

Winter's War

Part I

Dreamless sleep is what men like Gareth dreamt for. Some men said it was the closest thing to being dead. Others said it was like being in your mother's womb. But this wasn't that kind of sleep. This was a wolf in a sheep's skin, a false friend with an outstretched hand and a dagger behind their back. And just as Gareth took the hand, the wolf bared its fangs.

Suddenly he was back in the Black Deserts; air so thick with sulfur and ash you could scarcely breathe. Fire from nearby volcanoes lit up the sky like unholy suns; ashen grey sand filled the wasteland. He wore old chainmail and helm, he was young again with shield and spear in hand. Gareth was caught off guard by a knight on horseback ordering him to get back in line with the other spearmen and form ranks, he did with the mechanical precision of hours upon hours of drilling. Then the demons came, red-skinned, pointed yellow teeth, and golden eyes. They wore robes the color of their surroundings, they rode massive wingless drakes the size of horses. They bore black steel blades and wore crowns of volcanic glass that shined in the firelight like a storm of stars. And the thunder of their charge made a hurricane seem tame. A few riders rode in front armed with grey wood bows and obsidian-tipped arrows. Horse archers were what the knights and lords called them, but the rest of the army called them *drake archers*. Drake archers weren't meant to decimate frontlines but to weaken the spear wall just enough. So that the melee fighters could have an easier time breaking through the phalanx. The drake archers fired off a few volleys, then reeled their mounts around to get out of the reach of the spears. Arrows ricocheted off shields. Others weren't so lucky. Some fell with throats red. Most who were pierced with the arrows wouldn't make it. The poison would have already made its way into their hearts before an apothecary could be fetched. The sword-wielding riders charged

forward. An especially fearsome-looking rider rode toward Gareth swinging his sword violently. The curved sword made its way around his shield and towards his unguarded neck. But just before blade met flesh, Gareth awoke.

He was back in that dimly lit tavern sitting alone at a table with a pint of mead in his hand. Gareth looked down into his cup and began to sob. Gareth could not say whether it was the trauma of the nightmare or the betrayal of sleep, Gareth could not say.

“What’s your problem?” The barkeep asked.

Gareth rose up slowly and threw his pint, hitting right where the barkeep’s head should have been if he hadn’t dodged.

“What in the seven hells was in that drink?!” But Gareth knew there was nothing wrong with the drink. The problem was him.

“Oy, you better pay for that!” The barkeep shouted.

As Gareth made his way to the doorway, he grabbed a couple of coins from his pocket, not caring for how much he took. He slammed the coins down and made his way for the door.

Gareth stumbled out of The Fevered Ferret Tavern. The only place where a man could get a drink in all of The Frozen Wastes—leaving the warmth to meet the cold bite of the tundra. The snow crunched under his fur boots his black leather armor would’ve stuck out like a sore thumb if not for his white fur cloak masking him like a white shadow. Though he only had a few drinks, he still could feel the poison of intoxication affecting his mind as he surveyed what the locals called a town. The great town of Glacier’s Port it was called, old as the mountains themselves, one of the last bastion against winter’s bane. But in truth, it was but a ramshackle mess of longhouses and cabins placed in no particular order around docks that led to a partially frozen

sea. His breath turned to mist as he dug his hands into his pockets and roamed down the town streets.

Making his way down the winding pathways, which the locals called streets. He trudged through the kneedeep snow as he surveyed the surrounding areas flexing his lean arms and trying to get his tangled beard into something somewhat presentable for onlookers. *If only I had a mirror; what a sight that would be.*

“By the gods, why did I come to this place,” Gareth yawned to himself. His question was quickly answered by some commotion in the distance. And Gareth knew that sound all too well.

“That’s why,” Gareth responded as he jogged towards the shouting. He thought back to why he came here in the first place. In truth, he was a soldier at heart, a veteran of The Demon Incursions. He still had nightmares of the horrors they had suffered on the front lines and later took up the bottle to help deal with them. But when the war ended and he returned home, he was still fighting the war in his heart. He even kept a demon-made shortsword that he had won in the war; he kept on him at all times. But when he heard of the lawless land of The Frozen Wastes, where every day was a fight to survive, this would give him a reason to fight and continue. He had the money to travel as he had looted many abandoned homes during the war and picked off trinkets from the dead. And so had he wandered The Frozen Waists for two years now, looking for adventure.

It was a man brandishing a hatchet against a mother and her son. The mother stood in the doorway of a squat cabin built of logs and roofed in animal hide with her son huddled behind her. The man was built like a bear wearing a few scraps of rusted armor over his furs. Gareth recognized his sort as the type of man. He looked like a brigand, possibly a former soldier. The mother and son were natives of the wastes dressed in parkas, hair the color of crow, and skin as

pale as the snow with eyes of blue ice. The mother was tall and lanky with a thin face and the boy wasn't much better off.

The brigand roared, "Hand over the money your husband owes or else."

"I haven't seen my husband in months, and I haven't the money," the mother cried out.

"Then I'll take him as compensation," the man gestured to the boy with cruelty in his eyes. The mother then reached for something in her parka.

"Actually, you won't be ... wait, hang on," Gareth said as he unclipped his hood, casually letting it fall to the ground revealing an ornately kept shortsword. The brigand stared at him as if he had three heads. The mother then reached

"So, as I was saying, you won't be taking anyone," Gareth finished.

The brigand fixated on Gareth's shortsword, "That's a pretty sword. You wouldn't mind if I took that off your hands?"

Gareth chuckled to himself, "Come and take it then if you want it so badly," as he said this, noticing a bullwhip by a discarded dog sled, he picked it up, readying his newfound weapon.

The brigand brought his arm back readying to throw the axe, but Gareth was quicker, letting his whip fly through the air as it wrapped around the handle of the axe. It pulled it out of the brigand's hand, hurling it into the air. Gareth casually caught it as it fell.

"You won't be needing this anymore," Gareth said as he caught the axe by the handle.

In response, the brigand drew a curved dagger and bounded toward him. Gareth drew his shortsword, its black steel shimmering in the sunlight like an obsidian flame. The brigand made two swipes with his blade but Gareth parried both with ease. He could feel the adrenaline pulsing through his veins as the battle fever took him. The fever was not just a feeling but a hunger.

Gareth attacked furiously, hammering his opponent blow after blow with his enemy only barely able to keep up until he finally knocked the dagger out of the brigand's hand. Gareth then made a sharp kick that hit the man square in the chest; he hit the ground right on his butt.

Gareth pointed his sword threateningly at the man and said, "If I ever catch you threatening these people again, then you'll suffer from more than a sore bum."

The brigand slunk away with his tail between his legs. as Gareth watched him like a hawk to ensure he didn't try anything funny. When he had gone, he turned to the woman and her child and asked, "You said your husband is missing?"

He could now see that what she drew from her parka was a small hand crossbow with a bolt already loaded.

She opened her mouth, hesitating at first, but after half a moment, she answered putting the crossbow behind her back, "Yes, he went hunting in the northeast and hasn't been back in months. Thank you, sir

"What's your name, miss?" Gareth asked.

"Mista, and this is my son Arne. I do thank you, sir, and... uh you can keep the whip. I never used it anyway, far too cruel," she replied, nudging her son forward. She beamed at him with a face full of thanks. "And yours, sir?"

"Name's Gareth. You know, I've heard some other stories like your own of hunters going missing in the northeast," Gareth said pocketing the whip.

"Yes, I've heard a few of those stories. Some tell tales of frostlings. Some say that's why people still haven't gotten word from the towns to the far-north," Mista explained.

"How would you like your husband back?" Gareth said abruptly.

Her eyes narrowed, "What's the catch?" she asked.

“No catch,” Gareth answered with a smile. Just give me your sled, and I’ll go get him,” said Gareth gesturing to the dogsled where he picked up the whip.

Mista crossed her arms. “So you want to rob me now,” she accused.

Gareth lifted an eyebrow “Rob? No, I’ll be renting it,” Gareth said after producing a small pouch of coins.

She sighed and then told Arne to go into the house before saying to Gareth, “Well, come inside before you catch a cold.” For which Gareth met with a smile.

Gareth calmly entered the cabin, following Mista. It was only a two-roomed home with the first being a bedroom and the other only being slightly shown with a half-closed door on the right side. Inside were two beds on opposite sides of the room covered with blankets on a cobblestone floor. Arne huddled around a fireplace from atop an oak chest with a blanket wrapped around his parka. In the other room was a small wooden desk with springs, gears, and string on the desk with tiny tools made for meticulously putting together clockwork machines laid just in sight through the doorway. Gareth had seen the workspace of an inventor when he passed by engineers working on artillery and siege weapons when they had to take fortified demon-held towns.

“Well, make yourself at home,” Mista advised as she plopped down on the bed on the right. In response, Gareth sat on the left.

Gareth pointed to the desk, “That’s your husband’s desk. Is he some kind of tinkerer?”

She looked at him sternly, “Those mine, everyone has their hobbies”

“Sorry, my bad.”

“So why do you really want to find my husband? I mean, he might not even be alive,” said Mista.

Gareth paused for a moment, “Let’s just say it’s out of the kindness of my heart.”

Mista stood up and put her hands on her hips, “You think that’s the answer I’m looking for? Of all the things you could have said, that’s it?”

Gareth chuckled, obviously amused with her response, “It’s not the answer that explains why, it’s the answer to get you to stop asking stupid questions.” Arne grinned at this response, but the smile quickly faded with a sharp glare from Mista.

“Well, I need a straight answer. Not some vague response. Besides, I’ve seen your type. You have a soldier’s heart,” said Mista.

“I know... I’m still fighting the war,” Gareth said as he clenched his fist and lightly pounded his chest. “Still fighting it in here... and that’s why I want to find your husband-because I need a war to fight,” Gareth said.

A silence took the room. After a moment, Mista spoke up, “You may fight this war, but will you finish it?”

Gareth smirked, “I always do.”

Mista nodded, “Then it’s a deal. You’ll get my sled.”

Part II

The dog sled raced through the tundra, dogs barking as he rode. Gareth surveyed through his snow visor, noticing the pine trees off in the distance, their branches weighed down by snow and ice. The Forest of Frosts. As he neared the woodland, he noticed a squat log cabin nestled among the trees. The windows were shattered, and its door was torn from the hinges, lying lost in the snow. Mista told him this was her husband’s hunting cabin and had given him a map to find it. Gareth had learned how to steer a sled in his time in this land.

He got off the sled, crept to the cabin's door frame, and stopped upon noticing an arrow embedded deep in the frame's wood. The head was crafted of a clear crystal that was cold to the touch, with a shaft of pine fletched with white feathers. Frostling crafted, too big for any human bow. Gareth could feel the arrow give off a biting chill that burned his skin. He quickly dropped the arrow as he entered the cabin.

Gareth had to duck so as not to bump his head on the low ceiling. Wooden fragments of broken open barrels littered the place. It was a small cabin with a single cot by a fireplace. Above the fireplace, smeared on the cobblestone, was a message in ash.

May death come to all warmbloods.

Gareth merely shrugged and mumbled to himself, "I've overcome it before I can do it again."

As he turned to leave, he heard a faint rustling sound. He stopped and froze for a moment, knowing that the sound could have been made by the creatures that raided the cabin or possibly just some animals. Listening closely, he heard more rustling, perhaps multiple creatures. His sled dogs started to bark frantically. Then his ears picked up a different sound but not just any sound, a voice.

The voice was like a blizzard's wind, cold and raspy with hate spoken in every word, "*Come on out, warmblood, we know you're in there.*"

Gareth looked up towards the doorway and saw the monster. It was a Frostling, but no account could prepare Gareth for its horrid appearance. The creature stood twice the height of a man with arms that went down to its knees; it was a gaunt, starved-looking wretch with pale white skin. The body was bare, all except for a loincloth. Its face was more like a skull, as it lacked a nose with a wide mouth with no lips revealing jagged teeth as black as frostbite. In its

right hand was a sword made of white crystal that was long as a man was tall. It stared at Gareth with sunken eyes that were enveloped in blue flame. The flame gave off no heat and seemed to freeze the very air around it.

“I prefer to stay here,” Gareth responded.

“Typical warmblood, hiding like a rat in his den,” The Frostling growled, and in response, Gareth drew his blade. It somehow was able to speak the common tongue without any lips. The creature's eyes darted to the sword, then to Gareth; if the creature had lips, it would be giving Gareth a black tooth sneer.

“You want a fight, don't you? Now, why is that?” Gareth asked.

“I wouldn't expect a warmblood to understand,” the Frostling scoffed.

“I might surprise you,” Gareth said.

The Frostling tilted his head in curiosity, forgetting its hatred, possibly for a moment, maybe more. Gareth knew he was in the eye of the storm and that one wrong move would cause the beast to charge. Gareth was somewhat familiar with diplomacy; he knew he had to use this moment well.

Gareth paused, “After all, a soldier should know a thing or two about fighting.”

The Frostling perked up at *soldier*, “*A soldier you say, then I shall speak to you of my war. One warrior to another.*”

“But first, tell me your name,” Gareth said, trying to hold onto this moment of peace as long as possible.

“*My name?*” the Frostling paused as if trying to remember. After a moment, the Frostling spoke, his voice was slow and quiet, “*My name is ... Ulric. Yes, I believe that was it. I haven't said it in so long.*”

“And what is your’s, warmblood?”

“My name is Gareth,” Ulric merely nodded as if he was discussing the weather.

Dusk was beginning to set in, and the skyline became alit with dying orange sunlight that was once hidden behind grey clouds. He was losing daylight, and soon the only light he would have would be that of Ulric’s eyes.

“The cold has battled the warmth for all of eternity. I merely continue that battle,” Ulric said.

“I am a part of a war, just not yours. If you live with honor, then you’ll let me go.”

Ulric let out a laugh that sounded like the cracking of ice, *“Your breath brings warmth where mine brings cold, which means you are my enemy. But I wouldn’t expect you to understand. You warmbloods live and die quick, but my kind... my generation alone, has been fighting for decades, while my ancestors have fought for untold centuries.”*

“But that’s the thing about wars-no matter how long, they always come to an end,”

Gareth said, “Even mine.” As the last word left his mouth, Gareth realized his mistake only then.

“Not this one,” Ulric remarked as he bolted towards him, sword raised overhead.

Gareth met the beast's charge with a counter charge, and they met in the middle; their two swords clanged against each other. Gareth could feel the sheer inhuman strength behind his foe’s attack that forced him back, almost knocking him off his feet. The creature raised his blade for a second attack as it slammed onto Gareth’s, the swords sparking as they collided, briefly illuminating the area around them. Gareth moved back a few paces and took a defensive stance, sword hilt at waist level with the blade pointing to the sky at an angle. Gareth knew he stood no chance trying to land a blow. Ulric had the advantage of reach, so he knew he would have to be defensive. Ulric's blade swung through the air each time, meeting Gareth’s. And so the duel

went. The two moved together not like the untrained brawls Gareth had found himself as of late, but rather a competitive dance attuned to the rhythm of the duel. Ulric struck like a hammer but with the careful precision of a trained archer. Gareth met this assault with a defense of his mind and body; each time, the Frostling let its massive blade strike through the air like lightning, Gareth anticipated the strike parrying the blade with his own. The battle fever pumped through Gareth's body like blood, filling his very core with a fire to fight on. But alas, that's the thing about fire; it can be quickly started but just as easily put out, and the *Frostlings* knew it.

As Gareth deflected a would-be deadly thrust from the monster, he spotted *it* in the treeline, a second pair of glowing blue eyes. *Wait, no three pairs, now four, five, six!* The darkness of the treeline was alit with eyes, eyes as numerous and ancient as the stars in the night sky. They seemed only to get brighter and brighter as the eyes neared, chilling the very air around them with their cold winter light. Though the day was slipping away to night, he could still make out the silhouettes of the Frostling hoard. The great host brandished every blade and armament Gareth could think of swords, axes, clubs; a few held even held recurve bows that not even the strongest man could draw. But even though the Frostlings seemed to be armed to the teeth, most lacked armor, and the ones who did wore it only in small scraps over their bare skin. They marched in a disorganized mob with a single figure leading in the front who was covered from head to toe in white crystal armor. Shadow clouded its body. With each step it took, shadow lashed out of its armor in bursts, slithering in and out of the joints like snakes. Some of the darkness formed faces. Laughing faces. Screaming faces. Smiling faces. Each face let out a shrill screech as it left and reentered the armor.

Gareth tried to move back to make his retreat, but Ulric pressed the attack, not letting him catch his breath even for a moment. *I'm not getting out of this one, at least not alive ... unless.*

His sword clattered to the ground, and raised his hands to the heavens, "I surrender." And as soon Gareth proclaimed his surrender Ulric lunged forward, trying to bash the pommel of his sword into Gareth's skull, but Gareth was quicker and dodged.

"Wait!" Gareth shouted at Ulric. Ulric froze with his blade still leveled at Gareth's chest. "But ... you have to take me prisoner and not eat me, torture me, or any other messed up thing you do to prisoners," Gareth said.

"Of course, we are not monsters as warmbloods seem to think," Ulric responded.

"Oh? And here I thought you were going to skin me alive or turn my eyeballs into jelly. Well, that was a rel-" he was swiftly silenced with Ulric bringing the pommel of his sword smashing into Gareth's temple, knocking him out in an instant.

The next thing Gareth remembered was waking up in a cell.