

## On the Purple Teralt

Grandfather says we did not always live this way, *vagabund*, travel-clan. Grandfather says that once we lived in a round-town of sungwood with a thousand other humans.

Grandfather says we did not move with the season and the work. Grandfather says we took no orders or coin.

Grandfather says the nutrient well gave us food and the water well gave us water and the air well gave us visions.

I do not really believe grandfather. I am not like some of the other motherborn, who take the words of the elders as gravity. Those, oh those worship at the feet of grandfather as though he were some wisdom daemon made flesh.

I know better. I have studied the manuals of the golems and keep our wagons running. I have studied the manuals of the vats and keep our eldest alive. I have imbibed the insight-bloods of Aspera and Abaco and lived.

Grandfather is skilled, but that is not why he lives still, he is wise, but that is not why he lives still. No, old wire-face made compact with Error and got lucky. Lost his legs, but kept his life and more. Now he's seen the winter ring sparkle as the black sun and the green sun intersect a hundred times and a hundred again. So he says and I believe *that*, at least. But I've

known him long enough to mark well how his tales change to suit him, to comfort us, to keep us coming back.

I keep my eye on Grandfather. No great harm having an ancestor along, in his wheel-dome on Bigleg's back. He doesn't consume much, and he keeps the vagabund united. We all look to him and know we are one, Clan Wireface, and we also look at him and shudder and remember. Don't trust Error. Stay away from the falsetech, it will only do you in.

But how much is Grandfather wire and how much man? More and less each year, I think. The others do not notice, but I've dived the noö and I've seen how the machine daemons talk and think. Sometimes I wonder, are Grandfather's routines becoming too mechanical, is he not guiding us but corralling us? We always arrive on schedule to service the big old houses, to till the rough thorn fields. We always leave on schedule to stay invisible to angel or minister.

We're traveling now. Again. Unpleasant trip over the *teralt*, where the sky lights bite like acid if you unwrap, with the air itself like knives if you stray from the flag-roads. Shouldn't be traveling in Snowbringer, but there you go. Talked to Hardboy at the serai yestereve and he said the weather moon wouldn't make it white for another three days. Enough time to reach the Ovum House. Plumbin and ductwork job. Two months to

keep the mechamonkeys happy. Load the skills and be metal-bangers for a season. Nice and warm in a crater-valley.

But we're traveling again and I remember we were supposed to be nice and warm in a crater-valley overwinter *last month*. I keep remembering and the others just smile and nod and grin, like they've got no longterm memory. I think the skill-loader is tricking us. Lying to us. Making us believe.

I know Grandfather isn't my actual Grandfather. Folks just been calling him that since I was a wee earth-sitter and made my first memories. People find it funny I have memories like that. Lots say I should just live day to day. That you can't trust yourself to tell imagination from what happened, and that it's best to trust memory to the elders. That's what they're for, with the wire memory inplugs. But, it doesn't sit with me, and now I'm thinking it's keeping me safe from the skill-loader's trickery. Or maybe it's what Halter called me last summer. "Pulphhead!" he'd teased me, suggesting I had no crystal in my head for back up. He doesn't remember that now. But I do. And I wonder.

Mother was a witch, said some folks when I was little. My mother. Not generic mother. Not like some vagabunds and villages have, the big synthetic *mannomalars*, that paint people from stem and egg to air-sucking infant. Mine was an iron woman, I guess, doing things hard mode. She disappeared

when I was four. Better for her they said, but I wonder. Wouldn't put it past old Codeeye and Slackears to have sold her for peace of mind. Nowadays they say it's for the good of the bund that we buy new children from clans with *mannomalars*.

She wasn't a witch. She was naive and too prone to say what she thought. Maybe she was from one of those soft round-towns Grandfather talks about and we avoid. I'm not naive. Heading on thirty and harsh as a sixty-wolf. That's what Yellow Yu't said. I'd thought about peacing out with that one, but being a herdwife out in the steppelands. Brrr. The winters here are bad enough.

I catch myself. Daydreaming. Chewing thoughts like a cow with no thought for the shock-fence. No clanfriends near. None of *us*. I look back. There's Codetwo on his roan. One mile back, semaphore on his back, ready to relay. We're out near the fronters on the Rim. Gotta move with scouts to keep safe.

I don't usually let my thoughts go dangerous places like that, but out here, scouting, rare opportunity. No words from Grandfather dribbling clan history like an incontinent radio spout. No elders nodding and calling back. None of the clan-babes clapping and agreeing.

I pat Molar with a callused hand and spur her over a ridge and just out of sight of Codetwo. Bit more freedom. A snowflake. Hah, so much for Hardboy's "intimate and perspicacious relationship with the weather moon whisperers. A course of scrubby pines along the vale floor, struggling against the teralt's winds, growing taller where the water cuts down through softer rock into a combe.

Not sure, almost without meaning to, I nudge Molar and soon we're hidden by fern and pine, sliding down a boar-track into the deeper valley. Half an hour. More than that and Codetwo would rant about piss-poor scouting and dock my rations. Wouldn't dock them too much, needed me to keep Codeeye running happy, but still. Maybe he'd dial up the bitter.

My mind goes still as the air. Out of wind, out of whistling chattertrack.

Molar trots quietly of her own accord. I let her have the reins. Past a fallen oldwood, round boulders the size of house buses, into a glade of broadleaves. Warm, suddenly. Unseasonable.

I stop Molar. This means oldtech. Maybe falsetech.

I dismount and lead the white horse quiet as I can, brush aside the feathery foliage. Feathery? Yeah, there's some microbiome mess going on. Some sourcebreaker, perhaps. Corruption

danger. Error, error. Voices scream within me, but some intuition hushes them, feels alright. Oldtech yes, but not false.

I mutter a prayer to Aspera. Slackears would rage at that, but, well, she's not here, is she? And without my vatwork she'd be done to bone and bonfire in three months.

Past club mosses the size of small children and under trailing fronds like air-jelly legs. Summerwarm here, air swirling with air plankton, and a soft yellow glow. Like in the oldstar stories I'd loved when I was thirteen and found a set of pulp prints in that abandoned town library.

The glow is coming from a rectangle suspended between four metal poles encrusted with moss and lichen. It's warm and inviting and makes me want to reach out and touch it. Five meters, maybe six? I stride forward, Molar follows without hesitation.

Then I spot the little two-headed furry creature sitting in front of the glow, licking itself.

I freeze and hiss.

Glowing eyes open in its faces and its voice appears in my head like fireworks, "You look just like your Mother. Well, come on, I've been waiting for ages."

*(part 2 coming soon)*