

## One

Walking the breadth of the desert was not easy. *I should have taken a horse*, Guild thought bitterly to himself. Guild wasn't his name, but his name was dangerous now; a thing that may bring death to him if others learned it. He reflected on his life. He had been a simple farmer, living in the shadow of the Holy Yellow City. His mother's family owned the well in the village, and used it to irrigate their crop – figs. He had been born wealthy, compared to most. He was also one of twelve children.

His family could have done without the extra mouth to feed and so, the moment he reached manhood, he eschewed marriage and became a member of the Fortu Guild – a hired sword, filled with the promise of adventure and plenty of coin. He rose through the ranks quickly. First he was Tigil. Then Braddard. Then, at length, Guild Master of the Fortu.

Now, he was Guild Master no longer, robbed of his title by a former friend, bent on vengeance; a man who would not hesitate to have any opponents killed. So he called himself Guild.

*I should have taken a horse.*

On horseback, it was no more than three days between villages, between water and beds and food. On foot, it was well over a week.

A week without water did strange things to a man. Shapes appeared in the shimmering desert heat. Women, translucent and enticing, who danced strange dances appeared frequently to Guild.

After months of walking, visiting village after village and almost dying of thirst each time, he almost believed in ghosts.

"Iris," he whispered, tears of regret staining his dusty cheeks as he stumbled across a dune. Iris. Her memory haunted him now more than ever. A slave, no more than a slave, and yet the only woman to have ever captured his heart. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I should have done more."

Yet what more could he have done? He did not have the money to buy her, and even if he did, there could not have been any guarantee that she would not have died in a month regardless. Guild reached into his pocket and his hand closed around the clay wolf idol that remained there, hidden from the unfriendly eyes of the desert. The clay was ice cold to the touch, despite being alternatively pressed against his body and beaten by the sun.

Guild smiled grimly. It was winter in the tundra. He pulled the wolf out and pressed it to his chest. The cold hurt a little, but it was welcome relief from the unrelenting heat of the desert.

"Can you hear me, Winter Wolf?" he whispered, directing his thoughts to the idol at his chest. "I'm coming. I'm coming."

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Seraphimé, who most knew as Otsana, shifted uncomfortably in her sleep. She was sweating profusely, though it was the middle of winter.

"Otsana?" Bran whispered softly. He shook her gently. "Otsana? Are you all right?"

Seraphimé slept on, groaning a little as she shifted yet again. Bran chewed on his lower lip. He looked at the walls of the onion-shaped pavilion that had become his home. They were starting to lighten, the painted forms of the animals and symbols that decorated them slowly becoming shadows cast by the sun.

Bran had chosen to stay with his wife's people after the Great Gathering. The majority of his entourage were sent back home to the territory of the Baveii with instructions to relay the situation the people of the tundra faced to his father there.

No doubt his father would relay it in court, and a debate would rage as to whether or not the Baveii should involve themselves.

The tribesmen of the Sierran Tundra were now kin. That fact alone should move the Baveii into action. So Bran hoped, at least. That had been the plan since the beginning, and the whole reason for his marriage to Seraphimé in the first place.

Bran placed his cool hand on Seraphimé's burning skin once more. "Wake, Otsana," he whispered. "The sun has come. It is day now."

This time, Seraphimé's eyes fluttered open and she looked around. Her green eyes met Bran's and she smiled.

"Hello, little crow," she said.

Bran smiled in return. His heart still skipped a beat when she looked at him. "Are you all right? You are burning to the touch."

"I had a dream."

"Oh?"

"I saw a small desert wolf. He was orange, like the sand, and the sun. He was coming, coming to me, in answer to my call."

"The desert is where the Ottals live. They are all snakes there."

"Perhaps one is a wolf."

Bran chuckled. "I think you place too great an import on dreams, Otsana."

Smiling in return, Seraphimé said, "When we are sleeping, we travel to the spirit world. There, we are shown things. I think you place too little import on dreams, my crow."

"In this, I think we can agree to disagree."

Seraphimé nodded. "When are your messengers expected to return?"

"Not until the council has decided."

"Will they decide in our favour, do you think?"

"I certainly hope so."

Seraphimé stretched, exposing part of her naked body to Bran. He leant forward and kissed Seraphimé on the now exposed crest of her hip. She laughed and turned to face him.

"We can be late to breakfast, can't we?" Bran asked, his blue eyes wide and hopeful.

Seraphimé laughed again and traced Bran's face with her fingers. "I don't think anyone will mind."

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"Your fault."

"Go away."

"Don't you growl at me. You might be a god, but I'm her kin. She'll listen to me before she listens to you."

"You're an annoying hag."

"Perhaps."

The Lord of the Hunt, Master of Animals and God of Death turned his gaze to the old woman on the cairn in his clearing. His expression was hostile, twisted by an unexpected jealousy. Hers was perfectly amiable, except the twinkle of mischief that sparkled in her vivid green eyes.

"Why are you here?"

"Because, when you so callously drove her away, she asked me to intervene on her behalf. And so I came here to tell you precisely what I was thinking. God or no, you are an idiot."

The Lord of the Hunt turned away again. The constant howling that had sounded in his private world since he had banished Seraphimé to marry had stopped some months ago. Some part of him yearned to hear it once again, to know that she had not forgotten him.

“You should be glad she’s made peace with it. There is no more pain.”

“I should be,” he agreed. Here in the clearing, as it was in the land of the living, it was winter and the Lord of the Hunt wore his armour and helm of the skull of a great deer.

“But you are not.”

The Lord of the Hunt rolled his broad shoulders in a bid to relieve the tension that had settled there.

“I knew it! You love her.”

“Go. Away.”

“No. I. Won’t.”

“Do not mock me, woman!”

The old woman sighed. “You are just going to have to compromise.”

The Lord of the Hunt turned back and looked at the old woman with an expressionless gaze. She had been around him long enough to know that meant he was curious, but did not want to be.

“You’ve fashioned her into the Winter Wolf. She is on her way to ascendancy. If all goes according to plan, she shall become the tundra, yes? The goddess who chooses her kings, yes?”

The Lord of the Hunt cocked his head in acquiescence.

“Then you have no choice but to set her free to make that choice.”

The Lord of the Hunt turned away again. “I want her.”

“Yes, well a god cannot be a mortal king as well. She cannot lie with you anymore, not again, not yet.”

“Not yet?”

“The kings of the tundra will need her blessings with the return of the sun and the herds. The spring and summer months belong to the mortal kings. But the winters, my Lord; the tundra bears no fruit then.”

“So I must share her.”

“If she will have you,” the old woman said with a smile.

The thought was enough to drive the Lord of the Hunt wild. “I will not!”

“Fine. Then you must learn to live without her at all. She will not abandon her husband now.”

The Lord of the Hunt growled.

“Besides,” the ancient woman said as she closed her eyes and leant back. “I like him.”

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Ur awoke first, carefully dressing and exiting the pavilion so as not to wake Inna, who was still fast asleep. Precious few others were awake. No one had started a cooking fire yet. Ur stretched and yawned, turning sightless eyes towards the birthing sun. He paused for a moment at a lone figure on the horizon. A man, dressed in the skins of a deer and wearing a helm made of a stag skull. He was not an Ayal.

Ur smiled a little and walked towards him, knowing where he was by some power other than sight. Once at his side, Ur turned back and looked at the village of the Osprey Clan. It was not as big as it ought to have been.

“You are sad,” Ur said after a deep silence.

“Yes,” the figure replied, his voice deep and silken.

Ur smiled a little. "About Otsana." It was not a question.

The figure did not speak for a long while. "Yes," he said at last.

Ur remained silent. "Two men who love the same woman," he said, shaking his head. This time the figure drew his attention away from the portable village and looked down at the boy at his side.

"You see much, for one who has no eyes."

Ur smiled. "I have been gifted," he said. "When my eyes were taken, I received sight in return."

"What else do you see?"

"I see Otsana as Chooser of Kings. I see her as the Wolf of War. I see her as High Queen. Not just now, but always."

"What is she queen of?"

"That depends on you, King of the Dead."

With those words, Ur smiled serenely and walked back to the village. The Lord of the Hunt watched him go with a frown.

"Clever boy that," the old crone said from behind the Lord of the Hunt.

He groaned.

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"I don't believe it," Algar said bluntly as he paced in front of his brother at dinner. He had been in a meeting all day with his father and a member of the Holy Wetouan Council, the arm of the Holy Yellow City within the Tuan Federation. "The yellow robes have declared Holy War on the tundra."

Alam almost dropped his cutlery. "*What?*"

Algar threw his hands in the air. "Convert or kill. They aren't pleased with the ascension of a heathen war-leader over all the tundra. They consider it an act of treason and have declared war."

"There wouldn't be a heathen war-leader if the damned yellow robes told the desert idiots to stay the hell away."

"It's a culture of slavers, and they aren't allowed to acquire goods from the desert. Where else were they to range?"

"Acquire goods. They're people, not cattle! And that is no justification! What has father said?"

"What can father say? What the council decrees we must ratify."

"We were going to trade with them. Now we must fight them?"

"So it seems."

"That's just stupid." Alam was infuriated beyond words. They had just last year dispatched a messenger to the Osprey Clan informing them of their desire to trade, and now they were to ride out to slaughter them. Alam's mind turned to Gabija, the Chieftain of the Osprey Clan. He had promised her friendship, and had hoped for more.

Algar grunted. "The word is, the tundra has enlisted the help of our Greyll neighbours."

"Which ones?"

"Our closest ones."

"The Baveii?"

"Yes."

"Oh dear."

"Hardly surprising though, is it? They share gods still. The Greylls are primitive and yet to convert. And then there was that Otsana girl who married one of the Baveii princes."

“How so very convenient.”

“Political marriages happen all the time.”

Alam grunted. “If the Baveii have joined the fight in the tundra, we’ll have an enemy on our left flank. That’s a terrifying thought. Drawing the Baveii into a Holy War will draw in the rest of the Greyl tribes, who have long taken offence at strangers telling them how to think and behave. Do you know the size of the potential Greyl fighting force?”

“Expansive, I’d imagine.”

“That’s putting it mildly.”

“But they lack discipline, Alam.”

“And more than make up for it in courage and zeal.”

Algar grunted. “This is going to get messy.”

“Very.”

“Damn it.”

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Once Tigil and now Guild Master, Mtsusa, head of the Fortu Guild had been busy indeed. He had been twice to the Yellow City to speak with the Ottalan High Council. The council members had, at first, been dismissive of the Guild Master, but were moved by the threat of members of the guild converting to the religion of the tundra.

It was not true, at least as far as the Guild Master knew. However, a perceived threat was the same as a true threat. Great Susa knows, the stories of ghosts and gods in the tundra had made the circuit more than once, and the Guild Master had noticed a growing reluctance on the part of the Guild members to venture to the land of frost again. It irked him. Hired swords were not supposed to be cowards, and he’d be damned if he let a handful of them tarnish the Guild’s reputation. Not while he ruled.

The second visit to the Yellow City proved much more promising. The council, greedy for slaves and sensing an opportunity to expand their influence over a larger territory had decided to back the Guild Master at last.

The Guild Master knew enough about the Holy Council to know that it was new slaves they desired, though they had used the excuse of ghosts and gods, just as he had.

The Ottals were all alike; power-hungry and greedy. It was a good thing, for more righteous men were less easy to manipulate. Mtsusa smiled with smug satisfaction as he rode away from the Yellow City.

Those frozen tundra bastards would pay for all they had done.

The council need only send out word to all the converted peoples under its control, and they would have an army like no other. The tundra would be crushed, and their cursed gods and ghosts with them. The thrill of the thought made the Guild Master lustful. He had taken a Sierran girl as a personal slave and he allowed himself the luxury of anticipation wash over him as he rode back to the Guildhall. She told him she was from the Ice Bear Clan. No ice bear would ever match the ferocity of his ravishing, he promised himself that.

His self-satisfied smile became vicious.