



## Saga of Survivors II

*Verge of Ruins*

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## CHAPTER ONE

### *Delicacies*

*Seventh of Ashes in the year 2310*

*in the Second Common Era (SCE)*

The color scheme of the world had changed. Vegetation struggled to survive, rivers and lakes had shrunk, the soil was polluted in countless ways. Water was prized above anything else, and most everything digestible counted as food. Life was hard and its dangers many, but civilization was, in many ways, more diverse than ever before. No longer the world's principal player, mankind shared the stage with other races and creatures, primitive and civilized alike. Borders and the phenomena once called nations, had evaporated. City-states and tribal societies took their place. The world embarked on a new course.

Through a paneless window, looking out between crumbled walls, Baldur watched a thin, dark wisp of smoke undulate from a valley a few kilometers away.

“Bandits,” said Farrah. She stood guard by the window, bow in hand, watching the street outside. “Could be any race at all. But most certainly vicious.”

“How do you know?” Baldur was still slightly disoriented and out of sorts after his struggle, and the unexpected time travel.

“That dark hue.” She pointed to the smoke without taking her eyes off the street. “In these parts, it's a sign that everyone better keep their distance. They're most likely bandits, but might also be mercenaries. Or even foolhardy scavengers, or traveling peddlers.”

“If they’re bandits,” Rostam said, “they’ll hopefully have no reason to come here.” He looked at Baldur. “Otherwise, we’ll just have to deal with the bastards. It’s too late to move on. The open ground is much more dangerous at night.”

They were in a small, dilapidated house, which stood in an abandoned, nameless and utterly lifeless village in the hills. The ruined village was a three days’ journey east of the ruins of a city once called Belgrade, which now belonged to the city-state Takram. Little over an hour ago, shortly after Baldur regained full consciousness, Farrah and Rostam had told him where he was; that the land beneath their feet belonged to no one, but was part of the Empty Lands. This was what the no man’s land between the city-states was called, a collective term for the world’s dangerous areas. They were in the Empty Lands, and wanted to make their way inside the borders of Takram as soon as possible. They told Baldur that the national divisions he knew no longer existed. The rules were different now. They also said that a relatively civilized society thrived inside the city walls of Takram, that it was their present home, and harbored some other survivors of the Aesir as well.

That was all Baldur knew, for that was all they had said in the short time since they’d found him whimpering on the rocks.

The house’s roof had collapsed, and lay in fragments against the walls or on the floor. Gray moss and pale yellow lichen had spread across the village ruins. There was no sign of human activity; nothing seemed to have been disturbed for years. Baldur sat down on a roof beam, rested an elbow on his thigh and looked up. The sky, unable to project its pastel colors anymore, was shifting to a muted grey as the day progressed.

“Let’s have a look at the delicacies on offer,” said Rostam brightly, lifting the spirits of the company. “These fine confections here are produced in Takram. Swimmingly expensive fare, which we intended to save until we were more or less out of danger.” From Farrah’s backpack he produced two tin cans, cut them open with a knife and carefully divided their

contents between three wildly disparate containers: a plastic mug, glass bowl and an ancient tea cup. He left the fourth portion, his own, in the cans. Their feast would consist of tinned beans in a sauce – red and yet not tomato sauce – and tinned vegetables resembling asparagus.

Up until now, Rostam had done his utmost to remain calm and composed, a ruse that Baldur saw through. The false calm was for the Aesir's benefit, to help him get his bearings in the midst of all this strangeness. But Rostam's charade was useless; his own visage betrayed him, revealing how harshly life had treated him all this time. The cheek bones of the Persian champion jutted through the thin beard that once was thick and black, and the fire in his eyes had lost some of its former mystique. An ugly scar across the left side of his face underscored his grimness. Baldur knew that the suspicious worker from the desert was gone; the proud hero who beat his fists against the table at Glitnir was gone. Judging by his appearance, Rostam had probably been forced to do some questionable things to survive in the world. But had he trained himself in the virtues he previously claimed to pursue? Had his present circumstances taught him composure, loyalty and humility? Baldur found this unlikely.

“We had more,” Rostam said, “but I was stupid enough to leave my backpack on my motorcycle last night. We slept up against the bikes, but it didn't matter; everything was stolen. Food, drink, ammo, a compass, binoculars and more — all gone. But so it goes, these days. And we'll have to make do with this.” He placed the receptacles on what had once been a parqueted floor.

Farrah took a step backwards without taking her eyes off the street. She bent down for the plastic cup and shook a mouthful out of it, chewing calmly and swallowing small portions at a time. When she crouched down, Baldur noticed that she was wearing a beautiful necklace under her outer clothing. It was obviously valuable, and struck a sharp contrast to her raggedy garb.

The old man who had led Rostam and Farrah to Baldur was acting distraught, scratching himself under the locked metal ring around his neck. Farrah had attached a chain to the ring shortly after Baldur was found, and they were careful to tie the chain firmly at the end each time they stopped. The man crossed his arms and hugged himself, waiting for Rostam to give the say-so. When it came, he fumbled out for the glass bowl and ate with his fingers, making sucking and licking sounds.

Baldur avoided looking at the old man.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *The Gray One*

*7<sup>th</sup> of November in the year 2012 SCE*

Winter came to the northern Qinling mountain range. An occasional snowflake drifted from the sky and settled on the cracked stone steps, which led to sharp-angled temples, abodes for well-trained minds and bodies. Wisps from the fog bank heading through the valley caressed the red bannisters, and then wafted down dizzying precipices, past colorful tree tops and ice-cold waterfalls.

Hödur listened to the familiar calls and rapid rustling of silk and linen clothing that reverberated down from the training grounds of the Taoist monastery Laozi. Although he had chosen wandering and exile over a sedentary life, this kind of environment came closest to his idea of home. He was able to concentrate again, stave off the chaos and uncertainty interfering with his perceptions.

During the last few days, in the evenings and nights, the small villages burned down on the plains. The inhabitants of the monastery kept watch on the lights, but couldn't hear the faint screams carried up the forest-clad mountainside. Nevertheless, the cacophony was heard by Hödur. The world of man called for help, but the survivors among the Aesir were still far from able to give it. He no longer felt the temptation to retreat to the edge of civilization. Hödur now realized that no place on earth was so safe that it would be spared the rapidly spreading entropy and destruction. Not even the Laozi monastery, which Hödur felt to be his safest refuge.

It was 2012 in the Second Common Era, and with each passing day the world's condition deteriorated. They would have to find and awaken the armies revealed by the Golden Tablet.

Without them, standing up to Magni and the sons of Loki would be impossible. The problem was that no signs or symbols concerning the fifth army had been found on the Golden Tablet. Besides, those armies that had been found were small, more regiments than armies; in the midst of the world's growing bedlam, in any case, prospects were poor of amassing a large army. But the surviving Aesir and their allies had no choice but to trust in the predictions of the tablet's symbols, which proclaimed that the power of the five chosen armies would counter the power of Gimli and the strength of Mjölfnir.

A short circuit involving the two Golden Tablets, Draupnir, Mjölfnir and advanced technology had whisked Hödur a year into the future, and a long geographical distance as well. Luckily, the two wise men, Homer and Oedipus, had managed to escape from Idavöllur unseen with the Golden Tablet, and gleaned from it where and when the blind Aesir would appear. The hunt for information lasted several weeks, and mostly took place on the ship Ringhorn. The ship also carried Módi, Líf and her unborn son, the four dwarves and a group of creatures from Idavöllur. Once they figured out where Hödur would appear, the course was set for China, in hope of finding him when he would appear there a year later. Farrah, Rostam and Hydarnes remained at Idavöllur, to help the creatures living in the underground city fight the armies of Gimli, who were by then commanded by Narfi, Áli and Magni. They fought on until Idavöllur fell, and then fled east, all apart from Hydarnes and his men, who went west to Skadi.

The boosted power of the Golden Tablets had sent Hödur to his favorite place, the Qinling mountain range, not far from the Laozi monastery. It was where he spent most of his time when studying martial arts. Homer postulated that Hödur's mind, his desire to be at a certain place, had a measure of control over where the tablets sent him.

It was more than a year since the blind Aesir appeared after his time travel, making it two years since he beat up Váli and prevented his brother from being shot in the head. Since then,

however, there had been no word of Baldur – or of Váli. Homer and Oedipus sent out search parties of light elves, dwarves and other well-willed creatures, hoping for news of Baldur. The search was fruitless, so far. Not a single clue to be found.

In the monastery, Hödur was known as The Gray One, and considered a holy man. In the many other parts of the world, where martial arts were studied in some form, he went by similar names. In the Laozi monastery, however, a specific style of kung fu, known as Blind Wanderer, had been dedicated especially to him. It placed great store in listening to the opponent and his reactions rather than looking directly at him – other senses than sight were employed to counter and attack.

Hödur had known many generations of the monks and masters of the monastery, which was built in the 4<sup>th</sup> century Before the Second Common Era, but he had never discussed with them who he truly was, or where he came from. They, in turn, asked nothing, or quickly gave up asking, rather. The monastery's documents contained many accounts of this mysterious wanderer. Among other things mentioned were his apparent supernatural abilities, and the observation that his spirit was as prone to wandering as his body. Nevertheless, Hödur's calm and concentration had a positive effect on the monks, especially the neophytes. Hödur enjoyed respect within the monastery, and the generations who lived to witness an appearance from The Gray One would tell their children and children's children of it. The blind Aesir was a mythical character in the Shaanxi province and the surrounding areas; he restored hope and motivation to the people, although he made no special effort to.

The Gray One had returned, but with a different purpose than before. Hödur, Líf, their son and the two wise men had arrived five days ago. Six months prior to that, Hödur had visited the monastery by himself, looking for its master, but had been told to return with the winter, for this was the time at which the master was expected to return. The reason for the presence

of Hödur and Líf was that for months, almost an entire year, they had tried to find a way to awaken the Terracotta army, the clay soldiers standing motionless in the underground catacombs of Qin Shi Huang. At first, their efforts were frustrated by the constant stream of tourists through the site, but their number quickly dwindled as the state of the country, and the entire world, deteriorated. Soon, the site was closed to the public entirely. This afforded them freedom to investigate how the army's awakening was supposed to take place. But, even though they had one of the Golden Tablets with them, they had made little progress so far.

It was a mild morning. The winter cold hadn't properly set in, but the air was cool and fresh.

Hödur had told Líf that he was going for a short walk, but he changed his mind when he passed the main temple and overheard two monks inside. They were hard at work, polishing statues and sweeping incense ashes, and though they were alone, the two young monks spoke in hushed tones. Hödur suspected that the two neophytes were talking of him. After his long stays in the country, he spoke the principal variants of Chinese, and listening intently he managed to make out a few words: *gray*, *wait*, *bad omen* and *the master will return soon*.

Hearing them talk of bad omens was a bad omen in itself. Of course, Hödur didn't enjoy being labeled this way, but what he found even worse was the detrimental influence that the external threat had begun to have on the monastery's way of thinking.

Before visiting the monastery, Hödur had been mentally exhausted. With little preparation, he had jumped into the role of father, and hadn't had any real rest for a long time, now, neither from the Terracotta riddle nor his young son, who was almost two years old and beginning to make all sorts of inferences about the world. It was taxing for Hödur. and he felt acutely how his blindness hampered him in his parental role. His senses needed to be constantly on overdrive to keep watch over the boy. Still, Hödur's complaints were never

voiced; his son and his relationship with Líf lent a fullness to his life that he had never experienced before.

He did mourn for Nanna, but nevertheless, she retreated from his mind little by little. He had finally found a new life among the survivors. His exile was over, he was now an important player in the fight against the world's downfall. He was now involved in a course of events that he could not ignore.

Hödur listened as his son, close by, laughed and attempted to express something about two monks who were practicing their kung fu on the training grounds. Hödur could distinguish their movements from the others around them. He guessed that one of them was using the Snake, the other the Crane.

The boy pointed, laughing.

“Yes, Hænir, isn't that something?” Líf said amiably. “Just like Daddy.”

She sat on a stone bench and watched the rehearsal. Her red stripes had grown out of her hair, most of which was gathered into a knot and fastened with a pin. She wore plain but warm clothes, a leather pouch for the morning dew hanging from her belt. Their son sat a few meters away, sucking on a pebble. Líf noticed, lifted him up, cleaned out his mouth with her thumb, kissed his plump cheek and adjusted a patch covering the child's left eye. There was no eye beneath the patch; the socket was empty.

She put Hænir back down, but he came up with the idea of waddling off towards the monks.

“No, be careful,” Líf said. “Don't get too close!”

Unsurprisingly, the boy ignored his mother's warnings completely, so she had to run off and gather him in her arms.

Although Hödur saw none of this, he listened, filled in the blanks, and smiled. Their wait for the return of the monastery master Li Bai had, if nothing else, given this little family temporary respite from worrying about the future.

Hödur had been told that Li Bai had been seen traveling around the mountain range a few days earlier, but that it was important to give him peace to meditate after the absence. These journeys had become a tradition within the Laozi monastery: every decade, the master vanished for six to ten months, and then returned, bearing new notions and knowledge. He was a learned man, full of ideas, and knew the ins and outs of the area better than anyone. Hödur was convinced that Li Bai could help them.

The monastery was overrun with people who had fled to the mountains, mostly rice farmers who had escaped narrowly from the attacks of the dark creatures. The refugees were accommodated in the monks' quarters, but as their numbers grew, they also had to be housed in the refectories and prayer halls. This was an infraction of the monastery's laws, but times were desperate. No one, however, was allowed to sleep in the main temple.

At dawn, the people formed small groups around the monastery gardens and prepared breakfast from the meagre rations they had managed to escape with.

Hödur enjoyed staying in the Qinling range, but couldn't help but feel that the outlook was pretty hopeless. In their efforts that were meant to counter the deeds of Váli and the sons of Loki, not a single thing had gone right. Strangest of all, it seemed that the latter had betrayed the former. What did they mean to do? The question burned bright in Hödur's mind, day and night.

## CHAPTER TEN *(the beginning of the chapter)*

### *The City Ruins*

A new day rose. The wispy clouds in the sky complemented the ash-gray ruins into which they strode.

Even though summer had arrived, it was still rather cold. Rostam said that the temperature wouldn't rise until noon, and that the overall temperature of the world was in any case ten to twenty degrees lower than in past centuries – a legacy of multiple nuclear winters around the world, sometimes described as the *Fimbulwinters*.

They had walked through most of the night, alternately alongside Long Gully or in it. Wishing to avoid further encounters and delays, they steered clear of friendly and hostile Folk alike. Baldur wore new clothes, procured by Farrah from the traveling peddler: jeans that once had been black; a tattered dark-green turtleneck; over it a long trench-coat,; and shoes, originally hiking boots but now patched many times over with rubber and leather. Most of his dirty and tattered hair was fashioned into a ponytail.

“It's just as if you had spent decades roaming the Empty Lands,” Farrah said once he had finished dressing.

The Aesir took this as a compliment.

The ruins grew denser as they made their way further into the place known as Belgrade three centuries earlier. Strange sounds echoed down faraway streets. Laughing, shouting, lovemaking; hard to distinguish, but certainly not produced by humans. They had been right to wait for daylight before venturing into the crumbled city remains. Much could lurk in the darkness of city ruins, and in the wake of the attack of the Querks, Baldur had become more cautious.

“As long as we keep to this route, we shouldn't run into danger,” Rostam said.

*Route? What route?* Baldur saw only shady, abandoned and dilapidated buildings, streets scattered with junk and other signs of extreme chaos.

They walked into a long, wide boulevard that once had been Belgrade's main pedestrian street, *Knez Mihailova*, but which now was called *Takram Thoroughfare*. Their cautiousness wasn't enough: with no warning, three beings materialized from a side alley – Folk with a similarly wary air about them. Both parties drew their weapons, called out, and took aim.

Baldur placed two of them immediately: A man and a female light elf. The man was dressed in a thin down coat, she a worn denim jacket. The light elf wore circular protective goggles, the man a tattered top hat. The third stranger was a creature of a kind Baldur had never come across before: a head shorter than the man and elf, and dark-blue, with even darker splotches sprinkled across its half-bare legs, which protruded from beneath a too-big military coat and pants that had been cut at the ankles. The hands resembled human ones, though the fingers on each one were four, and webbed. Baldur looked back at the feet – also webbing there. The limbs were slender, but the torso was hunched, and a small pot belly peeked out between the buttons of a Hawaiian shirt. The creature's beefy neck terminated in a broad, hairless head with thick and moist lips, protruding eyes, a pair of unused gills and two feelers dangling from each corner of the mouth.

All three were armed.

Farrah and Rostam slowed down and clutched their weapons more tightly, but did not stop.

“Are they friendly?” Baldur asked.

“I think so,” Rostam said. “But we'll see.”

(Flashback #1)

*By the shores of Troy, 1190 BSCE*

The sea is lukewarm, the air is saturated with warmth that is carried in waves off the cooling cliffs. Above the beach, the lights of the tents can be glimpsed, but in the distance, the day's fires gradually go out. Small groups of common soldiers have spread out across the beach, where they drown the ailments of their souls and bodies. There are also some who wander alone, downcast or staring into the sky, seeking solace in the constellations, hoping for portents announcing the end of the war. In fact, it has just begun.

A solitary soldier sits a ways off from the hubbub, much closer to the cliffs than any of his companions. He has seated himself on a rock, his back to the sea. The lights from the torches and campfires can't reach him, but he has planted his own torch in the sand by his side. He seems busy at something: his shoulders move and his elbows occasionally clear the silhouette of his torso. Or so it seems to Baldur.

Módi and he wade slowly in the shallows, one hand on a rowboat, inching towards the cliffs on their right, not far from where the soldier sits, in full battle gear. The sea is almost still, so they must proceed carefully. They plant the boat in a rift in the cliffs, mooring it to a small cedar tree two meters above, which despite being separated from the other trees above it has miraculously managed to take root. The boat shouldn't go anywhere for a while.

"Ready?" Baldur asks.

"I suppose," Módi says.

They wade a bit closer to the beach and then climb up the cliffs, which is quieter and offers better camouflage than if they had made landfall directly.

The sand is soft and comfortable, and Módi mutters something about envying the drinkers on the beach. Baldur concentrates on each step, careful not to crack sea shells or dried seaweed underfoot. As far as he can see, the soldier is repairing a small wooden object, possibly a musical instrument.

Módi knocks the soldier insensible, ties and gags him. Then he wades back into hiding by the boat. Meanwhile, Baldur puts out the torch and changes into the soldier's gear. He passes drunken soldiers, making his way through the camp until he finds the general's tent. Two enormous guards stand on each side of the entrance. Their faces are obscured by their helmets. Without seeing their expressions or eyes, Baldur can't take their measure, but he has no choice but to try to persuade them.

"I bear a message," he says.

They say nothing.

"An important message concerning the war."

One guard moves his head.

"A message from the gods to Menelaus."

The helmets turn to face one another. A brief, deep laughter emanates from beneath one, the other nods.

One of the guards pulls the curtain aside and points a finger.

Inside, five champions sit at a table, chatting and drinking wine. Baldur recognizes them: Menelaus, Agamemnon, Ajax, Nestor and Ulysses.

When Baldur walks in, they fall silent and look at him in surprise.

"Who are you?" Menelaus asks sharply. "How dare a common soldier come in here unannounced? What is so remarkable that it cannot wait until morning?"

Baldur tells them that Zeus has appeared to him in a dream. The resulting expressions of the five at the table are not encouraging. He goes on to say that he has been tasked with

delivering a message. He launches into his speech, and says that the war will have a definitive impact on the future, positively as well as negatively. But in the end, the war will be part of a historical chain of events in which man is transformed into a monster.

They let him speak for a few minutes. Eventually, the patience of Ulysses wears out. “Zeus appeared to you? A common soldier?”

Baldur is shown the door. Outside, he takes his head in his hands, disheartened and angry.

On the way to the beach, he spots the great Achilles. Dead drunk, the hero sings tunelessly and plants kiss after kiss on a young woman and man by his side. With an arm around each one, he pushes them into a nearby tent, but then stumbles over an object that makes a rattling sound. Lying on the ground, he curses and kicks at the object with his heel. It ends up jutting out from underneath the tent’s hem. When the entrance is drawn closed, Baldur approaches and sees that the object is a shield, beautifully engraved. Wanting something for his trouble, he snatches the shield, and then continues on his way down to the beach.

The following morning, war resumes.