

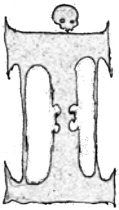


AN

A mistake to let go
When nothing else cheers me
Wind-fallen of the world-tree

*Bú er betra, þótt lítit sé,
halr er heima hvern;
þótt tvær geitr eigi ok taugrefjan sal,
þat er þó betra en bæn.*

HÁVAMÁL, VERSE 36



T was as if the frost giants had slain spring's unborn child and cast her corpse into the mountains, for it was but the first month of autumn and the dawn's hoar-frost clung still the rotting forest even well after noon. A sunset, fiery red and deceptively warm, blazed with malign peace across the world, lighting everything it touched with riotous, ethereal flame and bathing the ramshackle hamlets of the Field with rare evening light. Poor ralkin drovers of beasts, driven by the frumious wind, hastened their wretched creatures back to within the stone walls of their folds before the night chill sought to claim more than had already been lost; coiling lines of shuffling churls aborting their work stringed from their iron-hard strip-fields for the comparative warmth of their decaying homes.

Those talk – those common creatures, those humanely mortal things so frail, those *people* – whom the fates had unkindly planted within Boar's

wood were already on their cautious and yet hasty way home – of the cold was not their only fear. There were other things, creatures, fierce, desperate. In this desperate time wicked hobgoblins, ælfs and other faerie-folk gathered together to hunt in mobs, ambushing travellers and dragging down mounts and their riders in their despairing determination to survive. Though a few of the antlered woodwolves strayed beyond the boundaries of the forest to prey on drovers and their charges, the majority of the stinking creatures remained within its dark confines, stalking the unfortunate many who lose their way or become entrapped in one of the many strangleholdens – the vast, stagnant lakes of standing water that grew only thorns and brambles, an utopia of the savage woodwolf.

The forest was all the old charcoal-burner had known; in Boar's wood he was born, and there he was certain to perish. The Bloody-axe they called him, Ælfric son of Ælnoth, bane of trolls and saviour of Wingdale; but that was well past half a century ago, and any memories of deed or battle the old man may have had were long gone from his frail mind. Few remembered him now; they were all dead, their blood cast out upon battlefields of old or drunk up by the forest.

Though it was still light, he could hear the collective hunting-howl of a pack not far from where he trod – his weary step quickened, for had they found him? He was loath to use his ancient lantern, for that would draw every thing that had eyes – and fangs, no doubt – upon him. The *crack* of many padded feet upon the frost echoed between the boulders.

'Fools thou art, fools!' Ælfric bellowed into the gathering darkness, 'wouldst thou try to take me again?' He had little to fear, for the great weapon slung over his shoulder and for the four cast-axes in his belt: Age and his ravaged memory had perhaps done much to dull his skill, but he still knew how to throw a cast-axe.

The howl sounded again. Closer. The forest stilled, expectant of the confrontation.

Ælfric took his axe in his hands, halted, and rotating on the ball of his naked, frost-scarred foot in a wide arc, knew they were all about him. They

were surrounding him, perhaps a dozen of the fiends by their conduct of speech, closing as a noose upon his neck.

Behind him, an uncoiling spring, the first emaciated wolf leapt.

A blur of movement over the charcoal-burner's head and his axe painted an arc of blood through the air to land a blow betwixt the antlers of a second beast. And a third. Seeing their brothers fall so heartlessly, the remaining wolves drew back affrighted and the conflict was stalled, leaving the old man a moment to hasten on as the bitter night fell.

He had not carried on more than a quarter of a mile when the howl sounded again in his ear – so loud – so near! A movement behind a great stone to the right halted Ælfric's flight, and without another thought, he dropped the axe with all the force of his body upon it, splitting it in two – and striking flesh and bone.

To his dismay, the lobbish act drew not a bestial snarl from the darkness beyond, but a scream, a woman's scream! A grasping hand, sickly pale and desperate, reached out and seized madly at the handle of the axe, pulling, trying to wrest it out of grasp; but the old man replied it with a crushing blow that shattered bones, and the hand went limp, releasing the weapon.

'Who art thou?' Ælfric cried, half in dismay, half in wrath and half in alarm, 'show thy face to me! By Throne, *now!*'

A wolf's face appeared over the stone and was almost cloven from its shoulders if Ælfric hadn't stayed his hand an instant; for the face was not that of any base canid, to be sure. Ralkin shoulders rose underneath it, the



delicate shoulders of a woman – though one side was horrifically mutilated by the old man’s axe – covered in a fine coat of buff-white fur and dressed in dark cloth that shone in the twilight – glittering where smothered in gory crimson.

What is this madness – it is a FENRIAN!? Ælfric couldn’t believe what he saw. Sorcerous creatures they were, sired by – *by what, fell magicks? Daemonic sires?* – many centuries ago, created for war alone – evidenced clearly in the female now before him, for the grievous wounds she bore and yet she lived and stood upon her feet with drawn hammer, immense ringstraked tails lashing in anger behind her. A hiss of flaking iron and the charcoal-burner *hoped he had* finished what he began, in splitting between head and shoulders with a welter of blood his axe and casting the creature back into the darkness without another sound.

What was a fenrian doing this side of Mount Lune? Mount Lune, where all the Lawkish parish said the wolven-folk were meant to live... He would have to report this unwanted appearance to the priest at St Gunhild before anything worse–

His vigilance had dropt, and the wolves, dismissing their chastising, lifted out of the moonlit gloom again and in a wabe of rank pelts and flashing teeth sprung upon his back, tearing into his back with diseased claws and crying out in triumph. Caught quite by surprise, the old man was quick to retaliate and lashed out in fury with a cast-axe and foul oaths – but it was not him the wolves sought; they passed him over and began to clamour about where the fenrian had collapsed, sniffing and pawing the frosty ground with cries of frustration. Ælfric thanked Throne for this, his postponed death, but not wanting to know any more, broke into a run. He hadn’t even reached the old iron bridge; home was farther beyond.

But he was to be denied that, for in a bellow of anger, another fenrian appeared directly in his path; a male, this time taller, broader of shoulder – and bearing a loaded crossbow. Side-stepping the evil weapon as it fired with a *hiss*, the old man feigned a stumble and brought his axe up under the beast’s guard, but hadn’t so much as touched his new foe’s body when

the fenrian stopped the blade in his hands and tore it from the old man's grasp, replying to the unrealised strike with a kick of such force that Ælfric was lifted off the ground and painfully struck stone and bramble a good twenty feet away.

'*Follk!*' He heard the beast cry into the darkness, '*frjn sie ist! Drovit, drovit Follk? Skø!*' and with a step lighter than thought believable for one of such size, passed by the prone charcoal-burner and disappeared, no more than a rustle and a passing thought in the falling night.

When Ælfric at last had the strength and presence of mind to stand, darkness had truly fallen and was contesting for supremacy over the watery Moon-light that filtered low across the horizon. The charcoal-burner still had the rusted remains of his lantern bound at his waist – but naught to light it with any longer – and the darkness was most oppressive. But the creatures of the night had begun to squabble far away, which reassured the old man and gave him courage to carry on.

Many minutes passed and Ælfric had still not gained the bridge that marked the last half-mile home. A faint shape loomed in the distance, a formless lump which tuned into a great stone – the same as he had split before, and Ælfric cursed himself for losing his bearings so easily. Blood was everywhere now; yet here now – here was a body in the path now – the shuddering corpse of the fenrian that had kicked the old man, and standing over him was the blood-drenched figure of the female beast whom Ælfric thought he had slain, hammer still death-locked in her quivering hand. She cried out when she saw him, staggering forward a few steps before tripping on the body and falling to the ground a corpse.

Was she guarding a thing of such importance that she would forsake her life for it? For a moment, growing curiosity overpowered the dread in his heart and the old man paused a moment to glance behind the stone, to find only this; the reeking form of a battered wicker basket, covered in parchments and mould and thrust, with obvious haste, into a water-eaten alcove. It was about the same size and shape as those which mothers of the Field bury unwanted children in. Her child, perhaps? But it smelt of vegetable reek, an herb most vile! There was but one way to be sure.

The blade halted just short of the lid when Ælfric's attention was caught by the wolf-howl that rang out nearby. Gathering the basket in his arms, he turned and fled.



What was home in this dark age? But a dwelling in which to sleep and to eat – but a place to tie you without reason to land forsaken by dead generations past – but a trap in which you willingly lie and await thieves, beasts or witches to seize your life and possessions.

To Ælfric, it was all of this and yet still he remained, for, bound by tradition, he knew no other. It was here, in a little clearing in the forest's most forgotten midst, that his flight eventually led him; a small, round affair made of dry-stone with two windows, a door that had not closed properly for *not for a few days yet* years, and a thin mould of thatching cast over the conical roof.

Behind the portal propped shut, the old man let out a deep sigh – as he had done every night; home, sound and whole, what more could he ask for? A fire in the hearth to thaw his freezing limbs for one, or fleece to make a blanket for his bed: but the wood was wet, all too wet and nothing he could do would dry the pieces out. And as for the dream of fleece, Throne curse you, in the Boar's Wood?

So the old man wrapt himself in the rotting hide of a brillock and hunkered down in the shadow with the stinking basket set out before him. Cast-axe in hand, he hacked off the seal that held the lid shut and gingerly prised it open with hands that shook from cold – and his first thought was confirmed; within the basket lay an infant, a tiny beast-child who lay cold and still with his huge, liquid amber eyes staring pitifully into vacant nothingness, as a pair of ragged tails slowly uncoiled about his bony little frame. One of the tails seemed to grow from the base of the neck; the fenrians would call that their foretail, a freak occurrence due to the nature in which their sires were first created.

At the infant's feet, a crumpled roll of parchment, mould-caked and stained with much blood, had been thrust beside a sheathed swordcatch almost as long as the creature itself, and the withered branch of an alien herb from whose lacerated stump the foul stench pervaded. There was nothing more to see – at all – under the fur and the grime, the old man couldn't even tell if the child was a boy or not – so he unpeeled the sheet from about itself and cast his eye over it. The other rotting parchments that had covered the basket were all enwritten with odd, vertical runes, but this scrap – much to the old man's to his surprise – it was all a language he spoke and in the highest, basestst of ralkin hieroglyphs, though written it seemed by a fast, scrawling hand with words that seemed to slip off the edges.



*Bear him safely to an ally of the house til it is all past. If
Then kill him and carry his swordcatch with you. So they shall
Is no more. Yet if you do take his life or let him live, tell
Mother Fyranda awaits her grievous wolf in the swallow's home.*

ALCLEAUR VAULID.

There too was a break-armed Veratican cruix drawn in the corner, with the same pen; and that motto – *Alcleaur vaulid*, a form of Druiur vulgate, “*the saints often cry*” – that too was Veratican, was it not? Yet, what sort of hiding-place was the home of a swallow? Was this devilry?

At that moment, the infant gave a splutter and began to cry. It was a sound most strange and disturbing; the whine of an animal wracked with human

sobs – or was it laughter, hyenific laughter? The fenrians were chimæra – amalgamations of ralk and animal – *confusion*, as the Lawkish church in St Gunhild preached, *suffer them not to live in the sight of the Throne of Man*.

Up rose the swordcatch out of the basket, turning over in Ælfric's hands. The sheath was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, once-proud blue with traces of tarnished silver coiling like blood across the length. The pommel was barbed; a perfect miniature of those swords forged by the Field – but the middle blade, now he drew it, was of a flamberge pattern, something never seen within any province in the Midst at all. The child was of noble birth – if the blade was not stolen – he could discern that much, but Confusion remains Confusion until the grave may claim otherwise.

The old man lifted the creature's jaw to slip the blade under it, and thought again. Whoever had written that last fragment, were they not Veratican? He assumed it to be the infant's mother. *Mother Fyranda awaits her grievous wolf?* Mayhap the dead beast-woman out in the wood did not hold that matron's curse: Supposing she were a kind of nurse – a servant of lords – a herald?

He looked down into the child's fearful blue eyes again. The poor thing was so young and helpless – so cold, starving, driven far from his home and his mother – there was no honour in slaughtering him like this, nothing to be gained in wrenching such flesh from life.

'...I cannot do this,' he sighed, lifting the little creature into his arms, 'thou shalt be as my own child 'til thy mother doth return for thee. RYGNIR shalt I call thee, Rygnir Wyndfallen; thou shalt be taught in the Veratican way and I shall keep thee from the horror of the world.'

The child lifted his weary amber eyes to Ælfric's – and the corners of his mouth flickered in an innocent smile before he fainted.

Mayhap it was not noticed the child's eyes had changed colour.



‘*Throne of—!*’

Ælfric was awakened in an instant with the appalling reek of that herb strong on the foetid air. What had roused him so?

The thought drummed through his mind as with throbbing neck he strained his failing eyes into the utter darkness enveloping him. The Moon was fallen (and her small sister gave no light) and reposed deep within the cloud-wreathed horizon, leaving the wood in apprehensive, black dread – and yet, could he feel them, near – approaching – *within the threshold?* Oh yes, they had heard him cry out as they unintentionally awoke him, and had frozen in place, awaiting him to sigh deeply or shrug his weary shoulders and slump back upon his bed and slumber again – saints forbid! He knew who their disreputable selves were, and to what object they had broken in.

With an oath, the charcoal-burner flung himself from his bed of rotting straw and seized up his axe; almost instantaneously, a trio of lanterns flared into blinding life before his eyes, strange iron constructs attached to the backs of three fenrians – one who was soon to be revealed as the spokesman being that beast-man he had seen and been kicked by the even past.

‘Madness!’ Ælfric cried, ‘Why dare ye impose so upon my humble dwelling? Off with thy filthy feet from my ground, *confusion!* Begone!’

‘We apologise, O charcoal-burner,’ he who kicked now spoke, accent thick with Oustlundy and muffled through spider-like fingers clasped over a muzzle, as did they all, ‘but we seek the child of a usurping fugitive – mayhap it were hid here—’

‘Then seek it else-where,’ Ælfric swore with a glob of phlegm, ‘and take thou no more of my sleep. They brought him not here.’

Mumbled apologies heralded their exit, and the guttering light vanished with them, leaving the old man in darkness chill of before. A smirk of triumph crossed his features a moment at the thought of having outfoxed the fox – while he had not committed the sin of mendacity, he had not spoken all the truth; for it was the old man himself who brought the beast-child, having slain the absconder that brought him. At any rate, they would never find the infant – Rygnir – never – Ha! had he not wrapt the basket in a blanket for a pillow?

By this time, Rygnir had awoken and begun to cry, hastening the old man to return and quieten his charge before the beast-men heard. The poor thing was starving, but there was nothing to feed him, so Ælfric sat upon his nest with the child in his arms, putting the corner of a dirty rag in his mouth in an attempt to soothe him and rocking from side to side, as he had done so long ago with another, dear child, now long dead in the fires of war...

‘O be still, little one, be still. Why wilt thou not settle? Here, this shall I sing for thee; lo, here is a book from which I once did sing upon the night’s shore...’

As an open cloud, memories rained down upon the old man, sad memories of blood and horrors – those deaths at the hands of the men of Tenbridge, of Rune, of the dread burg – how he’d mourned them, venerated them for years until their bodies were no more than festering bones in a damp corner of the cottage. The overflow of decaying emotion drove his heart as he sung to the filthy little foundling beast-child in his arms.

He always carried that book with him. Red leather and gilt vines, it bore the crest of a white gryphon, now quite lost in the years of deep grime that coated every page, but the charcoal-burner held it in one hand with the same care as he tucked the miserable head of the hiccuping infant under his grizzled chin, as low and grating his voice began to sing to the night.

*O see them all striding, the red and the gilt,
All under rotting boughs of dead asc and dead oak,
Proud feet smite the earth with Veratican lilt,
Mail glistens beneath ev’ry pike-thrower’s kilt...
Marching doom, marching death, we the mighty Feld-folk.*

*O see him, he turns back and smiles in shame,
All under rotting boughs of dead asc and dead oak,
The child I once carried, now carries my name
With pike, and with hammer, salvation to claim...
Marching doom, marching death, we the youthful Feld-folk.*

*O see them, all riding, all riding as one,
All under rotting boughs of dead ash and dead oak,
Converge in the field underneath the rare Sun,
Ringing clamour, like rivers of sound as they run,
Marching doom, marching death, we embattled Feld-folk.*

*O see them, all dark'ning at promise of end,
All under rotting boughs of dead ash and dead oak,
The sparks of the stone fly and hammer hafts bend
On the forms of contagion that misery lend...
Marching doom, marching death, we the rotten Feld-folk.*

*O see her all weeping, her tongue never still,
All under rotting boughs of dead ash and dead oak,
In the failing twilight, this new life did outspill
For the mad-man's desire to wound and to kill...
Marching doom, Marching death, we the maddened Feld-folk.*

They sat in silence, awaiting the late rising of the cold sun and another day.



That at least was the story told.

Autumn's descent into winter slowed the world with the cold and a great many months passed with agonising slowness, more months than was wont, more than the accustomed ten: but Ælfric was able to gently nurse the infant Rygnir back from the brink of starvation to a state where sleep was the sleep of rest, not insensibility, and the waking was pleasant and without pain. The charcoal-burner found it necessary to cease his work at the forest's edge to

remain at his cottage, hidden away in the vast expanse of Boar's Wood where pious eyes would not pry, fingers eager to point and to condemn would not touch him or find the child until he was grown. The folk of St Gunhild, once familiar with the old man's face about the town, were suspicious of this sudden reclusive turn and sought to know why; whispered rumours of fenrians traversing the forest did not help the righteous fervour in finding him. Was the church worried for his health and his immortal soul? A proper execution had not been performed upon the village grounds in a long while, could that be why they sought him?

Whatever their purpose, Ælfric knew all the folk of St Gunhild wanted was for the beasts to die. He himself hated even the thought of chimæra – ANY chimæra, and so too with all his heart – but Rygnir – but poor little Rygnir was different. He just... *was*.

After many aborted attempts to reach the closest body of water without anyone finding he carried the child, attempts made appallingly difficult by the sudden and surely not coincidental traffick of the road, the charcoal-burner had come at last to the sad, grimy excuse of a stream that the half-a-mile iron bridge overstood, and thence had cleaned some of the grimy blood and the gathered mank from the creature's body. At the same time he made a number of discoveries; namely, the child seemed neither male nor female – but what disturbed him more was the image of a vine imprinted upon the flesh of his left arm that twined from his jugular down to a spiral on the back of his hand.

This image seemed to depict a vine that grew skulls, horned skulls with grimacing countenances in terribly sharp detail, and many runes were written around them and beside them. A tattoo of such scale, surely would it not blur with age? Why then did he (the old man had come to referring to the child as he) bear a mark that only *sorcery* could create so intricate? The image disturbed the old man greatly, and would continue to bother him for many years to come as the child grew; when he would look upon the child's smiling face, only for his eye to be drawn back to that ghastly tattoo, and he would shudder and turn away.





Rygnir Wyndfallen. Throne and fate had let this young life live in the presence of Ælfric, son of Ælnoth, but to what end? There was very little the old man could teach the growing child, except to bring down a tree or to throw a cast-axe – and these he did very well indeed, for after eleven winters passed the beast-child was possessed of a strength equal to a dwarf his age and was dragging whole trees to the burning-piles. They were happy – they were, really – a forced, empty happiness though it was, but Rygnir knew no different, for he was made to forget. This was the only life he remembered; playing innocently in the shadowy expanse of the forest, killing goblins with sticks and hiding from the rare passer-by; working alongside of his “grandfather” as he called the old man, was the greatest joy of his simple life. By some divine providence the charcoal-burner possessed the skill to read a few of the myriad convoluted forms of text, so to the beast-child he imparted this; with the red and gilt book of poems and the scrap of parchment he found upon the little basket he taught him.

*Yet if you do take his life or let him live, tell...
Mother Fyranda awaits her grievous wolf in the
swallow's home.*

And Rygnir would ask, ‘I should like to go there, but to where, grandfather, wouldst I go? How can there be room in a nest in a tree for people, how?’

Ælfric in honest, ignorant reply would say, ‘Ah, ‘tis naught, my child, see thou not? But words of nothing are they, words of nothing.’

So emptiness prevailed as monotonous day proceeded monotonous day on their ice-rimed pinions, all the same, all the same without change of any sort... Until, that is, in the eleventh spring of the beast-child’s life as the twelfth winter approached, his grandfather fell ill, horrifically ill.

‘I would that thou stay,’ Ragnir had begged him, ‘couldst thou not, but a day? Please, when-ever ye leave for the Swine, I fear for thy life!’

‘It will be well, child,’ the old man tried to reassure him, ‘thou seest this fragment of bone and this little scrip I wear now? Father Grensildur gave them me with his blessing. Saith he, it shall consume the fever and I wilt be safe.’

‘... but there is wood all about us!’ the beast-child was desperate for excuses, ‘can we not burn this instead?’

‘The wood is sodden, child, and we need to buy fire to dry it. I wilt be gone for but a day, fret not, I will bring fire home.’

‘Then take me! The cart is large, and I can hide in it – leave me not here again, I beg thee!’

In desperate attempt to procure sustenance, Ælfric had been taking his old gumbelgor and cart to the ground of Mugwort the Swine, digging peat with a number of other churls under his banner, hoping for a bit of coin or maybe some embers to take home. One-by-one, they had been laid low with a horrific fever, “devils’ fever” some were calling it, one that eventually claimed their lives in a most slow and torturous death, worse than that of the bloodmead as it was unpremeditated and usually came upon those who still wished to live.

The old man extracted himself from the child’s claws that dug into his threadbare tunic and clambered up into the cart before Ragnir could protest any further, and with a flick of the chains, the old man was disappearing into the gloom of the forest, leaving behind the sobbing child he had left in like manner for many days past, fully aware that he may not return. But it was only right; Ælfric had already been excommunicated from the church for

his suspicious actions; his spiritual purity and that of his child relied now upon some heretic drunkard of a priest who hid in the forest and grew his whiskers like a thistle-flower. What things worse could happen to the old charcoal-burner, but for saint Sinpium Herself to look upon him in pity and end his misery?

‘I shall be back at dawn of first night. Please worry not for me, child; let all the day pass as it hath done so past, and remember – if any ralk see thee, suffer them not to live.’

‘...So too, grandfather,’ squoke the defeated reply.

‘This day, too, I may return with something for thee.’

‘Thankee, grandfather.’



Why now did he fret so for his grandfather? Had some deep inner feeling alerted the beast-child to the approaching of insurmountable doom?

Rygnir spent his day as every other lonely day before; he brought down a branch and hewed it to pieces, stacking as he saw his grandfather do in the failing hope it would dry for burning, which of course it never did. He went hunting about the wood near the cottage with his swordcatch, never daring to take more than a dozen steps deeper into the forest for a childish fear of becoming lost. The little animals, the spiny rats and the goats, the mustelid toves and the badgers, they would gather about him and ask him news of wider things, news which he could only grant them piece-meal for the ragged snippets he could recall his grandfather telling him were all so awfully confusing and rumoured of wars in the north, and the east, and all twelvery-ten points the compass chose to stand at.

Sometimes, Rygnir would catch a glimpse of light so pure and sweet, it was all he could do to remain at his enforced threshold from the cottage and go dancing after the source. Faeries, of course, they had magick doors

in the bigger mánöc trees from which they would spring, doors that closed with no handle and left no trace. The fenrian would wonder what would happen if he sat and waited at the tree's side, and what he would see should he look into the open doors, *teeth like iron bolts of tussock*, then he would remember Ælfric far away, digging peat where he could not reach him, and train of thought would break into misery.

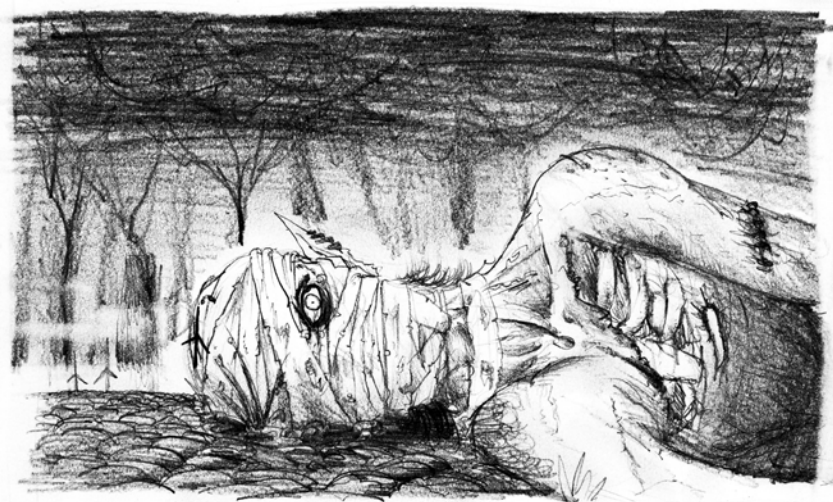
Time slows when nothing happens except coldness, and this day was an offender worse than any before it. The lengthening light and the evening mist rose chill, heralding the day's end, and still his grandfather had not returned. This was the longest time the old man had been gone – oh, where was he? Rygnir sat miserably in the open door of the cottage, rocking back and forth in the bitter silence. He had tried to light a fire but without success (for he knew not how) and the cold pierced him with icy blades unrelenting, driving all thoughts from his mind.

'Where art thou...?' he murmured into the suffocating dusk, 'O Throne, to bring him home, I pray... where, where?'

A sudden noise, sharp and rending in his ears drove him to his feet as noisome panick drove even that away – a bell, it was a *bell*, he had never heard one before – what was this? 'No – NO!' the shriek tore, fey and high from his throat without thought, 'Grandfather-! I will go, I will go!'

Flinging himself from the portal with decaying emotion, the beast-child scampered down the winding path into the darkness of the forest, his mind consumed with a blinding haze of white noise. In this brief lapse into madness, Rygnir forgot the woods about him and the wicked creatures; he forgot the ralkin parish who sought to purge the filthy little blot that was his life from the world. All he saw was the few feet of boggen path before him and horrific images conjured by a frenetic mind of what could have happened to his beloved grandfather.

The way carried on without change for almost an hour before it split some distance ahead into a five-pronged crossroads with a towering waystone to one side beneath an ancient awye tree, and it was here that the fenrian halted and, now standing in a place fully alien to him, knew the lobbish



dunce he was for rushing out like this into a world that wanted to kill him – he couldn't read the worn runes carved into the stone, nor could he even remember which way he had entered.

With a sinking heart, the beast-child found he was lost when there was no need to be. The Swine, to whom Ælfric had gone, did not even live in this direction, but the way of the half-a-mile bridge... now the Sun was soon sunken and direction was nothing.

'Grandfather!' Rygnir cried again and again with growing distress but could hear no reply, only the soft echo of his own voice amid the trees and a mischievous whisper that pervaded the shadowy forest in the latter hours of day. Wrapping his tails about him, he slumped under the waystone and whimpered into the growing darkness, shielding his eyes against the phantasmagoric images of leering red-irised eyes.

The Sun was gone now, all gone, and nobody passed by, not even Ælfric, and the poor beast-child was growing ever colder with every passing minute. With the cold, dark things, wisps of things unimagined began to dance upon the cold path, sending Rygnir into a dizzy panick. Why was he even here? He felt his muzzle and struck it, a habit he repeated when consumed in

nightmare; there from infancy was borne a barbed iron spike thrust through his muzzle, tongue and jaw, and the jarring pain rippling up through his nose was an odd comfort to him, a ward against evil, so it felt.

There was a tree in the middle of the crossroads. It was not a large tree, stout-limbed and copper-leaved as a late spectacle of the deciduous in premature autumn, though all the beech surrounding was black and olive green and comprised the surrounding foliage in its entirety. Beneath the tree a figure lay, and Rygnir looked again and saw the tree was, in fact an iron frame with a looping cable and chain hung from an overhanging beam, a gallows. The figure lay motionless, hewn with axe-strokes and glittering with a colour the beast-child could not discern through the deep, hewn across the shoulders and back and bearing his ribcage forlornly to the cold.

In spite of himself, Rygnir crawled forwards, tails still wrapped about his frame, and reached out stupidly silent for the figure. It shuddered and whipped a bandaged head about with a gurgling shriek to stare with a horrible, pigmentless eye into the fenrian's own as he collapsed back in terror.

'Yes!' the figure's breath whistled from between the bloodstained wrappings as a rattle of dry bark – a crooked finger pointed at his chest–

With a shriek the fenrian surged to his feet and began to run laughing, without sense of direction – or anything more. He simply ran. He did turn to look at that figure a second time, not even to see that his flying steps had left the path. He only felt the subconscious effect of entropy begin when he moved, so move he tried, and did. The frosty maw of night bit hungrily at his heels, bidding him stop, give in; *there was no escape. The forest shall have you.*

The thought rose unbidden to his mind, and it was angrily pushed aside.

'Throne protects me!' He cried in an attempt to steel breaking nerves, 'I am His child! I command thee depart in His name!'

Hours passed and still he ran, but perhaps Throne did decide to look upon him without disfavour this one time, for by a miracle of miracles the fenrian stumbled upon the cottage. The door swung open in the wind, illuminated from within by a dim red glume that projected great shadows out into the clearing. *Grandfather was home!* Forcing the tattered remains

of his strength into one final burst of dying speed, he stumbled towards the open portal and collapsed at the rotting threshold.

‘Grandfather! I knew not wh—’

Two figures arose from the darkness to stare upon him with looks of mingled fear and anger burning from within their hoods.

‘Who’s is this-?!’ one spoke in an old woman’s voice filled with abhorrence. The other shadow produced a rusting billhook from his belt and bore it forwards menacishly – and yet, the two churls quailed to approach the fenrian. The old man’s last command to the boy sprung to the fore of his fearful mind – and with swordcatch drawn, he sprung.

It might have been the simple horror of the hanged man at the crossroads that had numbed his mind. It might have been the cold, or simple mindless reaction. Twelve winters old he was said to be then, and Carig Catchpole and his elderly wife Pelir counted among the first lives Rygnir Wyndfallen had taken, the first blood spilled by his hand; they were not at all to be the last, and his conscience scarce felt it.

He saw the old charcoal-burner lying in the corner as the bloodied weapon returned to its sheath and the mutilated bodies had stopped shuddering; though wrapt heavily in borrowed pelts, he still shivered violently and his matted white hair was slick with water.

‘What is wrong? ...Hast... hast thou caught the fever?’ Rygnir was too frightened to suggest lest it were true. It was replied with a weak shake of the head, which joyed him, if only a little.



‘I fell from the cart,’ a violent fit of coughing wracked the old man’s frame mid-sentence, ‘...Goblins found me upon the bridge and did frighten the gumbelgor. I doubt he shall ever return... Carig and his wife, acquaintances of old, and those you slew just now, they brought me home upon their shoulders...’

‘But they saw me!’ Rygnir spluttered in protest, ‘ye saist I couldst not let any living ralk see me!’

Instead of replying in anger, Ælfric simply hung his weary head and said, ‘It is the price I am made to pay for thy life. I found thee, and my life was curst to death. Father Grensildur spoke of such...’

The little fenrian started at this. Up until this point, his “grandfather” had deigned not to speak of how he was found; he simply did not oft question before, and when he did the old man seemed so terribly busied that he was loath to ask again. But now he was not, nor could he escape from the beast-child’s questioning, so in the guttering light of the rain-embittered flame in the fireplace, Ælfric was compelled of the child to tell him all he knew.

‘...And the lady – my mother – what was her name, her title? Was – was she a noble’s wife or a serf or...? Dost thou really know not?’

‘I remember not; please, cease this incessant asking! I must leave now! Goodbye, run about in thy boots and let not another innocent soul thy face behold again.’

Ælfric was in an awful state this frost-bitten morrow. Not only was he still soaking and shivering bitterly from the fall the previous day; he had begun to cough, quite uncontrollably. Each time his weakened frame doubled over in a wretched fit, Rygnir feared that the old man would heave himself inside-out and was all the more fervent in his attempts to keep him home; all was in vain, naught could stop the old man, not even the subtler contrivances Rygnir had been made to learn. The poor fenrian had no idea that it was this work that fed them both, paltry as the afforded food was; nay, he knew nothing at all of what those trips consisted. All he knew was that the only friend he knew was leaving him, perhaps not to ever return to him again... Not even the new Scandere boots, forged of iron hoops, pliable

leather that rose above the knee and covered over with a pair of thong-bound spats, cheered him any.

So burdened was his little heart that the beast-child did nothing all day, except to wear his boots as told, to cower on the threshold of the cottage and sing timorously to himself mournful strains in a tongue not even he knew. The shadows of the dying trees moved quicker than did he that windless day. There was evil in the air, he could feel it; keenly had he felt it, every day since the month past when Ælfric deemed him fit enough to leave alone.

Though it could have been but imagined – nothing more than the bitterness in his heart at being “abandoned” as he told himself – he was no longer sure. Nothing made sense any more to the beast-child. Nor did the eyes that faded from the corners of his vision as his gaze sought to clarify their presence, or the barbed coils made as of shadow that danced in like fashion.

The last light of day at last drew his grandfather from the darkness of the wood, slowly, so very slowly, stumbling, fighting the incline, fighting for breath. Rygnir rushed out joyously to meet him at the clearing’s edge with cries of happiness and welcome; cries that to his dismay, went all unanswered, all. The pallor of the charcoal-burner sickened him, the features which were pulled taut into an unreadable grimace, his white-knuckled hands wrapt about his body that trembled with more than cold.

‘...Grandfather – no, no! How couldst thou–?’

‘Doom, doom...’ the old man chanted, not even to reply, ‘doom... it is the end, Throne have mercy...’

Then the fenrian saw them.

Hideous, raw, weeping black liquid. Blood. Grievous blessings of the Unanswered Saint; the marks of devils’ fever laid open upon his throat...

‘Oh Throne, no! No! Grandfather, why, why? Why is this so? Tell me it is not!’ and he cast his bony arms about the old man’s shoulders and wept.

‘Let me alone...’ Ælfric tried to push him back, but could not in his weakened state, ‘I am unclean, let me alone...’

‘I care not!’ The fenrian fought for words, ‘I want to die witee! Life is now naught!’

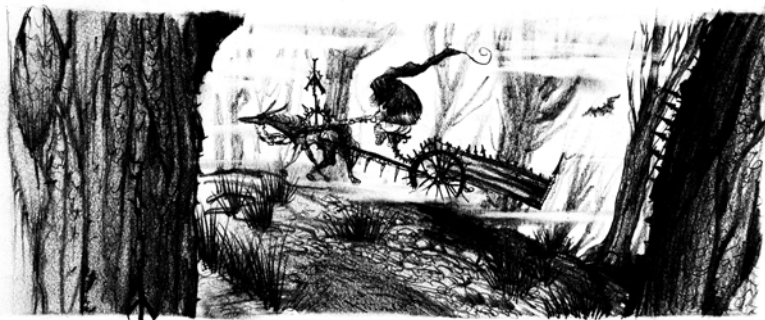
In his fever, as Ælfric slumped to his knees, the chains on his back broke open – and downward slipped his axe. That was the last of the bloodied-axe, the bane of troll and woodwolf – for it shattered into dust as it struck the stony ground, irrecoverable – irreparable. The saviour of Wingdale was saviour no longer.



Nights rose and fell, the Sun was caught back up into the sky, yet the poisoned tears would not leave Rygnir's amber eyes. Thirteen cycles of the day, and twice that of the night, he had tried to help the old man; he had tried to fight the losing battle with death, but it seemed death would at length have the final word, as it always did... The disease had begun to eat away at Ælfric's reason, leaving him lost, wandering without direction in delirious ravings. The ugly black craters – now yawning wide, infected sore and maggot-riven – had spread under his arms and across his throat, causing him pain greater than the beast-child could know; still he tried to give him a medicine he had learned to make from the petals of a plant that no longer flowered this late into the autumn. It was a miracle, really, that the fenrian himself hadn't succumbed himself to the fever.

For the fourteenth time, the failing Sun crawled back into the spores amid the decaying sky, and Rygnir rolled his cramped frame out of his cot to see to Ælfric's wounds. He had wrapped the old man in whatever rags he could find, along with all his own, even a number of goblin skins from the sidhe he used to catch for fun, but it didn't help. There was no more whistlemead, for such was the flower's name, and Ælfric was not going to live even to see the everfrost grow and spire into the failing light of the dying autumn.

There was only one option left to the child.



‘Grandfather,’ he began in a loud voice so that the delirious charcoal-burner could hear, ‘I am going to find more whistlemead: I am going to the apothecary at St Gunhild. Which way ought I take?’

The eyes of the old man flickered open a moment and tried to focus on the beast-child’s face. Forcing down the lump in his throat, Rygnir repeated his words.

‘East...’ came his feverish reply, ‘in broken skill, broken – no, it – take, ah yea, child, take the middle way – but leave me not, leave me at... at...’ The fenrian took his grandfather’s shuddering, calloused hands in his own, kissed them, and thence departed the cottage without another backward glance, apologetically slipping a thin, black pelt over his own wasted shoulders as he left.



Circuiting the place where one road became five in fear of any new apparition, Rygnir marked the exiting path – the central one – embarked thereon with a small cairn of broken stones lest he became lost, and hurried down that path churned into a slough by itinerant folk to and from the village, the way to St Gunhild.

The path descended for hours, sometimes in steep drops a score feet or more, made passable only by a slippery evocation of a stairway of tree-roots worn smooth, and sometimes a destitute cable left behind by some cart drover who had to winch his passage up or down, else lose all his possessions to the Wood. A mist rose, lifting not, soaking everything within its reach and leaving the beast-child shivering and miserable. Still he pressed on.

The forest beyond that which he had seen or known was all so utterly different. These sub-alpine trees were taller, wider about the girth and apart more one from another; the low mist clung about their rotting bases in place of the tainted frost of higher altitudes; the rank haze tangled around coiling thorns left the spreading pall of moulder shimmering with sparkling lights. It felt to the boy he was wading a magical river of sorts, infinitely wide and shallow, biting cold even through his Scandere boots.

The light-wreathed trees slowly resolved into lamps on posts, and Ragnir discovered the hours of damp chill had almost driven his senses from him. A clatter and murmur rose upon the breeze not far distant, and before he knew it, the beast-child was treading a ramshackle wooden bridge towards the yawning entry of St. Gunhild. Wrapping his tails tighter about his body and cowering deeper into the makeshift cloake, he passed over with a desperate prayer on his lips.

Encompassed on three sides by the ruin of a stone wall and the fourth by a river-gorge, a few dozen bizarrely stacked buildings that nestled under the mossy shadow of a larger façade was all the manor town of St Gunhild consisted of; home to perhaps five or six hundred, packed into the buildings like corpses in a grave-pit, or tobacco leaves in a barrel. The residing ferdrsi would most likely live in that manor-house that rose imperiously out of fog into fog, through which could only be discerned the lit windows scored like bestial claw-marks in the sheer wall.

But Ragnir was looking for an apothecary; he had convinced himself the sin of theft would be outweighed by saving his grandfather's life – but though he looked everywhere, no apothecary could he find (not that he

knew what he was in search of, though he was certain it would be obvious or at least shown to him).

He now had entered a wabe of mudden ground that churned with the steps of the parish, the parish that circled their ponderous orbits about many jumbled stalls of produce and craft. The divers tongues and voices that grabled hoarse wares enforced the image as a market-place – a market-place, surely one would have whistlemead here, would they not? The beast-child drew near as he dared to the closest, ruinous construct, slipping between two elderly women wrapped in black to see what the trader meant by his hawk “*jáfri, jáfri*, crell-a-handful, crell-a-handful.” There was only a pile of damp, black sand spread over the table, none of the little white flowers he sought, so he passed on before he caught the eye of the burl ralk who tended the bizarre stall.

Another stall sold the bones of a fish, scattered in like dereliction; there were those who sold thread, iron flakes, a trader of teeth, even a man who let blood, distilled it and gave it back as alcohol, but there was no apothecary any where, no whistlemead to be had, for it was a spring weed that only lived one day. Shadowy figures like spectres breathed through the mist about the fenrian, never acknowledging, never seeing. The shivering beast-child was terrified, utterly terrified; if they knew he was more – less, rather – than an ordinary ralkin child, they would contest with the frost giants to light a flame beneath his bound feet. Or perhaps they’d simply gut him where he stood, laughing at the revelation of his slowly uncoiling intestines. But what was this? He had lost concentration again. An apothecary, *where* and *what* was an apothecary?

At that moment a small black lump ahead had moved into his path, tripping him and sending him careening over face-first into the filthy mud of the ground. A passer-by halted a moment and laughed, kicking the obstacle until it had picked itself up and moved off in a jumble of limbs.

What was it? Rygnir thought with horror it might have been a poor child, but he said nothing and scampered away, not daring to confront the aggressor.

A dry jangle of little cracked bells began to descend the streets, sending

many dark figures retreating to the shadows of the houses round about, for up ahead, a shuffling group of cloaked bodies were making their way down towards and through the market-place with cries of 'Apothecary! Apothecary!' on their shadowed lips. They rung bells and shook rattles, and as they passed by Rygnir caught sight of two bearing one on their shoulders, stumbling as they went. The beast-child followed them, and after them all followed the angry shouts of the stall-holders whose limited industry had been halted by the passing of the infectious rabble.

After meandering up and down, doubling back and tripling forward, their shameful shamble brought them to a shale tower apart from the rest of the manor town, windowless and set on a slight rise with the river-gorge immediately behind, giving the building a rakish and most precarious air. The little door in the front opened and out shuffled a stooped, lantern-bearing figure with an improbably long and pointed face.

'Brother Apothecary,' one addressed him in a despairing tone 'it is Saric.'

'Bring him in, brother lepers.' the long-faced one vented in reply and stepped out, letting the two figures in with their burden, followed shortly by their fellows – and little Rygnir, who slipped in without their notice.

Within the flaring light of the chamber they all found themselves in, the beast-child gasped in wonder at the multitude of things to look at; benches were strewn with things, all manner of things – bowls, glass orbs filled with liquids and pastes – drying plants bound in clusters, there were even candles, more candles than the boy could count; for they were the sole luminescence within the apothecarion. The air was thick and cloying, with a low pall of smoke wreathing myriad animal corpses strung from the sagging beams in choking darkness, but it was warm, praise Throne for warmth!

'This way, child,' the apothecary directed the figure his supporting fellows released to a narrow ladder ascending into the smoke. Now he was in a decent light, the beast-child could see the stooped man wore a mask, a long iron thing with myriad bulbous eyes made of punched steel. His limbs, as the lepers, were wrapt in bloodied bandages, and the white surplice and black cowl of Saint Leupar hung from stooping shoulders: rank-smelling he was, and stained thick with layers of bile and gore.



Brother apothecary and Saric ascended the ladder with the other two, and as the remaining lepers clamoured for a small fire in the corner, the beast-child began his desperate search of the chamber. He was utterly *certain* the monk would at least *some* whistlemead hidden about the place, but as always his search was without success. At last, he gave up and asked one of the hunched cloakes.

‘Doth the good brother keep whistlemead, my leurd?’ He winced at the strength of his own hereditary accent and shrunk deeper into his cloake as the figure slowly turned upon him, staring at him with shrunken yellow eyes.

‘Hast thou the fever-?’ he asked with revulsion.

‘...Yea, my leurd, of a kind.’

This was replied with a brutal barrage upon the beast-child’s body with the lepers’ sticks, and cries of ‘fever! The child hath the fever! Out with him,

quick, quick!’ and soon Rygnir was back outside, battered and muddled. To think a leper would balk at devils’ fever shook him – what horror had he set out to heal?

After only a few moments, his daze was interrupted by a touch on his back. The beast-child lifted his eyes and saw, to his surprise, that same hunched, black-clad figure about half his size whom he had tripped upon before; a rusty piece of knife and a small, corked pot gripped in thin and talon-tipped hands. Without a word, it dipped its dirty fingers into the vessel, cast Rygnir’s cloake back over his shoulders before he could resist and began to rub a pungent salve upon the boy’s throat in dutiful, mechanic rapidity. Rygnir wondered at why the child did not cry out or try to attack him; surely the apothecary had sent it to see to boils (that were not there) in place of himself for fear of contagion.

‘It is done,’ the figure vented in a dry rattle, as the beast-child quickly shrugged the pelt back over his features, and it dropped back its own hood – bringing to view a horrific, boil-encrusted clenched fist of a face with a bulbous nose that hung above low-browed, mismatched eyes. It lifted the piece of knife to its swollen throat and slit it without any hesitation, spraying the fenrian’s face with poisoned, black-speckled blood before turning to shudder away and crumple into the wayside bushes.

This was Rygnir’s first encounter with yet another abomination upon the face of the world – Halflets they were called, bastard children of witches or lustful nobles who forsook the Veratican creed and lay with those who were not their own by marriage. Throne sees all – condemns all – and damned union begets damned unification; the Halflet-slaves, in whom no blessing or Tapper may be found. In this grim age of darkness they were sold and bought in droves, an iron Trill each in the markets of Midst, and were worth less than the filthy scraps they were dressed in.

The dying creature still had the vessel of whistlemead in its claws, so the fenrian dove into the bushes, snatched it from its dead grasp and ran off through the town, back towards the bridge. Every passer-by was a sentry

in his mind's terrified eye, every accusing face turned towards him to mark him heresy; he gripped his tails so tight about his body for fear of dropping them, he was certain they had broken somewhere along their length. Throne and Heaven were wearied sore with his prayers, but his doom was stayed another few hours, and he crossed the bridge without challenge and was in time on his way back through the blinding fog to the cottage.

'Ah me! Truly I have ill reckoned my way,' the beast-child sighed after an hour of slow uphill through chilling nothingness, 'first night descendeth, even so... Why did I not see that tower *first!*? It would have saved me so much time...' Ragnir was not aware that already he could see through the darkness better than could any ralk, and that by running the pulse of his blood would increase that twofold; so consumed was he by the wellbeing of his dear grandfather he gave thought to nothing else, running on and on without pause for breath until the wind caught in his throat like needles of ice and his weary heart was fit to burst from his chest. Visions pounded upon his mind with the blood-pulse – visions of Ælfric's death, how the child would find the cottage dark – lifeless – with the charcoal-burner slumped in the corner, blood across the floor, *and – and a blade in his chest?*

He hooked his neck forward and doubled his pace.

Even after slipping upon the root stairways so many times his ankles were no longer ankles and knocking himself insensible at more than one point, Ragnir at last reached the clearing long after first night fell. Once again, it seemed as if a fire had been lit – guilt bit at his soul, but he heeded it not, for there was none here save Ælfric, and his grandfather had not died in his absence, but rather was sitting up in his bed, looking about him with doubtful countenance.

'Oh Grandfather!' was all the beast-child could say, everything else departing his mind in a wash of tears as he produced the pottle of paste and flung himself into the old man's shaking arms.

'Be still child, be still,' he tried to comfort the fenrian who would not be so, 'what... what is this found thing? Whistlemead? Oh, thou wonderful child!'

‘I dreamt thou wert dead,’ came the whimpered reply. ‘Whilst I ran, I dreamt. Wast it a warning? For the fever had not claimed thee.’

Ælfric looked intently into the child’s eyes. The old man’s were glazed and red, swollen from fever and trembling. Rygnir’s, though liquid and corrupted within were a sparkling blue, glistening with tears unabated.

‘I care nothing for my self now,’ he whimpered, ‘if thou die, if thou even die... what is my life then?’



