

# WRETCHED

BY RUTH BEEDER

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O winter! bar thine adamantine doors:  
The north is thine; there hast thou built thy dark  
Deep-founded habitation.

*William Blake*

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## 1: BLOOD AND SNOW

**H**ALLA COULDN'T FEEL his fingers. He couldn't feel much of anything, and in some small way, he knew that was a mercy.

His fingers were still there. He knew if he looked down he'd see them, but they remained numb to both sensation and command. Not like Stigr, whose raised hand had met the bite of monstrous teeth, scattering his clever musician's digits onto bloodied snow. Stigr, who now wept in his time of dying, still searching blindly for his lost flesh.

It would be long years before Halla first saw the forests of Cymrija as the red leaves tumbled before the sighing winds of autumn. Long years before he would stand and see again in their spiralling, inevitable fall the defeat of the Kiruna; scattered to the snow by the giants as the leaves were scattered by the turning of the year, staining the ground with the fading colours of life. He would know then, as he could not now, that such a fate could not have been avoided or averted. Such knowledge would bring no peace, but only a new kind of loss.

Today, unknowing, he walked among the dying and the dead as he would one day walk among the fallen leaves, axe haft gripped tight in numb fingers, mind silent with dull anger.

There had been no surprise in the attack. Frost giants were not the only threat the Kiruna faced in their nomadic wandering across the vast and frozen wastes of Norsca's desolate north, and the tribe had lost good men and women to their mindless aggression before. Other creatures posed far greater and more common threats; rival tribes of trollkin, elementals with minds colder than ice, yeti that would track the tribe through storms, silent and lethal, picking off anyone foolish enough to be alone in the night. The giants were fearsome opponents who had risen from the twilight of legends and fireside tales to roam freely over the glaciers once again, their numbers increasing and their appetite for aggression spiralling out of control. At first they'd been solitary, and given to predictable habits. Halla had lead warriors to take them down with acceptable losses, and though he'd counselled a retreat south, the Jarl had heard the voices of the elders over that of his son. The raiding season was over, they said. There was nothing worth turning back for; the hunting to the north was good, and they had strong spears and axes to protect themselves. So the Kiruna had continued along the jagged line of mountains, hunting in the low passes and in the clear blue waters of the glacier's edge.

And all the while, Halla had spoken of the danger.

And all the while, the elders had refused to believe.

Now the ruin of his tribe was laid out around him. Dawn had broken hard over the mountain ridges, and the Kiruna had found themselves unprepared for the enemies that had come against them. No solitary wandering beast, but a pack: twenty strong and well prepared, breath steaming in the air as they ran. The ground had shaken with the weight of their charge, and the first light of the day had seemed to race against them as if to bring a warning that could only ever come too late.

He could hear his mother praying, her clear voice raised in supplication to Eir, but Eir would not come. In that at least, his father had been correct. Now the Jarl lay close to death while priests rattled bones and charms around his bedside.

Eir wasn't coming. No one was.

This was worse than an ending. An ending at least would have been final; the dark wings of Valkyrie come to lift them from mortal suffering and carry them into everlasting summer. Their foe had outmatched them, but there'd been no one in the Kiruna, no single person who hadn't lifted a blade or bow to defend their family. The fortunate had died in battle. The rest... the dying numbered too many to count easily. There were no Valkyrie here, only the beginning of a slow destruction. With their numbers so low, the Kiruna's chance of reaching safety were devastatingly poor. They would dwindle and disappear, leaving only a trail of frozen corpses as they fled across Norsca's frozen skin.

He walked, and the dying called out to him. He didn't hear them; his mind had turned inwards upon itself, listening to memory and the sweet song of voices now long lost. How long would it be now, before the Kiruna were nothing but a memory themselves? Who would remember them? His feet guided him unthinkingly away from what remained of his tribe and to the water's edge. Light skimmed the still ocean, making him narrow his eyes against the piercing glare.

"It does not need to be the end," said the stranger who had been there all along and was not there at all. "A bargain can be struck, in the old way."

Halla said nothing. The stranger heard him anyway.

"Your life for theirs. A trade."

His lips felt cold. The world seemed to sharpen around him, bringing his senses to focussed points; he seemed to hear the drip of blood as it fell from the smiling arc of his weapon to the unforgiving ground, to feel the ice crystals forming in it where it was painted across his knuckles, fastening flesh and leather together, making his axe a part of him.

The stranger tipped his head and looked at him. "I offer you a chance; a way to save everything you ever held hallowed. All you have to do is say yes."

He laid a hand both heavier than guilt and lighter than innocence upon Halla's shoulder, and showed him.

## 2: A SHADOW ON THE LAND

**T**IME IS NOT like ice. It rolls in waves, pulled by unseen tides. It flows according to its own plan, forwards and back. It is not solid, not tangible. Most people can only ever see the time that they are in, and although they can recall the time that is past or imagine the future, they are not aware of its fluid nature. Others find it crashing down upon them with the burden of prescience or the terrible weight of hindsight, and so it was with Halla, as he stood at the edge of the glacier, his feet planted on the solid and unyielding ice, while his mind lifted free, momentarily untethered from what he would at any other time perceive as a linear progress towards an unknown destiny. The stranger's grip chased away his blood slicked weariness, and filled him with a fierce joy at being alive. A sensation he had not felt for six seasons. Not since...

"Halla." Vashti hissed at him. Vashti, who had been dead and gone for four long, painful winters.

"Vash?" He whispered, as the memory turned solid around him.

"Do you see them? There, by the edge of the floe. Our lucky day."

They shuffled back down the ridge, hearts beating quickly with an eagerness for the hunt.

"We can't take all five." Halla said.

She grinned. "Where's your ambition?"

"Back at the camp with your common sense."

"You sure it was five?"

"Yes."

"Then one of them is small." Her voice was barely more than a whisper. "Let's try to isolate the bull, bring it down and drag it back to camp. That'll keep the whole tribe fed for half a moon."

He laughed, smothering the noise behind a furred glove to quiet it. "You can do the dragging then; that thing's huge."

Vashti grinned, the long distant traces of an inhuman heritage visible in her pointed teeth. "I'm stronger than you anyway."

"Not as pretty, though."

She shoved at his shoulder. "Prick. I'll remember that next time you crawl into my tent."

Halla affected a mock indignation. "Madam, I do not crawl. I stagger in a manly fashion."

The strong line of her jaw trembled with laughter. The cold of the early morning had frozen white cords into her hair, and it glittered under the pale summer sunlight.

She turned and he followed her; two tiny figures among a vastness of ice that stretched out even beyond their combined imagination. The spears in their hands were as familiar as the comfort of worn leather and fur, the pattern of their hunt so well known that it came as easily as breathing.

Halla let Vashti lead, though he knew the land as well as she did. He knew it as well as any of the tribe; it was a Hersir's place to know, to understand how the land might kill, to see the deaths of warriors and hunters before they happened, to avoid them where they could be avoided, and to decide who would fall where they could not. Vashti had been the best of the hunters long before he ever had to make those decisions, her fame made legend when she returned late at night to the camp dragging the carcass of a yeti and carrying the unconscious body of the only other surviving hunter from a group of nine.

They moved silently, out of sight of the seal pack, avoiding the treacherous air currents that might drag their smell ahead of them and give warning as surely as any shout. This was a land where everything killed. Even the summer, whose thin warmth they greeted eagerly, killed without compunction; melt-water and weakening floe ice made well known pathways suddenly dangerous, and beasts dormant through the winter awoke to hunt for flesh.

Vashti's hand flicked into the space between them, fingers clamped into a tight fist. Halla held his breath, eyes darting between the harsh white glare of the snow and the tensed back of Kiruna's most respected hunter. In the susurrus of wind sweeping inland from the open waters of the ocean, the snorting breath of the seals was clear, but Vashti made no sound, only waited, head cocked, hand raised. He knew her eyes would be narrowed, forehead creased, mouth slightly open as though she could taste a danger he couldn't even see.

In the years that followed, he would wonder how she'd known. How she'd sensed the thing that lay hidden in the rocks at the base of the cliff, masked from sight by shape and shadow. In his drunker moments, after the world turned sour and he lost a part of himself to despair, he would wonder if it was his fault. If somehow, by thinking of the things that might kill them, he'd summoned them; tearing claws and fangs like glittering steel, the heat of blood and the slow cold

fall into darkness as the world turned red and faded away.

*Had* it been his fault? Had he somehow caused it? Or was such thought only vanity, a way to martyr himself to the grinding death that fell upon them all? Such thoughts would not come to him until later.

"Something's wrong." Vashti's tension seemed to make her compact, dragging her body into a smaller space.

They paused, silent as moonlight.

One of the seals barked.

"Perhaps..."

With a noise like the breaking of the world, the first frost giant to trouble the wastes of the north in a hundred years erupted into the daylight, scattering rock and ice across the sheltered shingle beach where the seals basked. Its jaws were slick with drooling foam that sprayed into the air in fine droplets as it howled, steaming breath a cloud of hate and horror. The hunched spine bent backwards, and fists like slabs of ice beat a violent and enraged tattoo on a chest as dark and misshapen as the rocks which had hidden it.

Cold terror flooded Halla's mind as the seals fled, squealing. *You're a story*, his mind shrieked at the monster as it caught the slowest of the pups and lifted its wriggling muscular bulk with careless ease. *You're a myth; you're not real*.

Rough teeth like slices of weathered fissile rock tore the pup in half, then the giant turned its very real face towards the rest of the scattering pack.

Halla moved without thinking, long years of training taking over where his mind refused to even comprehend. He grabbed for Vashti even as she did the same for him. They ran, stumbling and stunned, still silent, their hands clasped like small children fleeing the approach of a storm that had come from clear summer sky to drown them all in a rising tide.

### 3. THIS IS NOT WAR

**S**MOKE SPIRALLED AS it drifted up from the fire. The smell of roasting meat still lingered, clinging with a greasy grip to the waxed canvas. There were few enough tents remaining, and this one bore the marks of careless haste in their journey over the ice; a watchful wandering turned to a reckless flight that had lasted through four long winters, desperate to escape the swelling numbers of giants and monsters that roamed Norsca's icy tip. This was their land now, their playground, and the Kiruna were as bugs under glass, crawling with sickly desperation away from the unfeeling furnace of destruction brought down upon them.

The monsters had come individually at first, then in pairs. They'd been manageable, at least

enough that the elders had dismissed his mounting fears. The odd beast seen lumbering across the ice, or heard in the silence of deep night, an unlucky team of hunters killed, a scout party that never came back. Not enough to shake them from the fugue of age and tradition. His had been the only voice raised in council for the need to turn south, to hear wisdom, to flee.

Now, it was too late.

The warriors had begun to whisper of curses and the work of evil spirits, unable to accept the slow demise of the Kiruna: a third of the tribe dead through attrition and a further third wounded beyond the ability to fight, monsters found in places they had no right to be, as though lying in wait for them to come, and no sign of an ally or friend no matter where they turned. Every route they had scouted for the last three full cycles of the moon had been found unsafe. The elders still refused to see it, still called their enemies mindless beasts, but to Halla it was clear: they were being corralled, and there was no clear path away from this dwindling death.

It couldn't be long now, before the end. Halla supposed that to survive four years against such odds could almost be considered admirable, were it not for the losses, and the refusal to believe. Vashti would have believed him. Even if she hadn't been there, hadn't seen the first one, she would have believed him. But she was gone now, back broken by a fist as large as her torso. Her body had almost seemed to wrap around it as she ran, mouth open in shock, blood on her teeth, long hair twisting in the autumn wind. Killed by a myth, and gone to the ancestors that Halla's father decried so openly.

His mother's voice was calm in the smoky air, raised in prayer with an unshaken faith that made him marvel. She was so sure they would be saved, so sure that Eir would send them a saviour, so sure that they would somehow survive. In the quiet hours before dawn, when sleep was elusive but weariness still held him down, Halla had found himself questioning if her faith was in fact foolishness, and if his father was right. The losses of the tribe lay heavily on Jarl Hallason as he drifted in restless sleep; his hair now gone almost entirely the colour of snow, the once high and proud bones of his face now draped in sallow skin that sagged under the memory of a fierce and vital man worn away to almost nothing.

Hallason lifted his head to look at his wife from the hollows of his eyes. "Why do you still pray? Don't you see the time for that is long since passed?"

"Eir sees us, my Jarl." The kindness in Aslaug's tone was almost maddening. "She sees us, and she tests us."

"She tests my patience, as do your endless prayers. The ancestors have abandoned us. They don't see us, woman. They're blinded by the lights that reflect from the snow, or they're gone from the world altogether. Nothing but mortal courage will defend us in this war."

"This isn't a war." Halla muttered.

Hallason scrutinised his son through weary eyes. "What do you say, boy?"

"This isn't a war. This is extermination." He sighed, and the breath frosted gently. "If only you'd listened to me, instead of those old fools. We could have saved dozens of lives."

"We could have scurried away like frightened rodents, you mean."

"It would have been better than this!" Halla snapped angrily, on his feet, face flushed.

Aslaug's prayers faltered, and the three fell into an uncomfortable silence.

Halla sank back onto the bench opposite his father. In the centre of the tent, the fire popped and crackled cheerfully.

"It doesn't matter anymore." His mother's voice was subdued, as wreathed in smoke as the air rising above the fireplace. "We've come to a place where the wisdom of old ways doesn't serve us, but we're too hurt to see a new way. The things we used to fear are like distant dreams, and our new nightmares are flesh and blood. You ask why I pray? Why I cling to Eir? I do it because our faith is all we have left. Truly, I believe the ancestors will save us, and my faith is strong enough that your doubt does not shake it. But I see the bloody footprints that wind between the bodies of our tribesmen as they litter the path we've walked. I see the light of hope, and I see how thin it has grown, how fragile. We stand on the edge of despair, beset by enemies eager to harry us into the darkness. It will take only one step backwards, one moment in which we falter, and that light will be gone out of our reach. It is too late for us to change the past, but we must not lose faith. We must do everything we can to step into that light, or we will become nothing more than memory."

In the long silence that followed her words, Halla and his father looked at each other, and both knew that she spoke the truth.

## 4. BARGAIN

**H**ALLA OPENED HIS eyes into the glare of the rising sun, and the visions fled.

"Yes." He said, although he was alone.

And so it was.

## 5. WRETCHED

**E**VEN SO MANY years later, the land was still scarred from the waking of the first frost giant. The cliff top pathways had become treacherous and unpredictable, and the changing shape of the icy land had turned the beach into a cove where tiny, resolute flowers bloomed colourless and defiant through the snow. The stranger sat at the peak of the cliff, one idle foot dangling over the edge to be pulled by the perilous winds, face

cast south west as though watching something so far distant that no mortal eye could hope to ever see it even from this lofty vantage.

Behind him, another figure climbed the arête of the shattered cliff under the tumultuous skies, stern face serene. The stranger raised a finger and his new companion paused, waiting. They stayed as though carved from stone for a while as birds wheeled above, turning calculated arcs in the air over the narrow inlets and cliffs of the coastline.

The finger curled back down. "It's done. The first part is played out at last."

"More games, Loki? You've destroyed good people to get what you want this time."

"You wound me. This has more intricacy than any game, and the outcome will be worth so trifling a price."

His companion barked a derisive laugh. "Only you would think of the damage you've done here as *trifling*."

"And yet it possesses an elegance that even you can't deny. Their harried path has chased them backwards and forwards until they've come back here. It's amusing, don't you think?"

"I suppose *you* could see humour in that."

"There's humour in everything, provided you have wit enough to see it."

Blue eyes narrowed, the second man stared out towards the same distant point. "Humour, perhaps, but no honour. Not in trapping a desperate man in a bargain such as this."

Loki sighed. "It's hardly a bargain; he has nothing of value."

"But value is like humour, isn't it? It's present in everything, provided you have wit enough to see it."

"You see, brother?" Loki laughed. "That's why we still talk. You're not as stupid as you look. Well. Not *quite*."

"I'll not rise to your underhanded japery today."

"Spoilsport. What do you make of my newest thrall then?"

His brother shrugged. "A protector of his people, like me, but one who lives in the shadows, like you. He stayed for no farewells, gave himself no opportunity to be persuaded to stay."

"No, he listened to his father's dying words, then slipped away like moonlight over the snow. Hardly a brave exit."

"Maybe I should thwart your plans for him? He is a warrior after all, and I could claim him as my own."

For the first time, Loki turned to look up at his brother. "You won't, though. If you do, you'll never see this play out. Despite your bluster and your total lack of subtlety, I think your curiosity will get the better of you this time. After all, what could I possibly want with a *warrior*? I don't imagine you can see very far ahead for him, even with your skills."

A frown played across his brother's face as he watched possibilities and pathways bend and fold beyond the vision of a less powerful mind. Above them, the sun set and rose again, bright



and fierce, then sank into late evening.

"What do you see?" Loki asked, at last.

"He wears not the warrior's destiny. No death in battle for this one. A darker fate awaits him. One of your planning?"

"Do you see that, or presume?"

"Truly, Loki, the weavings of your mind are unreadable, and I've wisdom enough not to presume anything on your part."

The skin around Loki's mouth tightened into a smile that carried both mirth and mania at its edges. "Truly."

"What I don't understand is how his death will serve your purpose?"

Loki snorted. "You're so one dimensional. I don't want him to die for me. If I wanted another corpse, I could snap my fingers and lay waste to the scraps of life that cling to this icy wasteland as though it were their mother's tit."

"Then what?"

"I want him to *live* for me. He will carry my name and my nature across the skin of the world, and when his death comes, as pointless and wasteful as it will be, I want it to follow a lifetime of service."

"How *fortunate* it is for you then, that these years of violence and loss have made him desperate."

"Fortunate. Yes."

"It is a small prize, though. This is no army, no library of knowledge. He has nothing more than the rags on his back and a battered blade. Why go to such vast lengths for one wretched life?"

"I'd tell you the answer." Loki pulled himself to his feet with a clever, glittering smile. "But where would the fun be in that?"

Loki stepped past his brother, touching him lightly on the shoulder, and leaving him lost in thought on the cliff top. The wind caught about him as he stepped with an inhuman grace down towards the shingle of the beach to greet his newest thrall, and set him to a purpose that would last even beyond his death.