

"When the snow lay round about..."

(Written on the Feast of Stephen, 2006, and based on a well-known Christmas carol. For those of you who read "Lookout Hill", this is set a few seasons later. Any HQ players will recognise the feats and subcults mentioned: MRQ players may want to read "Thunder Rebels" and "Storm Tribe".)

It was cold, standing on the Goodfork palisades at night. Keeping watch was easy enough at this time of year: no-one moved in Dark Season unless they had to, even to and from the trading centre of the Kheldon, the richest tribe in Sartar, and the deep, even, snow meant that anyone who did would be seen, especially with the bright red light of the Moon shining down, making every shadow distinct. But it was *cold*. Hindina shivered, stamped her boots to keep her feet warm. She'd heard some people managed to fall asleep on duty, it was that boring, but she'd never worked out how you could sleep when your nose and fingers hurt this much. Tarki Wrylip, the warband leader, went the rounds every few hours, checking up on them just in case. She didn't really approve of Hindina, didn't really like any of the girls who'd joined Vinga in the last few seasons, since word had come of the new Kheldon Queen who their parents had said was going to change everything. For good or for bad, they weren't sure, but it was a chance to make a name for yourself, one way or the other. For good or for bad... Hindina wanted to earn a use-name of some sort, to be famous for *something*, but there were some names she'd rather not have. Ragna Pig-breath, her childhood playmate, came to mind. Or "Bad King Ugrain", villain of so many tales. Just plain "Kedrasdottir" was better than that. Vaguely she wondered if someday tales would be told of "Good Queen Kallyr".

There were sounds now from the next post along: Tarki must be coming. Hindina straightened her spear, made sure she was very obviously looking outward, not being distracted. But the voice from behind her wasn't the one she'd expected.

"Anything interesting happening?"

Of course there wasn't, and of course she'd have reported it if there had been, but you didn't say that to your Queen. "Not a thing. A noise a while back, but it was just a tree-branch breaking under the ice."

"The clear nights are always the coldest. A perfect night for scouting, tonight: if you think this is cold, you should try it a few miles up." Hindina was no flyer and had no intention of trying any such thing, but that wasn't something she could say, either. Fortunately Kallyr didn't seem to expect an answer. "Just look down that road. You can see half-way to Swenstown on a night like this."

"You can?" Hindina had heard tales of Kallyr's star magic, she could almost believe it, tried not to let the awe show in her voice. Kallyr Starbrow – now *that* was a username.... She'd had others in the past, too, mainly to do with fights she'd won, but that was the one that had stuck.

"Well, maybe not quite. The road bends." There was a hint of laughter there – it had been a joke, after all. "A few miles, though. Look, there's the light from Lambnet Fort, and that's over seven miles away. And there's...." She stopped, frowning. "That's someone on the road. There's movement. Only one, though."

"Only one?" No-one travelled in Dark Season unless they had to, and no-one travelled alone unless they were out of their minds. Hindina strained to make out anything in the darkness, failed.

"One. And not an enemy. Run down to the gate and tell them to go out and meet him."

Time passed faster when there was something happening and it seemed only a few minutes later that they heard what had driven a man to travel the road to Goodfork on a Dark Season night. Having your eldest son killed and eaten by a previously unknown monster, and another child not returned to the stead by nightfall, will do that. By then a crowd had gathered, eager for anything new: even some of the tribal ring had appeared, trying hard to look as if they were there as official advisors to their Queen, above the idle curiosity of the mob.

"What was she doing out alone, anyway?"

"Gathering firewood."

"Your woodpile was running low, this early?" No more need be said – an inadequate woodpile, in a Dragon Pass winter, was the ultimate measure of incompetence. Some of the audience turned away, disgusted: it was obvious that there would be no further action to help anyone who had failed so badly to help themselves. Well, it was obvious to some, less so to others, and to one other in particular.

"Right, get the rest of the warband awake, and get armed up. We're going monster-hunting."

Tarki turned back from her retreat to the warmth of the hall. "But he's only a stickpicker!"

"He's a *Kheldon* stickpicker." Kallyr turned to the older man beside her. "Ferenan, advise me. The oath I took, and that you took before me: as far as I remember it said "The king must protect the weak". Did it include anything about "unless he's only a stickpicker, and an incompetent one at that"? Or "unless it's cold and we don't feel like it"?"

"Not as such, no. Tradition, however..."

"Stuff tradition. He's Kheldon. There's a monster on our lands, and children in danger: let's go. Where is this place?"

Tarki sighed, resigned to the different approach of a Queen who, like herself, followed Vinga, the warrior goddess and protector of children. "A good league away, under Sacred Top. You know where the spring comes up?"

"Got it. Edge of the woodland, and where the land starts to be too steep for cattle."

"That's a long way, and slow travel."

"For men, yes. Offir, take them round the slow way, take supplies, meet us at the stead. I'll take any Vingans who can run on snow, we'll find the second kid and scout out the monster. Tarki, who've we got?"

A list of names followed. All Vingans know the myth of how Vinga had run lightly over fresh snow and most present had learnt the feat which allowed them to copy her. Still, there were differences in that ability and none were as good as Vinga herself. No-one was ever going to get a name from running on snow, it was too common. Hindina listened with her usual resignation and slight resentment: as she expected, her name was not called. This time, though, something made her speak up. "I can do that, too."

Tarki brushed her aside. "You're too young for this."

She'd known. If she pushed it, all she got was making the humiliation more obvious. But this time there was a difference, and one she hadn't expected.

"Oh? So she's old enough to do the boring but important jobs, but too young to join in the fun and easy ones? If she can do this, she's coming."

Hindina had no idea why Kallyr would care enough about anything so trivial as to overrule her warband leader in public, but it worked. Tarki shrugged, looking slightly surprised, and she joined the group forming up at the gate before anyone else objected.

Kallyr turned back to Ferenan. "You were the one telling me to watch for the warband getting bored. It'll be safe enough, probably a troll, they'll get some exercise, and we'll get a few days boasting about it."

Ferenan watched thoughtfully as his niece disappeared into the bustle of preparation. "Tarki, *are* the warband getting bored?"

That scarred mouth never smiled properly, but there was some amusement there, backed up by twenty years experience. "I think it's fair to say that *someone* is."

"I wondered. And that girl – here's a hint for you. Never suggest to a twenty-five-year-old Queen that anyone is too young to do a responsible job, not unless you want trouble."

Running across the snow was fun, it always had been, ever since she'd picked up that trick. But that paled into insignificance beside the joy of finally being allowed to join in with the rest of the older Vingans. Hindina trotted along with the rest of them, keeping to the middle of the group, trying not to do anything silly or to get left behind. Just to prove she could cope was all she was after, there was no need to draw attention to herself: too much danger of getting the wrong sort of name. This was no time for dreaming. Her feet were warm enough now, the exertion of running was far better than standing still in that icy wind. The few miles to the isolated stead were easy enough, the tracks the man had left stood out to guide them, and once they got there, following the child should be easy enough, too. It wasn't until the first white flakes started to fall from the sky that she realized there was a potential problem.

Whiteness swirled around them. The moonlight was hidden, the tracks they were following had vanished under a fresh layer of snow. Her run slowed to a walk. Hindina was sinking into the snow at every step now, icy wetness soaking into her boots. Her cloak was completely failing to keep out the wind, flapping, wrapping itself in sodden heaviness around her legs. She stumbled on something she couldn't see, nearly fell, choked back a sob. Then a strong hand was pulling her back to her feet. "Run, don't walk!" She could see the glow of Kallyr's star gem, that had given her her name, even through the blizzard.

"But..."

"I know, so you run *slowly*. It has to be a run, or the magic won't work, right?"

So that was what had gone wrong – of course, it made sense now. Vinga hadn't walked, she'd run, you had to do it the same as the goddess.

"Stay in the middle of the pack: use the people ahead of you as a windbreak. Come on, you can do this! You just stick right behind me and keep following, you'll be fine."

Of course she would. The cold was forgotten in the exhilaration of returned self-confidence. She trotted on, trying to match Kallyr's stride, knowing she could never, ever, possibly match her in anything else.

Dawn came, and with it the snowfall lightened, then stopped. Another crisp, cold, clear day – but one where there was no longer any chance of following tracks. Hindina surveyed the forest and rugged hills – a child in that lot could be anywhere, and she resigned herself to a day of careful checking the whole area. Kallyr was frowning at the hillside, presumably with similar thoughts.

"The steady's over to our east, but there's no point in going there, not now. You know, this might even be faster than the original plan. There's no point in following the child's path, let's just go straight to her. Tarki? She's a lost child. Can you sense her?" Hindina knew that Tarki had been worshipping Vinga before she herself had even been born, but it hadn't previously occurred to her that her magic might be closer to the goddess than Kallyr's.

The older woman closed her eyes, rubbed at runes on her forearms before reaching her hands out, turning this way and that. "Over here. Less than a mile."

"Good. Let's go, then. If I remember right, there's a ravine about there, she'll be on this side of it."

It was so much easier in the light, and running in an almost straight line. Yes, there were obstacles, but at least Hindina could see them. And then they were going downhill, and there was an opening in the trees ahead of them before the land rose steeply again, almost a cliff beyond what was presumably the ravine. They came out into the open and...

"Oh. That must have been a *lot* of snow."

It might have been a ravine once: presumably still was, underneath. Now, it was a flat blanket of snow, blown into waves by the wind driving up the valley. And there clinging to the rock on the far side was a small figure, waving to them.

"That makes life easier, too. No need to go round, we can just run across that." Tarki sounded relieved: perhaps she, too, had wondered if the child would still be alive after a night like that. But for once Kallyr was the one hanging back.

"Just a minute, something doesn't feel right about this. And what's that she's saying?" Hindina could barely hear the girl's voice at all, but clearly Kallyr could, once she'd waved the troop to silence. "It's underneath"? What's that supposed to mean?"

Ahead of them, a rabbit broke from the undergrowth, scampered out onto the open snow, away from them, the tiny body barely marking the smooth whiteness. Except that it wasn't smooth, not any more. There were ripples spreading from the centre. Moving? And then something burst out and up from the snow, something with huge teeth in a circular mouth, something scaly and cylindrical that sucked in the hapless rabbit before sinking back into the depths, leaving a smear of blood on the snow. Not the only stain, now they looked more carefully. And the other was larger...

Kallyr watched, imperturbably, ignoring the mass rush away from the hidden chasm. "So that's where the monster is. Let's not try running across there after all. We'll just have to go round – it's what, half a mile?"

The child had jerked back from the teeth, letting go of her grip on a bush to do so, and then sliding down the slope a little way. Kallyr watched her, too. "The only trouble, of course, is that she isn't going to manage to hold on that long. Damn it!" She spun, punched the nearest tree in frustration, the careful self-control shattering. "A few seasons ago I'd have flown across, picked her up, end of problem. But oh, no, I had to let Ferenan talk me into this "Queen" business, and Vinga as Dar, not Vanganth. No more flight."

Tarki laid a hand on her arm. "That's what the tribe needed. He's right, you know."

"He usually is – but what that kid needs is someone who can fly, or she's going to die."

Hindina stared at the snow, fascinated. The ripples, the frozen waves – it reminded her of the frozen waterfall they'd seen on the way, the cascade stilled in mid-fall. Here, the waves of a lake had stopped still. Like water – frozen water.

"Or someone who can jump?" she said, slowly. "It's water. I know how Vinga jumped over water."

"Yes!" Kallyr's infectious enthusiasm returned immediately. "Of course it is. Good idea, plenty of us can do that." She

looked round, started to pace back. "There's enough room here for a run-up, and...."

Tarki's grip on her arm tightened instead of loosening. "Oh no, you don't. If you miss, how many spare queens do you think we have?"

"But..."

"No. No way. Not worth it."

Kallyr looked at her, visibly estimated her chances of doing the jump with the older woman still attached, then turned to Hindina. "You think you can do it?"

She studied the bank at the far side - steep, but no worse than the banks of the tarn she'd grown up by. And the wind had blown the snow surface into ripples. It *was* a lake. "Yes. I can get there, and if she's too heavy to jump back with, I'll climb the cliff."

"No need. Stay with her, stop her from panicking or falling off. With the extra time, we can circle round and drop a rope to you."

"Oh, come on!" Tarki's exasperation was barely hidden now. "That's snow, not water. It can't work."

Just as someone was taking her seriously – Hindina's hopes wilted again: but only for a moment, as Kallyr caught her eyes and held them.

"You can do anything you think you can. If you think you can do this, you keep believing that, and go and do it. Don't ever let anyone tell you you're not up to it, or it's impossible."

"Right." How had she ever doubted herself? She bent, scooped up a handful of snow and put it to her lips. Only a silly child drank snow, in Dark Season, but she wanted to prove the point, to herself as much as to the others. "It's *water*." She stepped back, looking at the lake before her with half-closed eyes. Waves. Ripples. A lake. With fish in it – big fish. She started her run, felt the familiar rush of unreal dizziness as her foot left the bank and landed three feet and a hundred yards further on: on mud, and snow, and gravel. She grabbed the nearest bush: made it! And the child... she reached out, hugged her in close. "You're safe. It's all going to be all right now." She wasn't sure how to make her voice sound adult and reassuring, but she seemed to have succeeded, as the little girl relaxed into her arms. Now all they had to do was wait. She sat down, less chance of sliding that way. Just wait. It was almost warm, here in the sun, and sheltered from the wind.

Her eyes jerked open as a rope hit her on the shoulder – but it had only been a minute, hadn't it? Then a pair of boots hit the mud next to her, and Tarki was smiling down at her. "Nice work, Snow-leaper".