



RUNES OF GALLIDON

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You Can Never Go Home

Beestie

a short story set in the world of Runes of Gallidon

“It’s snowing.”

“I know, Timoteo. You just said that,” said Tatianna. She sighed.

“Again,” he said, a whiny tone tainting the word.

“Yes, *again*. It’s snowing, *again*. And you said it, *again*. And again, and *again*. That happens—the snowing part—in the North Realm. Your whining seems to happen *wherever* you trudge—starting in the Sea of Grass.”

Tatianna took another painful breath. She could feel the inside of her nose crackling as she did. The bitter air hurt her lungs, despite the knit woolen scarf covering her mouth and nose. She glanced over at Timoteo. The snot running down his face had formed a small frozen icicle on the moustache and beard he had begun growing as they traveled farther north. She wished again that she had some rendered fat left over from their last kill to spread on her chapped and cracked lips.

“Very funny. At least it was warm there, m’lady—”

Tatianna whirled around and cuffed his mouth mid-sentence with one of her mittened hands, the batting inside softening the blow.

“Not out loud! *Fool!* There are *eyes* and *ears* everywhere! The very snow has the same! Call me, ‘Tati.’”

Timoteo pursed his mouth in distaste. “I can’t, m’l—er, ma’am. It’s not in me to be that informal with you.” He snuffled and wiped the back of his hand across his nose. A wet trail appeared on the back of his mitten.

Tatianna bent down to his height, her piercing gray eyes glaring into his rich brown eyes.

“Adapt.” She patted his bearded face. “Our lives depend upon it.”

Tatianna straightened up and tried to huff an annoying strand of black hair out of her eyes through the scarf covering her mouth. Exasperated, she reached up to pull down the scarf, but instead pushed her hair up out of her eyes. She turned back to the direction they had been traveling. The large, wet flakes that had been falling were getting smaller. They were also falling harder and at more of an angle.

“Quickly now, Timo—this blizzard is worsening.”

“Yes, m-ma’am.”

He started clomping through the snow behind her once more. His feet were making crunching noises as they broke through the hard covering of ice crystals that was forming on top of the fluffier snow that had been falling earlier. “We should have kept the horses.”

“You said that before.” Wolves howled in the distance. “And *there* is the reason why we could not keep the mounts,” Tatianna said, waving a hand in the general direction of the howls. “Horses would just draw the wolves.”

“Does not our own scent also draw them?”

Tatianna turned to face Timoteo, cocking her right eyebrow. “Perhaps if you had *bathed* as I suggested at the last inn, this would not be such an issue.”

“But it was *cold!*”

“The water was hot.”

“I would have had to get out.”

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“The blankets on the beds were warm.”

“But it’s the cold between the two that concerned me, m’la—er, Miss Tati.”

“And so now you stink enough to draw feral carnivores.”

Timoteo reached down the back of his coat, scratching violently at an itch.

“And apparently now you also have vermin.”

“It’s *just* an itch. Probably dry skin.”

Tatianna’s right eyebrow arched up again.

“Tis so!” he said.

The wolves howled, closer this time. Timoteo took off his mittens and drew a bow out of the pack on his back, beginning to string it as Tatianna drew her curved sword from its scabbard.

“Let’s pick up the pace, shall we?” Tatianna began a slow crunching trot into the blinding snowy white-out ahead. They kept up this trotting walk for the better part of half an hour. The sounds of the wolves seemed to dwindle in the distance only to be replaced by a different sound—a sharp crackling and deep popping.

“Miss Tati, what is *that*?” Timoteo asked, blowing on his bare hands.

“I am not sure, Timo,” she replied. They paused in their flight to listen to the whiteness surrounding them. Tatianna was uncertain whether to investigate or have them bolt in terror. The snow was falling so hard now that she could not see more than a dozen yards in any direction.

A bass roaring *boom* reverberated from the direction they had been heading.

“Miss Tati, what was th-that?”

“No clue.” Tatianna was starting to have second thoughts about continuing north. Perhaps she should think of Timoteo and head back south—towards the hot, sunny element they were used to. She still had not sheathed her sword since the wolves had begun howling. Tightening her grip on the hilt of it, she began a cautious advance at an oblique angle from their original heading toward the noise.

Out of the white-out ahead, a billowing puff of sharp snow crystals wafted at them, propelled by a gust of wind contrary to the prevailing wind. Tatianna kept advancing, squinting into the white as if by doing so she could penetrate its veil. Suddenly she stopped. Ahead was a wall of white. Not a blank white such as the snow filled air, but an actual wall with cracks running zigzag along it. Overhead was an overhang of more white. They had made it to the edge of the north glacier at a point where the top layer had formed over the bottom. She could hear the ice crackling as it struggled against gravity and its own weight.

“Sweet, merciful Na’naat!” muttered Timoteo as he caught sight of the overhang. “Surely you don’t intend for us to walk *under* that, Miss Tati?” He began to back away from it. The heel of his left foot caught on the ice crust and he stumbled backwards a few steps, trying to regain his balance.

“No. Not hardly. *Look out!*”

A white shape hurled itself out of the snow at Timoteo. Tatianna slashed downward at the white shaggy form of one of the wolves that had caught up with them. She felt her blade bite deep into its neck, killing it. She spun around, pulling the blade free of the body preparing to slash at the next wolf.

Timoteo was down in the snow on his bottom, his bowstring singing as arrow after arrow left his quiver in search of targets. Every other arrow drew a canine yelp out of the snow.

Tatianna slashed out in time to catch another wolf pouncing out of the white-out for Timoteo’s neck. Her blade caught it just behind the shoulders, severing its spine. Another came lunging out of the snow, bowling her over onto her back. Vicious jaws snapped inches from her face as she dropped her

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sword and clawed at her right boot, trying to draw her dagger. She felt and heard the arrow wizz past her ear and into the wolf's head.

"Thanks," Tatianna barked as she rolled over to grab her sword.

She started to stand as another wolf charged in. She raised the tip of her sword just enough for the wolf to impale its own chest on it. Tatianna killed two more as they jumped at Timoteo's form. Then, as quickly as it started, it was over.

"Five bodies here," Tatianna said, cleaning her blade in the snow before inspecting it. There was one tiny nick on the edge. She'd have to stone that out later today she thought, frowning to herself as she sheathed it.

"Got seven out there," called Timoteo pointing off in the direction he had been loosing arrows.

Still sitting in the snow, he glanced at the bodies lying nearby. "Wolf stew tonight?" He stood up, brushed himself off, and then stomped out into the snow.

She thought about the hot stew for a moment. "Wonderful idea!" she said as he quickly returned dragging two carcasses by their back legs. "Except for one teensy problem."

"Which is?"

"When was the last time you saw a tree?"

Timoteo's eyes widened as he spun around looking into the whiteness surrounding them. He frowned.

"Oh."

"Yeah, 'Oh.'"

Tatianna pulled her pack off and set it in the snow. "But it's cold enough that we can take some meat with us frozen and wrapped in hide. It shouldn't spoil before we find a fire source. I hope." She pulled a skinning knife out and set to work.

"Miss Tati! Get up! Allow me! This work is beneath you!" He flipped his pack off of his back and began to get out his game dressing supplies.

Tatianna peered up at Timo's anxious face through raven bangs that had fallen into her eyes. "I've been cleaning my own kills since I knocked over my first hare when I was three," she snorted.

"But your mother—"

"Isn't here." Tatianna held up a bloody mass. "Bite? Liver's good for you."

Timoteo turned green. Tatianna shrugged and took a noisy, slurping bite, smearing blood across her face. Timoteo turned and ran three ragged steps before retching into the snow. Tatianna quietly chuckled before cleaning her face with a handful of snow.

She began cutting chunks off the flanks and wrapping them in some of the hide and had been working for several more moments before noticing a gray mass whirling between her and the glacier.

"Timoteo! Bring your bow. *Now!*" Tatianna allowed the barest hint of urgency in her call, but Timoteo was at her side in two seconds.

"What is it?" he whispered.

"Spirit." Tatianna pointed. Timoteo's eyes went wide and his breathing quickened.

"Did you call it?"

"No. Spirits are not needed for cleaning prey."

Tatianna got up off her knees and took a tentative step towards the swirling grayness. "Spirit, I did not call you. What need have you of us?"

"Tatianna!" called a plaintive voice from the gray mist.

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Tatianna recognized it as her mother's and swore a profanity she had first heard when her riding teacher had stumbled and sat in the fire.

Then Tatianna gasped. A spirit? Controlled by her mother? Tatianna's head snapped right, then left as she tried to spot her mother. A spirit normally had to be close to a Spirit Master's control to be brought under control.

"Come home, Tatianna." The spirit continued to swirl but didn't come closer.

"Timoteo, do you see or sense my mother anywhere nearby?"

He scratched his beard with a mittened hand. "No, Miss Tati. I don't."

Tatianna felt the palms of her hands begin to sweat despite the bitter cold. Her heart pounded. This wasn't possible. For a Spirit Master to gather a spirit like this, and set it on the trail of a person—there were legends that it could be done. But the power required? One Spirit Master could not hope to have done this alone. For all the time the Spirit Master was melded with the spirit, they could not move. It was not just her mother. She would have had to trade off to others, over and over for weeks; months.

"No, mother. Not even you could be this stupid." Tatianna gave a small sob, her heart fluttering in her mouth. The gravity of what her mother—nay, her whole tribe—was doing to try to coerce her into returning to her fate was horrifying. Tears formed in the corners of her eyes, only to freeze.

"You have been promised, Tatianna."

"Yeah, I know," she said aloud. "That's why I left. I want no part of that fat, dirty, stinking, drunken buffoon of a man."

"You have been promised to a prince, Tatianna. It would be a good union for our tribe."

A tribe that had been bogged down to one place until the spirit sent to find her had tracked her down and conveyed this message. Tatianna had been running for nigh on seven months now. A tribe immobile for *seven months*? Tatianna felt ashamed of what she had done to her own people.

"He would be a good match for the tribe, Miss Tati," muttered Timoteo.

Tatianna gave a snort around a ragged sob. "*You* marry the draggletail then."

"Tatianna, be reasonable..." Timoteo began.

Tatianna gathered the forces that were her birthright and dismissed the spirit with a violent forward wave of her hands. Her mother's power to hold the spirit in place was taxed across such vast distances, and it faded into the winds.

"Well, that's that," said Timoteo as he began to gather up his dressing tools and the meat Tatianna had wrapped.

"What are you doing?" Tatianna asked, wiping frozen tears from the corners of her eyes with the back of her mittened hand.

"Packing. We're going back."

Tatianna swore again, then barked out a sharp laugh. "No, we are *not* going back."

Timoteo's ears turned red at her choice of profanity. "But it's warm there."

"And filled with a pig that thinks he will own me as he owns his herds. No thank you."

Timoteo sighed and dropped his pack to the ground. He stood straight, his hands on his hips.

"Then... what? There's no wood for a fire. There's no cave to sleep in. There's no inn in sight. There's no city or village in sight. What now, 'Tati?'" He said her name in such a way as to make it a slur. "I know you know what the tribe just did to get that spirit to follow us and find you. The power they have used... do you have any idea how dangerous that was? How much it has weakened the tribe? How vulnerable they are right this instant? Do you?"

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Tatianna whirled on him, sorrow battling with terror in her eyes. “Yes, I know. Sweet Na’naat, how I know. By my own selfish flight I may have doomed my family.”

Contrite, Timoteo stumbled over to the girl and wrapped his arms around her in a hug. “It is all right, Miss Tati. We’ll be all right. They will be all right, too. I’m sure of it.”

“I wish I was sure of it, too,” she said, patting his head as she cried softly.

“So now what do we do?” he asked after a few moments.

“I don’t know, Timoteo. We’ll do something. We’ll keep going until we find a place to call our own. I think I can hide us from my mother’s spirits if I can just figure out what called it to me. I will *not* be chained to that pig they promised me to. I just know I cannot go home. I can never go home.”

She turned to Timoteo. “I free you from my service. If you wish to return to the tribal lands, do so.”

Timoteo looked at her without a word for a few moments. Then he knelt and began again to put his tools back in his pack.

In silence, they packed up all the wolf meat they could carry, plus some of the pelts and continued their mind, body, and soul numbing walk along the glacier’s front, plodding ever deeper into the wilds of the North Realm.



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