

FANTASY: *THE RULKURKH* BY ANDERS CAHILL

Summary: Part two in a novel series I'm working on. One of the main characters from the first novel, who all thought was dead, is, in fact, alive. He has been surviving and thriving in arctic-style alternate-world, but an omen sends him on a journey to find his way back to his old companions from the previous novel. The opening is written in such a way that readers from the previous book will not immediately identify the character. The current events (crossing the tundra) and the backstory will reveal who he is, how he arrived at this place, and what the aim of his new journey is.

The man trudged across the icy steppes, his snowshoes scrunching on the hardpack, the curved pinewood skis of his sledge plowing through the snow as he dragged his supplies behind him. The fur of his caribou parka was crusted with blooms of frost, and his head hung down, his eyes on the ground in front of him. Every forty steps, he lifted his head and adjusted the translucent sealskin membrane that helped to shield his eyes against the wind and snow, sighting his course against the skyline. He had been walking for so long now that he had no need to count his steps; the rhythm was written in his bones.

He couldn't help from smiling as he took in the view. The monochrome tundra of the Rulkurkr stretched out behind him, countless leagues, barren and desolate, but he could see the forest now, a growing band of darkness resolving on the horizon. At first, he hadn't been sure. He'd hallucinated numerous times on this journey, his mind dredging up oddities and old memories to fill the emptiness. But this was real. Day by day, the nearly invisible sliver of color had grown larger and larger, and now he was certain. He had done it. Against all odds, he had made the crossing.

But the wind still fell low across the land, keening like a grieving widower, pushing back against his progress. It would fight him to the bitter end, until he stood beneath the boughs of the

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old-growth trees. He adjusted the straps on his aching shoulders, then leaned forward against the weight of his sledge and pressed on.

His days crossing the glacier had been interminable, unceasing, the perpetual sun hidden behind a perpetual cloud cover, coating the whole land with a cold, shiftless light. When the snows came, it was even worse, desperate stretches of sightlessness that might pass in minutes or last for days. All he could do was dig a hole and hunker down, waiting out the storm, repeating the mantra that helped him cling to sanity.

The tribes of the valley of the green lands had a name for this singular tedium: Hurntui. The neversleep. White days without end. A man who walks too long in the Rulkurkr might never really return, even if his body makes it back alive. The emptiness of the frozen lands works its way inside the mind.

Sun Calls Dawn, the sachem of the people of the valley of the green lands, had told him all of this before he left, had told him he must find something to hold to, some mantra to keep his spirit warmed against the loneliness of Hurntui.

All he had left were their names.

His mind wandered backwards through time as he silently recited each one. Back, back, all the way back to those simple, ignorant days when he had no idea that there were worlds upon worlds, connected by the roots of the great Deepening Tree that filled the gaps between each universe. It was as if he were remembering a dream of a life that had never really been his.

Silence shook him from his lonely reverie. He realized with a start that the wind had slackened. He lifted his head, shading his eyes with his hand, and gasped. He had arrived at the Sunderwolt.

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The outermost trees of the forest rose like skyscrapers, bursting up through the snow and ice, trunks as wide twenty men with arms outstretched. The people of the valley believed that the Sunderwolt was the primeval root of all life, and its sheer majesty made the huge forest that the Botani tribesfolk called home seem like a modest copse of fir trees. The trees here were so deep and old that even the height and chill of the Rulkurkr could not swallow them. They pushed up through the glacial ice, their trunks stretching down over a mile to the raw earth below, where their roots split stone as if it were brittle shale.

He loosened the straps on his shoulders, letting off the weight of his sledge and all its gear, then walked to the nearest tree. He placed his gloved hand on the trunk and it felt like mountain stone beneath his palm, firm and unyielding. It was much easier to see without the wind thrashing snowdust across the open tundra, and he peered into the shadowed twilight of the forest. The trees stood like pillars beneath the eaves of an ancient, cavernous temple, evergreen boughs vaulting high overhead, dappled with white sky.

He walked back to the sledge and untied the heavy sealskin tarpaulin that covered the gear. His empty leather rucksack rested on top. He set it open on the ground and began rummaging through the equipment. The shelter gear he'd dragged across the glacier would be of little use beneath the trees, and he had come too far now to turn back, so the sledge was dead weight. He focused on loading the pack with all the remaining essentials he could carry; the last of his meat, cured and salted; the dense bread made from root tubers and spelt meal; his flint rock and the wooden fire drill; the lacquered driftwood basin he used to capture melted snow. He took great care, filling every crevice of the rucksack, When it could hold no more, he looped his stone axe through his belt, slung a length of rope about his torso, tucked his translucent eye-guard into a pouch on his waist, and hefted the load of gear on his shoulders. Then he pressed his

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palm against his chest, feeling the reassuring pressure of the relic hanging from a length of leather cable around his neck, held safe below the layers of fur and hide. Despite the arctic chill, it was warm against his skin.

With one last look across the cold, empty tundra, he bid the past three years of his life a final farewell, saying goodbye to all the people the green valley. Then he turned and walked into the woods.