

The Long Sunset

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May 2019

The south-facing coast was bathed in the light of a swollen and bloody sun that hung low over the ocean horizon. The land was thickly forested, the trees a patchwork of golds and browns, the air restless with an autumnal chill. A flock of seagulls mewed in farewell as they rode the salt breeze out to sea. When they had dwindled into the distance no sound was left but the rhythmic hissing of wave on rock and shingle.

Two people appeared out of an opening in the woods, scrambled down onto the rocks at the base of the low cliff and began making their way along the jumbled shoreline. Their rough grey cloaks and unkempt hair flapped in the wind. They stopped, and one of them pointed at a squared-off boulder resting against the cliff. It had an artificial appearance.

"That's it", the man said gruffly. "We're here. See the markings?"

The other, a young woman, was having trouble with one of her shoes. "Bloody strap's broken again", she complained as she sat down to fix it.

The man gave her a critical glance, then approached the rock face and examined it. He was bearded, and when the wind caught his cloak it revealed a glint of the jewelled sword hilt beneath. "Runes", he added. "Some ancient style. Can't make them out. Zantha, come and look!"

She finished tying a spare strip of leather around her shoe before looking up. There was anxiety in her voice: "What about the Ustfolken? Gor, do you think they saw us?"

Zantha looked back the way they had come, then suddenly stiffened and motioned her companion to silence.

With a rustling that turned into a crashing, a group of animals the size of wild boars burst through the undergrowth and emerged onto the rocks. Their hides were sleek and stripey-velvet, their noses adorned with ivory tusks, their tails flattened into a paddle-shape. Below them, the beasts spotted a small pebbly beach, and immediately made for it, honking in excitement.

"It's all right", Zantha sighed, and relaxed. "Water hogs. They're leaving us, Gor. All the animals are leaving."

The water hogs splashed into the water. When they had found sufficient depth they arched their backs and dived. Flat tails slapped the surface and slipped below. In seconds the whole family had vanished from sight.

"Come and look", Gor repeated.

She stood up and tested the repair on her shoe. Satisfied, she turned to look at the boulder.

"Looks like it fell down from above", Gor went on. "If we climb up we'll be right in the city."

"I don't see what good it'll do", Zantha murmured, but her attention had been drawn by the runic inscription and she traced her finger thoughtfully over the carved characters.

"Can you read it? What does it say?"

Zantha shook her head and turned away. "Abandon hope all ye who enter here. Something like. I dunno. What now?"

"Up here, I think..."

"Go on, then."

Gor gave her a critical stare. "Not like that. You can't enter the lost city of Steadfast like that."

"What? If you want to go in, then let's go. We've wasted enough time already."

Gor shook his head. "You have to... Look, you know we're being watched, right? If the dear departed, may they rest in peace forever, see us having irreverent thoughts..."

"What the hell does it matter about our thoughts?"

"Because our ancestors lived here!", Gor exploded at her. He gave an apologetic look upwards, clasped his hands and bowed his head for a moment before continuing in a quieter voice. "Maybe a hundred generations back – nobody knows how long. We could live here like them. We catch the water hogs, if there's any left, keep them salted, and fish, crabs, stuff from the forest. There'll be cold-rooms for keeping the food fresh. The forest – must be enough wood here for fuel and light and warmth for as long as we need. Obviously we have to fight the Ustfolken; there's not enough for them. It's our survival at stake. The sun's leaving us: every evening it sets a little further south, and a little further the next evening. It'll soon be winter – we don't know how long. The legends say a hundred years. Whatever it is, we can survive in Steadfast, but only if we approach it in the right frame of mind,

respectful to our dear departed ancestors!"

"We can't leave the fields", Zantha replied dully.

"The crops are dying!"

"Then we need to move on. South."

"There is no more south! Do you think we can walk across that?" – Gor stretched out his arm to indicate the ocean in front of them.

"We use boats."

"What boats? We left them behind. Trapped in the ice. Or burned in the war. Even if we had any, what direction would we sail? Where to?"

"We'll just have to build some more. Like you said, there's wood" – she gestured at the forest.

"Sail them through the winter storms?"

"What storms? – The old legends, I suppose?"

"Yes, as it happens, the legends tell of terrible storms. And darkness and cold for years, without a ray of sunshine."

"Why?", Zantha challenged him. "Why should we have this thing we call winter after hundreds of years of summer? What does the word even mean, other than a story wrapped up in a myth wrapped up in a legend? How can the world change like this?"

Gor pointed again at the burning crimson globe poised seemingly a hand-breadth over the distant line separating whitish blue sky from darkish blue water. "Because the sun's going south", he said flatly. "In my father's time it rose higher every day than it does now. My grandfather told of how his grandfather saw it pass overhead at noon. It went from due east in the morning to due west at night. The legends tell – yes I know you don't think much of them, but these are our dear departed ancestors speaking! – they tell how in ancient times the sun stood overhead even at the north pole. Yes, the north pole! It stayed there for generations, just circling round and round high in the sky. It was always day, never night. Always warm, the crops grew, the people prospered. But then the sun went south. And now, see for yourself..."

But Zantha's attention had been caught by something. "What was that?", she asked, listening intently. She stepped away from the boulder to get a better view along the coast. "Oh, shit!"

The man who appeared among the rocks was wearing an iron helmet and carrying a spear. When he saw Gor and Zantha he shouted at them, but in a language which they did

not understand. The aggressive tone in the man's voice was, however, sufficient guide to his intentions.

Gor and Zantha turned away from him and tried to run along the beach. This was a tricky business as they were forced to leap from one boulder to another, and to scramble down onto the shingle and back up again in places where the larger rocks were missing. Their pursuer turned out to be a powerful runner and quickly closed the gap. For fear that the man would cast his spear while his own back was turned, Gor was forced to pick his ground, draw his sword, stand and fight.

The attacker leaped from one boulder to another until he was close enough to engage his enemy. Gor fended off the spearpoint time and again, but was unable to take advantage of such moments to get in close enough to reach the man's unprotected chest with his sword.

A stone whizzed through the air and struck the man's helmet. Gor glanced around to see that Zantha was doing her best to help him, but the spearman was not inconvenienced, and the stone fell harmlessly to the ground.

Gor waved his free hand at her. "Run!", he cried. But she ignored him and hefted another stone in her hand.

The spearman shifted his position so that Zantha was unable to aim at him without danger of hitting Gor. Again the spear thrust at Gor; again he succeeded in parrying it aside. Then Gor stumbled on an uneven part of the rock surface. His attacker lifted the spear to his shoulder and hurled it before Gor could recover his balance.

The point penetrated Gor's body below the rib cage. He grunted, staggered, toppled and fell.

There was a resonant crack! as his skull slammed into the side of a neighbouring boulder.

"No!", Zantha shrieked.

The attacker glanced at her, smiled and drew his own sword.

She wriggled away through the boulders like a snake, fell to the ground, recovered and finally turned to face her enemy on a rough shingle beach, a large pebble in one hand. Her damaged shoe had come undone again, and she impatiently kicked it away. Her eyes glinted with hatred.

The man approached her, carelessly twirling his sword. He stopped and spoke again, this time in tones of persuasion as one might coax a wild animal, a smile playing over his

lips. Zantha bared her teeth.

“Come on”, she hissed at him. “Come and get me, you bastard!”

Whether or not he understood, he poised his sword threateningly and took another couple of steps towards her.

He was almost up to her when Zantha tossed the pebble at him in a half-playful manner. At the same time from her other hand she released a fistful of sand into his eyes. In that moment of confusion she rushed at him, pulling a short dagger from her belt. Before he could react she was too close for him to use his sword. She rammed her dagger up to the hilt into the man’s throat.

He fell slowly, first to his knees, the blood gurgling out of the wound onto his chest. Half a minute later he finally collapsed face down onto the beach. Little waves ran up the sand and lapped at his splayed legs.

Breathing hard, Zantha hurried back to where she had seen Gor fall. Her companion’s belly and the crown of his head were soaked in blood. His body lay inert. Zantha reverently closed his staring eyes.

She looked around. The sun was now resting on the horizon at the far end of a shimmering path of light where it caught the wave-tops. The breeze felt colder. Dark clouds were blowing in from the west. Far above, a winged lizard circled and uttered its carrion cry.

The sound chilled Zantha’s heart. She retrieved Gor’s sword, unbuckled his belt with its leather sheath from his limp body and pulled it on around her own waist. She threw away her remaining shoe and took his, though they were too large, strapping them tightly around her feet. Then she retraced her steps back along the coast towards the forest path, moving cautiously, wary for the possibility of more enemies intercepting her out in the open, where she could not hide.

Having made it to the cover of the forest path, she turned around and took one final look at the ocean. Only a sliver of sun now remained above the horizon, and as she watched, it slowly dipped under.

Another flock of birds passed over, forest swans, their white wings still illuminated in direct sunshine. They flew silently yet their course was straight as an arrow: not due south, but angled towards the south-west, towards the sunken sun.

Zantha suddenly realised that the seabirds she had seen earlier had taken the same direction. Would they really fly out to sea in the evening unless there was land somewhere beyond the horizon?

She resolutely turned her back to the sea and ran along the forest path towards the safety of her village.

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