

A Message from the North

By Konrad Cajgler

The howling of the winds lessened with the coming of the sun from the east—its first rays on the uncovered skin felt, to Ered Indovin, warm like the hearths back north. There, outside the security of his homestead lied dangers not embodied by monsters or men, but by the unruly nature of the wild. The same nature which froze plants and killed food for prey, thinning their numbers in the forest thus starving the wolves. They, in a starving frenzy, tore through his family's caravan.

He still remembered the blood, so much of it painted the white canvas of the snow-capped ground. His sister, barely breathing in his arms, would only cry out one phrase:

'Leave me.'

He couldn't do that.

'I'm just dead weight at this po--' she paused shivering.

After he caught enough breath, he ran deep into the woods—with her in his arms—away from the road and the wreckage to find cover.

'Shut up.' he said, throwing her in a ditch between a fallen tree and a rock.

He walked away from her and screamed. The chilling air bit the inside of his mouth, but he didn't stop, he couldn't—not with her safety at risk. The wolves came and when he made sure even the farthest ones and the curious ones focused on him, he ran again. This time, he scanned the ground for anything he could use as a weapon. With the sun aiding his vision, he saw a formidable rock and threw it at the wolf closest to him, smashing its head. Drips of red fell onto the snow, but Ered found himself surrounded.

'For my Mother!' he shouted as a wolf's saw-like teeth bit into his arm.

'For my Father!' as he punched another away.

'For... My Sister...' he fell to his knees.

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With her heart racing, Sandra Indovin curled up in a ball and dug herself into the dirt for warmth. She closed her eyes and moments later time seemed to have stood still.

The sun was above her head when she woke up with a wet face and a snotty nose.

She thought long about which city she should go to, north to Snowpass or south to Crestown. Though her family were heading south, they had already done a full day's journey, on horseback—a luxury she could no longer afford, courtesy of those savage southern beasts.

She got up, following her instinct to move.

Each and every step accompanied a throbbing pain in her left thigh. Blood oozed from it, a miracle its scent didn't betray her.

She made it back to the road and headed south towards Crestown, where she hoped to find some help, either from the local guard or a charitable covenant. The road stretched long before her, seemingly unending. Heart pounded in anticipation of the howling indicating danger being near. There was, however, no howling to hear. Not even the cold bothered her anymore. Not even when she fell, when her face met with the stone beneath her feet.

Last of her memory before passing out was that of hooves clacking closer and closer, a stern voice of a man shouting something.

* * *

'Out of the way!'

Kendric beckoned his horse to slow down when he realised that the obstruction was indeed a young woman. He stopped and climbed off his horse. He stooped down and flipped the girl over. Her face was white and blue. He took her by the hand, his finger searching for any sign of life that had not seeped away. Upon feeling a pulse, he wrapped her up in his mighty hide cloak, picked her up and threw her on the horse; the mare whined and neighed when he got back on the saddle,

evidently disliking the extra weight.

'Stop that.'

Then the horse sneered but when Kendric commanded movement, it obeyed and galloped forward. The girl securely hanged on her belly right before him, thought he dismayed at the likelihood that she was comfortable.

He was already running late—his officer never took kindly to that kind of thing. But Kendric couldn't stop himself; seeing a helpless damsel brought back something inside him he thought was lost, that his purpose was more than to liaise between rich nobles and bored captains; that it was to help those in need!

Upon seeing the outlines of the town, he remembered all those honeyed, patriotic and hopeful words that got him to enlist in the first place...

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The aroma was that of burned cherry wood. It sparked visions of cooking, with Mother, the spoils of Father's and Brother's hunt. Sandra opened her eyes and saw a roof above her head. She faced the orange light, a fire that crackled bitterly as the wood blackened and smouldered into white ash.

'Where?' she asked, looking around.

She was completely alone in a room, lying on a feather bed under a linen sheet. There was a candle on a table next to the bed, giving extra light to the room. There was a window through which she saw only darkness. It was night.

She stepped out from under the bedsheets to find she was completely naked. Startled by this discovery, she wrapped the bedsheets around herself and covering her body almost up to the neck.

She made one step towards the door and the floorboards creaked. One hand gripped onto the sheets and another held up to open the door. Beyond it, she saw a dark corridor. There was music coming from one end. She followed it down the stairs until she saw a bar, men and women; some drinking from dirty mugs, some eating stew from wooden bowls with wooden spoons, others talked

and laughed together. The balding man tending the bar saw her, he screamed at one of the bar maids. Almost immediately, a blonde woman came up the stairs and waved her hands, suggesting for her to get back.

'It's alright, it's going to be alright dear, get back to bed before you catch a cold.' she said, almost pushing her back into the room.

The blonde woman introduced herself as Cilla and assured Sandra that it was her who removed her clothes, not any of the vulgar men.

'they were so dirty, the clothes, we didn't want the bed to be filthy.' she said, giving Sandra her clothes back clean and folded in a neat square, except for the pelts which were placed on top.

'I say though, never seen such beautiful fur up in these parts.'

'I... I'm from Farcold.' Sandra said in monotone.

There were footsteps drawing near behind the door.

'Ah yes, the young man told us you were found on the northern road.'

Sandra then asked about the man, and then about her family's caravan. After a moment of silence, the door opened. The bar keeper walked in.

'So, how's the young lass doing? What exactly made you think to take a nap on the road in the middle of winter?'

Sandra explained her situation, and Cilla's eyes became tearful while the bar keeper simply crossed his arms and said:

'Well, that is truly and unjustly awful.' he began, 'but that bloody Kenrdic went and left you here without paying your bill!'

Cilla turned towards him with a frown.

'I'm running an Inn here woman—a business—and from what you told me,' he looked back at Sandra, 'you're a trader—I assume a wealthy one like the rest of them.'

Sandra asked about the debt and after hearing the numbers, formulated a plan of her escape from the Inn. She didn't want to end up working as a bar maid for the rest of her life to pay back her

dues.

'And don't get any ideas of running away.' he said before leaving and closing the door, 'or I'll make sure the law will chase you down.'

Hearing this, Sandra fell onto the bed in shock.

'Don't worry dear, I'm sure Kendric'll be running back through town soon, he often does these days, we'll chase him about the money then. How does that sound?'

Sandra cried.

THE END