

The Long Road  
By Carson Jones

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The Road to Port Fulworth is a long one.

It's been more than a Quarter since we fled - long enough for the winds to turn biting and the earth to grow pregnant with frost.

Walter tells me that things will get better, that we've less time to march now than we've spent on the road. He's a stoic old lout, but I can see that the journey tolls on him as well. He talks even less than he used to, and sometimes he limps when he thinks I'm not looking. Once I woke in the dead of night and saw him wrapping his feet, cracked and black with old, dried blood. I've given up on offering him the horse; it only serves to make him more cross. Some bunk about a Hrafsir's pride - as if needless harm is a mark of anything other than lunacy.

I've taken to writing, as you can see. I've plenty of time to myself on the road. I found this journal tucked in my bag, when I was searching for tinder. A gift from Camilla, I suppose, though I don't know when she'd expected me to find it.

The wind makes for poor writing, so I'll be done for the day. Perhaps the horse will be more eager to talk than Walter.

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"Wake up."

Every morning starts the same way: I jerk awake at some ungodly hour to the sound of an already-alert Walter tearing down the camp. No matter how full or fitful my sleep is on any given night, Walter is somehow always up before me.

That man is a force of nature. I've seen him soldier through illness and injury that would drive any sane person to their knees. There's *something* that drives him - a fire in his gut and a hardness in his eyes that forces one foot to follow the other.

I respect him more than anyone else - but on mornings like this, when I wake, wet and aching, to the sight of him bustling about before the sun has crested the trees - I want nothing more than to put his stubborn head on a pike.

I know my anger is unfair. I was an irritable riser even in the best of circumstances, and these conditions are far from ideal. Still, I badly wish that for once, he would let us rest. I said as much to him, but he brushed me off as he always does.

“The people who attacked your home will be looking for us. We cannot rest until we are sure that we are not followed.”

I know that, of course. My rational mind tells me that it's not safe to sleep where the dogs and riders could find us. I know that it will be at least another ten days of marching before we reach Duvall and can take shelter in relative anonymity. Those ten days seem unbearable enough; I can't bring myself to imagine the months more we have ahead of us before we reach Port Fulworth.

The past is too painful to dwell on, and the present is too miserable to hide in. The only thing that keeps me going is hope for the future. Port Fulworth, the light at the end of the tunnel. Our coinpurse is light, but there's more than enough to charter passage far, far from here. Far away from the burning ruins of the life we've left behind.

It's been twenty-three days, with at least as many left to go.

Ugh.

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### *Day 24*

We passed a trade caravan today. They were Illirian by the looks of them, judging by their dark hair and fair skin. Walter says you can tell them by their eyes; Illirians have a particular way of looking down on the world, he says. They seemed like alright folk to me, but Walter's a far better judge of character than I.

We traded away our best blanket for feed. Nick's been going hungry these last few days, and it's starting to show. Nick's the name I gave our horse, for the way she bites my fingers when I get too close.

The traders had wanted coin, but we had none to spare. Walter says we need to save every nelling we can for the voyage from Fulworth. I was against giving away our warmest blanket, but Walter said that the cover of the Aulderwood will shield us from the winds until we reach Stieger. I asked what we'll do once we get there, but he just put on that cross look that he gets when he's grown annoyed by my badgering and said, 'One problem at a time.'

Walter is my attendant - he's cared for me for as long as I can remember. He's a severe man, and not one for words. There's a kind of gravity about him, the kind that makes you listen when he speaks.

He's a head taller than any other man I've met, and his skin is gray like mountain stone. Mother once told me that he's a Hrafsir, descended from the giants of the far-north reaches of

Salingaard. I'm not one to believe in such tales, but his titanic stature leaves little room for doubt.

Ever since I was a boy, he's watched over me quietly. He'll frown at me when I show weakness and berate me when I've done less than my best, but he's always been there for me. Always with a hand ready to pull me from the dirt, and with hard-eyed assurance that one day, I'll be better. He's been like a father to me, in many ways. Certainly more so than my real father. I don't like to speak ill of the dead, but there's little to be said that's not ill about that man.

I'll not dwell on dark things any more, though. Perhaps today will be the day that Walter engages me in a game of wits. He says our attention is better spent watching for danger, but I think he's just scared.

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I don't blame them, you know. The people who attacked that night. I can't, really. My father was a dreadful man, and dreadful men scarcely make good rulers. He was Governor, appointed by some friend-of-a-friend for a favor done in his soldiering years. He was cold and wrathful; even as young children, we knew better than to draw too near to him. Mother was away as often as she could be - there were whispers within the estate of an illicit affair, though there's no way for me to know.

My father held such anger within him. Nearly anything could set him off. It seemed that every problem our township faced was anyone's fault but his. Paperwork undone or misplaced meant fits of rage and fired staff. If ever in need (or want) of coin, he'd levy taxes on the townsfolk and confiscate their produce.

It makes sense, truthfully. The people of Lanham were starving and suffering, and Father's moods only grew worse as time went on. Ruling with an iron fist only works for as long as you can keep it clenched.

There was more I could have done... more I should have done. I was too scared to face him. Too weak to do what was right.

It all seems trivial, now. Even the deepest fears and worries that I had seem a luxury now, reckoned against the dirt in my nails and the scabs on my feet. I can't remember the last time I bathed.

We've heard little news of home, and none of it has been good. It's hard to tell the truth from conjecture; We've only managed to gather bits of hearsay. We hear that the revolt was successful in Lanham, and there's a bounty out for the boy with golden hair and his goliath protector.

The night we heard the news, Walter cut my hair. We buried it in the hollow of a tree, and I've been caking my head with mud and dirt to hide the color.

It's been a miserable few days.

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### *Day 27*

I had a dream last night. I dreamt of home; it was nice, at first. The sun crested the distant mountains, painting the vineyard gold. I was a boy again, sparring with Syllas in the yard. I sat in Camilla's lap, listening to her gentle chidings while she picked the mud from my hair. I was warm, and we were happy.

It was the smell that set things off that time. I'd always loved the smells of home, of grapes and old wood and barley. Now all I remember is fresh blood and burning skin. I saw them as I did the night I fled, hanging from the old Willow in the courtyard. Everything else is a haze now, but I remember them clearly. The ropes were taut around their necks, their feet dangling above the stones in a gruesome dance. Cuts and burns bore down to bone, and their guts painted the dirt beneath them red.

They called me to them, beckoned with their listless arms. I drew closer, and they smiled. Mother and Father, too.

Then a dark hand grabbed me, dragging me away from them and into the distant flames. They mocked me, then, spitting and cursing. Coward. Weak. Then the hand gripped my neck, and turned to a rope, and I hanged next to the corpses of my family as our home burned down to dust around us.

I woke with my hands around my neck.

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### *Day 31*

We finally made it to Duvall - the heavy rainfall delayed our voyage by a few days. It's an old tillage, nestled in the plains between the Alder and the Rotwood. They're an austere and superstitious people, and he says they don't take kindly to strangers. I don't suppose that I'd be much different, in their shoes; rumors of witchcraft and faerie magic have made the Alderwood famous all across the Confederacy.

We passed a beggar in the streets today. He was a spindly man, dressed in rags and pleading in a voice that grated like time on a marriage. 'Please, sir, spare a coin for an old miser?'

He looked me right in the eye, and I saw the pain that hid behind his glassy stare. My heart broke for him, but then I felt Walter's hand on my shoulder, and I kept walking. Hardly a second passed before I heard the man call out to someone else, like he'd grown so used to being ignored that he had no dignity left to lose.

I've thought about that man all day.

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## *Day 42*

We hunted today.

We'd ran out of meat, and we needed to save the grain for Nick. Walter handed me his bow, and led me into the woods. We spent most of the day in cold, bitter silence. He shushed me when I tried to speak, telling me to keep an eye out for movement.

I couldn't feel my hands by the time an elk wandered into view. Walter looked pointedly at it and gestured for me to draw the bow. I did, my hands shaking all the while. I stared at it, and all I could think about was how beautiful it was. How innocent it was. The sun shone through the canopy in just the right way, wreathing its ivory antlers in golden fire. It stood in that grove, chewing on a patch of moss, oblivious to the danger hiding mere feet away.

I faltered. The elk made to leave, and Walter took the bow from my hands. He shot it deep in its neck, and the creature fell to the forest floor. It struggled; the blow hadn't killed it. It thrashed in the dirt, its eyes black and wild. It bucked its head desperately, and cracked an antler against a nearby stone. Walter drew a blade from his belt, and I squeezed my eyes shut as he drove it under the beast's chin.

I watched him clean it, numb all the while. He left the pelt on the floor, rising silently and dragging the carcass behind him. I followed, grabbing the broken piece of antler as I did. It's no bigger than my palm, and stained faintly with blood. I don't know why I took it.

Walter didn't say anything, but I know he was disappointed in me. He squared his shoulders and set his jaw in the way that he does whenever I'm too weak to do what's needed.

The road was empty tonight, so we built a fire. I've no aptitude for magic, but Walter knows enough to conjure some sparks. He says it drains him, but I guess he was too angry to stoke the fire by hand. We cooked some of the elk - It tasted like leather boots.

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I cried yesterday. I hadn't cried for a long time - hardly at all since we left. We passed a bird's nest on the road, fallen to the earth and trampled. I saw bits of shell and blood, and tiny black

feathers in the snow. I still don't know why it upset me so; I ate the elk the other day and felt nothing. It reminds me of something, a piece of a memory that I can't quite place. Somewhere warm, and the sound of ravens calling. A cozy place a world away. Even now, my eyes grow wet.

I fell to my knees there on the road, fists over my eyes as I wept like an infant. I don't know how long I knelt there, but at some point Walter placed a gentle hand on my shoulder. We sat there for some time, until my eyes went dry and the wind made the wet on my cheeks sting.

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Walter's fallen ill. He tries to hide it, but I can see the pallor in his cheeks and the sweat on his brow. His limp is pronounced, now. I took the flask of brandy from the pack and washed out the wounds on his feet, very obviously infected. The smell was ungodly - I was lucky I hadn't yet eaten. I've wrapped his feet with what's left of my cleanest shirt and thrown him on Nick's back. He was too weak to resist, and with some effort I hobbled him up onto her back.

I've lost track of the days - fifty-something, I think. It doesn't much matter, really; it certainly won't if we die here.

A fever's starting to set in as I write. I'll go fill the flagon with water from the creek nearby.

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I keep thinking about this old fight I had with my brother. I was nine, so Sy would've been twelve or thirteen. Mother had given him a pen for his birthday, one of the fancy ones that holds the ink inside. It was beautiful, carved from an ebony polished wood. He carried it around with him everywhere; I was painfully jealous. He never used the pen - Sylas wasn't what you would call a 'bookish' child. I, on the other hand, was in the library more often than I was in my own room, and desperately wanted that pen.

I went up to him one day and asked if I could borrow it. He refused. I wish I could remember what he said, but I remember it made me so mad that I snatched it out of his hands and ran away.

He chased me down the corridors, yelling and crying. I could be fast when I wanted to be, but he was always the more athletic of the two of us. He caught me, and tackled me onto the carpet. It was a gorgeous rug, woven from Pollonian silk. The pen broke under me, and stained the carpet black.

Father was furious; that rug was priceless, and he demanded to know who was responsible. I remember staring at the ground, crying but unable to speak. After a few seconds, Sylas looked Father in the eye and said that he had done it. I sat there, stunned, and without another word,

Father grabbed him by the hair and dragged him into another room. I don't know what happened next, but I know Syllas came to dinner with a black eye and a bloody nose that night.

I don't know what made me think of that.

Walter's gotten worse.

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Nick's been good to us on this journey. Better than she's had any reason to be. We didn't have time to take a saddle, but she's trotted softly and I've hardly chafed. Her dappled gray coat is so beautiful, like the sky on a day when the snow falls like flour. She always bit my fingers when I fed her, but if that was to be the extent of her rebellion, then I didn't mind.

I'm going to miss her. My hands are still shaking. She'd been lagging the last week or so, bowing under Walter's weight. This morning she was lame, blinking at me through misty eyes and breathing quick and shallow. I took Walter's knife from my pack, cooing at her as I approached. I don't think she even saw me coming; she just laid there, breathing fitfully. Exhaustion, maybe. Or some sickness.

I used the snow to wipe the blood from the dagger, because Walter once told me that stains can make a blade go dull. We've got plenty of meat now; hopefully the cold will help it keep.

I left them in a safe recess near the roadside and went to find a more permanent shelter. With Nick gone, I won't be moving Walter until his fever breaks. We're out of the Aulder now, a few weeks past Stieger on the north coast of Lake Valka. I can see the Alabaster Mountains piercing the sky to the far north - under any other circumstances I'd be moved beyond words by their beauty.

I found an old cottage some way into the woods, long-burned down and rotted through. I used Nick's hide and some wood from the forest to make a sled, and dragged Walter and the meat to the cottage over many trips. I spent the rest of the day covering my tracks, tamping the blood stains under thick clumps of snow.

Gods, I'm exhausted. I hardly notice the time pass any more.

We need food; but first, I need to sleep.

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Summer came, and Spring has gone;

Gone, to places over yon.  
Snowy curtains, skyward drawn;  
Drawn, 'till Summer comes anon.

Camilla was my oldest sister - she had the most wonderful voice. That was her favorite song, a rhyme that Mother taught her in a rare moment they shared together.

There's only weeks left to Fulworth, though they may as well be years. We're stuck here until Walter pulls through - and even then, there's a damned blizzard between us and freedom.

Summer's long gone, and Winter's come to reap the weak and weary.

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It's been three days in the cabin now. I've lain Walter against the sturdiest wall, and lined the cracks with his cloak to keep the wind at bay. I've wrapped him in hide and spare clothing, and rested ice on his head to quell the fever. I dug an old iron pot out from between the broken floorboards - it's rusted over, but it's better than nothing. I spent most of the first day starting a fire, and I've been boiling snow to make clean water.

I look down at my hands, and they look like someone else's. Cracked, calloused, and stained with dirt and blood. Nails long and split, scabs and scars untreated. These are the hands of one who has killed.

Is this how they felt? The people who burned my home and killed my family? Did they feel like animals, desperate and savage? Am I any different from them?

Maybe this is what I deserve. Maybe this is my punishment, for all my weakness and inaction. I'm not like those people - they saw an injustice and they fought back. I just ran; running is all I've ever done. Running from my father, from my family's expectations. Running from the fate I know I deserve - a place beside them on that courtyard tree.

Why do I keep running? Everyone I've ever known or loved is dead. My life burned to rubble, and the land I always knew as home is hunting for my head. It would be so easy to give in. The cold is almost comforting, now - it numbs the pain and clouds my thoughts. Hides me from the fears and memories.

It would be so easy to let go. To lie down on this old, jagged floor and rest. Finally rest.

But I know I can't. Not while Walter is still alive. If he lets go, then I'll let go, but I know that man well enough to know that he'll never stop fighting. I am weak. I am young, and cowardly and small - but Walter isn't. I may deserve to die in this frigid hole, but he doesn't. I don't know what in the hells he sees in me, but something in me has kept him around all these years, for all those times I've needed him.



Well now, for once, he needs me. And for once, I won't let him down.

We're not going to die here.

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We were attacked last night. By people - the first I've seen in a lifetime. There were two of them, a man and a woman. I awoke to the sound of splitting wood; the man had put his foot through the soft plank near the doorframe. I was on him before even I realized it, moving more like an animal than a man. He swung at me with the rusted shortsword he held in his hand, but I caught his arm and he only grazed my shoulder.

I threw myself onto him, bowing him backwards with his leg pinned under him. I heard wood split and I saw his eyes ignite with pain, but there was no room in my heart for sympathy. His sword arm was pinned between us, and I grabbed with both hands, forcing the blade up towards his neck. We struggled, shaking and drooling from exertion, but I forced a clean cut across his windpipe before a weight threw me off of him.

The woman was on top of me, her hands around my neck. I struggled as she choked me, more alive than I've ever been. I rolled and drove her against a beam, stunning her, and I straddled her torso, pinning her under me. I dug my fingers into her neck, frothing like a rabid animal as she struggled. I gripped her neck with all the strength in my body, until her lips turned blue and her eyes lost their last trace of light.

I crawled my way to Walter, and slumped against him. He was unharmed, best I could tell. I looked back at the man, struggling as he wetly choked, drowning in his own blood. I watched him for what must have been minutes, staring into his desperate, unfocused eyes until he, too, grew still.

Walter's fever had broken that day, and he awoke some few hours later. He hugged me tightly, brushing my hair away and staring deep into my eyes. I'll never know what he saw, but whatever it was, it broke him. He gripped me fiercely, and we cried together until sleep took us both.

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I looked the two over in the morning before we left the cabin. I found a sword and a dagger, and a parchment with our faces and the promise of a reward upon our capture. Someone in the last town must have recognized us and taken up the bounty. They were bandits, just trying to survive. Only they didn't, and I did.

Walter was still weak, but he could move. He cleaned and dressed my shoulder with the last of the sterile water, and we grabbed what food we could before making for the road. The skies

have cleared, parting way to the promise of a few days' travel unimpeded. We staggered off towards the road, and trudged along like we have for so many days now.

We passed a homestead on the road; we gave it a wide berth. It was a plantation of some kind, the fields left unworked for the winter. We skirted around its outer fence, but I saw something that made me pause.

I saw a willow, like the one from home, with a rope swing hanging from its lowest branch. I stared at it - I stared until my eyes ached. My fists were clenched so tightly my palms bled, but I didn't notice the pain.

I saw ghosts hanging from the tree. I saw the heads of Nick and the elk from the forest. I saw the beggar from Duvall, and the bandits from the cabin. I saw my family, just as I had seen them on that night when the old Callum died. I saw their faces; their slack, distant gazes. There were no smiles, this time. No beckoning, no taunts or jeering. They just dangled, staring past me into the distance.

They didn't recognize me.