

PRAISE FOR FOG & FIREFLIES



“Make no mistake, this is a great and triumphant tale. Dark and soulful; haunting and hopeful. Epic world building, beautiful prose, and the uncertainty of what moves and screams beyond walls of protection. It’s the kind of book and author that makes a darned, masterful, and compelling bid for literary greatness!”

— SEATTLE BOOK REVIEW



“I recommend it to everyone who likes Studio Ghibli movies, and reading about found family, hope, and a compelling female hero.”

— LIANNE BROUWER



“Dark atmosphere with Pan’s Labyrinth vibes. [...] The description is right: there is a noticeable similarity with the art of Hayao Miyazaki.”

— FÉLSZIPÓKÁS ŐSMOLY



“I loved this book from the first page, and I won’t be surprised if it is one of my favorite books of the year. It definitely lives up to all that it claims to be while also managing to surprise and delight in ways I was not expecting.”

— CAROLINE MCCLURE, LIBRARIAN



“I am almost at a loss on how to describe how wonderful this book was. Reading it made me feel like I fell through a wardrobe and was exploring something new and completely undiscovered.”

— DIANE TAIT



“Ogma is a perfect character for the reader to relate and root for. Envision Dorothy in a world of cruel mists summoning up her last bites of courage to save all her Oz companions.”

— SEATTLE BOOK REVIEW



“Master storyteller T.H. Lehnén’s debut novel [...] *Fog & Fireflies* is a truly unique and enjoyable piece of fantasy fiction.”

— SAN FRANCISCO BOOK REVIEW



“Lehnén takes world-building to a new level [...] The world of Lehnén’s creation is a dark, brooding character that taunts, invades, and can abduct the adults of the villages. The settings and environment are an essential character in the story.

— PORTLAND BOOK REVIEW



“The novel overflows with creativity and offers some of the most unique world-building you’ll find in a genre that can feel like everything has already been done. Lehnén is a masterful storyteller, and his realm of fear and fireflies practically glitters on the page.”

— SELF-PUBLISHING REVIEW

FOG & FIREFLIES

EXCERPTS FROM BOOK 1

T.H. LEHNEN



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AUDIENCE

This is a work of young adult fantasy, but whatever your age, if childlike wonder still lives in your heart, you will enjoy it.

SUBJECT MATTER

A primary theme of this work is parentification—the role reversal where children become the caretakers of their parents or siblings.

CONTENT WARNINGS

blood (minor), bones (animal), child labor, death, forced captivity, kidnapping, parentification, serious injury, violence

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“ Fantasy is escapist, and that is its glory. If a soldier is imprisoned by the enemy, don't we consider it his duty to escape? The moneylenders, the knownothings, the authoritarians have us all in prison; if we value the freedom of the mind and soul, if we're partisans of liberty, then it's our plain duty to escape, and to take as many people with us as we can.

— URSULA K. LE GUIN



CHAPTER I

SHADOW PUPPETS

A sobbing, guttural moan drifted over the rampart. Ogma froze and, despite herself, she shivered. At fourteen seasons old, after eight walking the wall, she still had to remind herself not to heed the voices in the fog.

Ogma had made up her mind seasons ago that it was better to be angry than afraid. But on nights like this, the butterflies in her stomach had their own ideas.

She took a steadying breath and pushed the fear away.

The night was crisp and clear, and her breath hung in the air. Her cheeks were flushed and pinched in the cold. The stars shone brightly over the roofs of the sleeping village, wheeling and dancing, winking in and out as they always did when the fog was high. She studied the gray bank as shapes gently coalesced within its form and, just as gently and silently, dispersed. The moon had just risen and hung low and large, bright enough to cast shadows. Ogma searched the sky for the moon's smaller sister, but tonight she did not join the dance. The glow of the fog under the moonlight was beautiful.

Beautiful and cold, Ogma thought, and wrapped herself more tightly in her coat.

She glanced back at the town as Enki and Enoch tolled their quarter-night chime. She held her breath for a beat and listened. A moment later, Ogma heard the cheerful chords of the twins' bells from the rampart ahead of her, and the clear basso note of Cole's single bell more distantly behind.

Ogma sighed with relief and added the sorrowful minor chord of her own two bells.

The younger children had remembered—only the bells could be trusted. Ogma rang hers in the pattern that meant: *I'm here! I'm okay. Don't worry. Keep to your post.* The other children on the wall acknowledged her with their chimes again.

Most nights were better than this. Most nights the fog rolled in gentle drifts much farther from the walls, quiescent. Most nights the ground was visible and voices could be trusted. On those nights, the growls and mutters beyond the wall were as likely to be beasts of flesh and blood as they were to be fog phantoms.

But even when voices couldn't be trusted, Ogma worried a cry for help might still be real.

She bit her lip, braced her hands against the stone rampart, and leaned out. The fog billowed back, away from her. Phantom shapes chittered and cajoled, egging her on to leave the walls, to come out to open ground where the fog could envelop her. Eyes straining against the gloom, she peered at the ground.

No one would be stupid enough to be out on a night like this anyway. No other towns had drifted close in weeks.

Trying to sort out shape from shadow in the fog was making her eyes cross. Ogma pushed herself back from the rampart and continued her patrol. The gently creaking frame of one of the village's great windmills silhouetted itself against the stars. At each of the eight corners of the wall, windmills turned, powered by heavy counterweights that teams of the village men cranked up during breaks in the fog when it was safe.

Though the blades moved ponderously slow to Ogma's eyes, she could feel the breeze. With each mill angled toward the next, they created a current that redirected the fog to flow around the walls to keep it from crashing over them.

Not for lack of trying. Phantom tendrils caressed the wind-mill blades.

Ogma grit her teeth and glared at the roiling bank. For just a moment it billowed back, retreated, and then the phantom voices laughed at her.

The mellifluous pealing of two sets of small bells in harmony brought Ogma back to attention.

It was the twins, Mae and Maya. Their patrol crossed hers as they went the opposite way around the wall. Ogma chimed her chord in response.

She turned once again to the walkway, peering into the night for the two approaching girls. At the midway point between this mill and the next, the fog sent gently probing tendrils out over the stones. The foremost of these were just curling over the wall's inner edge.

Berating herself under her breath, Ogma hurried her steps, glaring at the misty coils and shooing them with her gloved hands. The tendrils reared up, a hooded shape hissing and spitting, winding menacingly around her before dissolving as the coils tightened.

Ogma crossed her arms, staring down the bank—summoning anger to banish fear. Yet small shapes still seemed to dart beneath its surface, and rude and laughing faces briefly coalesced just out of sight.

Ogma tapped her foot.

The petulant fog gradually quieted into a placid sea once more.

The gentle harmony chimed closer, and Mae and Maya stepped up beside her. The twin girls were holding hands and

bundled warmly against the cold, eyes shining with excitement even as they looked anxiously up at her. Ogma realized she was still glaring. She put on a smile instead.

"Ogma! *Ogma-aa!* Have you *ever* seen the fog so *thick?*" Maya piped, wide-eyed and bubbling.

Mae was too excited to let Ogma respond. "Did you know? Did you know? We saw the fog make horses! And a cat!"

Both girls were breathlessly cheerful, and Ogma's smile widened, though she kept her voice stern.

"Mae. Maya. It may be your first season on patrol, but you know why the fog makes those shapes."

They shuffled their feet, ruefully studying their shoes.

"Wheeler says it's playing tricks to lure us away from our posts," Maya droned in the voice of a child reciting an oft-repeated lesson.

Mae puffed out her small chest and adopted a serious expression, deepening her voice to try to match that of the older boy. "You must be ever watchful!" she intoned pompously, wagging her finger.

Ogma tried very hard not to laugh as the young girl put both hands on her hips and swept the fog with an imperious stare. Maya giggled behind her mittens.

"That's right," Ogma said seriously. "And you should listen to him. You know what would happen if the fog got over the wall. *I* remember if you don't."

The two girls' smiles faded, serious faces now genuine. "We remember," they said in unison.

Ogma's heart softened.

Mae shuffled her feet hesitantly. "D-did you hear the voice?"

The tight feeling in the pit of Ogma's stomach returned. She and Cole had both heard several voices out in the fog these past

few nights. That was to be expected. *But that voice? It's the same every night.*

"Yes, I did," Ogma warned them, "and that just means the fog is trying extra hard to get you, so be careful, and don't listen to anything but the bells."

She saw the fear on their faces, but the excitement shone through as well.

They still think of it as a game. Was I ever that young? She wished she still was.

"You two get going to the next mill. Jory should be coming soon to replace you." Ogma shooed them with her bells, and the girls clasped hands and skipped on, chattering as they went.

Ogma went on her own way, to the mill the girls had come from, and settled in to wait for Brigid to spell her for the next shift. The windmill blades turned slowly, stirring whitecaps on the fog. She pulled off her gloves to warm her fingers with her breath.

Grumbling, she kept one 'ever watchful' eye on the fog and thought longingly of hot cider and a warm bed.

It was still deep night outside when Ogma woke, the echo of a moaning cry fading in her dream. Only a few hours before, Ogma had finished her patrol, stumbled into the watch house, and climbed into her favorite bunk. This upper bunk was hidden away in the back of the watchtower's great room. The bed and blankets were warm, and for a moment she did nothing more than burrow further into them, sliding her legs beneath the soft sheets and snuggling her face against her pillow. It was no use. She couldn't close her eyes without thinking of that voice. She frowned, and rolled onto her back.

She could hear the patter of rain on the roof, and she breathed in its clean scent on the gentle draft from the shuttered

windows. The rain was good; a respite. It would tamp down the fog.

The warm, flickering glow of firelight played across the wooden logs of the ceiling. A charcoal drawing was dancing on the rafters. Ogma hadn't noticed it when she'd climbed wearily into bed after returning from her patrol on the wall. Some enterprising child had teetered on tiptoes atop the bunk to draw the strange-looking bird. Ogma tilted her head. *Or is it a mule?* Probably the work of the acrobatic and determined Ambrose.

The murmur of the children in the watch house, most of them younger, was a reassuring noise. Because the children did everything in shifts—patrol, chores, lessons—some of them were always awake. From their giggling across the room, she could tell Mae and Maya hadn't even tried to go to sleep yet. They were clearly still wound up from their patrol. From another cot she heard more children whining over the claim to favorite blankets, but they were hushed a moment later. The older children, those who hadn't been on patrol that evening, were always there to calm and care for the younger ones, and put to bed those tired enough to fuss.

After so many seasons spent living together, they were all used to the tantrums and shrieks of the smallest children. It was tiring, and irritating, and loud, and sticky, and sometimes smelly, but also comforting. Mae and Maya might be giggling, but many of the older children had been quiet and withdrawn recently. The extended duration and malevolence of this fog bank worried them.

For Ogma, that worry never left. The pit in her stomach while on patrol became a tightness between her shoulders whenever off. She sighed and rolled over again, resting her cheek against the cool, polished wooden rail of the bunk as she looked down at the common room.

One of the youngest children was tugging on the sleeve of

the eldest, nearly in his seventeenth season, draped as he usually was across one of the low bunks nearest the fire.

“Wheeler? Are you awake?” she asked in a small voice. Wheeler was face down on the child-sized bunk and, having grown almost to his adult height, his feet dangled off the edge and his arms hung down either side.

He’ll have to leave us soon, Ogma thought with sudden anxiety. She shoved that icy bolt of fear away to deal with later.

“Wheeler! Are—you—awake?!” the little girl whined.

Ogma smiled, propping herself up on one elbow to watch the familiar scene unfold. If he wasn’t already awake, he soon would be.

“Can we have shadow puppets?” Emma was only five seasons old, but she was a seasoned expert at wheedling what she wanted out of the older children, especially Wheeler. Once they heard her ask, the other children—even those who should have been sleeping, or at least trying to, after long shifts on the wall—started to sit up and add their voices.

“Shadow puppets!”

“Shadow puppets!”

Wheeler didn’t even roll over.

“Yeah, c’mon Wheeler! Do the shadow puppets.” Cole, about Ogma’s age, was one of the older boys and styled himself Wheeler’s lieutenant. A beat later he added, self-consciously, “You know how much the younger kids like it.” Ogma snorted and gave him a look.

The youngest children were beginning to gather by the fire, laughing and hooting, while the older ones sat up in their bunks.

Wheeler, for his part, was still stoically pretending to be asleep despite the ruckus.

Emma tugged insistently at his blanket. He opened one eye in a mock glare, and swept it around the room, then closed it again, rolled over, and gave a terrific snore. The younger chil-

dren groaned in frustration. The older ones chucked their pillows at him.

“Wheeler, wake up! Shadow puppets!” Emma’s voice increased in pitch with that slight edge of a child about to get very frustrated and very loud. There was a breath of silence while the children waited for Wheeler’s reaction.

He burst up from the bed, firing off pillows of his own and pawing back his unruly bedhead. He tossed little Emma over his shoulder, the little girl now giggling madly, and grinned at the cheering faces.

“All right you rascals! But you’d better not wake up anyone who’s been on the wall tonight.” And with that, he shot a look up at Ogma’s bunk and gave her a wink—

—just in time to be hit in the face by her pillow.

“Just get on with it, you big lump!” She grinned. The other children back from patrol, all wide awake and bright-eyed, whistled their agreement.

“Phah. And in my own house.” He put Emma down gently, turning up his nose and stalking over to the fireplace. The hubbub of children devolved into the sound of them loudly shushing each other.

Wheeler carefully pulled an old carved fireplace screen in front of the hearth, dimming the glow in the room until Ogma could see only silhouettes. He lit the end of a stick of kindling from the fire, and used it to light a dark lantern, sliding the metal hood around to focus a single square of light on the wall. Cracking his knuckles and narrowing his eyes in concentration, he grasped at the narrow beam of light with his hands, molding the shadows to his design like so much clay. He warmed up with a few basic shapes while the children looked on: first a bird in flight, then a dog barking, and then a goose. Each successive shadow cast on the wall looked more natural and lifelike.

Wheeler’s talent with shadow puppets was magical.

Ogma had never been quite sure how he managed some of those shapes with only two hands. She was fairly confident, from careful observation, that some of the ones he could make had more legs than he had fingers. But then, her own experiments had only extended so far as making some very convincing shadow puppets in the shape of—well, her own hands.

Having limbered up, Wheeler made a horse gallop across the wall and leap into the air to become an eagle. The children gasped in delight. He gave a grunt of satisfaction, and a nod to little Emma who stood solemnly by his side, eyes shining, his ready assistant for the evening's storytelling.

He put a small wooden frame in front of the dark lantern, one that he had carved himself in seasons past, casting the silhouette of a rampart onto the wall. He'd carved several others: freestanding silhouettes of castles and towers, of trees and fantastic mountains, of caravan wagons and beasts—some on sticks he could hold between his fingers, or short poles he could prop against his knee. A few were on the ends of string so he could hang them from the rafters. His props in hand, he then reached behind the fireplace screen with the tongs and took up a smoldering coal, which he then carefully dropped into a tin bowl below the lantern. The children were finally, truly silent now—in rapt attention. A couple drops of water from his mug and a cloud of steam billowed from the bowl, casting a formless, shifting shadow that drifted across the silhouette of the rampart, laying siege.

Ogma shivered as Wheeler, whispering, began. The beginning of every story was the same.

"This is why we watch the fog."

"There once was a town where every house planted their grain on their roof, and the wall was built of red stone." Wheeler

paused as the children closed their eyes, trying to imagine the foreign town. “This town wasn’t like ours. In this town they had no windmills, and they had no bells.”

Every child’s hand went to the bells around their neck. Some gasped, and others just gave Wheeler a skeptical look.

Wheeler smiled and wrapped a kerchief around one thumb. His hand fluttered and the shadow of a child in a hooded cloak walked atop the wall.

“In this town was a young boy, and like all the children of the village, it was his duty to patrol the wall and keep his village safe.”

“But Wheeler!” Emma interjected. “Wheeler, how do they keep it safe without the—”

“Shh...” Wheeler chuckled, tousling her hair. “Just hold on and I’ll tell you.”

Emma subsided, wide eyes intent on his face.

“It was the boy’s first season patrolling by himself, and it’s true, the town had no bells, and no windmills. The fog couldn’t touch the children, of course, but it could slip between them—and if someone were lost, they had no way to find them again.”

Ogma watched the faces of the other children. The youngest were frightened, the older shook their heads at the foolishness of these shadow villagers.

“But this village had something else.” Wheeler picked up several puppet sticks between his fingers. At the end of each dangled a few pieces of rounded yellow glass, glued to strings. He paused to pour a trickle of water from his mug onto the hot coal.

Steam billowed with a hiss and the shadow mist boiled up to the edge of the wall where the hooded boy stood silhouetted. Little golden lights shimmered in the fog.



There were fireflies in the boy's eyes. He watched them dancing in the fog below. Wherever they went, the fog rolled back, swirling away and disappearing. The boy's chest swelled with pride. It was only his first season on wall patrol, but he was already the village's best firefly catcher. He pulled his hood back over his head and skipped over to one of the large leaded glass lanterns spaced evenly around the wall.

The lanterns were enormous. The boy could—and had—fit easily inside one without his head even brushing the top. This one was filled with a cloud of yellow-green lights, winking and dancing sedately. He pressed his eye to one of the leaded glass panes, liking the way the blurry glass distorted the lights and shapes within.

He opened the door carefully and slipped inside. He knew the glass was rare and expensive. If they broke even a small pane, it would be very hard to replace. They could patch the lanterns with rice paper, but the boy knew that wasn't as good.

His glowing friends landed on his hood and shoulders and buzzed their little greetings. He grinned and buzzed back at them, crouching to check their food.

The dish at the bottom of the lantern was still half full, he noted happily, but he topped it up from the jars on his belt anyway.

The villagers used to use sugar water or even beer to feed the fireflies, but the boy used milk and honey and his fireflies lasted twice as long as anyone else's.

The boy kept up his rounds, happily feeding the dancing fireflies while the stars danced above. He was halfway around the wall when he came across a lantern that was dark.

Crying out in dismay, he ran up to the lantern only to find that the door was hanging open and a small pane of glass had broken, smashed on the walkway of the red stone wall. The little plate of milk and honey was completely full.

The boy wrung his hands, not sure what to do. The wall was his responsibility. This was his first season—what if he was put back with the younger children? Even one empty lantern was a danger, especially if the fog got thicker.

He ran back and forth atop the wall, worrying his lip. The glimmer of yellow-green lights caught his eye. The fireflies he'd been watching before were still dancing just outside the wall. Even as he watched, the blinking lights seemed to grow in number until it seemed hundreds of the fog-banishing creatures lit the forest below.

The boy glanced over his shoulder at the town slumbering peacefully behind him. All those grown-ups asleep, counting on him to keep them safe. The night was clear, and with that many fireflies around... he made a decision. He rushed down the steps, scrambling down to the nearest gatehouse. He rummaged briefly for a firefly net and then dashed out through the wicket gate.

The gate was some distance down the wall from where he had seen the fireflies. Glancing up, he could see the darkened lantern standing forlorn and empty. He ran.

The fireflies had started to drift away. There were so many of them, and the boy had never seen them moving so purposefully into the trees. The trees were glowing green and yellow, winking in and out, but each time farther away.

He ran after them, through the trees, faster and farther away than he'd ever been from the town before. The fireflies were outpacing him. He almost cried in frustration. They'd always liked him! They'd always come to him and sat on his shoulders and buzzed happily in his ear.

Somewhere behind him, the fog rolled slowly in and the landscape shifted.

He tried to catch them up. He tried to follow them through the trees, but he wasn't as fast as some of the other children.

Maybe if he'd been older. He ran on and on but before too long, he had to stop. He couldn't even catch his breath. At first, he was panting too hard to really notice where he was. Or more importantly, where he wasn't. He couldn't see the fireflies any longer.

Dread started creeping up his spine. He didn't want to look up from his feet. He didn't want to look around because he knew that if he looked behind him, the red stone walls of home would be gone. He sniffled and rubbed his nose in the dark.

Finally, he forced himself to turn around, and when he did, he couldn't see the lanterns of the town wall, no matter which direction he looked and no matter how well he could see them when he closed his eyes.

He was lost, and he knew it.

After he had cried for a while and no one came, he decided that nothing much would come of staying put. He stood up, pulled his hood closer around him and started walking.

The world in the fog was strange. He might see a clearing through the trees ahead, but then the fog would roll through, and by the time he got there, all he would find was a thicket of brambles and a pile of old stones. He'd start to feel like he was walking uphill, only to roll his ankle as the fog shifted his path into a ravine or the bed of a small stream.

The fog didn't harry at his heels—but it stuck close, weaving sinuously across the ground ahead. Sometimes the landscape changed so fast it seemed the trees were walking; silhouettes marching across the sky. But the fog couldn't touch him directly and so, even though it threatened, it made no phantoms. The boy knew they could have done little more than gnash their teeth—he was much too young—but even so, he was glad they did not appear. They frightened him.

Eventually the boy found himself climbing a loose scree

slope, tripping over small stones and sending larger ones tumbling down the hill.

Cresting the rise, the boy found himself looking down on a valley. His heart skipped a beat as he saw, deep in the furthest part of the valley, the glow of hundreds, even thousands of fireflies. He was so eager in his excitement that he scrambled down the slope, sending a cascade of stones and dust down the hill.

He didn't see the strange figure until he'd nearly bumped into it.

It was tall and slender, and covered in what were either dirty feathers or tattered rags. It had the beak of an enormous bird and its eyes were dark chasms in a polished white skull.

Fear transfixed him to the spot.

Eyes wide, he could only watch as the creature slowly approached. It seemed to find him as strange as he found it. It cocked its head to the side quizzically.

The boy held his breath.

And then it spoke, its voice a croak. "How old are you?"

The sound startled the boy out of his paralysis and he ran, brushing right past the creature and running flat out down the slope toward the distant yellow-green lights. He stumbled over the loose rocks, tumbling in the sandy soil and picking himself up to run again. The lights were fading. The drifts of fireflies were disappearing out of the far end of the valley. The boy was afraid again, but he kept running.

At the edge of the valley the landscape changed—back to woods—the trees unfamiliar but comforting after the stony, barren slope. The boy rushed on frantically between the boles of trees, trying to keep sight of the disappearing points of light. He was about to give up hope again when a sudden noise stopped him dead in his tracks.

The sound was clear and pure and more beautiful than

anything he'd ever heard before. It was a bell, pealing in the night.

He changed direction and headed for the sound. Wearily clambering over fallen trees, he suddenly found the fireflies all around him.

The tree line broke, and he found himself staring at a town. He nearly broke down for joy, but as he ran closer, he realized the walls were not his own. The walls were brown stone, not red, and there were no great lanterns keeping watch over slumbering inhabitants.

But there were villagers.

The boy hid himself behind the trunk of an old oak and watched anxiously.

These villagers were trying to catch the fireflies. They didn't have the big glass lanterns that were the pride of his own village, but it looked like they had some wicker and rice paper ones, and they were trying ineffectually to entice the bright insects with sugar water and sweep them into the lanterns.

Even as these proceedings went on, every once in a while a villager would ring a bell, and then all of the others would ring their bells back.

A girl, about the same age as the boy, had wandered farther out from the rest, paper lantern in hand, trying to sweep the fireflies inside. Each time she swung the lantern at them, the fireflies drifted farther away. She seemed frustrated and was chasing the small batch of fireflies closer and closer to the tree line.

The boy made up his mind.

He stepped out from behind the tree, holding his net shyly.

"You can't do it that way," he said. "All the air's trapped in the lantern. It pushes the fireflies right away." The girl looked at him in surprise.

"You need to use a net." The boy crept closer to the milling

cloud of blinking lights. He made a friendly buzzing sound through his teeth. He swung his net slowly, gently through the air and turned back to the girl.

It was full of little lights, each one sitting calmly on the inner surface of the net. The girl looked at him for a moment, eyeing him skeptically. But the boy smiled hopefully and eventually the girl grinned in return. She began to ring her bell.

Events were a whirlwind after that, but the boy was happy and he'd made a friend. The villagers were friendly too, and he caught fireflies for them and did his part to protect the town. More than that, he felt this place could be his new home.

A few months later, as he and the girl were helping to fix a paper lantern on the wall, a great bell started ringing.

"Fog break!" a voice called out. It was a loud voice: a grown-up's voice. "Trade day!"

The village bustled into activity. As even the boy knew, fog breaks were a rare thing. Though sometimes the fog could settle down and leave a village quite safe for even days at a time, they didn't call it a trade day unless the landscape had brought another town in sight of the walls.

The boy ran with the others across the town, the stream of people becoming a spontaneous parade. Even the adults had come, carrying goods for trade and barter. Young men and women, probably only a few seasons off the wall, were stepping out into the cobbled streets. They were laughing and crying and gathering bundles of their belongings. The boy didn't understand that.

"Why's she crying?" he asked, gesturing to a young woman who was smiling and hugging everyone around her, while tears stood in her eyes.

"She has to leave now," the girl explained, her own eyes shining.

"But why?"

"She's old now. When you're old, you have to go to a new town and find a trade."

The boy remembered this same rule from his home village. When children left the wall they had to prepare themselves to trade villages.

"But can't she find a trade here?"

"No. It's tradition. Half of us must go, and half may stay."

The boy found this hard to accept. He began to worry that one day he'd have to leave this new home he'd found, too.

"Come on!" The girl pulled him into the rush of people and he quickly forgot his worry.

The adults crowded onto the wall, while the children left by the wicket gate to check that the fog had indeed broken and that it was safe to make the crossing.

The girl tugged the boy out through the gate with the rest of the children, and they fanned out into the woods. The fog was nowhere in sight, but the night was dark. It was difficult to see the walls of the other town at first. They seemed just an ominous shadow against the dark, especially with the glare of their own lanterns.

Something about that dark silhouette was familiar.

The boy's heart sank. His steps faltered but the girl was eagerly pulling him on.

"Come on—it's a town! Another town!"

He dragged his feet and she turned to look back at him with concern. "What's the matter?"

He shook his head mutely.

The girl turned and looked.

"Why aren't there any lights?"

She raised her lantern.

The boy could just barely make out red stone walls with shapes atop that just might be giant glass lanterns—but all dark.

The boy began to cry. The girl looked back at him and up at the red stone walls in the distance. She cried with him.



“This story’s too sad!” Emma objected. “It’s too sad for the babies.” She gestured in the direction of the bunk where the very few children younger than she were asleep under the watchful eye of the older ones.

Wheeler paused in his tale, handing her one of the firefly props—the crude glass wings at the end of the stick glimmering in the lantern light.

“True stories are often sad,” Wheeler told the little girl, knuckling her on the cheek.

Something in the way he said it made Ogma want to cry. She didn’t understand it. Sure, it was a sad story, but she’d heard sadder stories before and had seen worse things with her own eyes. But there was something about it. She’d even told Wheeler once, when she was the young one ‘helping’ with the shadow puppets, that she liked the sad stories. Something in the heartache of a sad story or a sad song helped her to sleep.

Wheeler was looking at Emma kindly. “Too sad then? Shall I stop here?” There were some grumbings of protest and mutinous whispers from the other children, but Wheeler silenced them with a look, and turned back to Emma for an answer.

Emma rubbed one eye, considering the glass firefly with the other. “No...”

“Okay then.” Wheeler clapped his hands and took up the tale again.



The boy grew up, and so did the girl with the bell, and gradually the shock and sadness of the lost town faded. They were now among the oldest who still walked the brown stone wall in the brown stone village that was once so strange but had become the boy's home.

They were inseparable. They traded shifts so they could patrol together. They ate together. They watched the dancing stars together. Some of the adults gave them looks, and whispered behind their backs. But the boy had already come from another village, as the girl would loudly point out if any of the elders complained, and so for the most part the village was happy for them.

Eventually, they were the oldest children who still walked the wall. And then, the oldest that anyone could ever remember doing it. But the boy kept catching his fireflies, and he liked the way they looked in her hair, and the fog never seemed to bother them.

One day they were out walking together, looking for fireflies. They were older, and they thought themselves wise, and together they were unafraid of anything the fog could offer.

But as they laughed together, holding hands and resting on an old fallen log, the fog stole up around them.

The boy saw it first. It was drifting slowly between them and the wall.

He leapt to his feet and rushed forward, waving his arms to send the sneaking tendrils swirling back. He could feel something wrong in the fog that night. It danced away from him mockingly. He rushed toward the wall.

"Come on!"

He turned back. The girl stood stock still, quaking in fear as the fog whispered and swirled around her. An insubstantial hand caressed her cheek.

The boy sprinted back and grabbed her by the arm, pulling

her away from the swirling mist. They ran—dropping their nets and lanterns, heads down, as fast as they could toward the wall.

The boy burst through a bank that had curled up behind them, crashing into the wall headfirst. Lip split, the taste of blood filled his mouth. He staggered, disoriented, trying to remember where he was, what he was running from... and then he realized that the girl was no longer holding his hand.

It took her. It had snatched her away, disappeared her—like she was a grown-up.

The boy shouted and called out for her and rang the bell she'd given him, but her bell didn't ring back. The boy got angry and desperate. He tried to make the fog take him, too. He waited outside the walls, tried to let it touch him, tried to touch it, but it kept fading away from him. As if he were still a child. Though he was no more a child than she.

His throat was hoarse, his heart ached. But he had no tears left to cry. The boy straightened his back and walked into the fog.

He wandered in the fog for many seasons. But no matter where he wandered—no matter how old he got—the fog never touched him, never took him. He was always a child to the fog, and though it changed the landscape, it never changed him.

One day he was taking shelter from the rain in a small cave in the side of a scree slope. In the cave he found rags, old bones, and the skull of a great bird. He recognized these things—recognized the hollowness that matched his own—and dressed himself in them.

As he was leaving the cave and climbing the hill, a small boy stumbled into him, panting with exertion, but rigid with fright. He cocked his head to the side, puzzled, and asked the boy,

“How old are you?” But the boy ran on, brushing past him down the slope.

The man walked into the night, thinking about the boy with fireflies in his eyes.



Emma was sitting in rapt attention, mouth hanging open. “But, but—Wheeler? What happened?” She tugged at his clothing insistently, her voice lilting up to that dangerous pitch again. “What happened to them?”

Ogma could hear sniffles around the room and wiped her own eyes on the sleeve of her nightgown. It was her favorite story—the sadness it left behind was like the peace after a good cry.

Wheeler scooped Emma up and sat her on his knee. He handed her a pinwheel and showed her how to hold it in front of the lantern to cast the shadow of a creaking windmill on the wall. Cocking an arm around her, he laced his fingers together into another shape. A figure dressed in rags with the head of a bird tilted up to look at the turning windmill.

Ogma sat up straighter. In all the times that Wheeler had told the story before, she’d never heard him keep going. She’d thought that was the end.

“The man who wore the bones, who was the boy, who caught the fireflies...” Wheeler took a breath. “The story of how he came to wander the fog is sad, true enough, but he left his fear behind. Out in the fog, he became a traveler. Some say—”

A scream burst into the room on a cold gust of wind and the children fell silent in shock. Wheeler sat stunned, the story forgotten, the shadows falling back into lifeless shapes cast by the lantern. Emma looked startled, as if unsure whether the scream was real or something from the story.

Firelight reflected on frightened faces as the children turned as one toward the shuttered windows that overlooked the wall.

Close, Ogma thought. It must be very close.

The watchtower that was the children's home was on the first terrace and only a short distance from the wall. She glanced at Cole. Even in the dim light of the dark lantern, she could see that he was looking back at her. *He knows it, too. The same voice. It's the same voice.* The room was still, frozen in the dark, with Wheeler's shadow puppets forgotten as the room held its breath. Ogma could see the pained looks play across their faces. *Could it really just be a phantom cry?*

And then they heard Jory's bell echoing from atop the wall. He rang a frantic, clangorous cadence—too sloppy for them to make out what alarm it really was. Ogma's eyes met Wheeler's as they cocked their heads to listen. *Someone's lost.* Emma started crying. The noise shocked the room into motion. Wheeler was on his feet, removing the shutters from the dark lantern. Ogma squinted against the bright light, blue and purple spots swimming in her vision like phantoms in her eyes. *The girl with phantoms in her eyes.* The thought brought her up short as she shook dozy remnants of Wheeler's story from her attention and clambered out of the bunk.

"Cole! The watch bell!"

Cole sprang to his feet, running for the door so that he could ring the watch bell that was meant to warn the villagers. The watch bell was too small to wake the whole village, but the bell tower in the central square could be heard for miles.

Wheeler stood, comforting Emma with a quick word and handing her to one of the older children. He started barking orders, "Brigid, Daniel—watch the little ones. Mae, Maya, and Bowen with me. The rest of you, gather blankets, warm some cider, and stay here."

Ogma bounced anxiously on the balls of her feet awaiting instructions.

“Ogma! Get to Jory! If this is a rescue—”

“I know!” she called back over her shoulder, as she ran for the door. Cole started ringing the alarm.

Enki! Enoch! the bell called. *Awake! Alarm!*

As she pounded toward the wall, she could just make out Wheeler’s continued orders as he too left the watch house. “Cole, once the village answers, I need you to take some of the others to the south wa—”

“The south wall? But Wheeler, Jory’s in the north,” Cole argued.

“I know, Cole, but it may be a trick. The fog might be luring us north, while it tries to slip phantoms over somewhere else.” Ogma’s heart skipped a beat, and Cole froze in surprise, the bell falling silent. “It’s tried that before.” Ogma heard an edge of pain in Wheeler’s voice.

She turned her attention back to running as she rounded the corner of the wide verandah that circled the common room on the top floor of the watch house. From there, an elevated stone walkway arched directly to a landing halfway up the wall.

Too slow. What are they doing? Ogma growled in frustration as her bare feet slapped the stone. No one could remember why the old bells in the central square were called Enki and Enoch, but they were supposed to be attended day and night, so that any alarm sent from the children on watch would be echoed throughout the village right away.

Just as Ogma’s feet hit the stairs, the deep clear peal of Enki rang through the night, making the stones hum. A beat later the deep resonant boom of Enoch followed, rebounding off the wall and echoing up the terraces.

Finally. She panted up the steps, the cold numbing her toes

and fingers. On the penultimate step, her bare feet slid on the rain-slick stone and she barked her shins painfully.

Well done, she berated herself, panting for a moment on the top step. *Nightdress and no boots, what a rescue. I'll be forgetting my bells next*. She sighed and stood, listening for the sound of Jory's bell between beats of Enki and Enoch's general alarm.

Someone lost! Alarm! Alarm! Jory's bell was ringing frantically from somewhere midway along the northwest span.

Ogma raised her hand to the two bells on the cord that never left her neck. *I'm here! It's Ogma. I'm close*, they sang. She limped up and saw Jory leaning out over the wall, hanging with one arm on the rail while he rang his bell frantically with the other. He seemed to be struggling to keep sight of something in the fog.

Ogma came up beside him, steadying herself with one hand, and leaning out to peer into the swirling fog. The rain had tamped down the mist, at least. It was thinner than it had been on her patrol earlier that night, and lower and farther from the walls.

"Jory! That scream—is someone really out there?" Ogma panted.

"It's that voice! The one that you and Cole have been hearing. It's not a fog phantom!" He was looking back at her, wild-eyed. She grabbed his belt, worried that he might slip. "There's someone out there. Look! Look!" He leaned out over the wall, bracing himself against the outer wooden railing, and pointing at something on the ground. Standing, as they were, in the shadow of one of the great windmills, it was difficult to see anything at first. The mill was still churning the fog into patches and swirls that drifted through the trees and across the ground. "It was just here, I swear!" Jory exclaimed in frustration. "Wait—the fog's moved it a bit. Yes! There it is!"

Ogma looked as the fog shifted, clearing an area that an

instant ago was completely obscured. The moon was bright enough to be casting harsh, strange shadows that made the shapes below seem alien and abstract.

"I don't see anyone... wait! Yes, there!"

A figure lay in the mud, legs protruding from under a tangle of thorny brush. The hair on Ogma's neck prickled. "We have to get down there," she breathed.

She watched Jory's jaw clench as he struggled to be brave, but there was a quaver in his voice. "Do we have to go down there?"

Ogma's look was grim. *It's nothing we haven't done before, just... not on a night like this.*

Wheeler's bell sounded his arrival behind them, with Bowen, Mae, and Maya in tow. Relief was writ plain on Jory's face. "Wheeler! What do we do now?" he asked, turning to the older boy.

You know what we have to do, Ogma thought irritably, keeping watch on the figure below. She was losing patience with Jory's helpless attitude.

"There's someone down there, Wheeler." Her voice was completely steady. "Probably hurt."

Wheeler was standing away from the lip of the wall, eyeing it nervously. *What's gotten into him?* The older boy was always so steady. He was their rock.

"Come on, I'll show you."

Wheeler took a deep breath and stepped up next to her. While he leaned out over the rampart, Ogma studied his face. *He's terrified.* The realization shook Ogma to her core. *How did I not see it before?*

"I can't see anything. Where was it, Ogma?"

She pointed the way.

"Right." Wheeler nodded. "Here." He handed her a coat,

then glanced disapprovingly at her bare feet. Ogma felt the heat rising in her cheeks.

"No time to waste," she said defiantly.

Wheeler let out a breath between his teeth. "All right. Bowen, bring me two harnesses, Ogma's and one—" he looked out over the edge, trying to gauge the size of the figure trapped on the ground "—one about my size. Mae, Maya, I need you two to keep careful watch. You call out as soon as you see any banks of fog rolling in, or any phantom shapes, okay?"

"Right!" the two girls chimed cheerfully.

At least they're still having fun, Ogma thought, the ghost of a smile returning to her face.

"Don't forget your bells. Don't trust a voice if you can't see the person it belongs to."

The fog seemed to be holding steady and the figure on the ground was still visible. With Mae and Maya keeping track of both, Ogma turned to face Wheeler. His expression was grim. She tried to put as much determination and bravado into her own expression as she could. He must have noticed because he smiled at her. *That's the Wheeler I know. Don't go anywhere on me.*

Bowen came running back to them, arms full of leather straps and rope. A cold splash on her collar warned her that the rain was starting again. She held her arms out to her sides as Wheeler helped strap the harness over her coat and nightdress. She tried to suppress a shiver as an icy drop of water trickled down her back. Once she was securely strapped in, she picked up the other harness and waited for Wheeler to raise his arms.

"Whoa—it's not for me," he said, stepping back. Wheeler dropped his eyes apologetically. "It's for—whoever that is, down there. You need me to belay."

Ogma stared at him for a moment. *Bowen and the others could do it. It'd be slow, but—he really doesn't want to go.* Bowen

was setting belay pins into slots drilled into the stone. Wheeler leaned in to clip one end of the tether to her.

"It's okay," Ogma whispered in his ear. "I can do it."

Wheeler leaned back, shamefaced.

Ogma caught his gaze. *Fog knows you've cared for all of us for so long.* She couldn't bring herself to say it out loud.

He took another deep breath and put his lips to her forehead. "I'm sorry." He looked down, laced the other rope to the empty harness in her grip. She felt a warm droplet on her hand. Wheeler turned away and tied off both tethers to the wooden railing on the outer edge of the wall.

"Right." Ogma spoke aloud, giving herself a shake and turning to the wall. "Are we ready, then?" She gave Wheeler a defiantly unconcerned look.

"You used to love this part," he reminded her apologetically. "You said it was just like flying."

She clambered to the top of the parapet and looked up, watching the stars dance. *You used to like it, too.* And then she stepped off the wall.

The wind rushed through her hair and whipped at the edge of her nightdress. She felt a rush of vertigo and weightlessness. And then the rope pulled taut and she came to a halt standing perfectly straight, ninety degrees out from the wall, bare feet flat against the rough stones. Her heart pounded, but after a slow, deep breath, Ogma felt an old confidence returning to her limbs. She started to swing to the left and right, like a pendulum on a gradually lengthening chain. She kept herself moving by running in short bursts across the stones, as easily as if she were jogging back and forth along the ground.

With each swing, Wheeler paid out more rope and Ogma's jogging arcs carried her farther and farther back and forth across

the face of the wall, and closer and closer to the ground. She kept her eyes trained on the figure lying some distance from the wall. They were definitely not just pinned under some brush, unless the brush had grown claws. Whatever it was, neither it nor the figure pinned beneath it were moving. It wasn't a phantom either. The phantoms were made of and by the fog itself, and though they could be solid enough they still looked like fog, and rarely stayed the same shape for very long. This must have been a beast that lived within the fog.

"Ogma-a!" Maya's voice called down from above, her bell chiming with it. "The fog is getting thicker!"

Ogma glanced around as she started another downward swing. She was about three quarters of the way down the wall, but the fog seemed to be building in a rough semicircle at the edges of the clearing. "It's all right," she called back up, "keep going!"

At last, she made her final swing, pushing gently off from the wall and letting gravity pivot her on the end of the tether, jogging to a stop in the mud. She deliberately set herself down some distance from the fallen figure. She stood, watching the two shapes warily for any sign of movement. The ground around the two figures was torn up. Beyond them, Ogma could see furrows in the mud and broken branches. A puddle around the still forms reflected a red moon. *At least one of them is dead*, thought Ogma. She began to approach cautiously, circling closer to get a better view.

The beast was enormous. Standing, it would probably have been taller at the shoulder than Ogma's full height. It had a coat of long, deadly-looking quills, some of which were scattered on the ground. Its front claws were long and broad, as if for digging.

Ogma stepped closer, gingerly, mud oozing between her toes. She suppressed a yelp of alarm as the creature's head came into view. Two armored ridges ran from snout to shoulder

blades across its head and back. It had two sets of enormous nostrils set in the front of its snout-like gills. Four eyes, milky white, stared out at her from under the ridges on the creature's skull. *There must be four eyes on the other side as well*, Ogma shuddered, *and none facing forward. It must burrow; some kind of tunneler?* She suddenly found herself wondering how deep underground the wall's foundations went. *I'll ask Wheeler when I get back.*

She stood for a moment, out of excuses, but not quite able to convince her feet to cooperate with what she knew she had to do.

A weak cry startled her into motion, and she ran to the other side of the carcass.

It was a boy, lying cheek to jowl with the beast, rows of teeth inches from his skin. He'd been crushed into the mud under its bulk. He looked to be about Wheeler's age. The rain had washed the mud from his face. Given the size of the creature's teeth, she'd been expecting something... messier. His face was locked in a grimace of pain or exhaustion, lips colorless, eyes tightly closed. He didn't cry out again. She knelt in the mud next to him and tried to find the injury. He had no wounds on his face and the beast had not managed to tear out his throat. *It might just have crushed him. It's certainly big enough.*

The boy coughed weakly and specks of blood spattered on his lips.

Wheeler's bell tolled on the wall above her. "Ogma! Have you found someone?"

Ogma chimed her bells in response and called up, "Yes! There's a boy! He's been crushed under this—thing! I'll try to get it off him."

"Well, get moving! The fog's getting thicker. And if he's too badly hurt—" Wheeler didn't finish the warning, but Ogma didn't need him to. She glanced around. The fog was pressing

closer, trees around her fading into nothing. And closer to the wall, the fog was beginning to curl inward. Before much longer, they'd be cut off. If that happened, the tether would be her only hope of getting back.

The beast's body was strangely hunched above the boy, as if its weight wasn't resting fully atop him. She grabbed one of the great claws with both hands and heaved, dragging its massive paw out of the way. A putrid smell turned her stomach. There was a gap between the bodies. The boy's hands were clenched around the wooden shaft of a spear buried deep in the animal's chest. It looked like he'd tried to brace the shaft against the ground, but it had broken under the creature's weight. The jagged end had punched a hole through the boy's armor and into his stomach. It was hard to tell how much of the blood was his and how much was the beast's.

Ogma stepped back and started casting about in the mud for a branch that might be big enough to use as a lever. A stand of saplings had been dislodged in the ragged earth. *That should do.* She dragged the bole of one through the mud and knelt beside the bodies so she could slide it into the gap between them. There was no place for it to rest except the boy himself. She laid it gently across his strange armor.

"Sorry about this," she said with an apologetic glance. "I expect it's going to hurt." His eyelids trembled briefly but he didn't stir. She braced the lever against her shoulder and pulled her legs into a crouch, hoping her feet wouldn't slide out from under her in the mud when she tried to stand up. "Here we go," she breathed. She counted in her head as she braced herself for the big push. She wasn't sure the boy would survive it if she dropped the thing back on top of him. *One... two... three!*

Ogma surged to her feet with a groan, heaving against the improvised lever with all her strength. It bent frighteningly and shuddered in her grip, but did not break. The carcass of the

beast lifted and began to lurch to one side. She could see the boy's hands clenching and unclenching around the spear shaft in his belly. Ogma's knee began to shake under the strain. She took some quick, shallow breaths. *One... two... three!* She pushed the bole of the sapling as high above her head as she could manage. The boy screamed as the carcass rolled off him, the spear shaft that bound them together snapping off as the great weight fell to the side.

"Au! Det gjør vondt!" he screamed out. "Vondt..." And went still.

Above, Mae and Maya's bells started ringing. Jory and Bowen were both shouting down to her.

"The fog! Ogma! The fog!"

Ever so quietly, the fog had stolen up around her. Curling tendrils were now between her and the wall and closing on every side. She hastily dropped to the boy's side and began strapping him into the second harness. Now that he was out from under the shadow of the beast, she could see that the strange armor he wore glittered with a blue iridescence beneath the mud and ichor. *Fat lot of good it did you.*

There wasn't time to fasten the harness properly, and with his wound, Ogma wasn't sure it would be safe to try, so she fastened a single strap under his arms. She gave the line two hard jerks and then ran beside him as he slid through the mud at the end of the tether. The fog dispersed around her as she ran toward the wall, but already too much of it had filled the gap between her and the familiar stones. Even as she ran, it seemed like the wall was getting more distant, rather than closer, and she had the terrible sense that her tether was stretching and unraveling. She put her head down and ran faster, lungs burning, stumbling in the mud, and the fog retreated before her.

She burst suddenly from the fog and hit the wall—hard. She cut her brow painfully and stars swam in her vision. Ringing her

bells frantically in the alarm cadence, Ogma tried to keep the boy's head from knocking against the stones as he jerked into the air. His tether was being pulled up more quickly than hers.

Wheeler must be pulling him up. Bowen's not big enough to do much more than brace me. She took the tether in her hands, put her feet on the wall, and started pulling herself up to match Wheeler's pace.

She heard the fog chittering and whistling behind her. Phantom shapes seemed to rush toward her in the corners of her vision. Her irritation smoldered into frustration and burst into anger in her chest. The fear that'd been a tight ball in her stomach was missing; she'd left it lying somewhere in the mud below. She growled at the fog as she made her way up.

"You listen to me. I'm tired, and I'm cold, and I am *angry*." Her shout echoed off the stone. She took a deep breath. "I've found the wall. You can't take me, I'm not old enough. And I won't let you have *him*." The wounded boy spun on the end of his tether, head bumping on her hip as she tried to steady him. "So you may as well go away."

The fog subsided in sullen whispers and drifted back into a placid silver sea below her. When she finally reached the top of the wall, she helped Wheeler and Bowen lift the boy over the edge of the rail and then climbed over herself. Mae and Maya stared at her open-mouthed.

"You're really—um..." Mae started.

"Muddy!" Maya broke in. "Really, really muddy."

Mae nodded vigorously.

Ogma was too tired to care, too tired to notice the shame-faced look Wheeler was giving her, too tired to stop herself shivering. She sank down on the rain-slick rampart beside the boy as Wheeler sent Bowen to get a stretcher and help.

The boy was muttering something. "Jassike... ikke forlat meg..."



CHAPTER 2

THE WINDMILL TOWN

Wheeler dropped to his knees to catch Ogma before her head hit the stones. Maya raised one hand to her mouth and Mae tugged at Wheeler's shoulder. "Is she...?"

"Unconscious. Looks like she hit her head." Wheeler wiped Ogma's hair back from her brow, a bruised lump rising where she'd run into the wall. He unbuckled Ogma from the harness and tether, the buckles slick with mud and his hands fumbling in the cold. Once she was free, he wrapped her in his coat and lifted her into his arms. Ogma's mud-plastered hair dripped icy trickles of water down the front of his shirt as she shivered violently.

Bowen's bell rang out, *I'm here! Brought help! I'm here!* He came sprinting back up the cobbled steps with two stout men from the village puffing behind him. It was Ulfred the baker, and his brother Oscar, carrying a stretcher between them. They kept casting nervous glances at the edge of the wall. The way the fog had been, Wheeler couldn't blame them.

Without being told, Mae and Maya took up watch positions between the men and the wall's edge. Wheeler nodded with

approval. The fog had died down after its final surge, but it was still lapping against the wall, maybe twenty feet below the rampart's edge. Far from comforting for the adults.

The two men grimly set down the stretcher, Ulfred pointedly ignoring the roiling fog, while Oscar was transfixed by a slaving phantom maw taunting them from the bank below. With a shudder, he turned back to the boy's wound.

"It's a damn waste," he muttered, shaking his head. "Having us up here for this? Look at 'im." Ulfred shot Oscar a quelling look but didn't contradict him. "I jus' mean—it could come right over—an' we already did our watchin' when we were of age, didn' we? Tha's all." He'd clearly been drinking his courage. Ulfred gave Wheeler an apologetic look.

They crouched beside the wounded boy and lifted him carefully onto the stretcher. Even so, Wheeler winced as the spear haft in the boy's stomach jostled. The two men took up positions at each end of the stretcher and the baker gave a quick count—"One... two... three...*hup!*"—as they lifted it. Ulfred paused for a moment to nod at Ogma in Wheeler's arms while his brother swayed slightly with his end of the stretcher. "She the one who brought this boy up? In that?"

Wheeler nodded.

"Brave girl."

Wheeler nodded again.

Ulfred's voice was gruff. "You're doin' good, boy." Wasting no more time, he and his brother clattered across the rampart toward the stairs.

"Bowen, go with them, just in case..."

Bowen understood: just in case the fog broke through. Bowen turned and ran after the stretcher, heels slapping on stone. Wheeler turned to Jory, who was still watching everything with a blank expression of shock. "Jory—hey, snap out of it!"

Jory started and met Wheeler's eyes.

"Stay here and finish out your shift. Can you do that?"

Jory nodded.

"I'll make sure someone relieves you soon."

Ogma had stopped shivering. That was bad. "We've got to get Ogma warmed up." He hurried across the cobbled rampart in the direction of the watch house. Mae trailed behind with Maya, biting her lip—both girls quiet for once. The sky was beginning to lighten, dancing stars fading to a deep blue.

When they arrived back at the watch house, it was buzzing with murmurs and worried speculation. The din died down as Wheeler carried Ogma inside. The children's faces tracked him across the room, the older with worry in their eyes, the younger with barely contained excitement. Mercifully, all were quiet. He gently set Ogma down on his bunk, mud and all.

"Daniel? Daniel—she's cold. Too cold. She's not shivering anymore." Daniel dropped the muddied clothes he was collecting from the children who'd just come off their shifts on the wall.

"Blankets, as many as you can find, and get her out of those wet clothes. Brigid, can you—?"

Brigid had been pacing the great room in her patrol leathers, waiting to call out after them if they'd signaled another alarm. She nodded and jogged over to Ogma, shooing the boys away and shucking Ogma out of her wet nightclothes and tucking her under the pile of blankets Daniel had collected. When she was finished, Daniel knelt at Ogma's side, a hand to her forehead. Wheeler hovered over them anxiously.

Ogma began shivering again, violently. Brigid turned to Daniel in dismay.

"Don't worry. That's good. It means she's warming up. She's going to be okay."

"What can we do?" Wheeler asked.

"You can stop fretting for a start. She just needs to warm up and rest. We should throw some more logs on the fire." Daniel's voice was soothing but his brow was knitted. As Wheeler turned to the wood pile, Daniel caught his eye. "Hey." He jerked his chin to the crowd of anxious faces looking out from the ring of bunks. "You worry about them. They need to know we're safe."

Wheeler hesitated a moment, then nodded and turned to the other children.

"It's all right. Ogma forgot her coat again," his voice caught and the younger children who didn't grasp the danger of the cold tittered. "She just needs to warm up. And no one was lost at the wall. We found someone, in fact." As he told the tale, excited whispers raced around the common room. "Ogma rescued him. He's... well he's pretty badly wounded, so they've taken him to the village."

"Will he live?" Brigid asked, expression grim.

Wheeler shook his head. "We won't know until they've seen to him. We did our part. It was good work. You should all get some sleep."

He turned back to Ogma and went to sit on the edge of the bunk. Bedtime went utterly ignored, and excited gossip spread around the bunks. Behind him, Mae and Maya launched into an expansive recounting of the evening's events, standing atop one of the bunks and gesturing dramatically. At the rate at which they were interrupting each other and finishing each other's sentences, they'd be at it till noon and no one would get any sleep. Wheeler fought back a yawn.

"You should get some sleep too, you know." Brigid touched his shoulder and handed him a steaming mug of cider. She turned to Daniel, "Is she warming up?"

"She's getting there. Would you bring a washcloth? As warm as you can find."

“Sure,” Brigid replied, and returned a moment later with two steaming towels borrowed from the washing. She went to work wiping the mud from Ogma’s feet while Daniel worked on her hands, and they worked warmth into her icy extremities.

Gradually, Ogma’s shivering slowed. She sighed contentedly and snuggled into Wheeler’s pillow, smearing mud from her hair all over it. Wheeler clucked in irritation and Brigid stifled a laugh.

“She’ll be just fine.”

Bowen jogged to keep up as Ulfred and Oscar rattled across the cobbled avenues of the town with the boy groaning on the stretcher. The pre-dawn twilight had just begun to shade pale colors back into the world.

“Where will you take him?” Bowen asked.

“Goodie Hazel’s,” Ulfred grunted. “She’ll be expecting us with the alarm an’ all.”

“Hope she don’t have that crazy old man there again,” his brother grumbled.

“He’s not crazy, he just don’t speak.”

“Whatever he is, he ain’t natural.” Oscar raised his voice. “Remember? Came in with the Caravaners! Calm as you please through a bank o’ fog thicker than Moll’s pea soup. Way he were dressed, I thought he was one of ’em!”

“He came from outside?” Bowen was stunned by this. He’d thought the mute old man who lived all by himself under the south wall had always lived there. Some of the other children told stories about him, but Wheeler always hushed them.

“Oh yes- and he was older than—”

“Hush your trap, Oscar,” his brother wheezed. “Save your breath for runnin’.”

Bowen hoped the baker’s brother would keep complaining

so he could hear more, but the baker had picked up the pace as they came up the terrace and his brother was red-faced and puffing.

They turned into a small building at the edge of the town, bearing the stretcher between them into the low, dark room. The old man *was* there, just lifting strips of steaming white cloth from a pot of boiling water and laying them down to cool while a plump middle-aged woman laid out a row of glinting metal tools. She motioned for them to set the stretcher down on the table in the center of the room. They heaved it into place with a grunt and stepped back to the doorway.

Bowen stood between them, shuffling from foot to foot nervously. The boy on the stretcher looked very pale.

“Goodie Hazel?” he asked tentatively.

The woman turned from her tray of tools.

“Is he going to...?” Bowen gestured uncertainly at the boy, who was shivering violently.

Goodie Hazel sighed and padded over to the table. “Just cold? Or fever...” she muttered to herself. His hair was plastered to his face by sweat and rain. She held his wrist in one hand and laid the other to his forehead, pursing her lips. Bowen watched anxiously, wondering if he should ask again. A moment passed in silence.

Goodie Hazel shook her head. “It’s hard to say. We’ll know more once...” She gestured to the spear shaft protruding from the boy’s stomach.

“Damn waste,” the baker’s brother muttered. Goodie Hazel turned and raised an eyebrow.

The baker turned and whispered furiously, “Shut yer mouth, Oscar. You been drinkin’.” He took off his cap, flushed with embarrassment at his brother’s behavior. They both wilted under Goodie Hazel’s stare and fell quiet. The silent old man standing behind her smiled placidly.

Goodie Hazel turned back to her patient. His breathing was shallow and his hands were clenching and unclenching on the table. She clucked her tongue and started cutting away the straps that held his iridescent armor in place. The boy started, tossing his head, and a weak moan escaped his lips. The old man bent over him, mopping his brow with a warm cloth. Goodie Hazel began carefully lifting the armor, trying to lift it over the spear shaft without jostling his wound—but suddenly he cried out, spasming on the table.

To Bowen's eyes, everything in the room seemed to slow down. The boy's arm swung up in some strange reflex and he snapped his fingers. At the same time, he pounded the tabletop with his right foot—two rapid, staccato beats. A rush of air filled the room in a sudden burst, and his whole body jerked upward, a good foot off the table, before thumping heavily back down. An earthenware jug fell from its shelf, smashing to pieces on the floor. Time returned to normal.

Bowen watched wide-eyed as the baker swore loudly and he and his brother moved to restrain the boy, holding down his arms and legs as he spasmed and shivered. Blood was dripping on the edge of the table.

He cried out again, "Vi vil slåss! For trollmannens datter!" Another gust of wind filled the room with a *whoomp* and another basin toppled.

The old man stepped forward, murmuring nonsense sounds quietly into the boy's ear. He'd stopped struggling but his face was still screwed up in pain. The old man brought a ladle of warm tea to the boy's lips. He coughed and sputtered at first, but gradually subsided again to fitful sleep.

Goodie Hazel considered the earthenware fragments littering the floor. She complained to the air. "Traded those from the Caravaners when I was a girl, I did." She shook her

head. "That's what we call a *waste*," she said with a pointed glare at Oscar.

With Ulfred and his brother keeping the boy pinned firmly to the table, Goodie Hazel and the old man tried again to remove the boy's armor. They moved more slowly this time, lifting it delicately over the broken shaft of the spear without knocking against it. This time, the boy did not cry out. They set it carefully aside.

The old man began slowly pouring steaming hot water over the site of the wound, washing away the gore while the woman carefully picked out slivers of wood and large fragments of the blue armor. She gave a grunt of mild surprise, knocking the piece against the table where it clunked hollowly, and then raising it to her nose. "Not iron. Lacquered wood, maybe?" With a shrug, she dropped them in a bowl and turned back to her patient.

Bowen stepped closer to the operating table and peeked into the bowl. The small fragments still shimmered with blue-green iridescence. He picked one up and retreated to a corner of the room.

It looks like beetle shell to me, Bowen thought.

The work of healing was close and difficult and slow. The boy on the table slept fitfully.



Dunkirk dreamed.

He dreamed of a green hill with blue sky above and white clouds drifting gently across the sun. He dreamed of dappled light on emerald grass. The world in shadow and sun.



“Can’t you just pull it out?” Bowen asked timidly, peering over the edge of the table for a better look.

Goodie Hazel wiped a bead of sweat from her forehead and leaned in close. The boy’s wound was now clear of mud and gore and splinters, but the broken spear shaft was still in the boy’s belly. She pressed her fingers against the heated flesh of his stomach around the wound, probing for further signs of internal injury.

“That depends. If he’s very lucky, we may be able to do just that and then stitch him up. Then again...” She paused and nodded to the old man. He pressed clean bandages around the wound and she took the spear shaft firmly in both hands. “Might be we pull it out and set him gushing.”

Bowen paled. The baker and his brother pressed the boy’s shoulders more firmly to the board.

Goodie Hazel pulled.



Dunkirk was lost. He couldn’t remember how he’d gotten here or where all the trees had come from. *Where are the other soldiers? Where are my friends?* He crashed through the undergrowth frantically—brushing through the thicket, ducking under fallen trees—searching for any sign of the battlefield he was on just moments ago: the emerald grass, his company, the Blue Legion... or even the enemy. He knew he needed to calm down—just stop for a minute and get his bearings—but the panic was overwhelming. His breath was coming in ragged gasps.

He’d been running for a very long time. He was good at running. He could run for days. He was quick on his feet, and agile too.

But he had a terrible stitch in his side.

How did I get here? he wondered again, as he fought with brambles that tangled around his arms and legs.

He remembered standing on the hill, his brothers of the company beside him, and the whole host of the Blue Legion below them. He remembered the enemy, standing in their companies across the emerald-green field, under a clear blue sky. The air was warm and still. The calm before the battle.

And then we... Why can't I remember? Something happened. They must have hexed us. I'm lost! Dunkirk crashed through the trees, cursing himself. He was cold and thirsty. He couldn't see anything through this fog.

What were our orders? He tried to remember. *We were supposed to slip down the hill ahead of the others. Disappear into the trees.*

Before a battle had even been joined, they were meant to be behind the enemy's lines. He was one of the trilsks: the sappers company. They carried the curse staves of the Blue Wizard. He could remember he and his brothers, moving like shadows in the dappled light of the trees, carefully planting the staves in the ground according to the Wizard's instructions.

In his first battle, they planted a staff to weaken their enemies' limbs. Dunkirk met them in battle later, some so enervated they'd fallen to the ground under the weight of their own armor, unable to rise. The prisoners that day had wasted muscles and pinched cheeks. In another battle they planted staves to dull their opponents' weapons and rust their armor. The metal leached through the ground, the armor rusting to dust as they wore it, while steel saplings grew up where they'd planted the staves.

The worst were the staves they'd used with no stealth at all. No deceit. For once he and his brother trilsk stood in the front line, facing the enemy across a broad field. They planted their staves and

stood still as the enemy charged. At first, it seemed ineffective. The ground churned to mud under the enemy's feet, but so it would have even without the staves. But then turbid water bubbled from the mud. The front ranks stumbled as the mud sucked at their boots, but the back ranks pushed them on. The field became a stinking mire, and the soldiers panicked. First they tried to pull each other free, but found the mud sucking each of them deeper. They tried abandoning the armor dragging them down, but too late.

At the end, men were screaming and crying—climbing each other's shoulders, pushing each other deeper in the fen, yet always sinking. Dunkirk watched as the last young man—a boy really, no older than he—disappeared into the mud, his eyes pleading.

Dunkirk shivered, rebuking himself for the unbidden tears in his eyes, and stiffened his back. He was proud to be trisk. Proud to turn the tide in the Legion's favor. They would win the day for the Wizard of the Blue Legion, and his daughter would give them blessing.

"Jassike," Dunkirk whispered.



Bowen worried at the beetle shell fragment in his hands. The boy on the table was breathing fast and shallow. He tossed and turned against the grip of the burly village men while Goodie Hazel and the old man sewed him up inside. Bowen wanted to ask more questions, but with the grown-ups' hands *inside* the boy's stomach, he kept quiet.



A faint tremor in the ground that might have been booted footsteps pulled Dunkirk out of his effort to remember what had happened.

His heart pounded in his chest. He whipped around, tangled in the undergrowth, looking desperately for any sign of movement in the fog-sodden trees. His hands were shaking.

I've never fought alone, he realized in a panic.

The glittering blue horn of his helmet caught in the low branches above him. It twisted around his face, blinding him. He wrestled it off and set his back to the trunk of a tree, trying to slow his breathing.



The boy on the table's breathing steadied, and Bowen let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding. Goodie Hazel wiped the sweat from her brow with the back of her arm. Her hands were red to the wrist.

"Think I might be sick," Oscar muttered.

"Don' you dare," ordered his brother. But both kept looking anywhere but at the wound where Goodie Hazel diligently worked.

Bowen didn't feel sick at all. He was captivated.



The forest was silent again. Dunkirk closed his eyes, leaning his head back against the trunk of the tree behind him.

Why can't I remember?

They'd been standing on the hill and then... and then...

They'd been standing on the hill and then the horns blew.

The enemy started marching.

They waited, watching rank upon rank of gray armored warriors advancing. Ten times their number.

And then she was there: the Blue Wizard's daughter walking among them. She spoke to them, whispered encouragements.

She put her hand to his cheek.

And then she was gone, and the Blue Legion answered the enemy's horns with the tolling of their great silver bells and began their charge.

He and the other trilsks quickly checked the straps of their armor and took up their spears. Some carried true spears to fight off enemy skirmishers. Some carried the curse staves, disguised to look like spears, to hide them from the enemy.

With a snap of their fingers and stomp of their feet, they burst forward on charms of wind and speed, rushing down the emerald hill toward trees at the edge of the battlefield, where they would disappear to set their staves. Long loping strides, quickened by the flitting of beetle's wings on their iridescent armor, carried them effortlessly down the hill and ahead of all the other companies of the Blue Legion. The thrill of the charge was all consuming.

It felt to Dunkirk like flying.

They'd nearly reached the trees and then... *This is when it happened*, Dunkirk remembered. *No, not again!*

A concussive blast of air knocked him to the ground and sent his companions tumbling in the dirt. Dunkirk's ears rang. He saw the front runners of the enemy's ranks collapse. *We've done it! Already? That can't be right.*

There were cries of alarm and confusion from both ends of the field.

Just as Dunkirk thought he might be able to pull himself to his feet, a shadow fell over the field, and with it an overwhelming pressure that crushed the air from his lungs and

smothered all clattering of armor and cries of panicked soldiers in utter silence.

Gasping, Dunkirk rolled over, trying to see what was happening, trying to see why the sky had gone dark. He saw it then, cresting over the trees. A bank of fog that towered gray and angry into the sky.

The fog crashed into the emerald valley in a pitiless wave. Where it crashed upon the grassy shore, phantoms rose. Beasts of spine and tooth and horn, forming and reforming out of the mist, towering above the trees.

What kind of spell is this?!

Screams shattered the silence. Dunkirk scrambled to his feet and broke for the trees, the Legion in shambles around him. Great grasping arms—of and from the sea of fog like some deep ocean nightmare—plunged down the grassy bank, cutting them off from the forest. Shapes resolved in the mist. Phantom faces with horns and tusks and trunks and teeth—too many arms—too many eyes—all shifting and reforming all around them. His brothers tried to shout over the chattering chorus but the fog beasts echoed back, twisting their voices, mocking them.

Dunkirk saw the others disappear into the gray mist, the phantom beasts pouncing upon them in glee. He was surrounded in the eye of this terrible storm, a small clearing of green grass and blue sky. The phantom faces mocked and cajoled. His knees went weak.

Why don't they get it over with?

Something lunged out of the fog—not a beast! One of his brothers!

“Markus!” There was a crazed look in the young man’s eyes. Clawed tendrils clutched his wrists and ankles, pulsing with a red mist and then dissolved as he stumbled into the clear, the flying charm of his winged armor stuttering.

There was a beat of silence as they stared at each other, breathing hard.

And then a greater phantom came, tall as a siege engine. It stretched four great arms, growling from a lion's head as other beastly faces burst from its neck like tumors. It lunged.

Dunkirk raised a fable hand to ward it off. He heard Eirik shout in panic as he ran.

But before those lunging jaws could snap, before the great claws could rend his limbs, this phantom too dissolved, leaving Dunkirk again in a fragile bubble of calm. He sank to his knees, breathing heavily.

A thin keening came from behind him. Slowly, he turned.

He could see a shadow in the fog. A smaller one. Human shaped.

"...Markus?"

The keening grew to a wail, a chorus of screams picked up and echoed by the fog.

Shaking and crying, Dunkirk ran.



The boy on the table whimpered while Goodie Hazel stitched. Even unconscious, the boy's hands clenched as he grasped at the pain in his belly.

Bowen imagined what it would be like to wield the needle himself—to be a healer. He still flinched every time the boy cried out, but Goodie Hazel was unflappable, almost serene. As she calmly and methodically closed up the wound, slowly the boy's struggling slowed, his chest rising and falling in ragged, gasping breaths.



Dunkirk sagged against the tree. *Then I was here*, he remembered. *Lost*.

Another tremor in the ground brought him back to himself. It was stronger this time, almost on the edge of hearing.

The low rumble grew louder and closer, and then Dunkirk realized it was not a sound made by boots on the ground. A great furrow in the earth was rumbling toward him, pushing aside root and tree. Dunkirk wiped cold sweat from his brow and braced himself, gripping his spear tightly in both hands.

A beast crested over a wave of earth, enormous.

Too many teeth. Too many eyes. Dunkirk could see the deadly spines on its back. He braced himself for its charge. And then it dived, burrowing deep into the earth, and disappeared.

Dunkirk stood his ground, choking back fear and frustration. He spun around, searching the ground everywhere and stabbing ineffectually at the dirt. But there was nothing, no sign of it, not even a tremor, until—

—until the ground exploded beneath him and the beast emerged, snorting clods of dirt from its gill-like nostrils, jaws snapping at his leg.

With a cry of pure terror, Dunkirk fell back, narrowly escaping the gnashing teeth. He ran.

The beast stalked him under the earth. Dunkirk ran without pacing himself, without any effort to orient himself or keep track of where he was going. He simply knew he had to run, had to escape the great furrow in the earth, tearing up stone and sapling behind him. Every time he tripped over an unseen root or loose stone, another shout escaped his lips and hot tears of shame stung his eyes.

He was certain with each stumble that the great beast would erupt from the earth, and this time it would have him. The ground around him kept changing as banks of fog swirled. He found himself running through mud, then moss, then on

parched earth, in open meadow, and then back in pine forest. And yet still he could feel the tremor in the ground beneath him.

The fog parted briefly, and through the gap, something caught Dunkirk's panicked eye. *Stone? A wall!* He wasn't sure but for a moment the stitch in his side seemed less, and he put on another burst of speed. The trees opened up and...

It was just here! I'm sure I saw it!

Dunkirk cried out in frustration and ran through the empty clearing.

It couldn't be that far. I'm sure it was just there. Maybe over that next rise.

He risked a glance over his shoulder. The furrow was falling behind, almost lost in the wisps of fog in his wake. He remembered himself. *I am triłsk. I'm a runner.* He was going to make it.

A root tangled his ankle and Dunkirk sprawled on his face in the mud. With a roar of triumph, the beast burst from beneath the earth and charged.



The boy convulsed on the table, wrenching upwards against the men who held him down and then collapsing again. Goodie Hazel stepped back, needle and thread still in hand. The wound was finally closed, but the boy was delirious, whispering and shuddering between fevered convulsions.



A gentle rain fell on Dunkirk's face as he lay beneath the carcass, slipping in and out of consciousness. He felt warm. *A rest. Just a rest and this stitch in my side will go away...*



The boy shuddered as the old man mopped the fever from his brow. And then, mercifully, he slept.

Ogma half-woke to a confused jumble of children's voices and the sound of a fire crackling. She could barely open her eyes. She felt smothered, ice cold and burning hot at the same time. Her heart beat echoed in her chest, not pounding, not racing, but tolling... ever so slowly. *What if the bell stops?* she wondered. She felt a burning hand on her brow and succumbed to uneasy dreams.

Her sleep was fitful. She lost time between each heavy-lidded blink. Sometimes the room was darker, sometimes lighter, and the children's voices rose and fell from bright chatter to gentle murmurs.

Someone was humming a lullaby. A tune she remembered deep in her bones, whose words she couldn't remember. She opened her eyes. Daniel sat beside her, rocking gently in a chair, darning socks by the fire. The watch house was dark and quiet. After a moment he glanced up from his work and met her eyes.

"Hey, little grub." Setting aside the socks he got up from the chair and knelt at the head of her bed. "How are you feeling?"

"...I'm not a grub, *you're* a grub," Ogma mumbled. He hadn't called her that in seasons. Daniel chuckled.

"Here, drink this." He held a warm mug to her lips. Ogma tried to lift her head, but everything felt too heavy. Daniel slipped his arm under her neck and lifted her up, murmuring, "There you go, drink up now." The cider was sweet and warm, gliding down her throat and warming her from belly to toes. After finishing the mug she fell back against the pillow, lids heavy over her eyes.

Daniel sang softly as she slept.

Confused memories of the rescue—of blood and fog and glittering blue armor—faded from her dreams as Ogma woke again.

There was an unfamiliar bunk above her. Golden afternoon light was streaming through the shutters, filtered through drifting motes of dust, lit up like fireflies. Ogma propped herself up on her elbow, every muscle complaining. *I'm in Wheeler's bunk?* She sank back to the bed and remembered.

She remembered the boy in the strange iridescent armor. *I brought him in. Got back to the top of the wall.* She took a few more breaths and sat up slowly. She ached from head to toe. Wheeler and Brigid were standing by the fireplace talking quietly. Wheeler looked tired. *Well of course he's tired,* Ogma berated herself. *Someone's been sleeping in his bed.*

The blankets were stifling. She was about to push them back when she realized she wasn't wearing her nightgown. She blushed furiously. Peering over the side of the bunk she saw a neatly folded gown in Daniel's rocking chair. She grabbed it and pulled it on under the covers.

She swung her feet over the side and noted the absence of mud with some surprise. A quick check revealed that most of it had been washed off. The thought of someone washing her feet while she slept made her blush deeper. *What if it was Wheeler?*

She stood up and hobbled over to where he and Brigid were talking. Brigid was dressed in patrol leathers and holding a few of the vicious quills that had been scattered around the carcass of the beast.

“—the fog had already taken the clearing. I did find a few of these in the trees, though I'm surprised there was even this much left.” Brigid stopped when she saw Ogma, and the

normally grim girl smiled and surprised her with a hug. "You've been sleeping for days! It's good to see you on your feet."

"Days?!" That meant she'd slept through watch shifts, missed meals. She didn't have time for that now and pushed the thought aside. "How is he?"

Wheeler gave her a grin, the exhaustion retreating from around his eyes. "Up-and-at-em and no nonsense. That's the way, right, Ogma? Sleep well?"

She carefully ignored him, color rising back into her cheeks.

Brigid covered her mouth with one hand. "Oh dear, your hair—" she began.

"Well?!" Ogma cut in, blush deepening. She felt her hair, which was sticking out in strange ways, matted with now-dried mud. She tried to comb through the tangle with her fingers, but they stuck in the knots. She extracted them carefully.

"Is someone going to tell me—?" Her voice caught suddenly. "I mean, is he... did he—?"

"He's all right," Brigid said kindly. "At least for now. I checked in this morning after my patrol. Goodie Hazel managed to get the shaft out of his stomach and his fever broke."

Ogma grunted and turned to the embers in the fireplace.

"Goodie Hazel had him moved to the Old Man's cottage in case she needs room for new patients. Bowen's been visiting."

Wheeler patted her gently on the shoulder. "You did well. No one could have done better."

"Little grub! You're awake!" The young ones with Daniel giggled at the nickname as he shooed them inside and ran up to pull Ogma to his chest. He kissed the top of her head. A tension inside Ogma let go; her shoulders sank and tears flooded her vision.

"I was scared..." she whispered.

"I know, little grub. It's okay to be scared."

Ogma broke the embrace and turned back to Wheeler and Brigid. "I'd like to see him if that's all right."

He pursed his lips. "Goodie Hazel says we're supposed to let him rest. Actually, I was going to—" the rest of Wheeler's remark was cut off as he yawned enormously.

"Go to bed?" Brigid finished for him, a twinkle in her eye. She motioned to Ogma to grab his other arm and they marched him over to his bunk.

"Hrmph." Wheeler grunted and gestured imperiously at his mud-stained pillowcase. "Mutiny is what this is. Muddy, too. *Mud*tiny." He pitched onto the bed, grumbling incoherently, and was asleep almost instantly. Brigid dusted off her hands and gave Ogma a wink.

"That's one thing settled. Now then," the older girl turned and rummaged through a pile of satchels near the fireplace. "These are for Rora and Effie on the south wall." She handed Ogma two burlap bags filled with fruit pies wrapped in rice paper. They smelled heavenly. "They relieved Cole a few hours ago and they missed breakfast."

Ogma opened her mouth to protest. Brigid raised a finger to stop her.

"You can visit your rescue once you've dropped off the food. You weren't the only one who had trouble with the fog. We had to step up the patrols. People are tired."

Ogma shut her mouth and took the bags. After a moment, she asked, "What happened?"

Brigid sighed and shook her head. "It... wasn't that bad. It was close, that's all." She paused. "The fog got through in a few places."

"Phantoms?" Ogma asked quietly.

"Big ones." Brigid managed a smile again. "No fear, right?" she quoted Wheeler. "Cole and the others told them off. No one was taken. At least it's finally clearing up."

"There's a fog break?" Ogma perked up.

Brigid smiled. "Why don't you go and see?"

Daniel put an arm around her shoulder. "Before you go... " He held up a comb.

Ogma rolled her eyes, "Okay, okay. I'm muddy, I get it." Then her smile softened. Restless as she was after days abed, she followed him back inside as he gently washed the mud from her hair with warm water. The feel of the comb on her scalp was deeply relaxing.

She gave him a hug and a small smile. "Thanks big grub."

Ogma emerged from the watch house door into the bright afternoon light. The sky was clear and the glare from the town's blue slate roofs was bright enough for Ogma to have to shield her eyes. The late afternoon sun was warm on her face. It had been dark and cold for so long that the feeling was almost unfamiliar.

She set an easy pace, enjoying the warmth as she walked through the cobbled terraces. From where the watch house stood by the northeast wall, she'd have to cross the entire village to reach Rora and Effie on the south span. She could have taken the rampart walk, but it was quicker to go straight through.

Her shoulders throbbed in a constant, dull ache, but gradually the warm sunlight worked its way into her stiffened muscles and the ache subsided.

The fields and gardens in the outer terraces were overgrown. With the fog as bad as it had been, most of the villagers had been unwilling to venture too close to the wall. From the look of it, the ermine moths had been at the crops as well. About half as long as Ogma's forearm, ermine moths were a common pest. Mice could be a problem in the granaries, but the big, fuzzy ermine moths would eat the grains right off the stalk.

Sometimes they'd venture into eating other vegetables if an ambitious mood took them. They were nearly impossible to catch, but sometimes they'd get drunk off fermented grain piles and you could just pick them up off the ground. You couldn't eat them, but their wings made a decent leather. Ogma actually thought they were kind of cute with their fat, furry bodies and fuzzy antennae.

Among the crops, wildflowers that had been waiting for any hint of sunshine after the long rains had begun to open. A gentle breeze swept waves through the tall grain that lapped gently around a few old stone buildings standing empty on the edge of the village, only just outside the shadow of the wall. Ogma wasn't sure why they'd even been built; none of the adult villagers would risk living so close to the wall in case a fog phantom broke through. But under the clear blue sky and the warm breeze, they looked much more inviting, as if they were only waiting, not abandoned.

The next terrace was better cultivated, the houses occupied and carefully cared for. Even though it was still fairly close to the wall, there were many more houses here, some even newly built from stone and timbers scavenged from the abandoned buildings. As large as their village was, they still had to make careful use of the space. Mixed planting was the norm, with vegetables, grains, and climbing gardens filling in all the space that wasn't occupied by the houses or the cobbled paths. There were orchard trees of several kinds as well. The ones on Ogma's path had budded a few weeks ago and now hard green olives hung from their branches, not yet ripe.

Her step lightened by the sunshine and crisp air, Ogma skipped up the steps to the third terrace. It was a higher climb than the rest, and more closely crowded, with some of the buildings reaching two stories. The few olive trees here were older and much taller. She set her bags down at the base of one of the

trees that stood apart from the rest and started climbing. The very highest branches were just high enough for her to see over the edge of the wall.

The silvery bark of the olive tree was warm. The upper branches swayed gently, and the leaves whispered in the breeze. Ogma looked out over the wall and she felt something in her heart swell.

The fog really did break! It's clear!

The roiling, angry banks of fog that had besieged the town had rolled back, retreating over the landscape. Ogma could see for miles. The fog had changed the landscape as it retreated. The dead pine forest that she had caught glimpses of when the fog was thick was gone, and instead she could see bright, green grass. Wild meadows surrounded the village in gentle, rolling hills. Stands of proud, green trees swayed in the warm wind. And in the distance, Ogma could see the peaks of snow-capped mountains. The windmills on the wall were still.

She'd never seen the fog retreat so far. The only signs of it she could see were in patchy banks on the foothills of the mountains and drifting like low clouds in valley meadows.

Ogma stood on the gently swaying upper branch for some time, just drinking in the sight of it. She started scanning the horizon excitedly.

Maybe there's a town! We could trade—and that would mean a festival!

Try as she might, she couldn't pick out any man-made buildings in the distance. She hoped she might hear Enki and Enoch start tolling—that someone else might have spotted another village—but the great bells did not disturb the warm afternoon air.

In spite of this, Ogma felt a guilty sense of relief. Other towns meant festival and trade, but more often than not, it also meant the young men and women of each village meeting and

courting... and, as often as not, leaving. And who knew if the two villages would ever find each other again.

So for all the color and noise and excitement of a fog break festival with another village, they were always sad.

Ogma shinned down the tree and shouldered her bag, reflecting on hazy memories of festival days from earlier seasons. *I guess it's not quite that bad. Sometimes we find the same villages again.* But there was no regular interval, and it was never certain. There was no way to predict when a given village might be brought close in the drifts. At least, not that anyone seemed to know.

She padded down the cobbled path toward the town square. Most of the buildings were two stories now, and some of those that lined the central square were even three. They were cleverly designed so that each building had an open balcony garden that overlooked the roof of the buildings below it. Even the path was divided to make room for a central planter. These were shared by the important craftsmen and village elders who lived in the center of the village and didn't have enough open space for their own plots.

The village square was bustling. Hopeful villagers had assembled goods on carts and were gathered around the cistern wells, chattering about the possibility of a trade festival. Most of what they had for trade was food: fresh produce, preserves and pickles, baked goods and pies. She also saw some homespun cloth made from plant fibers, and some pottery that the villagers made from the clay inside the walls. They looked up at the bell tower expectantly, but Enki and Enoch remained silent. No other village had been sighted.

A young woman that Ogma vaguely remembered as one of the older girls on the wall when Ogma had been very young saw her and waved. She hustled up as Ogma struggled to remember her name. She'd left the wall some five seasons ago.

"No village then, I guess?" the young woman said with a hopeful smile.

Ogma shook her head.

"Oh well..." She sighed, looking down at the folded linens she'd woven, ready for barter. "How's young Wheeler? Still doing his funny little shadow puppets?"

Ogma decided she didn't like the cheerful young woman.

"He's the oldest now, you know," Ogma said.

"Oh." The young woman's face fell. "Has it really been...? Is he coming off the wall soon, then?"

"I... don't know." Ogma worried her lip.

"Oh, that's all right... I'm sure he won't wait too long."

Ogma mumbled a goodbye and hurried on her way. Now that it was clear no other village had been sighted, she could hear the villagers beginning to argue the merits of going beyond the wall anyway to forage or hunt.

It'll come back, you know, Ogma thought. *It's still not safe.* Yet, if they caught something, perhaps they might have a feast. It seemed like the fog had been so close for so long that they deserved *some* kind of celebration. Ogma had only eaten meat once before, on a festival day several seasons ago when the villagers had killed a great antlered beast with three toes on each foot and bird-like talons. Goodie Hazel called it a hart. The juice had been sticky on her chin, but the saltiness of it was delicious. She was sick afterwards, but it was worth it.

Ogma's stomach rumbled.

She pulled herself out of her daydreaming and hurried on her way to the south wall. The north and south walls both had large gates so the stone steps to climb to the top were easy, if a bit steep. To get directly to the east or west spans, they had to either go around on top of the wall or climb a ladder onto the roof of a nearby building and take one of the connected rope bridges.

Rora and Effie were at the middle of the span over the gate when Ogma puffed up the steps to the top of the wall. Of an age with Ogma, they were cheerful mirrors to her own seriousness, and today they were smiling and enjoying the sunlight. Ogma chimed her chord and they turned. Effie's bell was clear and warm, and Rora's bright and pure.

"Hey! You're awake?" Effie waved.

"I'm here, aren't I?" Ogma replied, fishing in her bag for the pies. She tossed one to each of them.

Rora caught it easily. "Mmm... provisions!" She unwrapped the pie and took an eager bite. "Tanks," she said, crumbs tumbling from the corner of her mouth.

Ogma unwrapped one for herself and the three girls sat cross-legged on the wall, munching happily in the sunlight. They ate in silence for a while until Effie sat back with a sigh.

"Delicious. I think I'll have to be a baker when I leave the wall."

Rora snorted. "I bet. You don't know the first thing about cooking."

"I sure do."

"Yeah? What's that, then?"

"The first thing about cooking is that the cook eats first." Effie grinned and grabbed the burlap sack to root around for another pie. Ogma smiled and Rora laughed.

Brushing crumbs from her patrol leathers, Rora stood to glance over the wall. She shook her head in amazement.

"I've never seen it like this. It's so clear. And no fireflies, no other town, just *clear*."

Ogma went to stand beside her, looking out over the hills. "It won't last."

"Oh, I know. Don't spoil it," Rora said with a sigh.

Effie popped up beside them, offering the half-eaten second

pie first to Ogma, and then to Rora, who took it and finished it off absently.

“We should go out.”

Rora shook her head firmly and Ogma spoke, “No.”

Effie gave them a push. “Come *on*, you old grumps. You sound like the elders.”

Rora stuck out her tongue at Effie. “We’re on patrol.”

Effie rolled her eyes. “*After* dummy. If it’s even still clear by then.” she sulked.

Rora hesitated. She was clearly tempted.

Ogma shook her head again. “Not unless we go in groups. And besides, if we go out, we should take the villagers and the carts. Bring back timbers and—”

“Ugh. Yes, *Wheeler*.” Effie threw up her hands, but she was smiling when she said it. “So we’re going out then?”

Ogma blinked. “Wait. I didn’t mean—”

Rora threw her a wink. “She got you there. Smarter than she looks, our Effie.”

“Hey! Am not! Wait, I mean—”

Rora laughed and turned to knuckle Ogma on the shoulder. “Don’t worry so much, Ogma. We’re not going anywhere without talking to Wheeler.”

Ogma relaxed a bit.

“It’s just this sun—and the sky! It makes you giddy, y’know?”

“We’ve had some rough nights, that’s all,” Effie said more quietly. “A break is nice.”

It took Ogma a moment to realize they weren’t just talking about her rescue. “Brigid said you had trouble over here.”

Effie nodded. “Same night as your rescue. We’d just got out here for our shift when we heard double-E start ringing the alarm.” She jerked her hand at the bell tower standing above the

blue slate roofs in the center of town. “And we missed Wheeler’s shadow puppets *again*, by the way.”

Rora picked up, “We knew *something* was happening on the north span from the alarm, but we stuck to our span. It was a good thing, too. It really started boiling then.”

Effie nodded.

“We were sprinting up and down the wall clearing phantoms all over south and southwest.”

“Phew—what a run. This is why we always win the Circle.”

“Truth. Anyway,” Rora continued, “Little Ambrose and Zachary were on southeast.”

“We should have thought of it.” Effie put in.

“They’re still young. They didn’t realize what was going on,” Rora said. “They dashed right back off for the north wall when they heard the alarm. Left the whole span empty.”

Ogma sucked in a breath, biting her lip.

“It’s all right,” Effie was anxious to clarify. “I mean—it worked out in the end.”

Rora shook her head. “Only because they ran right into Cole coming the other way. He got them turned around real fast. But—”

“But some phantoms got over the wall,” Ogma finished.

Rora nodded. “Three of them.”

Ogma winced. “Brigid said they were big.”

“Big ones are easy to spot though,” Effie put in, waving it off. “But yeah—even the smallest one cleared the roofs by head and shoulders, easy.”

Ogma didn’t find that very reassuring. “What happened?”

Rora took a breath. “Well it turned out okay. Cole took the wall and Ambrose and Zach chased down the phantoms. Gave Old Keegan and Nan Aud a mighty scare, but they kept their heads. Left the house and ran farther in.”

“The old man was out there too. Not sure where he was

going, but it's a good thing he wasn't home. I don't know why he lives so close to the wall." Effie shook her head.

"He was going to Goodie Hazel's, I think," Ogma put in. "He helps her with the medicine sometimes, and the boy we rescued was hurt."

"Ah. That makes sense, then. Ambrose said he was heading in that direction. He didn't even run from the phantoms." Rora sniffed.

"So you found a *boy*, then," Effie teased.

Rora rolled her eyes. "How is he?"

"I don't know. He looked pretty badly hurt." She described the spear wound and the carcass of the beast she'd found on top of him.

Effie whistled. "Gross! And not even a phantom, just some animal out in the fog?"

Ogma nodded.

Effie seemed almost wistful. "Wish I'd seen it."

Rora grinned and nudged Ogma with her elbow. "That's our Effie, more interested in strange beasts than strange boys."

"Don't you know it." Effie pulled Rora into her lap, "That's why I like *you*, eh?"

Ogma smiled. Watching the two of them together never failed to cheer her up.

"It was well done, Ogma," Rora said.

Effie nodded. "She always does well, our Ogma. Say—remember your first season? When that big phantom came right over the wall and made it all the way to the village square?"

"We were fetching supper for the watch," Rora remembered.

"And here it comes, all horns and arms and teeth, halfway as high as the bell tower."

"And Rora and I are just standing there, holding the soup—scared stiff. And what do you do?"

Ogma felt herself beginning to blush.

"You walk right up to the cursed thing and wag your finger at it!"

"It looked so ashamed before it faded! And you in your nightdress because you forgot your coat again."

"At least you're not doing that anymore," Rora chuckled.

Ogma's blush deepened.

"No." Rora looked at Effie and they looked back at her in disbelief. "Is that why you caught cold?" Effie curled up laughing.

Rora tried to smother a laugh of her own. "We shouldn't. You were really sick." She snorted and fell over Effie, trying to hold back her giggles.

After a moment of heated embarrassment, Ogma started laughing too. It felt good to laugh. It replaced the pit in her stomach with a pleasant ache.

Rora and Effie's laughter subsided into chuckles and then yawns. Rora got up from Effie's lap and stretched.

Effie shook her head to clear it, short curls bouncing around her face. "Aren't we about done for our shift? Are you relieving us, Ogma?"

Ogma shook her head. "Sorry, no. But I think Brigid's sending someone soon."

"Where you off to, then? Back to bed?"

"No, I'm checking on the boy."

Effie started grinning again, but Rora elbowed her in the ribs and turned to Ogma.

"All right then. Hope you find him well. Thanks for the pie."

"Aye, thanks!" Effie waved and Ogma went on her way.

. . .

Ogma was a bit anxious about approaching the old man's stone cottage, which was almost in the shadow of the southwest wall. No one was quite sure why he'd decided to live there, but they let him be. He'd certainly never explained it—Ogma wasn't sure if he was actually mute or he just chose not to speak. The gardens and grain fields around his cottage were the best-kept in the lower terrace though, and while the other villagers had abandoned the rest during the weeks of heavy fog, he'd taken care of his crop.

The windows and front door were open and she could hear the quiet rustle and clatter of domestic sounds inside. She approached cautiously and paused a moment on the doorstep to calm her nerves. She'd asked Wheeler once what the man's name was. He'd shrugged and said he didn't seem to have one. When she said they had to call him *something*, Wheeler told her that Goodie Hazel had tried to give him one shortly after he came to the village, but he just shook his head. He didn't seem to mind that they all called him "the old man."

He appeared on the threshold as if he'd heard her thoughts. He seemed entirely unsurprised to see her, just smiled placidly and gestured for her to come inside. The cottage had only a single room, but it was spacious. The old man went over to the sink and pumped water into a kettle while she looked around.

What a strange place. He had a bizarre collection of knick-knacks: old feathers, bits of rock with writing or pictures carved into them, and brightly painted pottery animals—all cluttering the shelves and windowsills or hanging from the walls.

He must have traded these from the Caravaners. I wonder if they do anything.

Movement in the corner of her eye caught Ogma's attention. The boy was lying under a threadbare quilt in the old man's bed. *He's awake.* His eyes were following her around the room. They looked at each other.

After an awkward pause, Ogma ventured an introduction. "What's your name?"

The boy's eyes widened and words began pouring out. Words that she couldn't understand.

"Du snakker! Så du kan snakke, da. Selv om det høres rart ut. Gamlingen har ikke sagt et ord!" He gesticulated in exasperation.

He doesn't even speak our language? Apart from Caravaners, there'd never been a wanderer or other village that spoke another tongue, though some spoke their familiar language rather strangely.

"Jeg trodde dere var stumme alle sammen." He sank back on the bed. "Hvor er jeg? Hvordan kom jeg hit?" His voice was surprisingly soft and lyrical.

She'd thought he was a bit older than Wheeler, but now she thought he must be younger.

He sat up straighter, looking at her intently. "Er dette en avdeling av Den Blå Legion?" His voice became more insistent. "Jeg advarer dere—jeg er trilsk! Jeg er trilsk." He was strangely proud, and defiant, when he repeated the last phrase.

Ogma was unsure what to say. "Trilsk? Is your name Trilsk?" She pointed at him.

He nodded vigorously and pointed at himself. "Trilsk." He pointed at her. "Er du en vasall av den Blå Legion?"

She looked at him in confusion. *There's something—I could almost understand that.*

"Den Blå Legion?" he repeated.

Ogma shook her head and pointed at herself. "Denbla lagoon? What does that mean? No denbla lagoon."

The boy seemed to be getting agitated. He sat up straighter. "Au!"

Well that's clear enough. "You should be lying down."

He clutched at his side and sank back onto the bed. The old man was watching silently, a mug of tea in each hand.

Ogma pointed to herself. "My name is Ogma. Ogma."

The boy pointed at her. "Ogma?"

"Yes, yes!" She nodded vigorously and pointed to herself again. "Ogma." She pointed to him again. "Trilsk?"

He began to nod, and then shook his head as if he realized some mistake. He pointed at himself. "Jeg heter Dunkirk." He looked at her and nodded slightly, still pointing at himself. "Dunkirk."

Ogma pointed at him, "Dunkirk," and then at herself, "Ogma."

He pointed at her, "Ogma?" and then at himself, "Dunkirk." He watched her, and nodded when she did. He pointed at the old man and raised his eyebrows.

Well that's not going to help matters, she thought, *even we don't know his name*. She just shrugged and pointed at her mouth mutely.

The boy looked confused and frustrated, but then shrugged and began speaking again as rapidly as the first time.

"Jeg må tilbake til Den Blå Legion. Trollmannens datter. Hun er avhengig av oss. Vi må beseire fienden. Jeg må finne dem."

The words washed over her in an incomprehensible rush. He seemed to be asking for something. Pleading almost. *That last bit almost sounded like...* Ogma shook her head and waved away his words in frustration.

He kept talking at a desperate clip until at last the old man stepped in, murmuring soothing sounds until Dunkirk fell silent, and pressing a cup of tea into his hands. He turned and gave the other to Ogma, sitting her in a chair at his table. The last chair he took for himself. They sat in silence for a while, each sipping at their tea as the quiet drew on.

An approaching voice made them turn their heads in unison toward the door.

“—and then he started talking and talking, only I couldn’t understand any of it, so I left right away to run and get you.” Bowen’s voice carried up the walkway to the house.

“Good of you to think of it, young Bowen,” Goodie Hazel replied, and then she was in the doorway. She surveyed the room with an intimidating glare. Her gaze lingered first on Dunkirk, sitting up in bed, at which she clucked disapprovingly. She turned to Ogma next and smiled, but it was still intimidating.

“Come to check on him, have we? Of course you have.” She bustled into the room and addressed herself to Dunkirk. “Awake then? Feeling better?”

Dunkirk said nothing this time. *Well... Goodie Hazel can do that to a person.* Ogma half-smiled to herself.

Bowen trailed in behind her and whispered conspiratorially while Goodie Hazel examined her patient. “There was a lot of blood.” He chattered excitedly. “The spear was right there, right in his belly. They had to pull it out, but first they had to clean out all the splinters and stuff. Here, I’ve got a piece.” He handed Ogma a glittering iridescent blue fragment. Ogma turned it over in her hands, studying it.

“It looks like—”

“—beetle shell! I know, right?” Bowen gestured in the direction of the boy admiringly. “I wonder where he got it?”

Still a stupid thing to use for armor, Ogma thought, and went to hand the piece back to Bowen. Dunkirk squirmed as Goodie Hazel and the old man changed his bandages.

“Oh, you can have that one,” Bowen said, pushing it back into her hand. “I’ve got *loads* more. Goodie Hazel let me keep ’em.” Bowen was puffed up with self-satisfaction. Ogma pocketed the fragment, watching them unwind the bandage.

Bowen looked briefly disappointed with her lack of interest in the acquisition he clearly found rare and valuable. But then he shrugged and started narrating the proceedings, his observation of the surgery having made him a certain expert in his own mind.

"See—after they cleaned out the wound they just sewed him right up, just like Daniel mending shirts." He lectured with an air of clinical authority, as if it were something he'd seen a hundred times. "Only you have to sew the *insides* first, *then* the outsides so he doesn't keep bleeding inside and pop."

Ogma was rather sure it was more complicated than that.

"Au! Det gjør vondt. Når har du tenkt å slippe meg ut herfra? Jeg føler meg bra." Dunkirk seemed to be protesting the proceedings. He tried to get up from the bed, but Goodie Hazel pushed him firmly back down.

"None of that, now. Bed rest. *Bed. Rest.*" She spoke loudly and slowly.

It's not like he lost his hearing, Ogma thought. Dunkirk subsided sulkily back onto the bed.

Goodie Hazel turned to the room. "All right then. On your way!" She shooed at Bowen and Ogma with her hands. "I'm sure you've got more important things to do. He needs his rest."

Bowen was already out the door. Ogma stood up quickly to follow.

"You'd best come by early," Goodie Hazel said as Ogma headed for the door.

"Sorry?"

"Your Wheeler says the boy's to move to the watch house tomorrow."

"Oh."

"I told him: I said he's plenty old enough to be off the wall—and for that matter Wheeler should be thinking about—oh well, anyway, he insisted."

She thinks Wheeler should be off the wall. Ogma pushed that thought away. She was impressed that Wheeler had managed to insist on anything with Goodie Hazel.

"But is he well enough?" Ogma asked, gesturing to the heavily bandaged Dunkirk.

"He will be. Those sutures came from Caravaner thread." Goodie Hazel sighed heavily. "Not much left, I'm afraid."

Ogma had a vague recollection that Old Keegan had once had a very serious accident, caught his arm in the windmill works or something. As bad as it was, after Goodie Hazel sewed him up he was back at work in the village within a week.

"So you'll collect him early, then."

It didn't sound like a question to Ogma. She nodded and left. The boy's eyes followed her from the bed as she walked to the door, and the old man waved.

The golden glow of afternoon light was just fading to dusk as Ogma traced her steps back through the village. The villagers were lighting lanterns in their windows. Considering the late hour, there were more people in the streets than Ogma was expecting. Men and women were gathered in small groups just outside their doors talking in hushed tones.

"It's a whole *day* wasted, if you ask me," a man was complaining as Ogma passed by.

"Shh... I know," a young woman put a hand on his arm, nodding in Ogma's direction. "They're just being cautious."

"Hrm..." The man cleared his throat when he saw Ogma and lowered his voice. "It's just we could use the lumber. The roof's been sagging, Moll, and Kev's been hoarding all the timber we've got left."

"I know all that as well as you, Roose, you know I do." Moll replied, "and not enough leather for shoes either. But you heard

what happened. They're tired." She gave Ogma another sympathetic glance.

Just at that moment, Enoch tolled: long-short, long-short. Roose and Moll disappeared inside their home, emerging a moment later with coats and bells. The village was gathering. Ogma heard the answering bells across the village, including the clear note of the watch bell. She added her own simple chime and hurried curiously to the square. There was already a fair crowd, and lanterns had been lit in the fading light.

The village elders were there: Old Keegan the weaver, the only man in the village with fully gray hair; Nan Aud the stonemason, her hands as gnarled and bumpy as the cobblestone paths of the town; and Goodie Hazel, bustling into the square just a moment behind Ogma. Wheeler was there as well, for the watch. They stood on a small platform just below the bell tower as the stragglers filtered into the square.

Rora and Effie slipped in from the northern end of the square, Rora suppressing a yawn and Effie giving Ogma a smile and a wave across the crowd. They went to stand near the platform. Ogma was surprised to see them. She'd have expected them to go straight to bed after they were relieved on the wall. Wheeler usually took the meetings alone.

The sky faded to purple while Wheeler and the elders waited patiently for the last of the able-bodied villagers to arrive.

Nan Aud raised a bell in each hand, pealing first her own high chime and then the powerful basso gong of the Elder's bell. She cleared her throat as the whispers in the square subsided.

"Welcome all!" The clarity and tenor of her voice belied her rough manner. "It has been twenty-four nights since our last meeting, forty days since the fog last broke, and almost four seasons since the fog last brought another town to us."

The villagers murmured their quiet hopes for the fog breaks to come more often.

"There is much news, but first, the reckoning of the stores." Nan Aud stepped back and Old Keegan stepped forward, ringing his three bells in their complicated discord.

Ogma had heard the village where he'd watched had been almost three times the size of their own, and so he was used to carrying more bells. He'd always kept his three even though no one else in the village carried more than two.

Ogma had once worked out how many villagers they'd have to have before they really needed three bells. With two bells from up to three octaves, and discords as well as true chords, and only some people's chords rung in unison, while others were rung broken... It had made her head spin, but the number was at least five hundred, she was pretty sure. The village needed maybe half that many at its current size.

Sums weren't Ogma's favorite thing, but she was fairly good at them. Still, thinking about that—or anything else—was more interesting than listening to the accounting of the stores.

Old Keegan's voice quavered, but he was still easily heard across the square.

"We have thirty tons of grain left in the stores, enough for half a season, and we should have our next harvest within ten days. We have twenty tons each of beans and squash, with more of that, too, to harvest soon. Other vegetables have been plentiful, with three full harvests this season, despite the rain. Our food stores are strong, and we have plenty to trade should a break bless us with another village."

The villagers murmured agreement, but some were shaking their heads impatiently. Rora was yawning again, which made Ogma yawn in turn. As important as the reckoning was, it was *boring*.

"We are low on tin ore and very low on iron. We must hope

for trade or forage," Old Keegan continued, nodding toward Rowan and Isak, the village's smith and tinker, standing in the front row. "Down, cotton, and wool have all run low, and nights have been cold. We must hope for trade or forage. Leather stores are nearly empty. We should try to catch the ermine moths when we can."

Roose spoke up so the square could hear. "We should hunt, Keegan! We could use the hides."

There were murmurs of assent from the other villagers. Old Keegan raised his hands placatingly. "That is for young Wheeler to decide. He will speak soon."

"But—"

"He will speak soon," Keegan said firmly, and Roose quieted. "In the meantime, the stores are enough that perhaps we can leave some grain in the fields to ferment, to better catch the moths."

Nan Aud interjected with a gentle chime. "Food is not a thing to be wasted lightly."

Wheeler spoke up. "The youngest ones have been wearing through their shoes. Of all the stores, we have the most food. We always have."

Goodie Hazel agreed. "The watch must have their shoes." She looked to each of her fellow elders.

After a moment's consideration, they nodded, and together with Wheeler, rang their bells to affirm the decision.

"Good." Old Keegan continued, reciting the village's other precious stores.

Ogma's mind was wandering. She tilted her head back and watched the first stars come out. The ones directly overhead were still, though those on the horizon danced. The small disk of the moon's blue sister was high in the sky, though her larger sibling had yet to rise. She'd forgotten that the fog breaks stilled the stars. It was very peaceful.

Keegan had nearly finished. "Last, our timber stores are lowest of all. The reserve is nearly spent. We may have to salvage from the buildings closest to the wall." There were harsher murmurs at that. "We must hope for trade."

"Trade?" Roose called out again. "The other villages can no more afford to trade their timber than we!"

Other voices were rising in agreement.

Kev spoke up. "He's right, Keegan! We need to chop new timbers."

Old Keegan nodded grudgingly and stepped back, gesturing to Wheeler, who stepped forward.

He looked tired, and more than a little nervous. He stood as tall as most of the men in the square, a fact Ogma noted uneasily.

He cleared his throat. "I know the break has been tempting. I know you're eager to go out and gather." The villagers watched him grimly, nodding. "I'm sorry we haven't been able to send out parties yet."

A young woman's voice, Ogma couldn't tell who, spoke up. "These breaks hardly last more than a day most of the time. You know that. What if we've missed our chance?"

Worried calls of agreement rose up.

Wheeler raised his arms. "We've kept watch—there's still no fog within miles of the village."

"Then why haven't we gone out?" someone called.

"Please. The fog's been at the wall's edge for ten days, and even before that, the banks were thick and close. Every child's been on the wall. We're tired. I had to let them sleep."

The mutters quieted down again.

Nan Aud chimed her bell gently and stepped forward. "We know it's been hard. We thank you and the other children, Wheeler. We remember the wall."

The villagers called out their thanks, but many without feel-

ing. Ogma could still hear them muttering about the wasted day. She could see Wheeler tensing on the platform.

Don't they remember? It's not that long since some of them were on the wall. Ogma felt anger unfolding in her chest. *We have to live it every day.*

Goodie Hazel's glare withered the unenthusiastic crowd. She drew herself up. "*Three* phantoms crossed the wall before the fog broke."

Faces in the crowd paled, and the muttering stopped.

Now you remember, Ogma thought with grim satisfaction. Goodie Hazel paused and let the words sink into the sheepish crowd.

"*And* a wanderer, lost in the fog, was rescued. I'm sure we're all *very* grateful."

Some surprised chatter broke out among the villagers who'd heard of the phantom attack, but not of the stranger found.

"Who'd we find? Someone from another village?" Moll called out.

"One of the badgerkin?"

"A Caravaner?"

Wheeler spoke up again. "A boy. About my age. He was badly hurt, though..." He looked to Goodie Hazel questioningly.

"He will make a full recovery," she replied. It had more the tone of a command than a statement of fact. "He's resting now."

"What's his name?"

Wheeler shook his head. "I don't know. I'm not sure he speaks our tongue."

The chatter rose in volume. Even the Caravaners only spoke in their own strange dialects amongst themselves. They at least *knew* the proper language.

Ogma, near the back, spoke up. "Dunkirk. His name is Dunkirk."

The villagers parted and turned, most noticing her for the

first time. Ogma shuffled her feet, uncomfortable under their scrutiny.

“That’s as far as we got.”

Wheeler cleared his throat and the villagers turned their attention back to him. He continued, “He’ll be joining the watch tomorrow. He’s still of age to help.”

Roose called up again, “That’s all well and good, but what about this fog break?”

Kev added, “Aye. Are we going out, boy?”

Wheeler hesitated.

Rowan called out from the crowd. “It’s up to you, boy. We’ll abide.” She’d been the oldest too, once. She knew the burden on him. Wheeler nodded and made up his mind.

“Yes, we’ll go out tonight. But—” Excited voices cut him off. He raised his hands and shouted over them. “Please! But only a small party tonight. For lumber only.”

“Bah,” Roose sighed in frustration.

Wheeler’s voice hardened. “It’s dangerous enough in the woods at night. Harder to see the fog if it creeps up. If the break holds, we’ll send out more parties tomorrow.”

Roose nodded grudgingly. “We’ll abide.”

“Rora and Effie will escort. No more than two carts and eight people.” Wheeler finished firmly, “More tomorrow.”

Goodie Hazel nodded her approval and stepped forward. “If the village business is done, then?”

Nan Aud and Old Keegan nodded and raised their bells.

“Then we are done. May the breaks be many, and the other towns near.”

Nan Aud rang the elder’s bell in benediction, and all the villagers rang their own bells in answer.

The villagers began to disperse. Ogma noted with a snort that for all the bluster in the crowd, Roose was having trouble finding volunteers to go out with the lumber party. Rowan and

Isak had joined right away, and Kev was eager, but others were hard to come by. In the end, five men and three women stood by the carts, honing rarely-used axe and hatchet blades in the pools of yellow lantern light. Ogma sidled closer to the now empty stage where Rora and Effie were getting the party organized.

“One of us stays with each cart at all times.” Rora gestured at herself and Effie. “We’ll leave by the northern gate, and the carts must stay within bellshot of the wall *and each other*, got it?” She waited for each of the villagers to meet her gaze and nod.

Effie added, “We’ll have an extra patrol at the north wall watching for fog. So if you hear the watch bell, or fog forbid Enki and Enoch, you drop what you’re doing, grab the cart, and get back quick, right?”

The villagers all nodded.

“If you have to, you *will* leave the cart behind.”

They nodded again.

“Right, let’s go.” The expedition trundled off, the hand-drawn carts rumbling over the cobblestones.

Ogma waited in the square, letting them get ahead. She’d have to walk the same direction to get back to the watch house, but she’d rather walk alone than with the adults.

Wheeler appeared at the edge of the lantern light. “Dunkirk, huh? What’s he like?”

“He talks funny,” she replied, considering the lilt of the boy’s voice. “Almost like he’s singing? Can’t understand a word, though.” She started walking the cobbled path to the watch house. Wheeler shortened his stride and walked beside her. The air was pleasantly cool, in contrast to the bitter cold of the previous night.

“It’s almost worse during the breaks,” Wheeler said distantly, then faded into a brooding silence.

After a moment, Ogma asked, “What’s worse?”

"*This*," he said, gesturing vaguely at the village. "The fog. The watch." There was a bitterness in his voice she had never heard before. "It shouldn't *be* this way." He clenched his fists, nails digging into his palms. "All the grown-ups behind the walls while we train, while we patrol, while we skin our knees and break our bones and fight the beasts outside." Ogma had never seen him like this, never heard his voice quake with such anger.

She touched his shoulder gently "But it can hurt them. Kill them."

"I know! Of course, I do! I just..." He threw off her arm and sank down on his heels, arms wrapped around his knees. "Have you ever seen it? Seen what happens when the fog hurts someone?"

"I... we all know the stories—"

"—well I have! I've seen it." He rocked back and forth, his eyes somewhere far away. "It hurt her. It took her."

"...who?" Ogma asked gently.

"My—" He hunched his shoulders, started again. "She always came to check on us at the wall when I was little. She played games with us. Sang to us." His voice was small. "She always had something special just for me."

He seemed to come back to himself and stood.

"I'm sorry, Ogma. I shouldn't put this on you."

Wheeler's hands were shaking. It was the most frightening thing Ogma had ever seen. *What should I do? He's so afraid.*

"I try..." he whispered, tears streaking his cheeks.

Ogma hugged him fiercely, her own eyes stinging.

"You don't just t-try." She muffled her sob in his shirt. "You *do*. You're always there for us. You taught us everything—told us all the stories. Y-you're just getting older." She held him tighter. "We'll protect *you* now! All of us!"

Ogma felt the muscles in his chest tighten. After a moment,

he put his arms around her. He was warm. He took a deep breath. She could feel his chest rise and fall against her cheek.

"Why don't you let someone else take over?" She asked softly. She didn't want to ask. Didn't want him to leave.

"Who? Daniel? He's... he's too kind. Brigid's strong but she rubs people the wrong way. Rora maybe, but Effie brings out her worst. It would have to be... you."

Ogma broke the hug and stepped back, shifting nervously from foot to foot. She swallowed gruffly and rubbed the tears from her face, but couldn't meet his eyes.

"I-I..." She tried to steel herself, get the spike of fear under control.

"Not yet." Wheeler whispered. "A couple more seasons."

Ogma felt relief and guilt fill her all at once. She told herself she hadn't heard disappointment in his voice.

They stood quietly in the cobbled path for a while. After a moment, he relaxed slightly and exhaled.

"Why do we grow *more* scared as we get older?" he asked quietly.

"We know better," Ogma said.

He smiled bitterly as she wiped her cheeks. They turned back on their way toward the watch house.



CHAPTER 3

STRANGE CUSTOMS

A soft tickling on her face woke Ogma the next morning. She opened her eyes. Feathery black antennae tickled searchingly over her nose. She and the ermine moth stared at each other for a moment.

“Well,” Ogma started.

The unconcerned insect considered her in silence.

“I need to be going.”

The critter fluttered its wings once, but did not take off.

“And if you don’t want to be shoe leather, you should probably get moving too.”

Ogma picked the moth up off her chest, sat up, and dropped the fuzzy thing back on her pillow. It fluttered its wings again but didn’t fly away. It had a coat of white fuzz with black spots and was quite rotund. She wasn’t entirely sure it could actually fly, though she supposed it must have to get up to her bunk.

“Ridiculous,” she accused it.

It fluttered again.

“Suit yourself.”

Ogma changed quietly and picked her way past the other

sleeping children. Effie and Rora were snoring in two bunks closest to the door. Wheeler's bunk was empty.

Brigid was tightening the laces on her patrol leathers. They were well worn and looked very warm. *They were Rowan's when she was on the wall*, Ogma remembered enviously. *They'll give me my own when I've stopped growing*, she consoled herself.

"We'll be rousing them in a bit." Brigid nodded to the sleeping children as Ogma approached. "Wheeler's organizing more gathering parties. It's still so clear out there. We'd better make the best of it."

Ogma nodded.

"You off to pick up the boy, then?"

"Dunkirk."

"So he does have a name. All right then, you hurry back. Maybe once he's settled in you can help us with one of these gathering parties."

"All right," Ogma replied, turning to head out.

"Ogma!" Brigid called after her.

Ogma made an about face just outside the door. "Wh—"

The coat Brigid flung hit her in the face.

"Mrmph—thanks," she said, pulling the coat off her head.

Ogma wrapped the coat tightly around her as she mounted the stairs to the wall. The air felt thin and still cold in the early morning light. She'd decided to take the rampart walk. It was longer, but it would give her the chance to study the strangely unchanging landscape outside the walls.

Free of fog, the landscape glittered with a pale frost. Ogma's breath hung in the air. The banks around the distant hills seemed to be thickening, but none were approaching the town as yet. She could faintly hear the foraging parties: gruff calls and the crashing of timber.

Back over the town, the dawn light was cold and pale as it

glinted on the blue slate roofs. Long shadows marched across the ground and the sun shifted on the horizon as the fickle landscape changed in the distance. It was disorienting, but she knew that in a few hours, once the sun was higher in the sky, it would chart a straighter course.

Ogma shivered and yawned. *Time to wake up.* She shook her head and set a quick pace along the rampart, rubbing her arms through her coat to keep warm.

She met Ambrose and Zachary on the northeast wall. *Wheeler's moved them closer to the watch house,* Ogma noted. They jangled bells at her and she chimed hers in return.

"Ogma! Did you hear? Did you hear?!" Ambrose was beaming from ear to ear. "I banished 'free phantoms!" He held up as many fingers. "I was just like you! I ran right up to them and—and—"

Zachary was looking sheepish. He was two seasons older than Ambrose, and it was clear he realized she'd have known better than to leave the span.

"An' it had a 'fousand teef! And—and the other one had heads that kept arguing and biting each other."

"That sounds perfectly horrible," Ogma replied in an appropriately impressed tone.

"Yeah! It was terrible!" Ambrose responded enthusiastically.

"We'd better get back to patrol," Zachary said, coloring with embarrassment. He took the younger boy's arm and continued on their way.

Ogma walked on. The windmills were still. The wooden frames creaked as the cold and dew made them swell and settle. The canvas of the blades flapped gently in the breeze. She passed other children on patrol who rang their bells merrily as she approached. Each one gestured at the landscape beyond the

wall in apparent disbelief. Ogma grinned back and kept on her way.

As Ogma reached the southeast span, she heard muffled shouts and the sound of a scuffle.

What's going on? Some animal from the outside?

A vision of the beast that had nearly killed Dunkirk loomed in her head. She broke into a jog along the top of the wall.

Cole was shouting down at someone at the inner gate.

"You can't go out without permission! You can't leave the walls!"

"Åpne den fordømte porten!" The boy—Dunkirk—was shouting back up at him. "Slipp meg ut! Jeg vil ikke være fangen deres!"

As Ogma ran up, Cole turned to her in consternation. "He won't listen! He's trying to leave!"

Ogma looked out over the edge of the wall. The old man was trying to hold Dunkirk back from the gate. Dunkirk was rattling the bar on the wicket, trying to shrug off the old man. He was barefoot and shirtless, bandages still wrapped around most of his midsection.

He's not even wearing his bells? She was flabbergasted. *Wait, did he even have any?* She combed her memory of the rescue: she remembered the spear, the armor, mud and quills, but no bells. The voice they'd heard—those cries in the fog.

We heard them for days. The same voice. Ogma couldn't believe it. *If he'd had a bell, we'd have known he was real! We would have gone out sooner!*

She was angry suddenly; it welled up inside and boiled over. She was angry at the foreigner's complete stupidity and ingratitude.

"Hey!" she bellowed down the face of the wall. "You! Dunkirk!" He looked up at her in surprise, one hand pulling at

the bar on the wicket gate, the other frozen in the act of trying to throw off the old man.

She stormed down the stone steps, interposing herself between Dunkirk and the wall and jabbing him in the chest with a finger.

“What do you think you’re *doing*?” Ogma asked. Despite his lack of understanding, her tone was perfectly clear. Dunkirk shrank back from her.

She jabbed him again. “I can’t believe anyone could be so *stupid*.”

He withered under her glare, but then his expression hardened.

“Hva er galt med deg, dumme jente? Kom deg ut av veien!” He shoved her aside and made for the gate again. The old man threw up his hands and looked skyward.

By the time Ogma picked herself up off the dirt, Dunkirk had the wicket gate open and had walked through. He was walking quickly but limping, favoring his injured side. Ogma ran in front of him and spread her arms wide.

“No!” she shouted firmly.

He took a threatening step forward.

“Jeg vil ikke være din fange. Jeg må finne den Blå Legion!”

“Blå, blah, blah. No. I know it looks clear, but the fog could come back any time. You can’t just leave like this!”

He took another step forward.

“Look! Look. You don’t even have a bell. You lost your bell!” Ogma pushed him in the chest where his bells should be hanging around his neck, and raised her own, ringing them under his nose. “You forgot your bell!”

Dunkirk made a wordless, angry noise and grabbed the bells out of her hand, yanking them to one side and hurling them away from him. Ogma was jerked off balance as the leather

thong around her neck snapped. She fell to the ground and the bells clanked in the dirt.

She felt heat rising in her face and a red anger, hotter than any she'd felt before. Tears burned in the corners of her eyes. She blinked them away and stood up, running forward to cut the boy off again.

She stood facing him, chin thrust out defiantly, hands balled into fists at her sides.

"You're not going anywhere," she spat through gritted teeth. She wasn't as big as him. *But if I was strong enough to carry him out of the mud, I'm strong enough to knock him back down again.*

He gave her a contemptuous look and started to brush past her.

Her fist caught him square in the side, just above the unhealed wound. With a wheeze and a gasp of pain, he collapsed in the dirt.

"I *saved* you." Her voice was hard. "And like it or not, I'll save you again."

He wheezed in the dirt, face ashen, one hand to his bandages. She pushed aside a twinge of guilt. *Well I don't regret it.* She leaned down and helped him to his feet. Looping one arm around her shoulders, she led him back to the gate.

Cole's eyes were wide as they came back through. The old man noticed Dunkirk's labored breathing and clucked his tongue in consternation before stepping forward to help on Dunkirk's other side.

Ogma tossed her head to Cole. "Could you get my bells?"

Cole ran through the gate to retrieve the two bells from the dirt, whose melancholy minor chord sounded as battered as she felt. He tied the ends of the broken lace together and slipped it over her neck.

"Thanks."

He nodded and went to close and bar the wicket gate.

It was awkward for the old man and Ogma to try to support Dunkirk. The old man was so much taller than she that most of Dunkirk's weight fell on her shoulders. He turned them back toward his cottage.

"Wait. I'm supposed to take him to the watch house."

The old man glanced at her questioningly but took her lead. Dunkirk was still wincing with each step, but Ogma was still too angry with him to have much sympathy.

She changed course. The fastest way was straight through the village square, though it was also the most public.

"Hvor skal vi?"

"Hush. We're going to the watch house."

The village was bustling with all the craft and exchange of goods of any fair-weather day, plus clumps of excited bystanders waiting on the return of the foraging parties and their carts. Gossip and speculation were running thick and fast, especially given the fog's continued quiescence. A second full day of fog break was great luck, even if there was no other village close by.

Ogma saw Eve, a young woman who often made soup for the watch, chatting among a small crowd of people at the edge of the square. "I just keep hoping the fireflies will come. It'd be good to have a festival day."

"Aye, it feels like we should, with a break like this."

"Oh—!"

They noticed Ogma and the old man helping Dunkirk hobble into the square. They turned to watch in open curiosity, but made no move to speak or help.

When Dunkirk saw the villagers watching he shrugged off Ogma's and the old man's support to walk on his own. *Not hurt so bad after all, hm?* Dunkirk grinned smugly down at her, and then blanched as her elbow caught his ribs.

“Oops.” Ogma smirked. “Come on—this way.” She set a faster pace not waiting to see if he would limp after.

In the square itself, Roose was splitting lumber. He paused to stretch his back and wipe his brow.

“Good on you, girl! Getting him up on his feet already—ha! Why don’t you help us with the lumber, boy?”

“Hvem, jeg?” Dunkirk pointed at the cart and shook his head no. Roose laughed and they walked on.

As they reached the cobbled path that led to the northeast wall, they met a cart rumbling back into the village. Burly Rowan and Isak were hauling from the front while several others pushed from the back. Bowen was walking beside the cart. All were streaked with dirt and grime. The back of the cart was filled with dull gray and charcoal-colored lumps.

Bowen called out to Ogma. “It’s ore! We’ve found iron and tin!” He waved something over his head. “And look at these!”

They looked like rusted iron bands to Ogma, but they were clearly man-made—something that had been lost in the fog who knows when. The metal was good salvage and the ore a rich find. Between that and the lumber, they’d be well equipped to trade the next time another village came near.

She waved at Bowen and called back, “Well done!”

“So that’s him?” Rowan called out as the cart rumbled past. It was gone before Ogma could reply.

They walked the rest of the way in silence, pausing every now and again to catch their breath and enjoy the light breeze.

The watch house was nearly empty. Most of the children were on patrol or assisting the foraging parties. No available hands could be wasted during a fog break. Of those who remained, most were the very youngest and those who had stayed to watch them, plus a few exhausted older children slumbering in their bunks.

A blanket fort was under construction in the corner. Young

Emma seemed to be in charge, with predictable results: grandiose design but some difficulties in execution.

Daniel, yawning, watched them curiously and gave Ogma a wave.

Ogma and the old man pointed Dunkirk to a bunk near the fireplace, though Ogma made certain it wasn't Wheeler's this time.

Emma and the others had noticed them, but the sight of the strange boy and the old man kept them behind the safety of their blanket walls.

Ogma took a seat on a bunk across from Dunkirk. He avoided her gaze sullenly.

The old man watched them both for a moment, hovering by the fireplace. After a few minutes' silence, he came and put a hand on Dunkirk's shoulder.

"Safe," he said simply. They both looked up at him in shock. He smiled at them kindly, the corners of his eyes crinkling.

He was out the door and gone before they could reply.

"Safe?" Dunkirk repeated quietly. He said it strangely—more like 'saife'—but it seemed to Ogma that maybe he understood. He met her gaze, sullenness gone from his face, replaced by a simple, pleading query.

"Hvorfor?"

Ogma shook her head.

"Hvorfor?" he repeated, crestfallen.

Ogma didn't know how to explain the danger he only barely seemed to understand. She sighed, staring into the embers of the fire, watching the smoke curl up the chimney.

The glowing coals gave her an idea.

"Wait here," she told him. He looked on, puzzled, as she stood up. She ran over to the watch house windows, pulling them closed and shuttering them.

Still too bright, she thought. She cast around the room for a

moment until her eyes settled on the blanket fort. Ogma presented herself to the cohort of youngsters.

“May I borrow your blankets?”

Emma drew herself up. “It’s our *fort*. It keeps away the fog.”

Ogma nodded with appropriate, solemn concern.

“Of course. Only I was hoping...” Ogma sighed in mock disappointment, watching curiosity war with possessiveness on the child’s face. “I was hoping I could use them to cover the shutters... so I could make shadow puppets.”

Emma looked at Ogma skeptically. “Are you any good?”

“Oh sure,” Ogma lied brazenly. “Wheeler used to say I was his best assistant.”

“Pff. *I’m* his best assistant,” Emma said. “But I guess...”

“Thanks!” Ogma responded, gathering handfuls of blankets from the fort before the capricious child could change her mind. She returned to the shutters and covered them over as best she could. Some light was still leaking through, but the room was much dimmer.

“It’ll have to do,” Ogma said aloud, brushing off her hands. She jogged over to the fireplace and pulled the carved wooden screen across it, dimming the room further.

She fumbled with the dark lantern for a moment, burning her finger with the taper before managing to get it lit. *What am I doing?* She sucked her burned finger. *I should have just waited for Wheeler. Too late now.*

Emma’s cohort had wandered over with their pillows and they took up places around the bunk where Dunkirk sat. If anything, he looked even more confused. But he was watching.

Here goes...

She took the wooden silhouettes and arranged them in front of the lantern. The shadows of walls and windmills fell across the wall behind her.

“This is why we watch the fog,” she started. It was the only

proper way to begin. "The village." She pointed to the silhouette and then gestured around the room. "The village."

Dunkirk nodded, relief passing over his face as he understood her purpose.

"Byen." He mimicked her gestures. "Landsbyen." He screwed up his face, trying to pronounce it as she had. "Vil-laj." It sounded thick and heavy on his tongue.

"Village," Ogma repeated.

"Vilaj," he said hesitantly.

Close enough. Ogma turned back to the shadow puppets. She picked up the metal basin and reached behind the fireplace screen for a coal. After several failed attempts, she managed to grab hold of one long enough to drop it in the basin.

"This is *boring*," Emma complained. Ogma ignored her.

She hunted about for a mug and scooped up some of the wash water. She poured it slowly into the basin and set it in front of the lantern and silhouettes, as Wheeler had done. The steam curled up and the shadow of the fog's gripping tendrils curled around the silhouetted ramparts.

"The fog. Fog."

Dunkirk looked confused for a moment. "Brann? Røyk?"

Ogma grabbed several tree puppets and some mountains and shuffled them into and out of the steam. The shadows on the wall shifted and twisted.

Dunkirk understood. His expression tightened.

"Take," he said firmly. And then more hesitantly, "Fogg?"

"Yes, taken! The fog takes people." Ogma dropped the landscape silhouettes with a clatter and picked up doll figures. They made children-sized shapes at the top of the wall. She took one a bit bigger than the rest and made it walk awkwardly through the gate.

This is you, you stubborn clod.

She blew at the bowl of steam and the shadow fog billowed

and twisted. The figure in her hand disappeared in the shifting shadows and she dropped it to the floor out of sight. She blew more gently, clearing away a patch of the shadow fog and the figure was gone. She pushed the wall silhouette away and picked up the trees and mountains again. She made them dance in the fog, and then picked up the small figure. She showed it drifting through the fog, wandering first one way, then another, popping up between the trees, and then atop the mountain.

"Fog. Take," Dunkirk said again, expression grim.

"Lost," she said firmly, shaking the small figure in her hand.

"Lost. Take."

Ogma hesitated for a moment. She wasn't quite sure how to do this next one. It was complicated. She shifted the wall and windmill silhouette to the middle of her scene. On one side she placed the outline of a cottage. She moved the bowl to the other side so that the fog billowed up against the wall.

She rearranged her figures. One child-sized silhouette stood in the cottage and an adult-sized shadow puppet stood on the wall.

She picked up the basin of fog and brought it level with the top of the wall shadow. With her other hand she picked up a grotesque, ill-proportioned shape. Wheeler only used it in his scariest stories. She blew into the basin again until the fog boiled over the rampart, surrounding the adult-sized figure on the wall. She brought up her other hand and the snarling, twisted shape coalesced from the fog.

Emma's group shrieked with fear and excitement.

Ogma made the horrific shape attack the adult figure savagely. The adult puppet did not disappear like the child had but was pulled to pieces instead.

Emma's cohort booed the beast's triumph. Dunkirk's hands were clenched on the blankets.

Ogma poured the phantom over the lip of the wall and into

the village. She picked up the child-sized figure from the cottage and marched it straight for the beast.

“Yeah! You get him!” Emma interjected. “That’s me!”

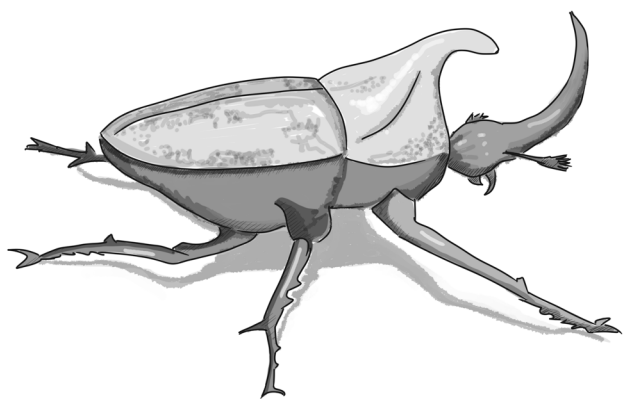
Dunkirk looked on warily as Ogma marched the little girl purposefully toward the beast. When the two shapes touched, instead of attacking the child figure, Ogma dropped the monstrous silhouette and the phantom shadow instantly disappeared.

Ogma lifted the child figure to the wall and made it patrol. She picked up an adult-sized figure and put it firmly inside the walls.

She turned back to Dunkirk.

“Safe,” she said grimly.

He met her eyes, and then looked away. “Saife.”



THANK YOU

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*All the best,
T.H. Lehnen*

MORE ADVENTURES IN THE WORLD OF FOG &
FIREFLIES ARE COMING SOON!




ABOUT THE AUTHOR



T.H. Lehn is an author who believes that young adult and children's literature is simply more honest about the magic in the world. Under Aspen & Thorn Press, he writes young adult fantasy for children who are old souls, and old souls who are children at heart.

He lives with his family in Portland, OR, and studied creative writing, philosophy, and English literature at Reed college. When he is not writing, he is tinkering with machines mechanical and digital (though he has yet to figure out how to fit a sports car through a wardrobe).

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