

Frosthold

Ice coated the edges of Frosthold, the frozen maw of the thousand-year-old fortress looming over travelers of the tundra. The wind howled through the remains of Frosthold, making a frightening moan echo just out of sight down every hallway. The hearth of the great hall had been cold for a century, with no feasting or festivals to keep warmth in the frozen world. The only flame came from the Igvar's room, the lone flame responsible for his very life.

Igvar's room was simple: a writing desk, a four-post bed loaded with furs, his traveling trunk, and the precious fire. There was a large pile of wood which blocked off half the room with a deconstructed forest wall. There was a book open on the bed, but Igvar focused on his writing at the desk.

Despite his youth, the cold did little to hide Igvar's struggles living in Frosthold. He had kept off the worst frostbite by tending his fire as if it were gold, but the frigid air did little for his hygiene. When the air was so cold that water spilled from a cup froze before it hit the stone floor, bathing was a luxury Igvar could scarcely afford. His beard was unsightly and wild, but he wouldn't dare do more than comb it into a more controlled mess. The thick hair on his head reached his shoulders, hiding his neck from the worst of the cold. He slept in his coats, changing as fast as he could in the brief respite when his thermogauge warmed to double digits. Each morning, the sun broke the worst of the tundra and Igvar would spend his precious hours of warmth preparing for the night to come. After his daily excursion to examine the fortress, Igvar had the evening to himself.

His fingers ached from the cold, but Igvar sat huddled beneath layers of animal pelts. His pen moved swiftly, forming surprisingly clear letters despite the shivering. His account of the 34th Age was coming along well. The book Igvar had been reading on the bed was archaic and stale, so he decided to modernize it in his isolation. Just as well, since the book was over 300 years old. In this 49th age, there was a great deal that needed updating to prevent bigoted attitudes from persisting.

The references to goblins needed revision, to say the least. They'd been extinct for well over half a century, but humans had reevaluated the character of goblins recently. Gone was the conniving, thieving race that stories depicted them as. They proved to be more complex than several human or elvish cultures. The revision was long overdue and Igvar felt adding a handful of goblin folktales would help with their mistreatment. As he fretted over the optics of his goblin story, the bell by the fireplace rang.

Igvar stood up slowly, setting in quill in the ink pot over a candle. He took a gold key out of his pocket, the chilled metal stinging against his bare fingers. His hand shook as he felt along the stones until he found a hollow, dark keyhole. The key slid into the lock and Igvar braced himself. The hearth flared full of fire before the flames vanished completely, opening up into a quaint, calm sitting room.

"I cannot," Horet said, rushing through the fireplace and dropping books on the bed so she could rub her hands together, "for the life of me, understand why you chose this frozen waste as a place for your work! There are dozens of beaches and even tropical islands where you could have taken your hermitage!"

Horet was a steward for eight other historians going through their hermitage. She was friendly and kind, getting him whatever he needed to finish his work.

"I like the isolation," Igvar said, his voice hoarse. "It keeps me from getting distracted. Hermitage isn't a vacation, Horet. It's a very valuable and important step in the Cycle of a Historian. I need the time to look through histories and work through the biases of the times. Besides, the cold keeps people away."

"You could have taken your hermitage at one of the mountain fortresses," Horet said, stamping her feet to warm up. "Or if you wanted isolation, there are some lovely volcanoes this time of year!"

"Did you bring what I asked you?" Igvar announced, putting one of his furs over Horet's slim shoulders.

"Yes," Horet said, gesturing at the books on the mattress. "The goblin historians were

eager to share their side of the story, particularly the Crimson Wars and their involvement with Dormock of Nord.”

“I’m happy to take them, thank you.”

“Oh! I also have some food for you.”

Horet rushed back through the fireplace, keeping the fur on as she picked up boxes of shelf-stable food that would last Igvar for at least a month. Everything was either salted or pickled, but nothing with too much moisture. She’d brought him eggs once, but they had frozen so hard that he couldn’t crack them open to fry them. Horet had kept to his list afterward.

“Do you need anything for my next visit?”

“No, no,” Igvar said, already opening the books of goblin history. “This should keep me busy for quite some time.”

“Igvar...be careful, please.”

“With the book? Of course! I’ll make sure--”

“With yourself.”

“Horet, you don’t need to fret over me. I have lived up here for this long. The elements don’t cause me any trouble.”

“It’s not the weather that worries me. You, here, all alone? Even if you don’t meet an accident, this is a pretty dismal place. I worry about your mind when you have nowhere else to go than this room.”

“I explore the grounds once a day.”

“For the preservation of society. You’re telling me you don’t miss evenings with friends? The warmth of a pint of ale...or a woman, if that’s your way?”

“Are you offering?” Igvar grinned.

“I’m serious.”

“You don’t need to worry. I need another year to finish the work I’ve started. After I finish this retelling of the 34th Age, I promise I will take some time off. I’m so close to

finishing and this could be just the impact I need to leave.”

“I’ve been an assistant to the Historian’s Guild for a long time,” Horet sighed.

“Sometimes, they get so absorbed in the past or the future that they don’t see the present. Their goals become more and more unattainable and they focus so much on the ‘truth’ of history that they lose sight of the reality of history.”

“The reality of history?”

“Sitting and having coffee with a friend is as much a part of history as slaying a dragon.”

“I’m trying to add the goblin’s perspective to our worldview.”

“There’s no guarantee that anyone will even read your iteration. As much as we talk of adding to accounts of the various ages, we also take things out.”

“That’s...fair. But I need to try.”

“Consider it,” Horet said. “There’s a difference between accounting history and missing it.”

Igvar didn’t respond with anything more than a half-committal nod. Horet took a few things to clean up his space and left the fur on Igvar’s bed. The chill was already coming back into the room, but it lingered with Igvar after he’d turned his key to close the gate. The fire crackled, each sharp pop of the wood echoing through Igvar’s chamber. Igvar set his book down and moved over to the bed to fold the fur Horet had been wearing. However, his hand lingered on the folds of the fur, still warm and scented like lilacs.

Setting the folds of the pelt on his bed, Igvar looked outside and wondered if it wouldn’t be prudent to take a few days out of his hermitage. Somewhere a bit warmer, in company if not in climate.