

My Home of Ice and Fire

1315

Seven hundred years ago...

Though many of his men continued to grumble and bemoan the wall of white that enveloped and drove the heat out of their bodies, and cut at their faces like knives, and made their bones ache with exertion, Skeld did not complain. He had been born in the midst of a violent bitter blizzard and thus saw the harsh snow as his father, and though many sons complained of their fathers Skeld would not.

He walked stolidly through the snow-encumbered field, relishing in the smells of the night. The moon was not visible this night, but the flickering fires of the burning, roaring wooden building behind supplied them ample enough light.

The wolf ran his eyes over the field, examining the rows and rows of stone crosses. His eyes were the color of frozen water, and were sunk deep into their hollows by lack of sleep. He did not permit himself the luxury and peace of sleep, not on this journey. The fur on his face was grey like sword iron at the top half, and below that was fur white like a winter sky. His hair was long and pale, faded yellow like corpse-skin that fell well beyond broad shoulders, hanging loosely in wispy strands over the heavy coat that had once been his brother, Varg. Dangling against his leather and hide armor was a necklace of thirteen rib bones, clacking with a calcium rhythm.

As he walked, he read the names and numbers on each cross and grave marker. A missionary had once tried to convert him to his new religion; Skeld had allowed himself to be taught Latin and, seeing no further need to keep the outsider, had promptly dispatched him to his heaven. Many of the men that were buried in this field he wished he had the chance to slay, but disease, famine, and the hungering cold had done what his blades would not. Finally, after tromping through the snow in search of the one man he had spent the last eight years in search of, he had found him; the was made of cut stone like the rest but much taller and thicker, and instead of a mere name and number it had a full inscription. Somebody had taken the time to ensure that this one would be remembered. He read:

Herein lies Leif Johansson, warrior-priest. May God preserve...anno domine 1307.

The inscription may as well have said "herein lies the fucking traitor and thief."

Christian burial had always amused Skeld; rather than sending a man to paradise in a roaring blaze with no delay, they would rather be put into the ground to decay with the worms, the insects, and other things that lived in the earth. The Aesir gods and the Jotunn will have already slain each other and the world consumed by fire and venom by the time they got to their heaven. Skeld rested his boot against the cross and with a forceful shove knocked it over.

The ice here was stronger than stone; the marker cracked in half as it fell and struck the earth, unnoticed by Skeld, who was already pointing to the grave with a long, calloused forefinger.

"Dig," he told his men. His voice was like distant thunder, like the earth itself were trying to speak. Some of his men shifted nervously, a feature they did not often display. One of them, a hulking brown bear who equaled the size of two men atop one another, retained the courage to shake his head, denying his chieftain.

"Is something wrong here?" Skeld asked them, somehow lowering his already impossibly low voice.

"We will not dig," the bear said.

"Oh?"

"We are afraid."

"There's nothing to fear from the dead, and less from that which has never lived to begin with. Now get on with it."

One of his warriors stepped forward, a short but sturdily built mink as white as the snow that fell upon him.

"Perhaps their god will be offended by this. Men we can kill, my chief, and happily, but a god-
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"One god alone will not stop me. Now dig, all of you!"

His men would not dig. Skeld stared at them, and they stared back, the snow beginning to ease back as the flames licked higher, casting their shadows out across the graveyard. The eyes that looked like shallow ice glinted dangerously as a paw began fingering the head of an axe he held at his waist. The bear spoke again, his brown eyes dancing with anger.

"This is your destiny, Skeld; it is not ours to go stealing corpses from Hel for some damned heirloom. Eight years we've followed you, friend, and of the dozen and four that we started out with seven remain, and for what? Did our brothers die just for one burning church and a stolen treasure? Your men...what remains of your men would rather paddle than dig."

"What are you saying, Hrothgar?"

"You know what I'm saying, friend. You can take your treasure, but we'll be taking the longboat."

A true man knows another man's significance, a trait that all chieftains must understand. Skeld knew this, but the years of ice, fire, and bloodshed had worn down both his willingness to endure and the import with which he held a man. With a dark look in his eyes, he watched as his warriors turned their backs to him as one and began walking toward the island's coast, the snow grumbling under their boots. He felt nothing in his heart.

He felt nothing when he slipped one of his axes out of its securement and threw it aimlessly into the mass of dark silhouettes. There was the familiar sound of metal chipping through thick leather, a forced grunt, and one of the shadows fell forward into the snow.

The men turned in confusion and shock, lasting only a moment before the angry lust of battle stole over them. They brandished their weapons, chipped or broken double-edged swords, sharpened sticks, cooking knives, all that remained after the hardships of their quest.

Their quest, Skeld mused as he watched his men running toward him. It has always been my quest. The nothing that filled him vanished, washing out as the tide, replaced by the heady furor of war.

"Run," he growled under his breath as he slipped his war axe out of the sheath strapped to his back, the edge along its single blade gleaming like a killer's grin. The bitter cries of his men became the angry drone of enemies.

"Run," he shouted, his deep voice thunderous in the night. At that moment, the blackening arches of the steeple had weakened such that they finally fell, toppling onto the entrance in a flagrant heap; embers shot up into the sky, little orange souls seeking calmer places. His men were close enough that he could see the whites of their scowling eyes, the gnash of their teeth.

"Run!" Skeld screamed, raising his voice to the night as he hefted his axe, howling a gravel-laden note of destruction, a cry of death for which he was famed. The men that had followed him for eight years--and some certainly far longer than that--were no longer his men, not friends. They were just enemies now, and the monstrous wolf gave them the same chance as he would have given any other foe.

Meaning to say, none.

The first to run up to him, the little coward mink, he had dispatched with little more than a thought. One thrusting swing upward and the blade dug into the mink's chest cavity, biting into the vitals that rested inside; Skeld kicked the surprised mink off of his blade and out of his mind.

He swung to the right, horizontal slash tearing into a red fox's shield. The fox, a meek man when he had joined Skeld's party, was now a fit man who had the speed and spirit of youth on his side, but experience he lacked; the fox snarled, tossing his shield aside to fight unencumbered. He shifted his sword from his right hand to his left, an admirable trait in battle.

The wolf was about to swing when he felt a burning pain in his shoulder, the feeling of something cold sticking him undercutting the pain. In his rage, he grabbed the wooden spear and ripped it out of the warrior's grip, blindly tossing him aside. Instinctively, he held up his axe to protect his right side; the ringing clang of metal on metal told him that the fox had tried to take his head. Growling, he ripped the spear out of his shoulder and swung it around, cracking it into two halves against the fox's skull. On contact, the vulpine gave a hefty grunt and fell to the side, clutching at his head.

The one who had stuck him in the shoulder, a smaller white wolf, was trying to get up; Skeld slammed his boot against the wolf's back to keep him down. Nearby, the bear Hrothgar had an

axe in each hand, holding them out in front of him, charging forward like the fool he was. Skeld knelt down, holding his axe to the side as if he were to swing.

As the bear slashed downward, the blades searching the air for his head, he jammed the broken spear into the white wolf's back, leaping and rolling through the snow. He knew the bear was far-sighted; Hrothgar impaled himself on his own momentum, bear and wolf howling in united agony. Skeld cleft through the two with one vertical swing.

Cold fire lanced through his right side, just at his back. The great wolf smiled as he growled; the fox was a stabber, never knowing quite where to stab. Skeld crouched down and mule-kicked the fox, sending him flying backward; he grabbed the sword by the blade and slid it out of his body, filling the wound with fire.

Erik, the portly and foul-tempered squirrel, rushed at him with cooking cutlery; Skeld blocked one of his blows with his axe, driving the sword hard into a fleshy stomach, thrusting upward. Erik screamed in his face, horror and hatred blending into one piercing note. The wolf silenced him, smashing a calloused and scarred fist into a jaw, feeling the bone beneath splintering like wood. The body slid off of his blade and onto the cold ground, steaming.

All that remained were the two foxes. Skeld searched for the other, certain he had fled, when he felt a weight jump on top of his shoulders, a vicious snarl in his ears. Gunnar was trying to bring him down, chokehold around his neck.

The other fox--Skeld tried to think of his name, not coming up with anything, not important--now jumped in front of him, broken spear cradled in one hand. The fox smiled, as if he knew that he was going to come out of this fight alive.

Skeld would not give the fox the satisfaction. As the fox on his back bit at his ears, sending little streamers of blood down his cheeks, Skeld threw up his legs, jumping backward; the fox on his back slammed into the ground, incapacitated as he was pressed by the wolf's weight, satisfying crunch of bone. Hearing the crunch of boots, he rolled off the small vulpine into the snow, twisting his legs so that he was crouching, facing the oncoming fox. There was a wild look in the vulpine's eyes, a gleam of battle-hunger as he hefted the sharp stick. As the vulpine stabbed downward, Skeld leapt at him, driving all of his weight into the fox's chest, sending them both down into the snow. He let go of his weapons to grab the fox by his head and the armor on his chest.

Losing himself in his bloodlust, Skeld spared the fox a single glance, saw the anger in the man's eyes. That was good; it was good to die angry.

The wolf gripped the fox's throat in his teeth, putting down pressure, feeling the fox beneath him stiffen and then begin to shake. The wolf bit down, his mouth flooding with coppery warmth. He bit harder, chewing the flesh like any other bit of meat he had put into his mouth.

After the shaking had stopped, Skeld stood back up, looking at the pulpy mess that rested between the fox's head and shoulders. He spat on the body, phlegmy red, and grabbed his axe from the snow. He surveyed the ground, seeing bodies lying prone that had once been breathing

and walking, the snow blossoming scarlet flowers, deep crimson pond. The whole skirmish couldn't have taken more than several minutes.

Skeld walked toward the grave of Leif Johansson, tapping his axe against his leg, when he noticed that one body was missing. Where was that damned mink?

The ring of metal preceded the irate hiss of furious teeth. The knife slid through his hide jacket and under the dense leather vest he wore, tearing through the muscle of his left shoulder. Wincing, he felt the blade tap against the bone, more fire as blood flowed out of the wound. He twisted around, his fist connecting with open air as the mink ducked under the blow. A fist struck him in the chest, claws tearing at his bone necklace.

He reached out to grab the mink by his armor, intending to decapitate the turncoat with his axe, but the mink was swifter; he kicked out Skeld's legs from under him, sending him flat on his tail with a snarl.

"Bastard!" Skeld rumbled, followed by a string of other expletives. The mink jumped on top of him, a small sharp stick in hand, aiming for the wolf's eyes. The wolf kicked the mink's arm up as his arm fell through the air, the stick embedding itself into his calf. He threw his war axe, the handle striking the mink's face, sending him reeling backward, clutching his face.

Skeld jumped up, snow flying through the air, the burning church lighting his mad smile. Before the mink could respond to his attack, the wolf grabbed him by his leather clothing, his claws entering the bloodstained slit made by his axe. He ripped the armor apart, exposing the mink's snow white chest. The mink grabbed his arms, vainly trying to pry off his superior grip.

His claws were as sharp as he was strong; he dug his nails into the mink's flesh, tearing through skin and muscular tissue. As red poured over his hands, he grabbed the curving rib bones, feeling so thin and feeble in his grip. The mink screamed in his ears, a harsh Gaelic tongue that Skeld did not recognize and did not care to. He hauled the mink up off of the ground, pattering of crimson beneath his airborne feet. The wolf brought up his knee as he brought the mink down, smashing it into the mustelid's navel, red spray splashing his body as the body fell limp to the ground, two curved bones gripped tightly in his hands. The rib bones he set deeply into the mink's stupefied green eyes.

The danger over, Skeld was free to complete what he had set out to do eight years ago. Stepping over his ex-crewmen, he grabbed his war axe out of the snow, ripping the stick out of his leg, leaving a trail of red boot-prints as he walked back to Johansson's grave. He swung his axe, chopping into the cold ground, removing the hallowed dirt piece by piece. Sweat combined with all the wounds on his body, the salt-sting pain keeping his mind awake and his body on the job. The splintering black ruins behind him crackled and popped, melodic harmony to the rush of the axe as it split the air, steady soft chunk sound; night music. To Skeld, all of this was the music of the north.

Eventually, enough time passed that Skeld felt himself beginning to tire. The sun was almost breaching the horizon, the sky filling with shadowy pink and violet. The heat of labor had forced him to divest his armor, leaving his body bare to the snow. His axe had been chipped and

blunted and lay somewhere above him after he had thrown it away out of anger. He scratched his way down, flinging the loose earth out of the hole, growling through clenched teeth.

Finally, his hands met with something harder than cold dirt. He wiped the surface of the grimy pinewood box, his heart thudding in his ears. The box had been nailed shut; ignoring the tools that seemed better suited for the task, he smashed his fist through the rotted wood, jagged splinters digging into his hand. He ripped the lid apart, throwing the fragments over his shoulders. His eyes met with, expectedly, a corpse, the skin beneath the tawny orange fur blackened from the cold. He didn't care about that--a body is a body is a body--but he did care about the long thing that rested on the feline's chest, swaddled in heavy grey mullein.

The sword had no name as far as Skeld knew, though his grandfather's mead-laced stories had always referred to it as "The Final Winter." He had seen the blade only once, during a trade made by a Mongol chieftain for a fair number of his father's slaves and chickens. The Mongol had proclaimed that the sword was a find his men had made in the far north, farther than Skeld's tribe had ever traveled. To Skeld's memory, the blade was as pristine as it was massive, a giant's sword, double-edged with a coiling silver handle, a gem like solid ice set into the pommel. Grandfather had always ascertained that the sword was a legend of ancient times, passed down from the Aesir gods, and from them the giants, and from them a much older race, those that had given birth to Ymir, whose body became the earth. His father, however, was equally adamant of a more modest belief; that it was simply a damn good sword.

Then, a thief in the night, a bitter nephew of one of the chieftain's rivals. Skeld searched long for the name and longer for the body, but the true treasure was finally in his hands. With a grunt, the large grey wolf stood and heaved himself out of the spoiled grave. Eager to see the blade in the firelight, he unwound the fabric from the blade.

It was exactly how he had remembered it; eight years had done nothing to the perfect metal. It was unmarked, no forger's signature, no runes. He threw the mullein down to the ground, getting used to the weight and size; the whole sword felt like it didn't want to be anywhere but in the ground.

He had lost himself in the light of the massive blade; he hadn't noticed how the air around him became slightly warmer, the flames from the burning structure lowered to bright embers, and the smell of singeing timbers and salty, metallic blood had been replaced by something sweeter, something saccharine yet acrid.

He didn't stop to check his surroundings until a low voice slipped into his ears, carried on a hot and cloying breath.

"Pretty, isn't it?"

Skeld swung around, hefting the blade in an arc toward the direction of the voice. At first, he couldn't quite understand what he was seeing, his eyes stinging slightly from the peculiar sight. Standing before him, the sword's tip almost touching its nose, was something Skeld could not quite identify. It stood upright some five feet in height, a heavyset shape surrounded by a glittering light the color of a winter sky. The wolf couldn't comprehend what sort of beast he was

looking at, as it appeared to possess characteristics of many animals at once; it appeared to be for the most part a dragon, with skin resembling the color and form of red oak; the antlers of a caribou curving upward like moss-covered bones over the golden eyes of a serpent; a seagull's wings; a horse's tail; the hooved legs of a ram supporting an ample stomach. The entity was covered by an ill-fitting robe of earthy brown that stayed open at the front.

"The blood, I mean," the shape said, speaking Skeld's language fluently. The wolf kept the large sword raised, his eyes narrowing as he absently glanced down at himself.

"Only half of its mine," he grumbled.

"Half? You're getting slow, old man."

"Oh? And how fast are you?"

The creature raised an objective hand, smiling a piss-yellow smile. "I think we're walking different paths here. I suppose you'd like to know who I am?"

"I'd sit better knowing just how you got here without my seeing you, and telling me what you are wouldn't be amiss."

The dragon-thing nodded and bowed to Skeld. "First, I appeared here when you claimed the sword you now hold in your hand, and, second, I am the sword."

The wolf had met madmen before; he could recall several lines of arguable sanity and they would often make him laugh, but this was a new one. He glared at the spectral creature, his brow furrowing even deeper than it was before.

"What?" he grumbled.

"What?" the dragon echoed.

"Explain!"

"Oh, I thought I had. Yes, I am the spirit that rests inside of the sword. When it was forged long ago, so was I born. I thought it only polite to introduce myself, seeing as how you are my new owner."

The dragon bowed low, his hands in an upraised gesture. Skeld, still under the assumption that the man was mad, gave him an anxious look.

"A spirit, are you? If you are a spirit, then this sword wouldn't hurt you if I were to, say, plunge it into your shoulder."

The dragon raised his head, his features expressing a worried look. "Ah, not exactly, I'm afraid. That's not quite how it works--."

Skeld jabbed the point of the massive blade into the spot he had mentioned. He certainly felt resistance against the blade, but it was light and soft, as though he were stabbing warm cheese. The dragon leapt backward, clutching at his shoulder with a snarl of pain.

"Ah! Yes, I see you're testing that idea out, good work..."

"Fraud! If you're a spirit then I'm a bushel of cloudberry!"

The wolf turned on his heel, bending down to retrieve his clothing, the mad lizard behind him making exclamations that he refused to hear.

"No, no, I told you that that's not how it works! You seem to think that a spirit resting inside an object is like a resident in his home, but it's much more than that! Yes, that's true for some things, I'll admit, but not in this case! If you were to punch yourself, would you not feel it? I'm more of an extension of the sword, what you might call the heart of the sword. I can sense and hear things that you cannot, and I can 'see backwards,' what you might call looking into the past. That was how I could make an observation that you were slowing down. Not to say, of course, that you don't make a suitable enough master--."

"Enough! You're mad, and I've no time for madmen."

"Well, actually you now have more time than ever."

Having donned his clothing, Skeld began walking toward the coastline. It had been a bitter journey piloting the ship alongside five other men, and it would only be that much harder without those five men. The dragon-thing followed closely behind him.

Once they had reached the beach, Skeld could stand no more of the lizard's inane twittering. With one vertical chop, he buried the blade in the reptile's neck. A twisting motion, and the head was severed, sliding off of the blade to land at its owner's feet. Satisfied, Skeld turned to the longboat, wondering how he was going to pilot the damned thing.

He had taken only one step when he heard the low voice again, smell of sweet filth filling the air. "That was a bit more than a pinch..."

The wolf turned, his face locked in shock. Were it not for the idea that the dragon was an immaterial spirit, Skeld would have found himself doubting his skill with a sword, a worrisome thought for anyone in his position. The dragon stood where he had when the wolf lopped his head off, his head now firmly stuck in its original placement. The wolf raised the sword in a threatening gesture, then, realizing what good it would have done, let it fall to pierce the beach of ice. He had to admit to a certain degree of curiosity, but he retained his apprehensiveness; whether good or bad, it was wise to give courtesy to something that wouldn't simply die when its head was removed.

"Alright, what is it that you want?"

At this the dragon seemed pleased, but more than that, he expressed a devious and cunning look that made the wolf give him a sideways glance, fingering the pommel of the sword.

"I have such plans, Skeld; plans for this dark land of ice and fire. These plans are so great that they cannot be completed in the length of one lifetime, or a lifetime over a thousand lifetimes.

I'm offering you immortality, total immortality, not just a second life but the essence of life itself."

"And what would I do with immortality here, when I'd achieve it anyway in Valhalla?"

"That's a good point, well spoken. What would a river-raider do when given eternity? I suppose you'd have eternity to think about it, eh?"

"Hmm, so you are slave to me in that you are merely a sword with plans, and I'd be a slave to you--I imagine that since you can bestow such a feature onto me you can just as easily take it away--but I don't much fancy taking orders from my own sword."

"Magic sword, thank you."

"Yes, magic sword, though magic or not, you are still an object in my possession."

"Yes, but for how long? You're getting older, wolf; there's tension setting in where there didn't used to be tension, pain where there shouldn't have been pain a year ago. Your heart is starting to panic in and out of battle. Tell me, grey and greying wolf, what good is a warrior if he is at war with his own body?"

Skeld glowered at the apparition, his anger rising with each truth. He tightened his grip on the sword handle, hoping it would be as if he were strangling the dragon, but the dragon kept smiling at him with his sulfurous teeth.

"I wonder how many warriors like you there are, Skeld, who envision themselves dying in glorious battle but end up passing on while taking a shit in the woods, or breaking his neck after downing too much mead. I wonder if Odin has a place for such men in his hall, perhaps somewhere in the corner, where there are soft beds for your arthritic limbs and poor eyes--."

"Alright! You've already sold me your idea of permanence; don't waste your gold by putting it on the chicken."

The dragon's smile widened to an impossible degree. "Deathlessness is a very marvelous chicken, I assure you."

The dragon extended a friendly hand, wreathed in a bluish-white light. Skeld looked at it for a moment, puzzling over whether or not all of this was simply a hallucination. He raised an eyebrow, his own hand poised in the air. As the sun breached the sea, black amongst the walls of white, he took the dragon-thing's claw in his own, puzzling over the feeling of silk or fine powder, giving the smaller creature the feeling of a man's grip.

The executives from Gruber-Koch were all smiling, teeth as straight and well-kept as their dark three-piece suits. They had all thoroughly enjoyed Olavi's presentation, the white fox beaming with confidence and businessman's bravado as he clicked a button on the tiny controller, sending the bright fluorescent lights back on and the projection screen scrolling back up the wall with a mechanical hum. He held his hands together in front of him, poster boy for politeness and etiquette as he waited for the gentlemen's responses, smiling as if he knew the answer to everything.

A tall and muscular reindeer with carefully trimmed antlers fidgeted with a pen as he spoke. "And you can guarantee that each and every product will sustain its efficiency for up to ten years?"

Olavi's smile never wavered. "Our experts have shown an efficiency rating equaling and, in some cases, exceeding the ten-year period. Gentlemen, we are always given one golden deal in our lifetime; don't let the gold slip through your fingers."

The businessmen chuckled at this; the white fox had quoted a popular German comedy that had recently come out. The men shuffled their papers and tossed out some more questions, which were countered perfectly with the white fox's clever responses. Eventually, the men all stood up and shook hands with Olavi and his boss, the man they had truly done business with, the aged but powerfully built grey wolf in the shadowy black suit, always shadowy black to bring out his hungry, pale blue eyes.

The reindeer had always made it a point to shake hands with the company's leader first, a sign of proper respect. When he took the wolf's expensively manicured hand, he almost winced at the strength secreted away beneath the skin. He didn't mind; the deal had gone very well, his investors were going to be very happy, and his investors were the ones who made him happy. The reindeer said his thanks in German rather than in his host's Norwegian, an intentional mistake, telling the wolf that though they had made an excellent deal, Gruber-Koch was, is, and forever will be, German.

Skeld smiled, his eyes beaming, as he gave his response in perfect German. Just playing the game...

The men gave their thanks and good-byes and left Skeld's office, undoubtedly to hit one of the pricier stripclubs in Bergen. Many of those joints were funded by Skeld's own money to ensure foreign investors just like the men who had left would enjoy their stay a little bit more and perhaps anxiously await their next business trip; a river of cash flowing down a chain of clubs and businesses, increasing steadily in their excess and seediness.

Certain that the men were no longer in the hallway, Olavi laughed and impetuously went to Skeld's liquor cabinet, grabbing a bottle of traditional alcoholic Glögg. He poured the brackish liquid into a pair of glasses, walking over and handing one to his boss with an overly dramatic flair.

"A victory toast, my king!"

Skeld smirked at the fox's brazenness. Men like Olavi were an aggravating fly to a man, but he had to hand it to the little vulpine, he certainly had a brain on his shoulders, a reedy fjolkunnigir in a Prussian blue suit. He accepted the glass and walked over to the far side of the room, passing the full-frame window wall, the sight of the city stolidly receiving another round of winter snow. He looked up at the world map that hung on the tiled wood, framed in a bullet-proof glass case.

"More territory covered, Olavi. If we keep up this pace we'll have outposts all over Europe, the Americas, and western Asia. If we can keep the Germans on the ball, the Americans will follow suit, and with them in our pocket the Japanese may finally listen to us. Like a brushfire, we sweep through everything in our path. Oh, put this Glögg away; grab something stronger, something with more fire in it."

Olavi laughed, slapping his boss's shoulder with a measure of respect. "You treat every business pact like an old Viking battle, don't you, boss?"

Skeld glanced at the young fox, one of dozens of representatives to his corporate empire. He turned away, back to the wall that held a world map centering on a united Scandinavia, large black gothic lettering proclaiming the entire nation's name: Valhalla.

"Yes, I do, boy," he said, his voice like distant thunder, his eyes of frozen water gleaming.