

Rhittach

The Beginning

by

David S. Leyman

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The Beginning

Two women slid out of their furry over-clothes. They stood, facing each other, in their skin underwear. It was stripped from the belly of the herd animals and been chewed to a fine softness by toothless old men.

A pair of cold blue eyes peered into another pair of cold blue eyes. They spoke quietly, without malice.

“For honour.”

“For pride.”

The weak, mid-day sun, hovering just above the Eastern horizon, glinted off two long, slim blades.

They fought for, perhaps, twenty seconds. So fast were their blades flashing that no human eye could follow unless they were also Chowras—the fighting women of Paya.

Undetectable to the bystanders, one of the women grunted and paused for a fraction of a second. It was enough. The other stepped back and watched the thin red line around the other’s neck grow until it was seeping blood rapidly.

The dying woman smiled gently then buckled at the knees. Her head rolled off as she hit the tundra pouring her blood, and her life, into the soft, frozen mosses.

The victor picked up the other woman’s sword and put it on one of the pack animals. Picking two herd beasts she mounted another pack animal and rode off to the South without a word or a backward glance.

*

As huts on the tundra go it was pretty impressive. Tommek had obtained some sprung steel folding frames from a trader. He protected them from rust with fat from the herd animals not knowing that they needed no protection. The same herd animals provided the laced hides that covered the frames and kept out the incessant wind.

Inside, dangling from sun bleached bones on leather thongs, were cooking

implements and a selection of knives each with its own purpose.

Dried mosses stuffed inside more skins provided the beds for Tommek and his three children; his wife had died in childbirth when their only daughter was born.

Outside, the sun showed an edge over the rim of the Eastern horizon and dropped away. It was not yet time.

Squatting on the tundra, Tommek noted the ever-lightening mid-day sky and knew that the long light would be with them soon.

The long dark was a time of deep cold and dryness; the long light was wet and often just above freezing. The long light was also a time of snow and harsher winds. It was time to move south so the herd animals could give birth where the mosses grew in greater abundance now that they had been given time to grow.

He went to the lake and called the children. They had caught a couple of the migrating water birds that skidded helplessly on the thick ice. They liked to eat them as a change from the milk, cheese and the dark meat from the herd animals.

The boys were told to link two beasts to the sled while he and the girl would dismantle the hut and stow it on the sled. They would be living rough, camping, for a few weeks.

The last items on the sled were the packs of hides that held the dried mosses for their fire and the carvings made from the great re-curved horns of the animals for trade.

*

The northernmost town on the planet bristled busily with trade. It was possible to obtain anything here, including death.

Tough women with bleak, emotionless eyes gathered at the bars. Everyone knew who the women were but only those with a score to settle in this land of vendetta approached them. They were kept busy. A shortage of people here meant that each family would hire one; the two Chowras would fight so that the family wouldn't lose anybody. One of the Chowras would die instead. They would die for honour and with pride.

None of the Chowras drank the harsh, throat-burning root spirit much sought after by the local traders and the herders who came in from the searing cold of the long dark. These Payan warriors would prefer meat in abundance. They had little

care for how it was cooked—much less if it *was* cooked.

When times were hard and there were no fights to be had, the Chowras would sneak out into the tundra and slaughter a beast or two at random. Nobody complained. The police did nothing and neither were they expected to do anything. The police here in the far North were pretty tough—most of them being ‘failed Chowras’, and many bore the scars to prove it. Even they would not challenge a qualified warrior.

*

The herdsman, Tommek, and his three children walked into one of the bars. He motioned for the children to sit at a table while he went to the bar to order food and milk for all of them.

“Hey, Herder!” The Chowra addressed Tommek with a voice like gravel emptying off the back of a wagon.

He looked up at her with fear growing in his eyes.

“You look a bit bigger than most. Where’s your woman?”

“Unh! She... er... died. Years ago,” he tried to back away.

She took a step towards him, “Oh, how sad for you. So much for the breeding programme, then,” she laughed, spraying spit in his face.

Her breath smelt of rotten meat. Tommek wondered if she had ever heard of using a smashed stick on her teeth to clean them up.

“Fancy a bit of breeding do you, little man?” she brayed again. Several of the other girls were smiling; they were expecting blood and were in happy anticipation of it.

A very quiet and very small voice wafted up at them from near the floor.

“Leave my Dad alone.”

There was a stunned silence for a moment and then hysterical laughter broke out among the Chowras.

“Gotcha now, Miswatis! I reckon you’ve been challenged!” one of them called out.

“Might be a problem for you, this one,” another shouted.

“Pick on someone your own size—this one’s too big for you,” yet another called out.

Miswatis went from mildly amused to anger. She did not like being the object of ridicule, especially in front of a non-Chowra.

She slipped her sword from its scabbard, “You daya’aal should learn to keep your brats under control.”

The small voice came up at them again. This time there was a cold edge tingeing the words.

“I can do your knee an awful lot of damage, bully.”

Miswatis looked down and saw the little girl holding a short bladed knife inside her right thigh. She had a vision of her femoral artery being opened up, or worse. She debated with herself whether she had time to swing the sword before this small girl could cut her leg.

“What can be the matter, Howsu? Indecision? Perhaps back to the school for further training you should be going.”

A streak of cold went down Miswati’s spine. Turning slowly she came face to face with an elderly woman accompanied by a slightly younger woman. Both of them were hooded and both of them were solid and looking very fit.

The other Chowras were on their knees, swords out with their hands resting on the pommels.

Never had Miswatis seen such coldness in the eyes of another person. She was suddenly, and acutely, aware of her shortcomings as the lowest ranked of the Chowra.

“You are an Abbess?” Miswatis asked as she, also, sank to her knees seeing, as she did so, the two toe rings of a Wirra worn by both of the women.

The Abbess ignored her. “*Rise,*” she commanded all of them without looking at any of them in particular.

The small girl stood her ground, now holding her knife to the kneeling big woman’s throat.

Tommek was shaking like a leaf. He was seeing his own mortality reflected in the icy blue of this old woman’s eyes and desperately trying not to embarrass himself

by relieving his bladder on the floor of this bar. He wondered, inconsequentially, if anyone would notice.

“Food and drink you order, Man?” the old woman addressed Tommek.

He could only nod.

She inclined her head to the bar owner, inviting Tommek to continue. She spared a glance down at the small girl who hadn't moved an inch nor had she taken her eyes off the potential target.

“We are liking you, little girl. What your name is?”

“Let me kill this one—then I will tell you.”

Miswatis' eyes went very big and round as she heard the Abbess say *“It is as you wish.”*

She felt her head pushed forward then the blade slicing through her throat just cutting a nick out of the carotid artery.

The girl stepped back, ready to go in again but it was, clearly, unnecessary. The whole bar watched as Miswatis' blood poured out and soaked through the gaps in the floorboards.

“What a miserable place to die,” Miswatis gasped, clutching her throat as she tried, in vain, to stem the flow of blood.

“What a miserable way to die,” the Abbess told her.

“Finish me, I beg you,” Miswatis pleaded.

“No. We shall with this young lady credit the kill. Her name is?”

“Rhittach,” the little girl told her.

“A Chowra you wish to be, Rhittach?” the Abbess asked her.

Tommek was pleading with his eyes, ‘No, no,’ they said. He knew it was futile. Rhittach had always been ahead of the boys when it came to killing anything and now he saw her eyes shining with anticipation of glory.

“Yes,” Rhittach sheathed her knife after wiping it on Miswatis' tunic.

“Then come with us you will,” the Abbess turned to Tommek, *“Pay for your meal we shall and your daughter with us, we take. To your herds return. You ever*

had a daughter forgetting.”

Tommek’s eyes filled with tears. He was helpless and knew it. His daughter was being torn from his arms so soon—she who reminded him so much of his dead wife.

He returned to the table with the food and drink. The boys asked him what had happened; he couldn’t tell them. He was choked with sorrow.

At some point during the next thirty minutes Miswatis slipped into the realms of eternal darkness while Rhittach swept out of the bar with the two elderly women; the Chowras, all respectfully standing aside.

One of the Chowras came up to Tommek’s table.

“Miswatis’ death was your fault, you miserable little man.”

Tommek still could not speak. He saw that she had one toe ring—she was a Siggay.

She backhanded him heavily that he was sent sprawling on the floor.

“Speak, you verminous little scum.”

“Leave him be, Darratith. Men aren’t worth the trouble. See if you can find another small girl to pick on,” one of the girls called out.

None of them saw Rhittach slip from the doorway. She had come back to say goodbye but thought better of it.

The rest of them laughed happily and dragged Miswatis’ remains out into the street.

Tommek heard one of them call out to someone, “Oy! Get rid of this if you value your life.”

The one called Darratith spat on Tommek and walked off. All the Chowras left the bar to mutterings of, “Food. There must be more food somewhere.”

The three of them, one man and his two boys, hurried to finish their meal and left the bar. They spent as little time in the provision stores as possible before heading back out to their herds on the open tundra. Not until the town was a faint memory over the horizon did any of them feel safe again.

**

Four weeks later a neighbouring herdsman came upon Tommek's tent with no smoke coming from it. Curious, he entered. The tent had a musky smell to it, familiar to the herdsman. They found the three of them, Tommek and the two boys, with their throats cut and looks of terror on their faces.

The ground was soft enough now. The herdsman buried the family and stripped the tent of everything that they could reuse. The rest they left as a marker for the graves. The pack animals were loaded and the herd was driven away to join the rest.

Unknown to Rhittach, her father and two brothers had ceased to exist.

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