“God-Killing”

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(Third Draft)

In front of her, the Queen’s Hall burned.

Around her, skeletons of her home and people were devoured by fire.

An entire memory being purified by *their* flame.

So many of her sisters were sent off to meet the Bride before her. Each of them with their heads bowed, and hands offered in completion of the ultimate vow each of them had made upon coming of age. Anaxa clenched her teeth, holding back her poisonous envy until she was near to choking on it. Except that envy didn’t last long. The horns– *their* horns –sliced through the death- and smoke-filled atmosphere to remind Anaxa that the culprit of this massacre was still here; still present. Her canines snapped, a fierce growl slid past the sharp-whites. She hoped they heard it, and that it brought their souls to tremble. By then her envy was bandaged over with fury; by then her envy was replaced by the need to taste their blood.

As if to answer that rage, their warhorns called in answer. Now she looked over the men lined up under banners bearing the mark of His Brilliance; The Bright Emperor; He who ordered her home to burn. The smoke of her burnt, and still burning home did not touch them. Instead the black clouds– born from charred wood, bone, and fat –rolled over the dome of protective runes, revealing them one-by-one.

Witnessing their exposure prompted Anaxa to ease up. Her fingers stopped themselves from drawing an arrow from her hip-strapped quiver, and her wish for violence quieted to a frustrated murmuring. Instead of firing upon them, Anaxa counted the arrows, accounting for the number of the imperial soldiers she could fell before they took her down. In her other hand, the

leather of her shortbow’s grip creaked from the pressure her anger inflicted upon it. Behind her, Snow Daughter shuffled in place, causing her bell and ribbon adorned mane to sing a reminder of her presence– that they would ride into battle together.

“My Love,” she invoked one of the Bride’s many titles, “may each arrow I count now be a dead man sent to you in honor of the sisters that went before me. May they be the wedding gift I bring to your altar, and if I do not fall today, may it be the beginning of my dowry to you until I fall into your icy embrace.”

The prayer did not calm Anaxa’s rage, instead it fed the flood of adrenaline preparing her for a glorious death in battle. As her finger left the last fletching, she wondered if the arrows she counted and the presence of Snow Daughter would be enough to get her through their formation and reach their camps; to see if their Brilliant Emperor had the courage to face the slaughter He commanded from His men? She knew, however, He wouldn’t be there. Instead it would no doubt be one of His champions, thereby declaring Anaxa’s people unworthy of the honorable fate of being felled by His command directly.

Well let the cow–

Anaxa’s thoughts were cut short by the scream of frightened horses.

“The stables!”

As Anaxa bolted that way, Snow Daughter swung her head but did not move to follow her bonded rider. Instead the mare stood in place, her waves of concern reached across the growing distance between them just before the sharp whistling of a thousand arrows filled the air.

Those deadly missiles, let loose from soldiers’ longbows, drew the mare’s ears away from Anaxa’s pounding, running, feet to that of the men who were no longer waiting.

Snow Daughter stamped down a hoof and called her warning out only to be too late.

Anaxa made it three paces before hitting the ground with an arrow through her shoulder, shooting pain through her every nerve and making every breath taste of blood and agony. The chorus of a hundred more arrows thumped into the earth, signaling death, but failed to deliver it unto Anaxa. Instead her heart broke as their percussion ended with one strong bodily crash. Just beyond the reach of her hand, Snow Daughter lay in a heap of horse flesh, bells, and ceremonial weavings; She had taken the death blow on behalf of her partner.

That pain, the one of losing her bondmate horse, hurt more than any singular arrow; more than the death of all her sisters; more than the burning of the Queen’s Hall; even more than the denial of reaching the wedding altar at the edges of the Cold Below. However hard she pressed her face into the earth, she could not hide from that pain. Instead she turned her head, pressed ear to earth, and listened to the duet of their horses’ thundering hoofbeats and marching feet charging upon the graveyard they had made of her home. As their advance continued, Anaxa’s heart fell out of rhythm. With each ground-trembling strike upon the earth their advance sounded, and instead of pulling herself up to give chase, Anaxa willed herself to crawl until she inevitably collapsed as near to Snow Daughter’s heaving sides as she could manage.

One soldier, then another, and another broke off from the many in a steady rhythm, prompting the fallen horse witch to action. Anaxa had lost her short bow long ago, or what had seemed like long ago. So, her hands scrambled over her person and into the folds of her cloak

until she found the horse-bone grip of her knife. The feel of it in her hands brought some relief as she held it tight to her chest. One of those many sets of boots approached. His shadow loomed over her until he grabbed her heavy cloak’s hood. Gravity worked its stress on the cloak and the arrow that still protruded from her shoulder, as Anaxa dangled there with teeth gritting, trying not to hurl out the score of curses welling up from deep within.

“Look,” the man begins, “one of those horse-fucking plains whores is st–”

Instead of voicing protest to the man’s choice of words for her and her passed-on sisters, Anaxa let the knife do her talking. Its curved blade plunged into the man’s neck where that blessed plate armor could not protect him. All other words he had to say about her, and about her people, were choked on as blood bubbled past his lips. Her whoop of triumph was short lived, however, transforming into a shout of pain as he dropped her back to the ground. That arrow’s shaft plunged deeper; its steel point was exposed to the air the moment it pushed through her breast. That arrow– now pointing skyward from her chest as she lay on her back –joined all the others upon the ground, in Snow Daughter’s horseflesh, and her sisters’ bodies, as if they were flagpoles of conquest awaiting their banners.

Every swear; every promise of returned violence; every vile thing she wished to befall His men that left her lips sported flecks of blood and the spittle of rage. She cursed the man drowning in his own blood, the army that he had come along with, and their precious Brilliant Emperor whose banner flooded her vision as the main body of the army marched past. Some laughed, others jeered, but they all used the same hateful title their comrade had used just moments before to address her – “Horse-Fucking Plains Whore.” A few, however, did use the less vulgar “Horse Witch”, but with a hint of venom as they spit it out.

Just these men wait, she thought, *I’ll show them what me and my sisters are capable of.*

Except, Anaxa never got the chance.

“*Not yet.*”

The voice that whispered was not Snow Daughter; a voice as soft and sweet as a promise. When Anaxa turned her head, as if she could find the source of the words, her vision filled with the sight of a burly and giant warhorse. The feathering of its hooves were soaked and ashy from treading through the ruins of her home. Its head held high, unbothered by the frightening scenes going on all around it, nostrils flaring at the smell of fat burning on the pyre of her home.

Good, let them smell it all.

Searching past the horse, Anaxa’s unfocused gaze fixed on the man astride it. His armor shining and sporting the crest of His Brilliance. *This*, Anaxa realized as he hoisted that spear up with its cruel point directed towards her, *is one of His champions*. Without giving Anaxa time for any last words, he plunged its point down into the center of her chest. That blade crushed her heart with a cruel decisiveness only weapons can manage, and allowed her just a single breath’s passing to hear the whooping cheer for the death of the final Horse Witch.

Now she could go rest with her sisters, proud to have taken down at least one of them.

Now let me rest, my beloved, with you and my sisters in that Cold Below.

“Not yet, Lady Anaxa.”

A hand– *Her hand* –removed itself from my vision. As those thin bone-white fingers cleared my vision, a soft cold light in a chilly darkness filtered through a wool-spun veil filled my vision. Its sheer fabric faded from white to red and then into violet, and then into a darkness that melded with that of the umbral cold around us. The fabric sported embroidery in patterns that told the stories and the oaths I had grown up all my life creating on the plains. That was when realization dawned on me.

This veil, I have seen it before.

Those white threads, with other pale colors woven in, had been woven in the day of my coming of age; when I took the knee at the altar of the Bride’s temple and swore myself to her as all my sisters had done before. We, the Daughters of the Plains and Keepers of the Pactborne Horses, all became her betrothed the day we drew our first blood from our first foe and learned firsthand the precious nature of life when taken by our bows and blades. My catch on that hunt– my first hunt –had been a small sparrow. I had been sad to slit the breast of the small foul, but I saw Her then as I see Her now– *unchanged and beautiful* –and thus learned how beautiful death could be.

This time, I was not standing, nor was I kneeling before Her altar to make offerings. This time my head rested upon Her shrouded knee, watching as Her delicate hands ran thread through a section of veil caught within a redwood hoop. What she wove into her veil now was the ending to a story about me, about Snow Daughter, about our lives and our deaths.

I breathed the word “Death” in reverence; with love.

“Rest,” her other hands– the pair unfettered from her task of life and death weaving –settled on my shoulders to keep me from sitting upright, “my love. Rest.”

Refusing to rest, I made an attempt to sit upright, only for those gentle hands to be the strongest thing I had ever confronted, even stronger than His Brilliance’s golden flames. I felt no surprise in response to the Bride’s strength, she was– and always will be –Death, after all.

My anger, despite my understanding, rose up in the shape of a growl.

“I cannot. The horses, my sisters–!”

“Are dead,” she said, “and you are soon to be damned.”

As if to punctuate Her point, the Bride looked up. Her deathly-pale skin, like bleached bone, shone in the darkness. I could now hear the song of waters moving below ice, see the motes of white snow flakes drift along the reeds and lily pads lazily frozen on the water’s surface, and the brilliant red blooms that flooded the scene and weeped with crimson dye. Their green stems touched with a white frost that flaked and melted away in spots, as if they were as hot as living bodies.

There was that slow creak of a boat somewhere in the distance, ice breaking against its stern, and I startled into a frenzy of action. My hand smacked against my chest, patting frantically for the sign of my Heartpouch only to find its weight not there at all. They had taken it! Not only had they stolen that pouch, they had removed the two marques carved of horse bone from it. How many of my sisters had theirs taken as well?

“How many of us are stuck here?”

The Bride’s silence conveyed her reluctance to answer.

“It’s only me, isn’t it?” I frowned. “I–”

“Will degrade into a wraith, unable to join them.” The sorrow in Her voice chewed at my heart. She focused on the ferries crossing the frozen waters in the most beautiful of bridal processions. “Eyes burning with rage, belly hungry for your murderer’s flesh, and you will fail beneath his light. Unless…” The look on her face, as her words drifted, spoke to something she wished to say, but hesitated to do so. A fight against some instinct raged on within behind Her dark eyes that searched for something before drawing in a deep breath and letting it all out on the gentle exhale. “Unless you kill the one who writes this path to the end for you; for us. Because this world will end, if this path continues, and no one will be able to avenge your sisters and destroy the greatest threat this world faces: The Author of Finality.”

“Why? If this world ends then His Brilliance is dead too, right?”

“Because the Author will make another world, and do this again.” She leaned in, brushing lips against my brow in comfort; continuing to speak despite the pain of a thousand lifetimes seeping into her tone. Pale features creased with distress as each world, role, and time coursing through Her existence– our existence –was relived. “You, your sisters, and all others– even His Brilliance –will be remade in a new world of his making, and suffer anew; as you have so many times before.”

It all sounded absurd, but Her pain convinced me.

“And, if I kill this Author?”

“He will be dead.”

“Obviously.”

A small laugh, “I always wished to make that joke.”

“It’s awful.”

“But my dear Horse Witch, dear Daughter of the Plains, Last of the Witch Queen’s line and chosen of Snow Daughter, if you do kill a man, he does die.”

“Even if he is a god?”

“Especially because he is a god.”

“And if I kill him, what will happen?”

“We all will be free of the Author’s loop. This world will not be crushed by his whim, but by your wrathful self after I bring you back here to take on the Emperor of Brilliance. A favor for a favor, my love.”

There was no second thought to give this matter, however absurd it sounded. Instead, I attempted to sit upright, and found that Her hands no longer held me down. So I turned until I faced Her. I lowered my brow to the soil at Her knee. The single answer left my lips as I laid a kiss upon the edges of her skirts: “Yes. Yes, I’ll go and kill this God for your sake, for my sister's sake, and for the world’s sake.”

Icy waters cracked in response, and rose in answer.

That cold chill of the freed waters crept up my limbs, over my neck, and submerged my head. It was only her hand that kept my face out of the rising river, dark eyes met with my own as they sparked with rage and gun powder. She leaned in then. Her chilled lips mere ghosts against the heat of my own as she kissed me. The last words I heard from the Goddess, before the water drowned and dragged me through the space between one world and the next: “May you enjoy this wedding gift, Love.”

Love.

The Bonewhite Maiden, Bride of the Daughters, and Goddess of Death, had spoken that word last, but the world that seeped into my senses now inspired no such feeling. It was loud, gross, and smelled as obscene as the hillmen druids. If this was the world of gods, why did everything about it make me wish to vomit right there on the uninspired grey beneath my feet? Did the Bride dwell here too? If so, perhaps it would be wise to rethink my intentions to follow her plans with killing this ‘Author of Finality’.

I lifted my gaze upwards and towards one of the great pillars that surrounded me. Upon them were great and colorful banners filled with strange symbols and imagery so alien I couldn’t discern what they were. I could, however, recognize the sigil of the Brilliant Emperor and the face of a man that seemed familiar despite never having seen him before. My feet carried me that way, and I nearly tumbled off a strange small plateau into a black solid path filled with loud and noisy carriages. One of them screeched to a halt with a horn blaring from somewhere within its wide front, and someone hanging out of a side-hole exposing its hollow innards.

“Watch where you’re walking you fucking lunatic.”

At first I was surprised because I could understand his words despite my inability to read the runes plastered all over his carriage, many of which match the ones of the banner. Those two clues told me that these words– the spoken ones –had to match the written ones. So, I planted my hands down upon the carriage’s hood, pointed at a sign, and stated as loudly and clearly as I could: “What does that say?”

Despite the angry color of his face, the man’s eyes went wide in confusion. “What?!”

“What. Does–”

“I heard you, you roleplaying lunatic.” The man, distracted by his sputtering rage, didn’t even take the opening presented to him by my walking around his vehicle. By the time he recognized the threat, my hand reached in to grab his shirt. I pulled him towards me, but not out of the car. I had no desire to draw the attention of witnesses– who numbered in the hundreds around the carriage path –to this scene. Now he choked on syllables over and over, failing to grasp some rebuttal or demand. Wordlessly I promised violence if he didn’t cooperate, letting my presence speak for me instead. He relented, wetting himself, and read the sign. “FantaCon proudly presents star guest F Underhill, author of the Brilliance Saga. Signings of the *Plains–!*”

“That’s enough,” I declared, pushing him back into his seat. “Thanks.”

Would I have compensated him for the information if I had a coin? No. If he owned a carriage then he had plenty.

With one sign understood, the rest fell into place.

Just follow the arrows.

My feet carried me across the black carriage-path to the other ashy plateau, which had a convenient sloped section to walk up. As I followed each guiding banner, the crowd around me grew thick with people in various styles of armor, weapons going from practical to impractical, and hair that was unfit for battle if it wasn’t contained under helmets. One guy was half a head taller than Anaxa and sported what looked like a fortress wall’s cannon, though it had no clear means of being fired. Another was a woman in clothing that barely held onto her flesh, but her staff was brilliant with fairy lights, promising great power from them. Others– a whole platoon of them –were dressed as footsoldiers of the Brilliant Emperor, complete with his sigil on their tabards. In a dizzying moment, instead of stopping me, one of them pointed and another waved, while another shouted.

My fingers fell to my hip and upon the grip of the shortsword they pointed to. Its horse bone grip, wrapped in leather made from the hide of the bison of the plains, was a comfort in this obscene place. I grounded myself with the feel of its cold iron, and reassured myself that these were not true soldiers. After all, their armor didn’t even smell of blessed steel.

“Amazing Costume! Where did you get your replica sword made?”

I did not answer them, for they did not deserve my words.

Instead, I shouldered through the crowd of them, reaching to grab the odd-tag at the edge of their belts as I passed by. It hadn’t taken too much for me to understand the importance of these clips when a guy in grey attire, who bore the golden sigils of justice, insisted on seeing them before he allowed access to the building. These were not unfamiliar concepts, after all. This

very same guard was appeased by ‘my’ badge, and told me to go to the ‘inspection point’ as he had many others with weapons, and I chose not to follow his directions. Instead I walked past the booth where additional tags were being given out, and into the building. No other guards or doormen stopped me, not even the imposing figures that surrounded me with their imperial regalia.

Stopping before a poster sporting the Author’s face, I took time to study it closely. He was clean, immaculate, a soul that had never had to struggle a day in his life and sported a soft body to show for it. In contrast, his creation– the Brilliant Emperor –earned Anaxa’s respect as a leader, due to the tales of his struggles and his countless feats. Granted, Anaxa knew why the author looked familiar now, there were traces of the Emperor’s looks in him.

“Those teeth of his,” I frowned, “are they even real?”

“Nah,” some stranger cut in, “they got to be veneers.” Then that same person redirected their attention to me, a hand slapping my arm alongside his declaration. “Hey, that's an awesome Horse Witch costume. Want to take a picture with me?”

He gave me time and space to answer, and I used it to observe him. This man was one of His Champions, and the sight of that familiar plate armor with His sigils made my stomach flip and instincts ignite. I did not draw my blade on him because it lacked the scent of His blessings. It would also draw too much attention, and he was relaxed despite being in the presence of a ‘Horse Witch’, making it clear he was a non-threat; Perhaps he was even a fake. Either way, I split from his presence even as he shouted at me for being an ‘ungrateful bitch.’

I had no reason to kill him.

Soon, I thought in those moments, *I will cut down his god and then His Brilliance, giving them the chance to see through all the lies.*

This line of thinking offered no peace, and my grip on the blade grew tighter as I followed a new set of arrows through one claustrophobic space after another, each somehow smelling worse than the city outside.

Do these people not wash?

It was all madness to me, and it all had one origin– F. Underhill. His imperial creation had doomed all dangers to these people, and they had been granted safety at the cost of mine. All so that they could gather together, hang off one another, and offer parts of their souls to flashing black boxes of metal and glass.

As I passed the last sign, this one without an arrow, I was greeted by the sight of a great hall, or what I assumed must be one. The great pillars of support towered over people both standing and in seats arranged like platoons of soldiers ready to march, though they were all useless and stationary. Each of them faced a platform sporting luxurious chairs, which I assumed to be thrones made of the finest of fabrics. In one sat a woman in strange attire similar to what the man across from her wore, but in a light skin-looking color as if she had skinned another humanoid to make the weave of her pants and jacket. I pondered if it was the flesh of gnomes given how it glittered under the light.

That sense of wonder died the instant I focused on the man.

Across from her was the man in the photos; the Author of Finality; the god called F. Underhill. Compared to the paintings of him, he was of middling height, quite milky in appearance, and soft. This was the kind of god that did not ready himself for war. His appearance was– for lack of better words in all my vocabulary –sad.

Despite his unassuming and weak appearance, I remembered the most important thing; This god had set into motion everything that had killed my sisters. His words on a page had sent me to a death where I was condemned to slowly breakdown into a wraith; only to be scorched out of existence by His Brilliance’s flames without getting to taste victory. He had also penned into being the moment my mother had gotten astride her pactbonded steed and faced the forces that vastly outnumbered us; the moment the cairn stones cracked beneath the fiery comets launched by imperial clerics invoking His name. He was the one who envisioned the scene in which the stones from catapults designed for sieging fortresses were cruelly used on our wooden walls, thatched roofs, and stone-and-wood structures. Even the Queen’s Hall had barely survived it. But it did not matter, mead would no longer flow in those halls nor would my sisters dance in celebration after gaining her pact-partner, or a great battle was won upon the plains to secure access to the hunt and harvest for another seasons’ turn.

Recalling all of it broke my heart. My anger, no longer capable of being kept fully in check, cracked open and spilled, oozing firehot lava from my heart and burst out of my lungs in a rage-filled cry that froze everyone present, even the guards. At first my stride was quick as I walked down that center path to the stage, then it became a jog, and then a full run. My scream tore past lips as the blade left the sheath on crossing the presence of two grey-uniformed guardsmen. They were so slow and unsuspecting for they had never once had to face a true fight.

Except for one, but his arm– the one that brandished an odd looking weapon at me –was cut clean off before it could do its damage. After the first slice, I kept going forward until my sword buried its blade into the fat and flesh of the god who thought himself simply for writing my home into being. I leaned in, letting each inch drive deeper, until my forehead met with his. Bright green fury in my eyes met the wetness of his gaze that spoke of his shock and pain.

So gods can feel pain.

Without tenderness, I pulled the blade from his body and he slumped into his chair. The sound of his last breaths gurgled alongside his pained groans; both of which were joined by a joyous whoop that left my lips. The woman to my right screamed and the guardsmen shouted some nonsense about dropping my weapon. Instead I spread arms wide, my reverent stare pointing up into the lights above this stage.

“Witness me! For I, Anaxa Snows-Daughter, have avenged my sisters.”

My body was struck with pain as my chest burst open in front of me, and my blood splattered to mix with that of the god’s. Again the cold rose up to claim me as the world faded. This time, however, I smiled as my beloved scooped me up in that most beautiful of moments. The joyous tears running down my cheeks at the magnificence of feeling Her cold arms wrap around me, summoning me back to the cold below with one final hopeful thought.

I am free to avenge my sisters.

And then, for the second time that day, the world went dark, cold, and silent.