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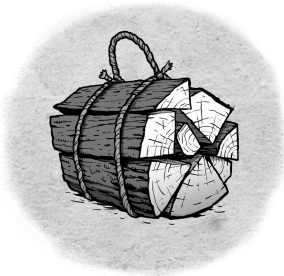
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1

FINGERS THROUGH TIMBER

When Oswin Fields picked a lock, he needed no more justification than curiosity for what lay beyond. But in the tumbling blizzard of a Tundran night, working picking tools with fingers comfortable in the cold, he was urged on by something else: saving someone's life.

He'd seen a woman dragged inside.

The fateful evening began with simple logic. Earlier that day, Oswin had discovered that the self-moving magic that took the log-laden carts from his family's produce field to Central Tundra was broken. An opportunity disguised as a nuisance. Lullia, his adoptive mother, had always forbidden Oswin from travelling to Central Tundra, but

with the excuse of having to manually deliver the logs, he could ask for forgiveness instead of permission. His desperation to fill the blank of what Central Tundra looked like was more pressing than Lullia's wrath. So, after the arduous journey, he found himself standing by a warehouse, snow up to his knees in the blustering wind, trying not to be distracted by the snowflakes catching on the bushy beard of the man he was trading with. The weather was Oswin's first guess as to why the self-moving magic wasn't working. Sadly, it also blurred everything into a white smog. His mental blank for Central Tundra was now a mental smudge of shadows and snowfall.

'Which produce field are you from?' asked the man – for the sixth time – as he counted tokens.

Oswin gritted his teeth, thinking – also for the sixth time – on how best to dodge the question. 'I've hand-delivered these logs and now you won't accept them?'

The man shoved the tokens into a pouch, but didn't hand them over. 'I don't recognize you. There's only one produce worker I don't know on sight; the stray Lullia's been hiding ever since she was forced to care for him. That's you, isn't it?'

Oswin prickled but didn't protest the truth of it. One could dodge questions only so much.

The man checked the logs once, twice, three times.

When he began his seventh inspection, Oswin said, 'The logs are fine.'

'I'm not trusting a stray's word.'

That was insulting. Oswin was far more likely to pocket one of the man's shiny bracelets than scam him.

The man finally finished, and said, 'Rochelle's mended the self-moving tracks. You won't find anyone better with timber magic than the Secondmaster of Corridor herself. You'll never have an excuse to darken my door again.'

Oswin crunched down on a retort. 'When was Rochelle here?'

'Just before *you* arrived.' The man hurled the pouch at Oswin, who fumbled to catch it. 'You're an insult to the name "Fields". A food-stealing parasite.'

Oswin leaned back as if he'd been hit but he didn't deny the truth of *that*, either. He *was* a stray, undeserving of Tundra's resources. He was also a Fields. His adoptive uncle, Michael Fields, had nearly torn Tundra apart with a civil war. Even though Michael was gone long before Oswin had been taken in by the settlement, sharing his last name made people wary of him.

Oswin grabbed the rope handle of the now empty cart and trudged through Central Tundra, adjusting his trapper hat, his short brown hair poking out from below it. Alone in the howling wind, he realized how late it was. Dusk

was fast aging into night. Lullia would be furious. At the thought, the oddity he'd merged with last year lit up and shuddered around his real hand. Oswin glanced at it. Since returning to the produce field, it had been common for the ghost hand to randomly shine into visibility and dart about.

Just as he was calming down – and the ghost hand was fading back into invisibility – there was a pressure, as if someone was pressing a thumb to the white skin of his neck. He turned. No one was there, though. The pressure remained. He spun again. Still no one.

His eyes caught on what the pressure had been nudging him towards: the Stalagmite. For all of the things Oswin had heard about it, nothing had quite captured its height. The icy formation was taller than even the Wice – the ice-composed cliff that surrounded two-thirds of Tundra. A cabin, called the Watchpost, was precariously balanced on the top of the Stalagmite, but in this weather, Oswin could barely see it.

The pressure on his neck grew. He took an unsteady step towards the Stalagmite, as if pushed. Whilst the Watchpost was opaque behind snowfall, the hexagonal cabin that enclosed the base of the Stalagmite's trunk was a murky silhouette. The world darkened from the night's strengthening grasp and Oswin had a horrid sense of familiarity. The pressure became a growing mould inside his skull, squeezing his ears, near and far at once.

'Oswin Fields.'

Oswin recoiled. He hadn't heard a voice since the ghostly one last year. Every time it had spoken back then it had meant a monster was prowling the training grounds of Corridor, ready to prey on ice apprentices before they'd finished their five years of survival training.

'Oswin Fields.'

It sounded different from last year's. Oswin tried to see where the voice was coming from. The Watchpost emanated protective magic to keep beasts away. He *should* be safe. Why, then, was a new voice speaking to him?

'It's Getting Cold.'

Jaw clenched, Oswin abandoned the cart and followed the voice. It drifted vaguely from the other side of the Stalagmite Cabin. He hurried around its perimeter, shuddering at the thought that some oddity-corrupted monster would lurch out. But if he didn't follow the voice, he'd never understand what was going on. Death was preferable to ignorance.

'Oswin Fields. It's Getting Cold.'

'Oh, joy. You repeat yourself, too.' At least the voice seemed louder. He was moving in the right direction.

That was when he saw her.

Oswin halted. A set of doors leading into the Stalagmite Cabin sat ajar. A golden glow leaked onto the snow,

shining on the pale white skin of a woman on the ground, hair strikingly blonde. She saw Oswin and opened her mouth as if to scream, but in a jerk was dragged inside. The doors snapped shut.

Oswin struggled through knee-high snow to the door. Through the keyhole he saw an interior lit by a roaring fire. The woman was in the centre, terror-struck. He heard the sound of someone walking, but no matter how he shifted, he couldn't see who it was through the keyhole.

He tried the handles. Locked. When he peered inside again, all was empty. The woman was gone. Snow soaked his knees as he worked his picking tools, but once he'd cracked the lock, the door still wouldn't budge. He realized the problem: a bolt had been pulled across on the inside. If only he had a coat hanger, he could slip it through the door's gap, hook it around and budge it along.

'Oswin!'

Dread stabbed his ribcage. That wasn't the mystical voice he'd been hearing. That yell was real. Borne on raging winds, Oswin knew who it belonged to: Lullia. She must have followed him.

Oswin remained there; mind stuck by the growing realization that Lullia was about to find him. Rationality exited. He forgot why he'd been trying to get into the Stalagmite Cabin. All he knew was that he couldn't let

Lullia catch him. He pressed his palm to the door, wishing he could somehow grab the bolt, pull it across and hide within.

'Oswin!' Lullia was closer, voice rage-shaken.

Panic rose within him.

'You little gadflyst. Where are you?'

Oswin closed his eyes, a candle flickering in his mind.

A clunk.

Oswin leaned back. *That* had sounded like the bolt. He saw the ghost hand slink through the wood from the other side to settle around his fingers. He stared at it then, disbelieving, tried the door. Unlocked. Had the ghost hand travelled *through* the wood to move the bolt?

'I swear to the ice below, when I find you …' Lullia's snarl was so close it made Oswin nauseous. He stopped caring *how* the bolt had unlocked, or that there could be worse danger inside. He slipped through and closed the door behind him, then waited, heart burning, to see if Lullia would figure out where he was.

Thudding footsteps stopped by the door. Oswin thought he may faint, imagining her reaching for the handle. Instead, Lullia moved away. Oswin had no idea where she'd gone, but he didn't care, because his focus was now on the potentially greater threat that could be in the cabin. He looked over his shoulder, taking in the

hexagonal room. There wasn't a living soul inside. Draped benches gathered around the base of the Stalagmite. Ancient climbing axes and boots decorated the walls. The nasty fire hissed, and candles flickered in sconces. Oswin yearned for the comfort of the dark he'd known moments ago. His precise hearing confirmed that Lullia wasn't nearby, so he cracked the door open to let the cold strangle the heat and the wind kill the candles' flames. Darkness won back the corners of the room, and he slunk into them.

His eyes landed on the Stalagmite's base. Something about it was magnetic. Nosiness snuffed his fear. He ventured over to see thousands of names carved into the ice, and an inscription at the top explaining that each name appeared when a Tundran was born. Oswin's breath misted on the Stalagmite's surface. His vision blurred; tears excruciatingly cold. *His* name wouldn't be there. He wasn't Tundran, after all. He'd been found on the Endless Expanse.

The door slammed open. Footsteps shuddered floorboards. Dozens of people flooded into the Stalagmite Cabin, blazing torches in hand. Oswin stumbled from the shock, catching himself on the Stalagmite as the door was thrust closed again, sealing them all in.

A deep voice boomed. 'You *dare* enter sacred ground?'



2

BLASPHEMOUS SNOOPING

With ground-shaking stomps, a mammoth man with pure black eyes, tawny skin and hair like smoke advanced. Oswin pressed against the Stalagmite as his heart mamatted in his chest. This wasn't just *any* man. This was *High Watcher* Greyheart, the person in charge of all of Tundra. He'd given a welcome speech at Corridor at the start of Oswin's first year. Now, his furious snarl pulled at his harshly groomed beard.

'I was only snooping—'

Greyheart hauled Oswin onto a bench. *'Blasphemously* snooping! Laying your filthy hand on the sacred Stalagmite. A Tundran needs permission to enter this

cabin, let alone a stray scrounged from the ice like some pathetically dying rodent.'

Oswin shrank in shame, then noticed the woman with pale white skin and blazing red hair behind Greyheart: Lullia. She must have fetched the High Watcher. In a room full of people glaring at him – including Tundra's leader – it was Lullia's flaming eyes that scared him the most.

It was Oswin's own fault. He'd been an awful son to visit Central Tundra without her permission. He'd been thinking about getting answers, not how she would feel. Failure settled over him. Whatever happened now, he deserved it.

Greyheart straightened to his full horrific height, broad shoulders blocking the ceiling. 'Watchers, arrest him.'

The watchers, in purple chequered cloaks – each with an eye embroidered on the right side that followed Oswin's movements – moved forward. Oswin noticed one watcher at the back sneak outside. He would have asked why, only he was being forced to his feet.

'I saw someone dragged in here!' Oswin protested. 'I followed to see if she was okay!' He didn't mention that, really, he'd been desperate to hide from Lullia.

The watchers glanced at Greyheart, whose grip on Oswin loosened. Greyheart glanced back and told a pair of watchers to check the Watchpost, giving them a key

with an end shaped like a snowflake. 'See if anyone's there, and check that the ice lungs haven't been disturbed.'

The watchers unlocked a complex door, disappearing up ice steps that, with a check of his memory, Oswin realized spiralled around the Stalagmite all the way to the top.

Greyheart turned his angry face to Oswin. 'Who did you see dragged in here?'

'She had white skin and hair so blonde it was like snow.' Oswin nodded at the watcher gripping his right shoulder. 'She wore a cloak, just like you.' His eyes travelled to the watcher's face, identical to the woman he was describing. 'Do you have a twin?'

'Not unless I have a secret sibling.'

'That could be it.' Oswin missed the joke until a smattering of laughter bubbled among the watchers.

Greyheart crossed his muscular arms. 'You entered here without permission, put your stray hands on the sacred Stalagmite, then lied. There is no other choice; you'll be sent to the Underbelly.'

Oswin looked up sharply. 'The what?'

'Our prison.' Greyheart stomped a foot. 'Excavated below our feet.'

Oswin imagined a sprawl of dingy cells. 'Is there another option?'

Greyheart snapped, 'We *could* commit you to the ice.'

Oswin grimaced. That was exactly what had happened to his uncle after he'd nearly brought Tundra to its knees. It wasn't exile – it was death. Those committed were sent onto the Endless Expanse to wander until they froze, starved or were savaged by beasts. He glanced towards Lullia, wondering if he'd see grief for what had happened. Michael had been her brother. A part of Oswin hoped to see concern for him. But Lullia's glare remained unchanged.

The two watchers returned.

'No one in sight,' said one.

'The ice lungs were still safely in their glass case,' said the other.

Greyheart glowered at Oswin and was mid-gesture for the watchers to resume their arrest when someone else ducked inside. Greyheart's expression seized. The watchers all stood that bit straighter, limbs stiff, as they faced the newcomer.

Dark cloak trailing over the floorboards, and bird's-nest hat perfectly straight on her head, was Secondmaster Rochelle. The relief of seeing Rochelle, the second in charge of Corridor, almost pulled Oswin to the ground it was so heavy.

Rochelle scythed a glare at Greyheart, her gravelly voice filling the room. 'What's going on?'

Greyheart snarled. 'What are you doing here?'

'I was fixing the self-moving-cart magic when I was informed an ice apprentice was in trouble.'

'Informed? By who?'

Rochelle remained silent, but Oswin realized that the watcher who'd slipped out earlier had slunk back in. None of the watchers, nor Greyheart, had noticed. Oswin looked the watcher up and down, taking in their white skin, curly blonde hair and, when the watcher shot Oswin a subtle wink, his gap-toothed smile.

Oswin knew that grin. This was his friend, Maury's, father – Julious Craftwright – if Oswin's memory was to be trusted, which it very much could be.

Greyheart tsked at Rochelle. 'You don't lead Corridor. You're not Grandmaster Yarrow, and even if you were, this isn't Corridor. I'm the High Watcher. You can't tell me what to do.'

Rochelle nodded at Oswin. 'This isn't Corridor, most definitely, but Oswin's still an ice apprentice. If you intend to arrest him, Yarrow will want a say.'

'We can't always have what we want. Need I remind you that, of our two seasons, we are currently in the one that makes travel perilously difficult? In this brutal Freeze, Yarrow won't be able—' Greyheart cut off, eyes bulging. With quick thumps, he marched to the doors and threw

them open. A quiet night-time Tundra greeted him. The Freeze had ended.

'Finally, the Thaw,' a watcher muttered. 'Just in time. Food was getting low.'

Rochelle continued. 'Nothing has changed since you and the Watcher's Ring decided Oswin could live in Tundra.'

'He's tainted the very thing that Yarrow argued was the reason he could stay here!'

Oswin's heart pounded. '*Yarrow's* the reason I was allowed in Tundra?' Other strays were turned away from Tundra or given 'mercy'. He'd always longed to know why he'd been the exception. It seemed Yarrow – and maybe the people right in front of him – knew why.

Greyheart didn't listen, the argument between him and Rochelle growing heated. Oswin replayed Greyheart's words. Oswin had 'tainted' the thing Yarrow had used to argue his case? He raced through everything else that had been said, desperate to understand what he'd tainted.

He found it. Greyheart had said Oswin had desecrated the Stalagmite by putting his hand on it. Oswin turned, eyes searching the Stalagmite. How had Yarrow used it to argue Oswin's case for staying in Tundra seven years ago?

He was momentarily distracted at the sight of the name 'Lullia Fields' near the top, next to 'Michael Fields'. He

wondered what it was like, being a new-born Tundran, your name etching onto the Stalagmite, proving your belonging. Your right to be respected.

Rochelle and Greyheart's argument was fizzling out; Rochelle's constant referencing of Grandmaster Yarrow wearing the High Watcher down. Oswin didn't care. He was focused on the Stalagmite. He drew in a sharp breath.

Was he reading that right?

He thought . . .

No.

He blinked. Double-checked. Because, right there, by his brother, Zylo's, name, was another.

Oswin Fields.

He shook out of the watchers' grasp. 'I'm not a stray!' He *had* to have been born in Tundra, or his name wouldn't be on the Stalagmite. *That* must be why Greyheart had allowed him into the settlement.

A stillness fell over the room.

'Quiet, stray,' snapped the watcher who looked uncannily like the woman he'd seen dragged in earlier.

Oswin ground his teeth. He'd been called *stray* too many times that night, especially when now it seemed that he wasn't one. If he was Tundran, he deserved better treatment than this. If he was Tundran, he had no reason to think of himself as useless.

But then Oswin's eyes caught on the watcher, and his thoughts stalled. Her movements were brittle. Oswin was about to ask why her pupils were so unnaturally piercing when, through the quiet, Lullia stepped forward and Oswin shrivelled into a shell of foreboding.

'You're not a Tundran.'

'But—' Oswin gestured pleadingly to the inscription. 'Only Tundran names appear on the Stalagmite.'

'Your name is an exception.' Lullia spoke softly, but the consonants held a hidden sharpness as she reached for his shoulder. Oswin froze, fear filling his limbs so they couldn't move. Fingers dug into his flesh as Lullia turned back to Greyheart and Rochelle. 'If Oswin isn't being arrested, I'll be taking him home.'

Rochelle kept her glower on Greyheart. 'If we arrested every reckless apprentice, we wouldn't have any.'

Greyheart held Rochelle's gaze, as if hoping doing so long enough would get her to back down. It didn't. 'Fine.'

The moment the word was out, Lullia's painful grip dragged Oswin outside into the calm Thaw. Everything had passed in a rush. Oswin still had no idea what had happened to the woman he'd seen, but he couldn't think about that now. Not with how furious Lullia's march was.

'I'm sorry I went out without telling you,' Oswin warbled, lungs constricting.

'Don't act sheepish.' Lullia moved her hand so that, instead of bruising his shoulder, she was tugging him by his neck scarf, twisting the material around his throat. 'You knew what you were doing. You did it anyway.'

Oswin struggled a breath in.

Lullia's eyes flicked to her tight grip, then his reddening face. She let go. The next second, she was hugging him. The realization of how close Oswin had come to being arrested crashed over him and he cried into her coat, scared at how quickly Lullia had changed from the source of his fear to the source of his comfort. Then it scared him even more that he could think something so cruel about her.

'It's okay,' soothed Lullia. 'It's their right to treat a stray poorly, but I'll keep you safe if you stay on the produce field. Corridor is for Tundrans. You were never meant to go to the training grounds.' She pulled back, hands on Oswin's shoulders. 'You will stay with me, won't you?'

Oswin couldn't speak between snotty sobs. He'd returned from Corridor to the produce field to help with timber production because Lullia had written asking him to do so. He'd never promised he'd stay indefinitely. He missed his friends at Corridor. He missed everything he'd been learning. But Lullia's melancholy face was making him feel as though he was breaking a promise he'd never made.

He scrubbed his eyes, stomach in knots. Fear. Guilt. Disappointment. He was drowning in emotions.

'Good,' murmured Lullia, as if he'd agreed. 'You've made the right choice.' Her excruciating grip snapped around his wrist, pulling him along. Oswin stared at his hand, memories of candles stealing the last of his fight. He'd be stuck on the produce field for the rest of his life, palms splinter-ridden, dreams plagued by rattling carts. Sobs stung the back of his throat as he stared, eyes dead, at his wrist.

'*The Hand Removes*.'

Lullia stumbled, her grip magically shoved off. She whirled to see who was responsible.

Rochelle stood tall in the darkness, looking down on Lullia. Her gaze shifted to Oswin. 'Are you all right?'

'Yes,' Oswin said too quickly, forcing some semblance of calm into his distraught expression. His blue eyes looked permanently sad even when happy, so he knew how horrid he appeared when *actually* upset.

'I'm taking you back to Corridor.' Rochelle's eyes narrowed as they slid back to Lullia. 'Tonight.'

When Lullia didn't say anything, Oswin looked at the ground, fiddling with the hem of his shirt. 'I'm not going.'

Lullia moved back to Oswin's side. 'Leave us be, Rochelle.'

Rochelle's lips twitched towards a snarl. 'You'll have to

forgive me for tying up loose ends. Your reply to Yarrow's letter regarding Oswin's second year never reached us.'

'Because I didn't send one.'

Rochelle smiled thinly. 'I'd guessed as much. I imagine you burned Yarrow's letter the moment it arrived, just like you burned the one she sent when Oswin was first found and brought into Tundra.'

Lullia's eyes shot wide.

Oswin stopped fiddling with his shirt's hem. 'I never got a letter from Yarrow.'

Lullia's jaw clenched.

'Nor,' Rochelle added, 'did you arrive at Corridor last year wearing the enchanted boots Yarrow sent you as a welcome gift. I'd assume, given that Lullia's feet would have been too large, that they received the same fate she gifted the letter.'

Oswin took a step away from Lullia.

'That letter,' Rochelle continued, 'offered an explanation. What it meant to be a stray, where you were found, the almost-certain fact that your stray parents are dead. It wasn't the only letter Yarrow sent, either. But I assume Lullia did the same to those later ones as she did the first.'

Oswin shook his head as he struggled to take it in. Grandmaster Yarrow had written to him, offering *answers*, and Lullia had destroyed every last bit of information?

'This is a distraction.' Lullia held a hand out to Oswin.

'We have work to do. Tokens to earn. I can't produce timber on my own.'

Rochelle snapped, 'I've looked into the Token Exchange records. You're doing fine.'

Oswin's words found themselves dressed with an edge of anger. 'You told me we were out of tokens. That you were desperate for my help. That you'd starve.'

'Don't raise your voice at me,' hissed Lullia, and Oswin cringed down. 'The records are mistaken.' She turned to Rochelle. 'I won't explain the running of a produce field to you when you've only known the Scouting Grove and Corridor.'

Rochelle raised an eyebrow. 'How soft are your hands?'

'Excuse me?'

Rochelle lifted a scarred palm. 'My work is evident.' She gestured at Oswin. 'So is his.' Oswin tucked his hands away. They were only scarred because of the work he'd done that morning. The weeks of hard work moving logs had already healed.

Rochelle indicated Lullia's. 'When was the last time you placed a finger on a log?'

Oswin couldn't help it. He checked his perfect memory. Lullia hadn't helped work the logs the entire time he'd been home.

Lullia bared her teeth. 'Enough of this.'

'As you wish. Let's go, Oswin.' Rochelle turned, but Oswin was stuck. 'Oswin?'

Lullia put a scalding hand on his shoulder. 'He's staying with me.'

Rochelle's dark brown eyes scrutinized Lullia, who scrutinized right back.

'She managed all of last year without you.' Rochelle's tone pinned Oswin. 'She can harvest the logs herself. If you want an ice apprenticeship, you are entitled to one.'

A stray is entitled to nothing, thought Oswin.

Rochelle swept her cloak aside, hand going to her spellbook, her *looming-ness* spreading like massive wings. 'Lullia can't stop you while I'm here. Zylo and Maury keep asking after you and, *even if she won't say it*, I know your friend Ennastasia misses you.'

Lullia breathed heavily, but under Rochelle's glare she stayed quiet. Oswin finally had space to *think*.

He bit the inside of his cheek to numb his emotions. 'Why was my name on the Stalagmite?'

Both Rochelle and Lullia blinked in surprise at the question.

'I don't know,' said Rochelle honestly. 'But Yarrow will have answers. About the Stalagmite, about why you were allowed in Tundra. Come to Corridor and you can have them.'

'Disgusting woman,' spat Lullia.

Oswin jerked his shoulder free.

'No,' Lullia despaired. 'Oswin, *please*. Do the right thing.'

Oswin walked to Rochelle, head hanging. It wasn't *just* the answers he wanted. He missed his brother and his friends. He missed Corridor. And he'd *promised* Ennastasia he'd return.

Rochelle let her cloak fall. 'Good choice. Follow me, Oswin. We have a long journey.' She indicated Oswin walk ahead, so he did, feeling like he was treading on his own heart with every step. 'Have a simply *wonderful* day,' Rochelle added to Lullia.