

## REIGN OF WINTER



## THE IVORY TOWER

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Two chipmunks dwelled in a cage on the mantel. One stuffed its cheeks with pine nuts. The other hid in a nest of storybook pages.

The fact that both recently had been monstrous spiders was less disconcerting than the revelation that one of my forebears may have been a unicorn.

Before, the only peculiarity I had entertained was some elven heritage, Dabril being across the river from Kyonin. I earned a couple black eyes before I learned that “whoreson” and “half-elf” were not synonymous.

The only other complication I had contemplated was a drop of noble blood. The Unicorn's Carbuncle, ancestral jewel of House Devore, supposedly only shone on the hand of a true heir.

The telltale ruby glowed indiscreetly as I scraped the unicorn's beard of shaving cream from my chin, rinsing my razor occasionally.

I examined myself in the mirror. Was my face a bit more equine? Did I stand a fraction taller? My beard had certainly grown heavier. But that happened with many young men, even ones who did not swill mutagenic tonics.

This was the trouble. Before I had discovered the Devores' treasures, I had been a crippled wreck. The duke's formulary had helped me heal my body. The duchess's stone? My heart. So I could empathize with Arjan Devore, slowly losing his faculties.

Having witches put some of him in a gemstone seemed almost common sense.

“You are very handsome, Papa,” said Emilie. “Even more than your portrait.”

I turned, wiping my face with a towel. “Which portrait?”

Emilie, garbed in ivory samite three centuries out of fashion, perched on the dresser, playing with a scrap of iridescent silk. “The one you and mama left.” She put on



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her hennin, the conical cap once popular among Galt's gentlewomen, and tossed her head, the silk now forming the cointoise, the pennant veil. "I memorized all of it, along with the other gifts you left me."

"Remind me," I said, "what were they?"

"Silly Papa," she laughed, "don't you remember?"

"I want to hear you say it."

She recited like a schoolgirl, "You gave me your joy of discovery. Mama left me her love of learning. Together they made me." She looked sad. "Will we never see her again?"

"I have not seen her since the Revolution," I lied truthfully. "It was a tumultuous time." I put on a cheerful face and changed the subject. "When we're in Galt, you must be careful to not let others know you're alive."

"Oh, yes!" Emilie nodded, fluttering her cointoise. "That was the first lesson Baba Alechka taught in Department: When a person enters, unless he is our master, a Jadwiga, or one who knows the secret of the dolls, we must hold perfectly still. Like this." Lightning fast, Emilie snatched a pair of tiny spectacles out of her pocket and jammed them on, simultaneously taking out a miniature book thumbed open to a familiar page. Her mouth froze open in a round O of wonderment while her eyes went wide with delighted surprise. Her face was the visage of a wizard discovering a spell or an alchemist cracking a formula.

I had an epiphany as well: This was how Emilie looked before she was brought to life.

She smiled then, putting away her book and glasses. "The only times we are allowed to move are when we need to protect ourselves or someone we've been ordered to guard. Or..." She trailed off and a pink blush of glaze rose in her porcelain cheeks.

"You're not supposed to say because it's another secret."

"Yes," she admitted, "and Lady Morgannan hasn't performed the Rite of Adoption yet, so you are not properly my papa yet. Even though you are!"

"If I guess, are you allowed to say?"

"Well... we are allowed to use our judgment."

I mulled it over for a moment. "You're ordered to kill someone."

"Only the bad dolls do that!" Emilie exclaimed, then clapped her hands over her mouth.

"I'm guessing the bad dolls are another secret."

Emilie nodded. "They're horrid. They've been torturing the spiders." She glanced about the guest room, then confided, "The wicked and unruly dolls take separate classes from the sweet and mindful ones. Lady Morgannan doesn't want us getting into fights."

She did not say any more, but I could read her expression. "And you spied on the bad dolls' classes."

"How did you know?"

I grinned. "Because it's precisely what I would do."

"It's been fifty years, papa!" Emilie exclaimed. "Mama sent letters for the first ten. She said you were unwell, but as soon as you were better, she would send for me. But then that horrid Revolution came and the letters stopped! I had to do something! There's nothing worse than being an unwanted doll!"

She began to cry then, real tears down porcelain cheeks.

"There, there." I picked her up, putting her head against my shoulder and patting her on the back. "Let it all come out."

Fifty years of bottled tears poured down my shoulder. While I wondered where the water came from, I also wondered where the food the dolls ate went. It was like wondering where the snow went and why Irrisen was not buried under a glacier after a thousand years of snowpack. Witchcraft. No further explanation was needed.

A more troubling question was what had transpired with Duke Devore. So far as I had heard, he died of old age shortly after his marriage, a decade before the Revolution. That death was not one from which anyone ever "got better"—unless, of course, you considered undeath a preferable state.

Then again, I had resurrected the dead with alicorn shavings and the duchess's philosopher's stone. If the equally fabled sun orchid elixir were added to the solution?

But there were more pressing questions. "So, what did you learn from the bad dolls' classes?"

That got her to stop crying. "Oh, tricks too wicked to tell," Emilie demurred, then confided with an embarrassed grin. "My favorite is the one where you pretend to be a mundane doll but move a person's possessions around when they're not looking to make them think they're going mad!"

I was curious what other tricks they'd taught, but was interrupted by a knock at the door. "Are you ready?" It was Valya.

"Just a moment!" I called. Some of Duke Devore's clothes from his last visit had been located. A richly embroidered kaftan and silver fox fur coat aired on a clotheshorse before the fire. They smelled of cedar chips, but the fit was good. I unlocked the door.

Valya now wore an ivory sarafan, trimmed in pale rose, and a kokoshnik, Koliadki perched on the crown. Madenya wore the same ensemble. After a moment, the doll declared, "You look wonderful!"

"Terribly old-fashioned," Valya added, dimpling. "But wonderful."

I didn't know enough of Irrisen to know what part of my ensemble was out of date. "I suppose I'm that kind of man."

I fetched my alchemist's pack, now transferred to a handsome white boarskin bag, and let Emilie clamber astride, riding my shoulder.

When we reached the round gallery, I heard the laughing screech of Lychee and the monkeyish snickering of Poskarl Elvanna. He wore a kaftan as well, but with a



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radically different collar and hemline. I also realized he was wearing his coat with the fur turned in and the brocade turned out.

Byanka Morgannan, her apparent age again grandmotherly, hid her mouth with her peacock feather fan, then lowered it, saying, "I'm afraid I did you a discourtesy, Duke Devore, when I allowed you to forego a valet. I thought you might recall the manner in which the clothing of Irrisen is worn." She glanced to Valya and Madenya. "Why didn't you inform him that he's wearing it inside-out?"

Madenya said politely, "He's a spellcaster of great power. I thought he had turned his coat to repel gremlins, or something similar."

Byanka merely gestured for the tall footman. "Please assist the duke."

I set down my pack with Emilie atop it. My coat was taken off, turned, and redonned. I modeled it. "Well?"

More snickers issued from Poskarl and Lychee. Parrot laughter came from Olya and Irynya. Kyevgeny let out a bearlike guffaw while Valya and Koliadki whistled and the gallery was filled with the tittering of dolls like porcelain bells.

"Oh dear," Byanka's fan dropped to swing from her wrist, "I had completely forgotten you had procured *that* shuba."

I looked over my shoulder and examined the brocade. Beautifully woven, it showed a landscape of snow-covered pines. Pulled threads created the silhouette of a fox below a branch with a crow holding a piece of holed cheese.

"Children, I would remind you that the Fox and Crow was once the height of fashion!"

"Duly chastened, Lady Byanka," Irynya noted.

"My abject apologies to House Elvanna." Byanka appeared mortified. "I was speaking to my grandchildren, my dolls, and my apprentice."

"I didn't laugh," said Orlin. Tinka hid behind him, looking fearfully at Byanka's hard-edged fan.

Byanka looked at him, then Tinka, then me. "This is a joyous occasion. I suggest that, within these walls, we act as if nothing were untoward." She glanced to Irynya. "Lady, are you prepared

to stand as godmother to this child?" She gestured to Emilie.

Irynya looked amused, but answered, "Yes, Lady Byanka."

"I suppose I can be godfather," deigned Poskarl, "unless you would prefer Lychee?"

Byanka appeared to be considering it, at last saying, "We Morgannans are a very traditional house, Lord Poskarl. I am afraid I would find that improper."

"I could be godfather," offered a muffled voice.

Byanka looked about the room. "Who said that?"

"I did!" The muffled voice appeared to issue from between Orlin, wearing the snowy white robes of a witch's apprentice, and Tinka, standing closely behind him.

A doll stepped out from between the two. He stood just above knee-high with a mop of fine blonde hair and the pearl-buttoned livery of House Morgannan. His blue-gray eyes were the color of shadows on a frozen lake.

A punch cup shattered on the floor. "Holgrim!" Irynya gasped.

"What did you call me?" asked the doll.

"His name is 'Hotisnarr,'" Byanka corrected. "And he is supposed—"

"You bound Holgrim's soul into a doll?" Poskarl inquired gleefully.

"I'm not a doll!" The Holgrim doll stamped his foot indignantly. "You're all cloud giants!"

"Cloud giants?" echoed Poskarl.

"White skin, white hair, three times the height of a man, surrounded by luxury?"

"He's got us there." Poskarl grinned like his monkey, then pointed to Kyevgeny's blond mane. "So what's he?"

Holgrim thrust out his lower jaw. "Either a very large frost giant or a very pale storm giant." He paused. "I had a friend who looked like him in the world below."

Kyevgeny stared at the tiny model of his friend, then softly began to weep. Irynya reached out a hand and placed it on his enormous shoulder. "Oh Kyevgeny... it could be worse..."

"Kyevgeny, yes!" cried Holgrim. "That was my friend's name!

Byanka looked like she could use a stiffer drink than punch. I took out my flask and topped her off.

"Thank you, Duke Arjan," she said softly. "You are a gentleman and a scholar." She downed it in one shot, then held it for a refill. I obliged.



*"Holgrim may be a doll, but he's still a man."*



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"I'm sorry, Holgrim," Kyevegeny whispered, tears in his eyes. "I'm so sorry."

"As am I," breathed Valya.

"His name is 'Hotisnarr,'" Byanka corrected.

"That's a stupid name," said Holgrim.

"And he will be silent, for I command it, as his maker."

Holgrim opened his mouth, but no sound came out. He tried to speak again, but was still mute. Then he ran up and kicked Byanka in the shins.

There were gasps of a hundred dolls and the clattering of silver on porcelain.

Byanka raised her ivory cane. "What I make I can unmake!"

"No!" cried Kyevegeny and Valya.

Byanka brought the knob down swiftly, only at the last moment changing its trajectory. "Sit there or be smashed!" She pointed to an empty doll chair.

Holgrim leapt to the chair and sat as if glued to it. He struggled to free himself, then proceeded to gesture. It was not sign language, but rather the rude gestures every boy learns.

Orlin moved to block Byanka's view, but she had already looked away.

"Please..." Irynya asked.

Byanka paused. "Of course, Lady." She swigged the liquor, then appropriated my bottle and refilled her cup herself. She took another sip and coughed. "Night's black balls, what's in this stuff!?"

Poskarl snickered.

"I was meaning to perform an elegant ceremony in honor of our friend, the duke," she said, "but given the events of the past week—"

"What events?" asked Poskarl.

"Morgannan family business, Lord Poskarl." She fixed him with an icy stare. "We had an infestation of spiders. They were dealt with, yet not before poor Holgrim perished."

"What sort of spiders?"

"It hardly matters. They're dead."

Poskarl turned slightly green at this. "All of them?"

"All," Byanka lied brazenly, not mentioning the cages in the boiler room or the two chipmunks in my bedchamber. "We burned the egg sacks as well. Evidently the jorogumos misunderstood my letter. Rather than sweet little scarlet spiders Kyevegeny might have used as a familiar, their eggs hatched some horrid monstrosities from Shenmen. Is that not right, dear?" she inquired of her grandson.

Kyevegeny nodded, not telling how the dolls wove dream spider webs into silk the past week, nor of me showing his grandmother how to brew shiver in case he was addicted and needed a safer source than Silvertooth and his ilk.

"It's been a very tiring week," Byanka concluded. "As such, I am hoping Duke Devore will pardon the breach of protocol and allow the bare bones rite."

"By all means," I said.

Byanka turned. "Emilie, I am not your creator but I inherited autocracy over your soul from my mother when I became head of House Morgannan. I hereby transfer it to House Devore—"

"Gantier," I corrected.

"Or House Gantier, as it's now known after Galt's unpleasantness." She waved curtly. "This man, whatever he calls himself, will be your new master."

"Papa?" said Emilie. "My papa is truly mine?"

"Yes," said Byanka, "and you also have godparents in case House Gantier perishes." She glanced to the Elvannas. "Lord Poskarl, Lady Irynya, I had so looked forward to being your hostess at the Frosthall this evening. Yet I am afraid that troubles in my own household mean that I must beg your indulgence and postpone the honor." She glared at Kyevegeny and Orlin, then reached into her sealskin muff and withdrew a pair of gilt-edged scraps of ivory pasteboard. "Yet as I know you have honored others with your own passes to the royal box for the opening night, I am hoping you will accept these if you still wish to see 'Kostchtchie the Deathless.'"

"Thank you, Lady Morgannan." Irynya took them with a pained glance at Holgrim. "If you would just have a servant crack a window, I will have Olya fetch a sleigh."

Byanka nodded, gesturing to the tall footman who took a long pole and opened the vent window atop the western oriel. Olya flew out.

I paused. My plan was for Orlin and myself to attend, then slip away with Dr. Orontius on the steps afterward, taking Emilie and Tinka with us.

Byanka laid a gentle hand on my arm. "I must apologize to you, Duke Devore. I know how you looked forward to tonight's performance, but I cannot in good conscience allow a guest of House Morgannan to be seen in a 'Fox and Crow' shuba!"

"Surely we could find another coat," I protested.

"Possibly, but there's a fine line between 'eccentric' and 'scandalous' and you shan't be invited to any reputable Jadwiga houses dressed like that. Besides which, there is a matter of discipline for my grandson and your brother. A willful apprentice does not last in Irrisen. Missing a social outing is the very least punishment my ancestress might respect." Byanka looked to Orlin. "I should probably turn his whipping child into a chipmunk as well..."

"Please don't," I said. "This is supposed to be a joyous occasion, after all."

Byanka nodded. "A fair point." She then turned to Valya. "What about you? Do you wish to go to the theater with your friends?"

Valya looked torn, but at last nodded.

Byanka produced one more pass. "Go to the Bone Bridge with the Elvannas and have Yelchev lower it so you may await their sleigh."



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They left, and an exceedingly awkward celebration began—the culmination of Duke and Duchess Devore's extravagant purchase a half-century earlier. There were cakes and frozen confections, little turnovers and tiny crepes topped with sturgeon roe which was the one bit of seafood Byanka considered fit to eat. I passed out small tabletop fireworks from my sample case, which the dolls were allowed to light on silver tea trays or set off in one of the fireplaces. A few rockets were shot out the windows.

Finally, Orlin used Kyeveny's shadow theater to put on a Galtan play, "The Imp and the Match Safe", one of Darl Jubannich's farces. Though the characterization of the wicked nobles was broad and the plight of the enslaved peasants was clear, the dolls watched impassively—excepting Holgrim, still bewitched to silence by Byanka's command.

Byanka looked unamused, but still spiked her punch until Orlin returned and refreshed her cup. "There," she commended, "that is a proper apprentice—though that was a most improper play." Byanka downed half the punch and reached for the flask. "You are fortunate Queen Elvanna—" She slumped forward on the table.

The room was dim, candles snuffed for the shadow theater, but I noted Kyeveny sprawled in his chair, Klaufi trying to wake him. Then I saw Byanka shiver, a most uncharacteristic activity for a winter witch—but a classic indicator of a certain drug.

"The goats," Orlin whispered. "She keeps them in her muff."

I blinked, then reached out hesitantly and took hold of the sealskin. Her cat familiar looked up at me and hissed, but clearly wasn't about to challenge me on his own.

Orlin took the fur roll from me, whispering, "Get Emilie, but give me that potion you got from the fireworks dealer."

He was speaking of the Tian Wash, the elixir for the banishment of evil. I handed it to him and watched him dump the contents over Holgrim who immediately stood up, the air filling with the scent of lemongrass.

I should have explained I had formulated a concentrate, but it was too late. The perfume spread out, the aroma designed to dispel all manner of evils, including charms and bewitchments. As we disappeared downstairs, I heard a childlike voice say, "Look! They left the bottlerockets!"

The sound of childlike laughter had become thunderous by the time we made it out the front door.

Orlin turned to me, holding an ivory goat in his hand. "Did you grab her fan?"

"No."

"Bother. We'll squeeze." He tossed the toy to the ground, calling out, "Trip-trap-trip! It's time to dance and skip!"

The toy skipped. It danced. It grew in size—then continued growing, bigger than a bull. The goat reared up, dancing on its hind legs, rampant, its hooves burning the

blue of alcohol flames. Its eyes glowed and it breathed fire the same color.

"That's not the same goat," I observed.

Orlin reached into the muff and pulled out another caprine figurine. He recited the charm again. This goat grew bigger than a warhorse, but was not breathing fire or rolling wicked glowing eyes like some shiver-addled herald's nightmare.

I put Orlin, Tinka, and Holgrim atop it, climbing astride the hellish goat with Emilie myself. "To the Bone Bridge!" Orlin commanded and the goats took off.

I pulled the bee-eater charm out of my pocket, whispering frantically, "Dr. Orontius. Meet us outside the Frosthall now. We are on our way. Norret."

I tossed the trinket in the air and it came to life, winging its way across the fjord.

The bridge was down, its bony planks spanning the gap, the way clear to the other—except for Yelchev the Troll. He stood in the middle, huge in his ivory armor.

"Who seeks passage—" he began.

That was as far as he got. My brother's bull-sized goat charged across the bridge, one of its horns having come free and transformed into a glowing lance. My brother held the oversized weapon awkwardly, yet it slammed into the astonished creature's chest at the same time as the goat's head met its midsection. The troll was thrown backward, past the rail-less edge of the bridge, and into empty space. Then he was gone.

"Orlin Gantier!" my brother cried. "That's who!"

I didn't know if the troll could survive the fall. Trolls were generally unkillable except by fire. That said, the indignity of being defeated by a human child—magical assistance or not—would likely make any troll consider self-immolation.

"To the Frosthall!" Orlin cried, reholstering his lance, which shrank to become his goat's left golden horn.

My own goat's horns were exceptionally large and razor-sharp, and I had no interest in touching them. Nevertheless, a blur of color shot out of the sky and alit on one of them.

"Help!" shrieked Olya, Irynya's parrot familiar. "Lies! Treason!"

It was only to be expected that someone would notice our escape. I made to backhand the offending bird—but was stopped short as it turned imploringly to me.

"Duke Devore, my mistress has been ambushed! You must save her!"

"What?" I gasped. "Who? Where?"

"The wolf!" cried Olya. "Silvertooth! Follow me!" It burst into flight again.

"Follow the parrot!" I called to Orlin, who relayed the command to the goats.

We dashed down the nighttime streets of Whitethrone, down a bright boulevard illuminated by lampposts topped



with skulls with flaming eyes, then careened into a dark alleyway lit only by the hellish eyes of my goat, the lanterns of a sleigh, and the blue glowing eyes of a pack of wolves.

Orlin charged. As he did, his goat didn't so much bleat as roar, a horrifying sound. Half the wolves turned tail and fled, tripping over snowbanks and pissing themselves in terror as the goat passed between them. Mine disemboweled a troll, breathing fire into its empty guts and setting the remains alight. This made it easy to toss in a fire grenade, which blew off the upper half.

The troll's lower torso stumbled about blindly, terrifying the other trolls, who ran after the craven wolves. There remained only the braver wolves and Silvertooth, who held Poskarl Elvanna up by the front of his kaftan. The boy was still alive, but bleeding onto the snow and missing several teeth. Irynya and Valya, unharmed, huddled in the sleigh with the Varki driver. The reindeer had all been torn apart, except for one that stood rimed with hoarfrost, frozen as a block of ice.

Seated on the front end of the sleigh was the old woman who'd tried to capture Orlin upon our first arrival, Poskarl's monkey familiar dangling lifeless from one hand. She grinned. "So the boy is back! But your Jadwiga owe Silvertooth a great deal of money, child. Perhaps they'll sell you to pay their debt?"

Tinka had the answer to that: "The wasp stings until she is satisfied!" the child cried, breaking the string on her wrist. She tossed a sparkling trinket toward the hag.

The Merrymead charm grew and grew, becoming a great golden whip. It stung like a wasp, striking the woman's hand, causing her to snatch it back and drop the monkey. Then it struck again, lashing about the crone, coiling about her like the string of a child's top. I half expected it to whip away and send her spinning, but apparently the Savored Sting was satisfied.

Holgrim was not. He leapt to the larger goat's head, pulling off its right horn. This became a golden greatsword, sized for a doll, but still long enough and sharp enough to do the job.

The old woman's head fell to the snow.

Silvertooth howled, taking wolf-shape, but his howl was answered by a new howling from the far end of the alleyway. Above it, the voice of Valya's thrush familiar trilled, "Guards! Here they are! Here!"

Silvertooth glowered at Poskarl. "This isn't over, boy." Then he turned tail and fled, his fellow wolves running after him.

Poskarl cradled his monkey, moaning, "Lychee! My little Lychee! Oh Valya, heal him!" He then looked up at me. "Don't let that villain get away!"

I nodded, and we charged on in the direction the wolves had gone. Solving Poskarl's drug-dealing debts was the least of my concerns, however. As soon as we were out of

sight, I turned us away from the canine tracks. A minute later, we thundered into the plaza where Dr. Orontius waited at the foot of the ice sculpture of Kostchtchie.

We dismounted, Orlin pronouncing the charm to reduce the goats to chryselephantine curios.

"Desna's wings!" Dr. Orontius exclaimed. "Is this all of you? Very well then. No time for frills. To Absalom!" he cried.

And then we were somewhere else entirely.

That, members of the Decemvirate, is my report. While my notes on the dancing huts are lacking, I hope I have explicated the mystery of the bonedust dolls to your satisfaction. Emilie will be returning with me to Galt, but Holgrim—while uninterested in being a historic relic in your vaults—is interested in applying for apprenticeship.

I would recommend him. He is very brave.

Sincerely,  
Norret Gantier

