poisons, Mr. Wulf with his long knives and greatsword.

"Thank you for this," Mr. Wulf said to Evelyn as they departed Volgstadt. "I'm sure you didn't intend to spend your winter scouring Vastengrad's docks for a missing degenerate."

"You don't give the case enough credit," Evelyn replied. "There is some mystery to it." She gave the big man a playful glance, "Besides, the exercise will do us good. Another winter spent drinking in the Penny Markets will see you too fat to be of any use."

Mr. Wulf laughed, "You've got your mother's tongue—cruel and clever and not a bit kind."

"Better cruel and clever than sweet and witless."

"Sweet and witless isn't so bad," Mr. Wulf chuckled, rubbing his horse's mane, "like this good fellow here."

Evelyn feigned insult with a gasp, "Are you saying you prefer the horse's company to mine?"

"The horse doesn't make nasty comments about my weight."

"In fairness," she advised, "that's only because it can't talk. I'm sure it has opinions."

"Perhaps we should put a gag on you then," Mr. Wulf suggested dryly. "We'll see if it makes you more agreeable."

"I'd advise against it. The last man who tried that got a bullet for his troubles."

"Was that the Attumen general? The one who wanted to marry you."

She scoffed, "Palla Unvari. He had that ridiculous hat."

"Do you think he lived?"

"Probably not."

"That's a shame," Wulf said, "I rather liked him."

"Yes," Evelyn replied. "I rather liked him too."

They stayed ahead of the worst of the weather, a thick sheet of clouds nipping at their heels as they made their way through the mountains, toward Vastengrad. It was six days to the port city, and each night as they made camp the storm closed in on them.

On the fourth day, shortly before nightfall, they made a grisly discovery.

"You smell that?" asked Mr. Wulf, and brought his horse to a stop. His brown eyes narrowed, and his nose wrinkled. The faintest stench

of decomposition in the air.

Evelyn nodded, "I do."

She scanned the tree line and spotted a break in one of the branches. They moved to investigate and found a wagon buried under branches and brush a hundred feet farther off the road. The wagon was loaded with corpses. Animals had gotten into them. Their stomachs were gnawed open, entrails dragged off. Broad streaks of dried blood smeared the ground, patches of rusty red beneath a light dusting of snow.

Evelyn's examination of the scene was deliberate and exact. A combination of skills she'd learned from her mother, a talented surgeon, and Lord Grimsby himself, an expert tracker.

"Brazen," she said, "to leave the bodies out like this."

Mr. Wulf climbed atop the wagon and made a count. "Twelve men, in all. Bits of grain on the flatbed. I'd say this wagon was part of our caravan."

"Lieutenant Pellender said the delivery in Streissberg was completed, didn't he? Why would someone kill the guards and then complete their deliveries? The banks handle the payment. There's no money in it. It doesn't make sense."

Mr. Wulf knelt by the bodies, checking their injuries. "A few of them put up a fight, looks like the rest were executed after the fact."

"No witnesses. They left the bodies unburnt and unburied. What does that tell us?"

"Perhaps the attackers had a schedule to keep," Wulf offered. "They had somewhere else to be, and had to be there in a hurry. It didn't

matter *if* the bodies were discovered, only *when*."

"Most unusual," replied Evelyn, her curiosity ignited. "This was not some crime of opportunity. There is a subtlety to this. Complexity. A design. If the grain were stolen outright, that would be one thing; but to kill twelve men and complete their delivery as if nothing were amiss? It makes no sense."

"What do you think?"

She did not answer, but Wulf could hear the engine of her mind springing to life. He could see its fires burning in her dark green eyes. What began as an indulgence for a dear friend, Wulf realized, had stoked that furnace of her curiosity. Whether it took a week or a month or a year, he knew she would not rest until she had her answers.

Without a word, she began to dig through the victims' pockets and strip the clothes from their body. She showed no civility or warmth as she worked. She was a bloodhound with a fresh scent, and there was no force, no taboo, that would keep her from following it to its source. Her eyes alighted on the honey-blonde hair of a Vittenberger and she moved to him with purpose. Animals had been at the man's belly and chewed him open, but the rest of him was well-preserved.

One swift movement from her knife and the dead man's shirt was neatly bifurcated.

"Here," Evelyn said softly, and rolled the corpse over so Wulf could see. The dead man bore a tattoo on his right shoulder. It depicted a naked man with six arms, each palm outstretched with an eye upon it. Wulf did not recognize its provenance, but he knew it for what it was; the marking of a cult, evidence that the man worshipped the old gods.

He inhaled sharply. "It could be a coincidence."

“Perhaps. Or perhaps he was one of the attackers.”

“Do you know the symbol?”

“No. And I know them all.”

It was scarcely an hour before night came, and with it came the stars. The constellation of the Atols, pale yellows and twinkling greens wrapped in faded purple, stretched from one end of the sky to the other. A vast tapestry of whirling color unfurled beyond them, the corals and lavenders of the Sineids, the yellow bone and dusky reds of the Einvars. Wulf was a child of the northern climes, and he was as used to such sights as any man—but they projected on him a powerful and discomfiting sensation of being watched.

Neither of them slept that night. It was not safe. Not with the stars so hungry. Not with the wind so cold. In such weather death waited for men to close their eyes before it stole them off. Mr. Wulf tended to the campfire, while Evelyn scowled into the night, silent and brooding.

Sometime after midnight, Wulf found himself desperate for some sound other than the howling wind and churning frost. His eyes kept drifting to Evelyn. He did not like to see her troubled, though she so often sought trouble out. “You look like something’s crawled under your skin, Evie. What’s bothering you?”

Evelyn looked up at him with those dark green eyes of hers. They were every bit as intense as the light of the stars. For a long time she said nothing. Wulf could tell she was considering her answer carefully. He often wondered how her thoughts worked. What strange roads they traveled in her mind on their way to her lips.

“I think this will be a bloody affair,” she said at last.

“Well,” said Wulf, “that’s fine. We’re good at those.”

“Indeed.”



The last miles down out of the mountains were terrible. Ice and snow snapped shut the road behind them and clawed at them as they reached the low lying taiga and vast tracts of white birch and pine to the city's east. It was a grim and quiet sort of travel, and Mr. Wulf was not sure from one moment to the next whether they would reach their destination or be lost in the storm. He could not say how many hours it was before civilization's warm glow at last shone through the heavy snows; the silhouette of tall ships beckoning from Vastengrad's harbor, the promise of the city's torch-pocked walls, and the dots of distant light from swaying lanterns.

Many houses on the city's outskirts were shuttered and boarded up. Pale faces peered out at Grimsby and Wulf from behind heavy curtains and wooden slats, as they led their horses into the city. Vastengrad was built on the shores of Malhalholtra, the Shrieking Sea, whose red waters and algae blooms stained its streets red over long centuries. Where the snow did not cover the cobblestones, they were a dusky orange color, as if the city itself were covered in rust.

“There we are,” said Wulf, as they approached the city square. “The Pigboy's Slophouse.”

Warm light pulsed through cracks in the facade of a nearby tavern, whose entrance was guarded by a heavy oak door. A sign painted garishly with a portrait of a drunken pigboy sprawled on a bale of hay as he drank from a pail of slop.

Evelyn arched an amused eyebrow at Mr. Wulf.

“The owner's an old friend of mine. Has his fingers in every pie in Vastengrad. If anyone can point us in Pellender's direction, it's him.”

"I'll get us a room," said Evelyn.

"I'll take care of the horses."

The inn's interior was dominated by paintings of the titular pigboy from the inn's front door, depicting the snout-nosed boy in bizarre scenes that found him peeking up ladies' skirts, filching drinks from distracted patrons, or lifting coins from guests' bedside as they slept. Aside from the paintings, the inn was neatly appointed. Its furniture was sturdy and polished to a cheery shine, its floors were scrubbed and lined with exotic animal skins, and two massive fireplaces burned at both ends of the common room, flooding the whole place with warmth.

Wulf spotted the inn's owner, Fyodor, at once. He was behind the bar cleaning glasses, one eye cocked for trouble. His wife, Iryna, picked her way through the common room clearing tables. The two of them were a funny couple, always pecking at each other for blood or sport, bound by lust and a savage humor.

Evelyn was already at the bar when Wulf made his way over.

"Aloysius Wulf!" the innkeeper bellowed. "It has been a dog's age!"

Mr. Wulf grinned on approach and clapped the man on his shoulder. "Fyodor! I'm glad you're still alive! I was worried Iryna might be fattening you up for the kill!"

"He's almost ready," the woman clearing the tables called out in a thick slavic accent. "A few more pounds and I will have him on the spit."

Mr. Wulf made a show of eyeing the plump woman's curves. She was the sort of woman who liked to be admired, as long as that was where it stopped. "Beautiful as ever, Iryna." He gestured to the artwork on the walls. "I see you're still painting?"

"Oh yes," the curvy woman purred. "Every night." She glanced with satisfaction at her portraits of the pigboy.

Fyodor nodded his head in Evelyn's direction. "She's with you?"

"Lady Grimsby," said Mr. Wulf, by way of introduction. "Lord Grimsby's foster daughter."

"The witch?"

"If I were a witch," said Evelyn, "I would have ridden in on a broomstick, and I would have told you to stable it somewhere very uncomfortable."

The innkeeper roared with laughter. "Very good. Lucky for me. So if you're not a witch, what are you?"

"I prefer to think of myself as a freelance troublemaker."

"Is that why you're here? Vastengrad has enough trouble, have you come to make more?"

"We're looking for Sam Pellender," Mr. Wulf said. "We were hoping you could help."

Fyodor set down the glass he was cleaning, and the friendliness in his manner melted away. He sighed and his shoulders slumped and he wiped his brow before leaning in across the bar. His wife, who'd been wiping down the tables, stopped as well.

"I know him," the barkeep said.

"I thought you might."

"A lot of people asking about Sam. Most with bad intentions."

"His father sent us."

“His father?”

“Alfred Pellender. I served with him in the war. I owe him my life. We aren’t looking for trouble, we just want to bring his boy home.”

Fyodor sighed heavily. “Mr. Wulf, I am sorry to say that if you are looking for Sam Pellender, then you *are* looking for trouble.”



Evelyn and Wulf followed Fyodor to a sitting area at the north end of the hall and warmed themselves by the fire as the barkeep described the love affair between Sam Pellender and Alina Vostrova. Alina was the eldest daughter of Lord Ivarr Vostrovich, who was himself chief amongst the lords of Vastengrad. The young lovers crossed paths in the market one day and were smitten with each other. All of Vastengrad watched their love take root in the taverns and dance-halls along the docks. Alina, always a serious, grim-faced girl, flowered under Sam’s affections. Young Mr. Pellender, as wild as his flaming red hair, was tempered by her calm demeanor. Gossip and rumour followed them wherever they went. Vastengrad’s housewives swooned at the sight of them stealing kisses, and the local men placed bets over what color hair the pair’s children would have.

Alina’s father, Lord Vostrovich, was not pleased by the match however, nor by the reputation of the young man who’d won his daughter’s heart. He forbade them from seeing each other, and put Alina under lock and guard every time Sam came to town.

“Sam arrived two days before the rest of the caravan,” Fyodor explained. “He’d worked out some plan to marry Lady Alina in secret.”

“You knew him?” Evelyn asked, “You were friends?”

“I suppose. Iryna’s got a soft spot for the young man on account of him looking like her pigboy. I helped him quit the drink. Sometimes the two of them would meet here. They’d sit right where we sit now and steal a moment together. They’d hold each other’s hands and watch the fire.”

“He truly loved her?” Wulf rumbled. “Is that what you’re saying?”

“They meant to grow old together. You could see it in how they looked at each other. It’s a sad business.”

“What happened then?”

“Sam went out to meet the grain caravan when it arrived. There’s all kinds of rumors, but all agree there was an altercation. Two of the guards were killed and Sam was badly wounded.”

“What caused the fight?”

“The story that went round,” the barkeep explained, “was that he’d been caught stealing from the caravan’s quartermaster and dismissed. The rumor and the two dead guards were all the excuse Lord Ivarr needed to put out a warrant for his arrest.”

Lady Grimsby frowned, “Do you believe that?”

“No. Sam’s a good boy. Hot-blooded and careless, maybe, but I never knew him for a thief. Sam was honest. Loyal. He’d sneak the young lady out and they’d go dancing down by the docks amongst the sailors and the Skraefolk. Men could make assumptions about behavior like that—but Sam never said anything to dirty her honor.”

Mr. Wulf leaned forward in his chair, “Where is he now?”

Fyodor shrugged, “Gone to ground. Dead, maybe. Last anyone saw him, he was covered in blood and being chased like a dog through

the streets. If he made it to the Skraefolk, they'll have squirreled him away somewhere."

"What do you think?" Mr. Wulf asked, looking to Evelyn. She was lost deep in thought, lips creased with a tight frown as she stared into the fire.

"Perhaps Lord Ivarr was so displeased by his daughter's match that he hired men to attack the caravan and make sure Sam died in the fighting. It would have worked, except for the fact that Sam wasn't with the caravan when they attacked. The men he'd hired were forced to improvise."

"If they only wanted to kill Sam, why execute the rest?"

"They couldn't have witnesses. Someone might have escaped and revealed the attackers were looking for him. Imagine: the caravan is ambushed, there's a brief struggle, and the guards surrender. The bandits realize Pellender isn't among either the dead or the survivors. They panic. They want to know where he is. If a survivor tells that story and the tale makes its way to Lady Alina... if she realizes what her father tried to do..."

"A complication Lord Ivarr would have wished to avoid," Wulf rumbled. "And the grain?"

"It's winter. Vastengrad needs the grain, so does Streissberg. If the grain is delivered on its normal schedule, there's fewer questions asked. If the grain went missing, or ended up on the black market, it might draw the wrong sort of attention. The loss of the guards might inconvenience the merchant concern in Istlenberg, but so long as they've been paid, why worry?"

"It fits," Mr. Wulf said reluctantly, turning it over in his head.

"It's one theory, at least," Lady Grimsby said. "There are certain variables it does not account for."

Wulf did not need her to say it to know that she was referring to the tattoo they'd found on the corpse's shoulder.

"Lord Ivarr's a brutal man," Fyodor said glumly. "I wouldn't put a plot like that past him. If you're right and it was him behind all this, the gods were watching and they are punishing us all."

"Oh?" Evelyn asked, "How so?"

"The city's in bad straits. A fire took two of the granaries. Half the winter grain supply went up. People are sick. Going mad. Lord Ivarr's got it worst of all. He was never a handsome man, but I saw him riding up to the keep a week ago and he looked awful."

"Awful how?"

"Pale as a ghost. Glass-eyed. Bloated like a beached whale."

"Wonderful," Wulf muttered, voice thick with sarcasm. "We're wintering with the plague."

Fyodor gave a hearty laugh, and clapped the big man on the shoulder, "Welcome to Vastengrad, Mr. Wulf."



An ice blue sky and a foot of fresh-fallen snow greeted Mr. Wulf when he woke the next morning. He found Evelyn in the common area. She'd already sorted out fresh provisions for the day. More than a few of the tavern's patrons were asleep in the main room, huddled together under blankets near one of the smoldering hearths.

She was resolved to investigate the site of the granary fires first.

"You think the fires are connected to Sam's disappearance?" Wulf asked, snow crunching beneath his boots as they set out.

"It is too much of a coincidence to be ignored. If we're missing a piece of the puzzle, it seems a likely enough place to find it."

There were signs of life here and there in the streets. Wulf sighted a few hearty souls shoveling their front steps; others gathered snow to melt for drinking water. Of course, stray dogs were everywhere. Vastengraders were known for letting them have the run of the city. Not out of a particular fondness, but because dogs were seen as a handy source of meat if winter went long and supplies ran short.

They reached the industrial quarter an hour before noon. Several warehouses had gone up in the blaze. There was a large group of ragged children picking through the ruins for baubles and trinkets. The burnt structures formed a perimeter around the three large granaries that were used to store food in the winter. Each granary had a silo attached; two of the three structures were cinders. The third, bizarrely, did not even appear scorched.

Wulf and Lady Grimsby paced deliberately around the perimeter of one of the destroyed silos. He kept watch as Evelyn knelt and sifted through ash before coming up with a tin cask. She held it up for him to examine. *CRIMSON WINTER* was etched into it in neat block letters.

He gave the cask a sniff. "Oil."

"Arson."

Wulf frowned at the intact granary. "A controlled burn. They didn't care if it spread to the warehouses, but they sure as hell wanted this

granary to survive. You'd need quite a few men to control something like this."

"Indeed," Lady Grimsby said, jiggling the lock on the granary door. "Which begs the question: what makes the one that's left special?"

She knelt and fished a set of lockpicks from her satchel and set to work on it. Before she could finish, two guards spotted them from a nearby watch post. The first's face was covered in shaving cream, and he held his sword belt in his hand. The second wore a heavy crossbow over his shoulder, and a quiver of bolts at his hip. Both looked pale and emaciated. Their skin was cracked with sores, their eyes red and watery.

"What are you two doing?" the lead guard hissed at Lady Grimsby. "Get away from there!"

Wulf intercepted the man before he could get too close. Both guards took a step back as he moved toward them; he was a full head taller than either of them, and much broader. Wulf put his hands on his hips, pulling back his coat so that they could see the pommels of his long knives, and the promise of danger. "No need for trouble," he rumbled. "We're here to have a look in on the grain."

"Look elsewhere," the lead guard growled.

His fellow, the man with the crossbow took up a post several feet back, and loaded a bolt. Despite his condition, his hands were steady. Wulf circled the two of them until he'd put the other guard in the line of fire. No reason to give him an easy shot if it came to violence.

Lady Grimsby gave an irritated sigh and let the lock fall. "Gentlemen," she said, holding up the hem of her dress as she tromped through the snow toward the guards, "are you Lord Vostrovich's men?"

"We are," the shaving cream man said, "and that's his grain. Who're you?"

"I am Evelyn Grimsby; this is my partner, Aloysius Wulf."

Both names landed as desired. There were benefits to a bloody reputation.

"Grimsby?" the crossbowman asked, his voice wavering. "The witch?"

The shaving cream man shot a glare back at his fellow. "Shut up, Evgeni." He cast a long scowl at Mr. Wulf and Lady Grimsby. "Town's had enough bad luck. What are the two of you doing here?"

"That's just it, Sir," Evelyn said. "I do not think bad luck is what ails Vastengrad. I believe something is wrong with the grain."

"What do you mean?" the crossbowman asked. "Is that what's made everyone sick?"

Evelyn handed the lead guard the cask of spent oil. "We found that in the ashes. I was surprised to see it there. Has there been an investigation into how the fire started?"

"No," the man said. "We were ordered to keep the area clear."

Wulf noticed the man's eyes lingering with discomfort on the name printed on the side of the cask. "You know it?" he asked.

"I do," the guard said. "*Crimson Winter* is Lord Ivarr's ship."

"Is there a reason Lord Ivarr would have wanted his own granaries burned?"

This question seemed to trigger something in the guard with the crossbow readied. He spoke with eager determination, as if vindicated in some prior argument. "It's them new boys that set the fire, Yuriy. I told you. Now they're up at the keep and we're stuck down here. It's not right. I don't trust 'em."

"We're here because Lord Ivarr trusts *us*," the lead guard—Yuriy—snapped. The way he said it, he lacked conviction. Mr. Wulf suspected Yuriy didn't trust the new boys either.

"Who are these new boys?" Evelyn asked.

"Men from the grain caravan. Vittenbergers. Father Geist hired some of them to stay behind and join the household guard."

Wulf and Evelyn exchanged a momentary glance. *Vittenbergers*. Like the honey-haired man with the strange tattoo they'd found dead on the road. It changed the theory somewhat. Wulf was reminded of what Evelyn said when they found the remnants of the original caravan. Complexity. Subtlety. Design.

"Who is Father Geist?"

"Lord Ivarr's priest. He oversees the day-to-day of the keep."

"Yuriy," Evelyn said, smoothing her skirts. "I know you've no reason to trust me. I know my reputation. But Mr. Wulf and I found a dozen men piled up in a wagon two days east of here. There were still bits of grain in its bed. Those were the men who were supposed to deliver this grain. I believe the men your Father Geist hired killed them and completed their delivery. I don't know why they would do that, but I need to find out. I need to examine the grain in that silo."

"I can't," Yuriy muttered.

"If I'm wrong," she assured him, "you can pretend we were never here."

"And if you're right?"

"Pray that I am not."



A long hall with waist-high bins on either side led through the granary toward its silo. A system of sloped wooden chutes above served to carry grain from the silo into loading bins. Everything was cool and dry to the touch, but there was a musk in the air that Yuriy didn't like the smell of.

"It's a granary," Yuriy said, looping his sword belt into his pants, "nothing special about it."

"Be that as it may," Evelyn said, "someone went to great lengths to ensure the others burnt while this one remained untouched."

She dipped a hand into one of the bins and sifted through the grain. After a moment, she frowned and withdrew her hand to examine it, rubbing her forefinger and thumb together.

"Got something?" Wulf asked.

"Indeed. Do you see the sheen? Mucus. A kind of..." the dark-haired woman hesitated, looking for the right word, "...lubricant."

Evgeni slung his crossbow over his shoulder and leaned over the bin to get a better look. He dipped his hand into the grain and picked something out. "Look at this, Lady Grimsby, is this some kind of fish egg?"

She took the object from him and held it in a better light. From his vantage point, Wulf could see that it looked like a little eyeball. A

clear, hard membrane sac with a single dark spot at its center.

"You have it almost exact, Sir," said Lady Grimsby. "A reptile egg."

The guard leaned over one of the bins and continued to sift through it. "More in here. Are these what's making everyone sick?"

"Yes, I believe so," Evelyn agreed.

She was still examining the egg when a sound came from the silo. Distinct from the howling winds outside, or the creaking structure of the granary itself. A thump and a swish. Wulf was a seasoned enough hunter to know that it was no mere shifting in the grain, but the shuffling sound of a living creature.

"What is that?" Yuriy asked, leaving his post by the door to join them.

Lady Grimsby placed her hand on the silo's outer wall and rapped against it with one knuckle, then pressed her ear to it.

Again the noise. Not a swish. A *slither*.

She tapped against the silo, and the noise came again. Threshed grain shifted and tumbled gently as something moved through it. Soft scrapes followed against the silo's interior walls, precisely opposite where Evelyn had rapped with her knuckles.

"What the hell is that?" Yuriy repeated, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

"I don't know," Evelyn answered. "Shall we have a look?"

She grabbed a stool from near the entrance to the granary, set it against the silo, then stood on it. She tapped again, this time higher

up, closer to the grain chutes. More slithering and thumping in response, always opposite the spot she'd tapped.

"Evie," Mr. Wulf muttered, "are you sure that's a good idea?"

His stomach was in his throat. Whatever was in there could be dangerous, but there was a recklessness to her born from a lifetime of close escapes and courting danger. Not for the first time, Mr. Wulf felt a pang of guilt for that. He often wondered if he'd encouraged that part of her.

"You have your knives, Mr. Wulf?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Good."

She continued tapping, farther and farther up the silo's wall until she reached one of the grain chutes. Whatever was inside tapped back. Bumping and writhing against the sound, drawn by the vibrations. She drew one of her pistols from her waistband and stepped out gracefully onto the edge of the grain bin, getting closer to the chute.

"Are you ready?"

"No, I'm not ready," Mr. Wulf barked. The big man delivered a string of oaths and curses as he struggled to hoist himself up onto the bin. He was feeling his age after the harsh journey to Vastengrad. His joints were kinked up with aches.

"This is what I'm talking about," Lady Grimsby lectured sternly. "You're getting fat. This is because you've been sneaking pies. I've seen the crumbs, Mr. Wulf."

“It’s Mr. Barghest that eats the pies!” Mr. Wulf huffed. He felt Evgeni and Yuriy’s hands on him as the two men gave him a boost, and managed to make it up to the edge of the grain bin. He wobbled before he found his footing, a stark contrast to Evelyn, who appeared sure-footed and cat-like. He steadied himself, one hand on the grain chute, the other holding one of his long knives at the ready.

“Go on then,” Wulf grumbled. “Let’s get it done.”

Evelyn pulled the lever that worked the grain chute, and tapped it from the bottom with the barrel of her pistol. The silo was quite full, and a rush of grain poured out, filling the sloped chute until it spilled into the bin below. *Something* moved near the hatch.

Lady Grimsby drew the creature forth with little taps, inch by inch. There was no easy name for what emerged; it was neither snake nor worm but some horrific amalgam of the two. Its bloated body was covered in sickly white scales, as thick around as a grown man’s thigh. It undulated and throbbed its way forward along the chute in pursuit of Lady Grimsby’s rhythmic tapping, chuffing and snuffling like a hog rooting for truffles. Its head, or what might have passed for one, was scaly and bulbous, with two holes where its eyes ought to have been, and a gaping, lipless mouth filled with fine needles.

“What in the hell is it?” Yuriy gasped, edging backward toward the granary’s door.

Evelyn craned up on her tiptoes for a better look, unfazed. “A kind of tadpole, I believe. I’ll need to examine it.”

“If that’s a tadpole,” Wulf muttered, “what’s it look like full grown?”

“Would you prefer to come back later, so we can find out?”

“No. I believe I’ll kill it now.”

“As you like, Mr. Wulf.”

The big man leaned forward and took a haphazard stab at the creature from above. Its body was all muscle, and it gave a tremendous thrash at the blow. The wooden chute rattled in response. Wulf moved closer to give it another stab, and there was a loud pop as the metal braces holding the chute gave way.

There was a moment, falling, where he felt sick to his stomach. The creature was upon him and then they were both in the grain, and he could feel its stink on him, searching at his flesh with its maw, the teeth scrabbling against the arm of his leather coat. It constricted like a snake around his elbow and for a moment it felt so tight he thought he might lose his forearm altogether. And then instinct took over. His long knife was in his hand and he was working it with a butcher’s calm precision, cold iron carving a river of ichor and ruin down the length of the beast.

The struggle lasted only a few violent seconds. When it was over, Yuriy and Evgeni helped Mr. Wulf out of the bin.

“Graceful as ever, Sir,” Evelyn said mischievously.

Evgeni set himself down on the floor. His condition was even worse than it first appeared. Even the slight effort required to pull Wulf from the grain bin appeared to have exhausted him. “Is it dead then?”

Lady Grimsby knelt and examined the creature, prying open the gash to get a look at its guts. “It would seem so, yes. It’s not yet fully developed, but it is female.” She worked her way farther down its body, to a pronounced bulge. “Here, a citellum. It is pregnant in

the fashion of a worm. It bears reptilian features as well. Ribs, still forming, which worms do not have. And underdeveloped venom sacs here and here." She pursed her lips. "*Idraga Vushalhala*. An organ of the elder civilizations, and a seed for Oogra Atol's rebirth. In our world, they are buried in the lands beyond Knet and Shur; in the other world, in Urartu and Babylon, and the lands of the Germans. What brought this one to a granary in Vastengrad, I cannot say."

Wulf gave the worm's guts a kick. "What do we do now? You have a new theory, perhaps?"

"No theories, Mr. Wulf. This is madness. I can think of no sane reason to poison an entire city with the eggs of *Idraga Vushalhala*. The nightmares spawned by this creature treated humans as cattle for untold millennia. It is said that the Atols are immortal and undying, their memories carried from one life to the next, and that they may sift through our minds as easily as we sifted through that grain. To invite their return is to invite slavery and death. We must find Sam Pellender and find out what happened to that caravan. As for the grain, it must burn."

"If you're looking for Sam," said Evgeni, still seated on the granary floor, "you should start with the skrae sisters. They have a shop called Just a Stitch off the docks. Before he was with Alina, he used to...spend time with them."

Lady Grimsby raised an eyebrow, "You know Mr. Pellender?"

Evgeni cast a guilty look at Yuriy and shrugged.

She nodded in thanks. "Mr. Wulf and myself will locate Mr. Pellender and get to the bottom of this. You gentlemen must ensure the grain is destroyed."

Yuriy scoffed, "We can't burn it. We've already lost so much. It's winter. People will starve. Surely there's another way."

Evelyn regarded him with cold eyes, "Look to yourself, Sir. You are covered in sores and your man can barely stand. Do not waste time pretending there is any choice in the matter. It is not food, it is poison. Starvation is a better fate than what the old gods will offer you. Burn the grain and when you're done, go down to the shore and drink as much salt water as you can. Drink until your lips are cracked and your belly is sore and you're half-mad with dehydration."

"Why?"

"You must kill the thing growing inside you. You must kill it before it kills you."

"Do as she says," Wulf advised sternly. "She's never wrong about this sort of thing."

He could see the panic in Yuriy's eyes. It was unlikely the man knew anything about old gods or elder civilizations beyond whatever stories his parents scared him with when he was young. But Wulf could tell, looking at him, that Evelyn was right. Wulf'd seen that look a hundred times, maybe a thousand, in the eyes of men he'd killed in battle—men whose wounds were fatal, but had time enough to come to terms with it.

"It has to burn. You understand?"

"Yes," said Yuriy. "I understand."



Wulf and Lady Grimsby made their way through Vastengrad's narrow alleys and twisting streets to the docks. Storm clouds lay atop the city like a burial shroud, and by early afternoon another foot of snow was piled up on the streets. It became impossible to ignore the evidence of the toll the tainted grain exacted on Vastengrad's most vulnerable citizens. Homeless men and women huddled for warmth in makeshift shelters and tent cities. Their eyes, red and bloodshot, were frosted over.

The lucky ones were dead.

"It's worse than Fyodor made it out," Wulf said, watching as Evelyn examined the remains of a small boy.

"*Idraga Vushalhala* can make quick work of a healthy person. Not enough meat on these bones to sustain them."

Vastengrad's docks were quiet, save for the gentle crash of the waves against the pier, and the creaking hulls of the tall ships as they rocked at anchor. Mr. Wulf and Evelyn passed beneath the shadow of the great ships. A group of men in thick furs were out smoking on the deck of one ship. Even at a distance, Mr. Wulf could tell that they were stricken with illness.

The seamstresses' shop was down an alley wedged between a brothel and a tavern, in the part of town reserved for the Skraefolk, who were seen by most as an unwanted nuisance. Graffiti was scratched into every surface. Signs and sigils proclaimed the divinity of the Old Gods and the glory of the world that was. Mr. Wulf was careful to avert his eyes. Skrae words had a kind of power to them that he did not understand. Evelyn took no such precautions, being skraefolk herself, and examined the graffiti closely.

"What does it say?" asked Wulf.

“Wards against the stars, and the things that live between them.”

“Not cultists, then?”

“No. Scared rabbits. Wise enough to remain hidden.”

“There’s an egress well here,” Mr. Wulf said, and knelt to clear it out. Buried under the accumulated snow was a window that looked into the basement of the seamstress’ shop. Broken furniture littered the floor, heaps of scrap cloth were piled neatly on shelves and tables. There was a spot for a makeshift bed, and a lantern’s quivering light filled the room. A man was fast asleep in the bed, face wrapped in bloody bandages, his shoulder-length hair the color of an open flame.

“That’s Pellender’s boy,” Wulf said. “I’m sure of it.” He looked to the door. “Shall I give it a knock?”

“Gently, Mr. Wulf.”

A skrae woman in her middle-years answered. Green eyes, olive skin, and long dark hair. She could have been Evelyn’s sister, or mother. *The skrae look*, people called it. The seamstress appraised Mr. Wulf, then, seeing Evelyn, touched a hand to her forehead, and spake: “*Malvo tae estra.*”

It meant something like: hello, dark sister, Wulf thought.

“*Malvo tae estra,*” Evelyn replied with a curt nod. “Do you know who I am?”

The woman eyed the pistols Evelyn wore at her hips. “Everyone knows who you are.”

"I am here to collect Samuel Pellender."

The woman's eyes narrowed and she hurried to shut the door.

Mr. Wulf stepped forward and blocked it with his boot. "You shut this door, and I'll have to kick it in."

The seamstress stepped aside and motioned them into her shop. It smelled like the tracts of birch trees that dominated the landscape east of Vastengrad. Rich, colorful silk curtains served to divide the main room. Their diaphanous blues, greens, and golds, lent the room a cheer not frequently found in the city. Mannequins draped in exotic furs and fashionable dresses were arranged throughout the room as if they were guests at a fine party. A pair of much younger women played cards at the shop's counter. All three women looked haggard, as if they hadn't slept in days.

"Are you going to hurt him?" the eldest of the sisters asked.

Mr. Wulf shook his head. "His father sent us. We're here to ensure his safety."

"None of us are safe," she replied.

Evelyn removed her cloak, depositing it with one of the mannequins. "What do you mean?"

"*Idraga Valshalhala*," she hissed. "The old gods are stirring. I know the signs. I know what comes next."

"Do you know who poisoned the grain?"

"It was the priest. It must have been."

"Ivarr's priest?" Evelyn asked, "Father Geist?"

“Yes. He is mad. A fanatic.”

“He is not a Christian?”

The seamstress shook her head. “Once, maybe, but no longer.”

“Fetch Mr. Pellender. Then we’ll discuss this priest.”

Evelyn’s order gave the seamstress pause. She nodded reluctantly, gathered up her skirts, and disappeared into the cellar. A moment later she emerged with Sam Pellender behind her, squeezing his frame through the narrow doorway. Only the young man’s eyes and mouth were visible under the bandage covering his face. He was tall, like his father, but broader in the shoulders, and cut a fine figure even in such a state.

In spite of his injuries, he laughed when he saw them.

“Mr. Wulf! I cannot believe my eyes! You are a miracle from the gods!”

The young man’s easy smile and cheerful eyes were infectious. There was a reckless joy in his manner that was obvious, even through the bandages on his face. It was a relief to Mr. Wulf to see his friend’s son still alive.

“Good to see you, Sam,” Wulf said, clapping him on the shoulder.

Evelyn was markedly less sentimental. “The gods did not send us, Mr. Pellender, your father did.”

“Lady Grimsby? It cannot be! I am honored to meet you! When I was little, I would hide outside my father’s study and listen to the old men gossip about your adventures with Sergeant Wulf and Lord Grimsby. The devil in the monastery—the expedition to Old Suram and Knet. I never dreamt I’d one day warrant your attention.”

Mr. Wulf watched in horror as the young man swept Evelyn up in a bear hug. She convulsed with disgust in response to the unfamiliar contact, as if her body could not decide whether the best defense was to go rigid with discomfort or liquefy itself spontaneously. She was not well disposed to affection.

To Wulf's relief, she did not shoot Mr. Pellender.

"You have left an awful mess in your wake young man."

"Yes, ma'am. I am sorry about that."

"What *have* you gotten yourself mixed up in?"

"Honestly?" Sam grinned, "I haven't a damned clue."

"Best you start at the beginning, then. Tell me everything."



Over the next hour, Wulf listened as Evelyn drilled Sam for information—everything from the company that hired him, to how he'd met Alina. They sat together at a card table and she laid out some of the contents of her bag as they talked. Powders and ointments and a proper bandage for his face. As the young man told his story, she unwound his bandage in order to examine his wound. The younger two skrae sisters sat beside her and watched her work, while the eldest sat by the shop's front window and listened intently.

"Sounds like you know most of it already," Sam said. "I came to town early and married Alina in secret. We hired a boat captain to take us out and perform the ceremony. After we got back to the docks, she went to the keep to tell her father what we'd done. I went to the east gate to meet the caravan as it came in."

"What happened then?" Evelyn asked.

“About two dozen men came in with the caravan. I thought my crew must have picked up travelers on the road, but when I saw they weren’t among them, I knew something foul must’ve happened.”

“Did you get the sense they were looking for you?”

Sam laughed, “No, I got the sense they were surprised to have someone call them to account. They were spinning some story about the regular crew being reassigned before I made it clear I was on that crew. When I confronted them and called for the watch, they tried to kill me.”

Evelyn finished removing the bandage over his face. The tip of the young man’s nose was sheared off. A raw nub of shredded pink flesh and cartilage was all that remained. Mr. Wulf could not contain a sudden bark of laughter. For all the seriousness of their situation, young Mr. Pellender, now noseless, was in fact the spitting image of the pigboy. The resemblance was uncanny.

“Is it bad?” the young man asked.

“No sign of infection,” she said, approvingly.

Evelyn fished a hand mirror out of her bag and held it up for him to get a proper look.

“Well,” he said, forcing a cheery note, “at least I’ve still got my winning smile.”

“Iryna’s going to love you,” Mr. Wulf chuckled. “You’ve a proper snout.”

“Maybe she’ll let me drink for free.”

“She’ll probably make you sit for her so she can paint you.”

He flinched as Lady Grimsby cleaned the wound and applied some of the powders and ointments from her bag. She continued to question him as she worked. "Continue your story. They attacked, and you fought back?"

"One of them went for his knife, so I stuck him in the eye. It happened quick. I didn't mean to kill him, I just reacted. I think he meant to kill me. Another one came at me, and I got him between the ribs. I was trying to pull my sword loose when the bastard bit off the tip of my nose with his dying breath."

"Then you escaped?"

"That's right. Lord Ivarr's man, Father Geist, was there to receive the shipment. I told him to tell Lord Ivarr what happened and ran. I thought he'd vouch for me, but the way I hear it he put a price on my head instead."

"Tell me what you know about Father Geist."

Sam shrugged. "He took up in the keep a little over a year ago. Lord Ivarr has trouble sleeping, and the priest had a remedy for it. It wasn't long before he was running the place. I broke bread with him a few times. He's quirky, but he's not so bad. A dreamy sort of fellow, you know? Easily distracted. Always going on about the stars. He can get carried away if you get him talking. Alina didn't like him, but he seemed harmless enough."

"Harmless," the eldest of the Skrae sisters scoffed from her perch by the window. "He is a *believer*. A *fanatic*."

"Starry-eyed," Mr. Wulf muttered.

"What does that mean?" Sam asked. "Starry-eyed?"

Evelyn finished wrapping Sam's face in a fresh bandage.

"Sometimes, Mr. Pellender, people spend so much time studying the stars that they become aware the stars are whispering to them. It is a kind of sickness peculiar to our world. Some are consumed by the desire to draw their attention. To be *seen* by them. To be favored."

"You think he was behind everything?"

"He met the caravan at the gates and inspected it. He hired the men who attacked you to stay on and hunt you down. A convenient excuse to keep loyal men-at-arms close at hand. The granary fires were arson; the cask of oil we found confirms that. Whoever used the cask to start the fire needed access to Lord Ivarr's ship to get it; the priest is his head-of-household and certainly would fit the bill."

"It's hard for me to believe. He's not a violent man. He's a scholar. Always has his nose buried in a book."

"There's little in life more dangerous than a book, Mr. Pellender."

"I'll remember to keep an eye out for paper cuts."

"When you read a book, you lower your defenses and let all those words in. You process them. Repeat them. Every book you've ever read has been inside you, Mr. Pellender, in the most sacred of spaces. Sometimes the ideas they contain take up root and refuse to leave. Some books, once opened, cannot be closed."

"I never thought of it that way."

"Do you know what sort of books Father Geist read?"

"No."

"Then you do not know what strange ideas might live inside him."

“Lord Ivarr still fits the theory,” Wulf said. “He could have directed the priest.”

“No. The Pigboy’s barkeep said that Lord Ivarr was sick. He wouldn’t have eaten the grain if he knew what was done to it. He was poisoned. Lord Ivarr’s men are down in the town eating the tainted grain with the rest of the townsfolk, and the priest is holed up in the keep with muscle.”

“What’s the move then?” Mr. Wulf asked. “Maybe fifteen men and a keep with forty-foot walls to hide behind. Those are both problems we don’t have a solution for. Not to mention the hostages. Lord Ivarr and the household staff.”

Mr. Pellender suddenly seemed to grasp the gravity of the situation. “Alina’s up there with him. What if they’ve hurt her? We have to rescue her!”

“You know a good way in?” Wulf asked.

“We can scale the walls.”

“In this weather?” Evelyn muttered, one eyebrow arched. “Far too much of a risk. And if we’re spotted in the attempt, we’ll be shot with arrows or cut loose to fall to our death.”

Mr. Wulf rubbed his chin. “It’s not the worst idea, Evie. We’d need thirty, maybe forty minutes, but you’re right about the weather.” He looked to Sam, uncertain. “You think you can land a hook that high up?”

Pellender nodded, “I can. There’s a spot where the ground comes up and the wall’s a little lower.”

Evelyn was unconvinced. “It’s a terrible idea.”

"We could wait," Wulf said. "Gather up some stout men. Pick off the priest's men when they come out on patrol."

Pellender pounded the table. "We need to go tonight. I won't leave her there with them."

"If you have any advantage," said the eldest sister, "it is that he does not know you are here. If he knows that you are here, that you are working against his interests..."

A ship's bell tolled sundown in the distance. The mournful sound immediately recalled the tall ships Wulf saw anchored in Vastengrad's harbor. Lean and deadly, with their ornately carved mastheads and hulls bristling with cannons. Evelyn rose, drawn to the window by the sound. Skraefolk had salt and sea in their blood, or most everyone said, and it seemed to Wulf that the tolling of the bells and the crashing waves against the docks tugged at her.

"Gentlemen," Evelyn said, "let's not overthink this. Our quarry is well armed and has fortified his position; he thinks that all he must do is wait and the city will be devoured by the tainted grain. By now, Yuriy and Evgeni have seen to its destruction. His plan is foiled, at least in part. Our position is far stronger than it seems."

"You have a plan?" Mr. Wulf asked.

"The course is clear. We kill the priest and restore order to Vastengrad."

"How?" the eldest of the skrae sisters muttered. "Better to run. If the old gods are waking, this is just the start of it. You have money. Perhaps one of the ship's captains would be willing to brave the storm."

"Run?" Evelyn's laughter was dark and rich. "Sister, I thought you said you knew who I was."

"I know who you are," the seamstress said.

"Then you know I do not run. Men who skulk and scheme and plot are fearful, cowardly creatures. You call him a believer, sister—a *fanatic*—as if that makes him something other than a wretch who kneels to the first power he does not understand. I do not run from such men. I grind them beneath my heel. I remind them they are right to be afraid."

"What will you do?" she asked.

"It's got a door, hasn't it? I shall knock."

"Knock?" said Mr. Wulf, rumbling with laughter.

"Yes, Mr. Wulf. A proper knock."



The keep stood on a forested overlook two miles outside the city itself. By the time Wulf and Lady Grimsby reached it, it was near midnight and the storm was at a fever pitch. The winds howled and waves of the Malhalholtra, flecked with sheets of ice, crackled and shrieked against the rocks on the distant shore. A cloudfront stretched across the entire peninsula above them, drowning out the stars. Only the moons bore witness, peering through gaps in the strata.

Castle Vostrovich's walls were squat and brutal in their construction, with blocky battlements and stern, featureless walls. Evelyn stood before it in fur and ermine, her long black hair put up in a tight bun, snow swirling around her. If the bitter chill bothered her, she didn't show it. She had a flair for the dramatic, and Wulf did not begrudge her it.

"IVARR VOSTROVICH!" she shouted, her sonorous voice ringing out above the cacophony of the storm.

The keep's darkened windows gazed down on the snowy hillside at the presumptuous challenger. Wulf watched for signs of movement as the wind whipped and wailed around him. The castle remained still.

"IVARR VOSTROVICH!" Evelyn bellowed once more, so loudly that her voice cracked.

Now, a flickering torchlight appeared in one of the windows and waited there a moment, as if in sitting in judgment. It disappeared down a stairwell, bobbing in and out in the windows, and then it was upon the walls, winding its way nearer to the gate. Wulf could not make out the bearer's features through the storm.

"What do you want?" the man shouted down. His accent was strange. Otherworldly.

"I am Lady Evelyn Grimsby. I have come to see Lord Ivarr Vostrovich."

"Lord Ivarr is gone. Something new wears his skin now."

"Are you the priest? Father Geist?"

"I am."

"Your accent is unusual, Sir. Where are you from?"

"Germany."

A foreign land from another world. *Elsewhere*. It was not unusual for people to lose their way and end up on this world instead.

Flotsam and jetsam carried on the cosmic winds, Lord Grimsby used to call them. Wulf was well-acquainted with the phenomena. In the north strangers often emerged from the forests with a foreign language on their lips, eyes wide with horror at the sight of the stars above. He wondered at times what their dead stars must look like, that the living ones of his world terrified them so.

“So far from home,” Evelyn replied. “The wrong world. The wrong sun. What was it you read first? What put you on this path? The Dream of Doors? The Song of the Radiant Stars? I can help you silence their voices. It may not be too late.”

“You would help me by plucking out my eyes. By cutting off my ears. By ripping out my tongue. What life is that? Why would I want to snuff out the wonders this world has to offer?”

“Do you know who I am?”

“Everyone knows who you are. The witch who murders miracles.”

“Then you know we have business, you and I,” she called. “Open the door. I would see it attended.”

He laughed, but there was no mirth in it. “My business is with the gods. Your business is with the storm. Go find somewhere to hide before you freeze to death.”

“I burned your grain. I killed your pet.”

The priest did not respond immediately, but his silence was louder than the wind or roaring sea. Wulf could see his eyes now, and the brutal features of his face. His furrowed brow, his bulbous nose, his flat black eyes and jaw quivering with a zealot’s rage.

"Pet!" he screamed at last. Anger and heartbreak. Raw emotion, unfiltered and uncontrolled. *He's lost his mind*, thought Wulf. His voice was an anguished wail: "A child of the stars!"

"Whatever," Evelyn muttered darkly. "It's dead."

Wulf was waiting for her as she turned and made her way back to her dappled gray. Neither Wulf nor Grimsby held any expectation that the gate would be willingly opened for them. All of this was to draw attention and purchase time for Pellender to begin his reckless ascent.

She checked her pistols. "Mr. Wulf?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Give it a knock."

The keep's gate was not a simple affair. It was twelve feet high, made from solid oak, and reinforced by a thick wooden beam on the interior. Both the gate and the walls around it had been built in ages past as a shelter for the people of Vastengrad, to keep them safe in the event of a siege. It was certainly not the sort of door that was meant to be knocked on.

Of course, one did not usually knock with a cannon.

Lady Grimsby saw the culverin on one of the ships anchored in Vastengrad's docks. It was eighty pounds of death, cast in beautiful black iron, its barrel fashioned in the shape of a dragon's maw. She fixated upon it from the moment she saw it, convinced it was fated to be hers. Mr. Wulf knew better than to try to dissuade her, so he'd

climbed aboard *The Lusty Mermaid* with her and Mr. Pellender to retrieve it.

They found the ship derelict, widowed by the tainted grain. Her captain must have been the last to die. He'd arranged the crew's bodies in their hammocks, then put a bullet into his own head. A final entry in his logbook told the story. Winter cold preserved them. They were dreamers gone to a final sleep. Evelyn pronounced the action not a theft, but a fair transaction: a cannon for a chance at revenge from beyond the grave.

Any self-respecting ghost, she claimed, would have consented to the trade.

At her order, Mr. Wulf set the culverin down on a makeshift platform that he'd cobbled together from rocks and fallen branches. He was grateful to have it off his back. He primed and loaded it, gave Evelyn a mischievous grin, and lit it off.

Now, *Lusty Mermaid's* cannon roared. Smoke and sulfur and a sound like seven trumpets rocked the mountainside. At such close proximity accuracy was not a concern, so he was able to load it with a double shot. The keep's door buckled and ruptured in a shower of splinters.

"Look at that. They opened up."

"Shall we?" asked Evelyn.

"May as well," said Wulf, lifting himself onto the shaggy black.

Then they were inside, spurring their horses through the blasted gates and snow-blanketed courtyard. A pair of guards who'd been on night watch were still rushing down the ice-slicked stairs of the

keep's walls when Evelyn leveled one of them with a shot from her flintlock. It pierced his armor and put a hole the diameter of a broom handle in his gut. Mr. Wulf unbuckled his greatsword from his horse's flank and, still astride his mount, intercepted the other man, cleaving him nearly in half.

What followed was chaos. The household staff emerged in terror from their quarters, shocked and horrified by the sudden violence. A dozen bearded men burst from the castle's main doors in night shirts and tunics, armed with swords and hatchets. Rough and ready men, not a raw recruit among them.

From the entrance of the courtyard, Evelyn took careful aim and felled another one of the priest's men as he clambered down the steps from the castle's front door. His comrades surged forward around him, dodging his body as it tumbled down the stairs. Mr. Wulf spurred his shaggy black on and rode amongst them, whirling his greatsword in wide, brutal arcs. He trampled one man with his horse. Another lost his arm trying to block one of Wulf's blows.

Evelyn kicked her dappled gray into a trot and kept her distance whilst she reloaded. Wulf spotted the priest in motion. The man ran down the stairs from the wall and across the courtyard toward the keep's chapel, ignoring Evelyn and Mr. Wulf entirely.

Wulf's attention was stolen by torchlight moving in the the keep above, moving with purpose from window to window. Mr. Pellender, no doubt, searching for Lady Alina and Lord Ivarr. A brief struggle erupted in one dark window. Two men locked in a deadly grapple, before one plunged to his death, striking the stone courtyard below with a sickening squelch. Sam Pellender paused at the window to survey the dead man, fiery hair blowing in the winter wind, then vanished back into the castle to continue his search.

By then, Wulf was off his horse and advancing up the stairs, grim and implacable. In addition to the two they'd killed in the initial

strike, six more of the priest's men lay dead at the bottom of the castle's stairs. Wulf had the full attention of those who were left. Evelyn dismounted and moved to join him. She took two shots; the first went wide, but her second took one of the priest's men in the collarbone and put him on his knees, gurgling and grasping at his neck.

Reminded of Evelyn's presence, the priest's men divided their attention. Three stayed with Wulf as he stalked up the stairs. Two turned to deal with Evelyn to prevent her from reloading for another shot.

"You're Aloysius Wulf," growled a graybearded soldier, squaring off against him.

"That's right."

"You killed Tom Harbaugh at Victory Bay."

"I did."

"He was a good man."

"He was."

"He was my friend," the graybeard said, voice choked with sorrow.

"He was my friend too."

The man came at Mr. Wulf with a wild swing, slowed by the icy stairs. Wulf returned the charge, ducked his blow, and impaled the fellow with his greatsword. He lifted the man off the ground, flesh and vitals tearing under his own weight, then tossed him to the side. Everywhere the snow was red with death.

Behind, Evelyn tugged her gloves tight, lifted her scarf so that it covered her mouth, and drew her knife. When the first attacker came, she was ready with a handful of powder from her satchel. *Widow's Wail*, Wulf thought it was. Extract from a plant that grew in the wheat fields near Grimsby's Hollow. A man would be out threshing his crop one moment, then dying on the ground the next. So it went. She hit the man full in the face with a cloud of the dark powder and held her breath. His screams started straight away. His face bubbled like it was being brought to a boil, and he collapsed to the ground clawing at his eyes.

The second man struck at Evelyn as she turned to face him. She caught his hatchet hand by the wrist and slashed at his neck. He caught her blow and twisted at the wrist until she dropped her knife, then gave her two swift punches in the face. Her left eye instantly began to swell. No matter, she was not so easily deterred as that. Wulf taught her better.

Her attacker wore a knife on his hip. She pulled it free and went to work with blinding speed. Warm blood bubbled out, soaking her glove and the sleeve of her dress. The strength went out of him. His hatchet dropped to the snow. He stumbled backward and collapsed on the stairs, clutching at his gut, eyes wide with shock.

Mr. Wulf finished the last two men. Two swift blows and their ruined bodies were sprawled across the castle's blood-slicked steps. He bent over double to catch his breath. Old. He was getting old. Not so old as Alfred Pellender, but old nevertheless. He looked up at Evie, panting, "You alright?"

She nodded. "Yes. But I didn't get the priest."

"He made for the chapel."

“Let’s finish this, then.”



The chapel’s interior was modest. A few rows of pews and a stained glass portal above the altar. Wulf’s eyes were drawn immediately to the crucifix which overlooked the chamber, with its kind-eyed Christ dispensing guilt and forgiveness in equal measure. Wulf’s nose was immediately assaulted by the fetid stench of decay from the far end of the chapel.

Lord Ivarr was arranged upon the altar, naked in repose. The lord’s body was befouled by the seed of *Idraga Vushalhala*, his belly was swollen to twice its normal size. It looked as if Ivarr were host to some monstrous pregnancy. Every drop of moisture had been drained from his body, leaving his skin flaked and white. Even so, his skin glistened with ceremonial oils.

“He’s still breathing,” Mr. Wulf boggled, seeing the man’s chest rise.

“No,” Evelyn replied. “He is not.”

Wulf realized what she meant. The rhythms of Ivarr’s body were all wrong. His body shuddered and trembled on the altar, stomach undulating as whatever was inside him stretched and yawned.

“What is that?” Wulf asked.

“*Oogra Atol*,” Evelyn answered, breath laced with fear and excitement. “The Father of Sorrows, the Doom of Old Quorog. The seed is hatched.”

“Is that a problem?”

"It is a *miracle*," said the priest, emerging unarmed from the sacristy. He looked as if he had not slept properly in days or weeks. Perhaps, Wulf thought, even longer.

"You were a priest," Evelyn said, "a Christian. How could you do this?"

Father Geist looked up at Christ on the crucifix with a terrible sadness in his eyes. "No matter how I prayed, no matter what I sacrificed, He did not answer. He did not listen." The priest's hand went to the collar at his neck. "I have found the Gods that speak and listen. I am their priest now. I am the priest of Worm and Toad, of the Voleids and the slumbering Atols. I am the one who draws the Red Door."

Evelyn advanced along the eastern wall, on the outside of the pews. "They aren't gods, just monsters, waiting patiently in the dark while we fatten ourselves for the feast. Pretenders. Old and ancient, perhaps, but pretenders nonetheless."

"They called me here! They told me where the seed was buried and taught me to care for it."

"People will suffer. Many have already died."

"We dwell in the garden of the stars," the priest frothed, reciting whatever madness lived in his mind. "We drink the radiant light; the hunger of the stars is a gift, and a gift offers no mercy. He is not dead, he is transformed. I have unshackled him from his flesh."

"You poisoned him!"

They were interrupted by a stir of movement from Lord Ivarr's husk. His body began to crack. A pale white tendril, segmented like a worm, emerged from Ivarr's mouth, probing the air for a moment

before it undulated and surged outward, fatter and fatter until bone cracked and split and Ivarr's face tore open. Wulf stepped backward at the sight of the obscene birth. The creature churned and slithered, working side to side as it removed itself from Lord Ivarr, until Ivarr's shoulders and chest were split and shed like the husk of an old skin.

"Behold," the priest murmured, trembling with anticipation. "The Red Door opens."

It looked at first to be some kind of worm, but the last parts to emerge were a chest and four great arms joined two apiece at the shoulder. Atop its neck and chest was an oblong head, alien to anything Wulf had ever seen, with slits where its nose ought to have been and a gaping, lipless maw filled with teeth like a thousand needles. A half-dozen eyes sat above its mouth, pupil-less and void of color. The creature drew in a hushing breath and swelled to a full twelve feet of height, then stretched its pale arms so wide that the chapel seemed too small to contain it.

Evelyn's first shot gave up a cloud of black smoke and struck the creature in one shoulder. Oogra Atol slithered with terrifying speed on a mass of worm-like coils, retreating farther into the chapel. It wound itself around the crucifix, hissing as it peered out over Christ's shoulder. Evelyn's second shot splintered wood. She was in motion, backing away from the monster toward the chapel's door.

The priest moved between the creature and them, holding his hands up as if to calm them. "Stop!" he pleaded. "Do not struggle. Let me show you. Let *Him* show you."

Oogra Atol placed a clawed hand upon the priest's shoulder and drew him back protectively.

The monster's whisper was an oily caress. "*Aug hessss il shuhat.*"

The words were like poison. Wulf felt them burning in his mind.

"Evie!"

She was near the chapel's doors, diligently reloading her flintlocks.

"Yes, Mr. Wulf, I know."

Another crack, another gout of smoke. The shot whizzed past Wulf's head and struck the crucifix in Christ's side, kicking up a shower of splinters. The creature released the priest and slithered toward Evie, knocking aside the pews with its serpentine body as if they were toys. Wulf tried to intercept it, but the creature grasped him by the head with one clawed hand and threw him against the western wall.

It held Evelyn, lifting her off the ground. Wulf heard it:

"*Evvvvv atash sssaaaa shuhat.*"

She struggled to free herself, and the creature dragged a razored finger across her belly. Mr. Wulf scrambled across the floor for his greatsword, then stumbled toward the creature, climbing over the pews to reach it. She was bleeding. Little Evie was bleeding. Still the little girl he promised to keep safe, but he'd grown too old and slow to protect her.

"Evie!" he screamed again.

The creature dropped her to the ground and turned back to him. She didn't hesitate. Her fingers found her powder and she began packing it into her pistol. *Stubborn Evie, still reloading.*

"Hhhehshhhhh," the creature hissed, the noise was like a dagger against Wulf's spine. He stopped to steady himself as he clambered over one of the fallen pews. His nose was bleeding. Little drops of blood. His ears weren't meant to hear those words. They were sounds that could kill.

"It's in my head, Evie," he muttered. "I can't..."

Dark-haired Evie with her baleful eyes. She raised her pistol and fired. The shot struck the creature in the back. The serpent turned on her again and reached down with two great arms, hands on her face. *My Evie, all covered in scars.* Wulf found the strength to strike before it could kill her. Three quick steps and an overhand blow and there was a stump where one of the creature's arms had been. It screamed and he screamed and his stern-faced Evie wriggled loose from its grip and returned to the business of reloading.

Nobody hates like my Evie, the thought filled Wulf with pride.

Oogra Atol turned to face him—it examined the stump where its arm had been and Wulf recognized the rage in its strange eyes. *No, not rage. Irritation.* It was *annoyed* he'd cut its arm off.

The monster grabbed Wulf by the face and lifted him high into the air, claws gouging his skin. Up he went, until he was four feet off the ground and kicking helplessly. And then he was back on the ground. His greatsword clattered out of reach. Something in his shoulder snapped on impact.

On your feet, he told himself. *She needs you on your feet.*

He forced himself up and drew his long knives. Evie fumbled with her ramrod, sprawled backward against the wall, holding a pouch of powder by the drawstring in her teeth. Blood on her dress. So much blood. Just like her mother. *Is this how we die, Evie?*

"*Hesshhh,*" the creature hissed. "*Hhhesshhh.*" One of its hands brushed over his face. Gentle now. A lover's touch. He could feel its thoughts slither inside him. As if its malign presence were a guest in his body, moving from room to room to familiarize itself with the layout. Wulf tried to tear its hand away, but to his horror, he couldn't lift his arms. He sank to his knees. The creature worked him like a puppet.

"*Hesshhh,*" the creature crooned again. It wanted obedience. It wanted worship.

"No," he rasped.

It was in his memories now. He was on the field at Sigmund's Folly, clawing his way toward cover with pneumonia in his lungs before the next sheet of arrows fell from the sky. This was what it wanted. Fear. The monster's presence took hold of his lungs and held them tight. Wulf gasped for air, but his lungs belonged to Oogra Atol, and it would not release them.

"*Hhhesshhh,*" it whispered, the corners of its colorless eyes crinkled with laughter.

He was still on the field at Sigmund's Folly. He'd been days without sleep. It was him and Ichabod and the few men still strong enough

to stand making them pay for every bloody inch. Half-buried in mud, lying in wait for the next charge with his hand on a pike. Lord Grimsby's final ploy. *Play possum. Wait until the last second, then show those bastards we've still got some fight in us.*

He could feel the thundering horses, the drumbeat of their hooves reverberating in the ground.

Then Pellender was there. Alfred Pellender with that wild mane of red hair, bursting through the chapel doors. *No, Wulf thought, not Alfred, Sam.* Young Pellender, his face in bandages. He struck the creature across its maw with a heavy flail, staving it in. Wulf gasped for air and his lungs flared back to life. The monster lashed out at Sam, but the young man swatted aside its blow aside. Bone snapped, and Oogra Atol shrieked.

Evelyn managed another shot in the chaos. It took the creature full in the face and made a ruin of one eye. The monster thrashed, crashing through pews as it slithered toward the back of the chapel. Sam stayed after it, grim-faced and determined, harrying the monster with blows from the spiked flail.

Wulf's fingers were in the mud and he was almost to her. *No, not mud. This isn't Sigmund's Folly.* He reached Evie's side and pulled himself up so that he was sitting next to her. *Sweet Evie, with her scowls and skinned knees.*

"Don't die, Evie. Please don't die."



Wulf was in and out of consciousness for the next week. Twice, he'd managed to dress himself before collapsing. Once, he'd made it out the door into the Pigboy's upstairs hallway before Iryna came to collect him. His room's window was frosted over. He'd half-hoped that winter would be over by the time he woke.

"You're awake."

It was Evelyn, leaning up against the frame of his room's door. She looked like death, all dressed in black, without a touch of color in her face.

"How are you on your feet, Evie?"

"There's work to be done."

"The creature?"

"Dead. *Lord Pellender* acquitted himself well."

"*Lord Pellender*," Wulf laughed, "his father will like the sound of that. And the priest?"

"Escaped in the chaos."

She crossed the room and handed him a woefully empty plate. He inspected it with his fork. Half an egg, scrambled, and a few slices of salted pork.

He could not hide his disappointment. "What's this supposed to be?"

"Breakfast."

"We died, didn't we? We died, and we're in Hell."

“Mr. Wulf,” she asked, “am I to understand you believe Hell is a meal with sensible portions?”

“Yes, and you are there, and you won’t stop calling me fat.”

“Strange that your idea of Hell and my idea of Heaven should be so similar.”

In the aftermath of the battle at the keep, Sam and Alina assumed control of Vastengrad. At Evelyn’s urging, able-bodied men from the city were drafted into service and sent house-to-house. The sick were quarantined for treatment; many did not survive, but many more did.

On the outskirts of town, a family was found murdered in their home, their pantry stripped of supplies. Evelyn and Wulf agreed that the priest was the most likely culprit. Wulf tried to search for him, but was frustrated by the mountains to Vastengrad’s east, which were still impassable.

Two months in, what little food remained in the city started to run out. Mr. Wulf tried to ignore how many fewer strays were roaming the streets. Evelyn and Wulf took their horses out to investigate the road to Streissberg. Alina dispatched her father’s ship to the city to warn them about the grain and bring back supplies, but there’d been no word.

“Still no way forward,” Wulf said, frowning at the narrow entrance to the mountain pass. “Too much ice.”

“It’s a risk,” Evelyn said, seated nearby on a rocky outcrop.

“I’ve had enough risk for one winter.”

Evelyn was watching the horses at play. They knickered softly and inspected a few threadbare patches for anything to graze on. Wulf’s

shaggy black nuzzled at her dappled gray, then ran a few yards off, trying to draw the gray to chase.

Wulf moved to join her. "They really are lovely animals."

"Yes," said Evelyn.

"Shame we're going to have to eat them."

She murmured her agreement, smoothing her skirts as she did. The sun was headed down, and the stars were stirring, winking to life from behind gray clouds. The yawning blue sky gave way to night, bitter frost, and the color-noise of the hungry stars. Wulf put his arm around Evelyn as she crept closer for warmth. For a moment she was eight and he was twenty, and two friends still had their whole lives stretched out before them.

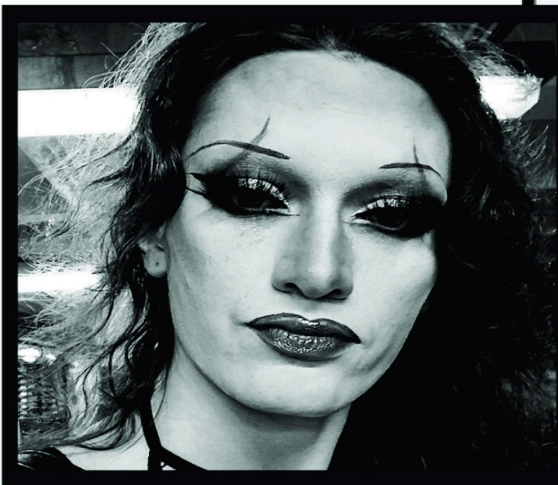
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