

## 'Bastion'

(Leona, traveling under the pseudonym 'Weaverly', has arrived in Durand seeking an audience with The Lady - leader of the Nososphore species living in the northern snow-flats. She travels with the Rasaalian, Kez, and a Nososphore mercenary, Phineas.)

**W**hen she awoke, Leona had to again fight the disorientation of the wan light on never-ending snow before she got some kind of bearing. Ahead of her, leaning on the handrail of the sled as he had been the night before, the broad back of Phineas rose and fell with infinite slowness. Streaming behind him, his 'tail' of hair snapped and flowed in the wintery winds as they blustered down over the... *hills?*

"Phineas? Where are we?" she asked as she sat up, bringing the furs up with her to shield her against the bitter cold. The falling snow, driven along by the coiling winds, denied much visibility. Despite this, she could definitely make out rises in near distance on either side of the sled as it clipped along.

"We have entered the blood valley," he replied without looking around.

"The what?!"

The Nososphore laughed, deep and long, then glanced back at her. With one of his familiar toothy grins, he gave a piercing whistle to the dogs, who came to a stop, warmth rising from the aether globes on their legs in plumes. From their jaws, their breath hung in the air as they panted and milled at the end of their tethers, happy to be taking a break, no matter how brief. Again, Leona found herself marveling at the tenacity and endurance of the fluffy animals, but then Phineas was stood in front of her, extending a hand. Next to her, Kez stirred as she took the Nososphores' clawed appendage, after a moment's hesitation.

"You are quite safe, little Weaverly. Come, see why it is called as it is. Tis a spectacle few experience, and still less understand."

"What's going on?" Kez murmured, sitting up and rubbing his eyes.

"We are exploring the blood valley, master Kalrith. Mind you step cautiously."

Leona stepped off the sled and took a few tentative steps forwards, towards the dogs. Snow crunched under her boots, and the canines wagged their tails as she came closer... and she noticed they were bleeding.

"By the Lights! Their feet! Phineas, their feet! How could you run them like that?!"

The Nososphore laughed again, his bass voice rumbling over the snowy expanse with genuine mirth, which Leona was well aware was at her expense. Frowning, she looked back the way they had come, blinking the slow drifting snowflakes out of her eyes. The tracks behind the sled... were bright red. Streaks of bloody red-orange stretched back as far as she could see, in the pattern of both paw prints and the runners of the sled. *The sled can't bleed... what is going on?*

She lifted one of her feet, then gasped when she realized the sole of her boot was a livid crimson too, as were the footprints following her away from the sled. Kez too joined her now, stepping into the snow and inspecting the resulting gap, pure white turning to red as the snow compacted.

"I don't understand... the snowfall is white... why is it turning red? Did something happen here?" he asked, his tone as perplexed as Leona felt.

"There are stories. The most popular, told at Year's Rest, concerns the great battle between Men and Nososphores. The background need not concern us, save that when Man came to Durand, he intended fully to remove all that was not human from its shores, in the righteous name of their gods. Many are the stories of the Lady, even back to that time, as if t'were she who faced the first settlers, centuries ago."

The Nososphore paused, then shook his head with a smile. "The Durandi, as they became, fought under the musical calls of the fife - a small reed pipe. Its sound was shrill and piercing, able to reach any in the snows, keep units together. Prevent men from becoming lost. So vital was the piper, twas the height of heresy among Men to slay one. For those with the gift to play, there was security for they fetched high ransom when captured, and inspired terrible bad luck when slain.

Leona returned to the sled as she listened, eyeing the slush under her feet with trepidation as the Nososphore spoke on.

"The Durandi thought their pipers would be either be venerated if we knew their ways, or that if we did not, at least we would have bad luck for killing one. Outnumbered, my kind was of course driven back, but the tale you want concerns when the fighting came to this valley. It was autumn, and if the stories suit you, they would have you believe The Lady herself turned the tide of the war and declared the Flats her own. She is said to have slain a regiment, and too, to have taken the chief piper. But she did not kill him. The story says that knowing the

Durandi ways, and the curse of the piper, the Lady bade him join the ranks of Nososphores, against his will, and made him as herself. Therein, the piper was not alive, nor was he dead, and lay anguished between states. Every year, when the sun returns in wan glory to the valley, the piper rises from the snows and plays his plaintive song. 'Tis the blood of his regiment that seeps up from the ground, and the spirits of his kin he summons as wraiths, seeking both company and to avenge his fate."

"That's... dark." Kez said, his tone flat and disgusted.

"Most fables to explain the unknown are thus, is it not so?"

"Nososphores can't 'make' other Nososphores, though. So... it's just a story," Leona injected, resisting the urge to take off her boots in the wake of the story.

"Ah, Milady is right as usual. 'Tis just a story indeed, and the truth... far less interesting. Here, they call it blood snow, but travel to another northern clime and the same phenomena is called merely 'pink snow', or 'red snow', or even 'melon snow'. 'Tis not blood that surged under your feet, but a red alga that enjoys the cold. When the sun comes each year, so it grows in the snow, and only when it melts or is compacted does its color shine through. Merely a plant."

"That's still incredible. I never knew somewhere so wintry could be so varied and interesting."

"Then I look forward to your response to the home of the Lady."

"Is it much farther?" Leona asked.

"No, we will be there by nightfall. You will hear it before we see it, I think. We are at the right time of year."

"Hear it?"

"Wait and see, little Weaverly. Now, onto the sled with you both, and let us break our fast. The dogs are eager to run."

The day drifted by without any major incidents, the valley giving way by mid-afternoon to a pass that ran between the rises of ice and snow. After a few minutes, it opened out onto what Phineas assured them both was an open plain. It was impossible to tell, however, as the winds picked up now there was nothing to obstruct them. Stopping for a late lunch, and to let the dogs rest and refuel, the trio sat out on the snowy field, in the lee of the sled, and enjoyed

the frozen wilderness for what it was.

"Why isn't the path from Nofdur like this, Phineas? It's been so calm, and beautiful so far," Leona asked as they sat.

"That's because we travel in the shadow of the Nososphore," he replied.

"Yes, you've said that before... but what does it mean?"

"You have heard that the Durandi employ Nososphores?"

"In their army, yes. Like how you fought for Wessenland, right?"

"Non. I am a mercenary, milady, and I have never pretended that I do not choose, of my own will and without remorse, to kill for my own desire. It is what makes me certainly the monster my adopted country perceives me as, but not the monster of myth. With the Durandi, it is different."

"...I see." Leona knew even as she said it that her expression indicated she did not, in fact, understand.

"War is a fleeting thing, especially to old eyes. The reasons go on forever, but the act is short. Very much so, for some. The war between Nososphore and Durandi was similarly short and brutal, and soon forgotten beyond mere story. The Lady is very fond of Doyen Sulsten, and his line."

"The leader of the Durandi? I don't understand what that has to do with my question."

"Nososphores that fight for the Durandi have all the sustenance they require, and more. Their presence in Durand, absorbing the aether of the land, keeps away that which would otherwise slip into the lands of Men. Similarly, we keep the path to the Lady's bastion as clear and free. Of an eve, these flats see many of my kind wander under the stars, seeking the lost, or the desperate, or merely animals in the night. The Flats are replete with the aether that sustains us, trapped in ice, and by our presence... that of the wraiths is diminished."

"Wait, wait... you mean to tell me wraiths are real?"

"Of course. But they are not the spirits of the vengeful dead as you are thinking. They are..." Phineas paused and gesticulated as he sought the words for what he wished to express, "anti-magus. They do not use the aether, they consume it. They may lay dormant for decades, waiting for a new storm or source, but in the presence of my kind... their sustenance becomes ours, and we are more than they can be. Durand is inhabitable only because of its 'ghouls' and 'vampires'. Nofdur... has no such luxury, and fears its borders with the Flats."

Leona sat in silence, thinking about what Phineas had said, and picked at her lunch. Next to her, the Nososphere bit into a hunk of raw flesh with every sign of relish, his quaint manner of speech and refined dress again juxtaposed against his eating habits. Squeamish, she looked away across the snow and wondered if she would be able to handle this 'Lady' when they met her. By reputation, she was likely to be so much 'worse' than the Wessenland mercenary.

The snow stopped falling when they resumed their journey, the plain now beautiful as wan sun glimmered on the top coating of snow. Eddies of snow crystals remained low to the ground, almost like a mist as the sled progressed on, the dogs running as hard as ever.

The smooth progress only halted in the late afternoon, when the dogs began to yip and slow a little in their run a little while after the ground had taken a sudden and unexpected turn upwards. Phineas clicked his tongue and urged them on, his calls interspersed with soothing shushing sounds, non-plussed as ever. Frowning, Leona concentrated and peered ahead... but there was nothing there.

"Listen..." said Kez, sitting bolt upright. Leona looked at him, and in doing so turned her left ear towards their direction of travel... and heard the tinkling noise. As the dogs pressed on it started to become louder, until the air seemed permeated with the eerie sound of creaking, crackling, shattering and tinkling, like someone was dropping Dragons Night ornaments, one at a time.

"What's that?" she asked, kneeling up behind Phineas so she could peer ahead into the eternal white desert.

"We are almost at the bastion. We have made good time. The snow here is actually very thin, and there is warmth beneath the dirt."

"...you're enjoying not telling me anything, aren't you?"

Phineas winked, grinned and urged the dogs on to one last bout of effort, driving the sled hard up the remainder of the incline. It leveled out at the top and the winds dropped away as if adhering to some law of dramatic tension. Leona gasped as she got a clear look at the land ahead of them.

Out of the ground, needles of ice pierced up towards the sky with jagged edges, glistening in the sun. Some were as wide as a child's arm, others, as thin as a darning needle.

No matter the size, every single one seemed to be growing at an observable rate, until the weight of the extended ice was forced to submit to gravity, and the needle fell, shattering as it hit the earth. In its place, a new needle would immediately begin to extrude itself from the ground, reaching for the heavens.

"Dragons teeth..." Kez muttered, swearing by the deities of his faith. *Ironically*, thought Leona, *that's exactly what they look like... dragons teeth, growing out of the snow...*

"Welcome to the glass ridge. The bastion lies in the middle of it."

"It's... beautiful," she breathed. "Amazing."

Phineas smiled and urged the dogs to start crossing the noisy ground, turning the sled between the larger spears of ice as they pulsed out of the dirt, crushing the smaller ones under the sled as the dogs walked on. Progress became slower, to deal with the sharp shards of water, but that gave Leona plenty of time to observe the incredible phenomena. Soon, she realized the dark splotch ahead of them was, in fact, a raw, open cliff face with a massive cave entrance, intricately carved around its outside. Wincing as another huge spike crashed to the floor nearby and showered them with ice crystals, Leona raised her voice over the perpetual tinkling.

"Is that it? Is that the bastion?"

"Yes. Welcome to the Nososphore homeland, Weaverly. The Lady is expecting you."