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Saga of the Dead Men Walking
Snowflakes in Summer

*I have known Akaran since he first was brought to the Order.
Even then, others in our ranks believed him to be unsuitable.
Unreliable. Undisciplined. Unstable.
Yet, it was not our decision to make.
We were told to accept him, and thus we did.*

*He survived the training. Excelled in some exercises.
Failed others, with some degree of flair.
His approach was cocky, violent, and frequently terrifying for
all those involved. But he still survived every situation we placed him in,
and always on his own. He flinched but he fought,
the one often leading to the other.*

*Eventually, he reached the pinnacle of his lessons.
There was no more we thought we could teach him.
Every exorcist has one final trial, a task,
a simple quest to be undertaken on their own.
Once completed, they are sent into the world to bring the warmth
of the Goddess of Love to those things that are Her anathema.*

*There was... a simple disturbance.
A haunting. A simple haunting.
It was just... there was snow. It was just ice, and snow.*

*We knew there was a wraith.
A wraith that made and was made of ice and snow.
That is what it was, that is what we could sense from afar.
Please do understand, please let me speak it again:*

*That **is** what it **was** and we sensed **that** from afar.*

*All these years later? Through the battles and through the Crusades?
Even after Civa? And Agromah? Even after Draedach, Roschel, and
Zordak?
I still don't understand how he could have made such a 'simple haunting'
so complex, so disastrous, so brutal, and so caked in frozen blood. So
much blood.*

SNOWFLAKES IN SUMMER

I do not know how he did it.

*And I was **there**.*

*~Sir Steelhom
Office of Oversight
Order of Love*

PROLOGUE

The view from the top of the Temple of Love was one that very few people would ever see. The highest point of Southern Dawnfire, the tower even eclipsed the Queen's own loft (a fact that the royal only tolerated because the distance between the two was so great she didn't have to see it). It was one of the two largest towers in the known world – contested only by the Citadel of Civa Prime. It was said that from the top of the domed tower, you could feel the warmth of the Goddess's very breath on your skin. That you could see the ripple of Her beauty if you looked out to the ocean.

There was so much of it and about it that was shrouded in so much mystery and mysticism, any story could have been true and none would have been the wiser. Stories of how the room was built of the purest white marble (it wasn't). Or how the top of the dome was open to the sky so one could look and see the moons and the smell fresh air from the sea (that was silly; it was on a coastline, and it rained there as much as it did anywhere else – probably more – so if it was open to the sky all the time the entire tower would have flooded out decades ago).

The stories would speak of the glory of the Sisters of Love, the ladies tasked to hear the words and whispers on the wind from the Goddess, so in-tune were they with Her desires. The stories would say that no mere woman could match them for their grace and their poise. Hushed whispers stolen between scribes and pages would awe at rumors of their beauty, for if they were chosen by the Goddess Herself, they must be of angelic stature.

But in truth, Love takes many forms and knows no one shape or size. It was not the beauty of the Sisters that made them instruments of

Her will. Nor was it their elegance or radiance.

There were many stories. Stories of women draped over silken pillows, lost in a hazy fog of incense and heady herbal concoctions as they sipped the finest of wines from gold and silver goblets. Stories of the most resplendent of sheer silken robes that adorned their skin, or in the minds of many, a marked lack thereof.

The stories that were the most important were not the ones of wishes and daydreamed hopes. The stories that were of true importance began with a whisper in the wind. They began with a voice that only the Sisters were (falsely) believed to hear. Words spoken to them, things so far off in the distance that nobody else could manage to tell were even there.

Those stories, and one of the greatest of their stories, began on a summer eve with a few wisps of clouds that hung high in the sky. It was the first time, but not the last time, that the Sisters of Love would find themselves surprised by the chaos that stirred within the Order. It was in the halls below them, on the beaches they could see. It was chaos that lived with them and was trained by them by divine edict.

It started with a whisper.

Two of the Sisters heard it and understood it. They listened to it even as a girl – a small, blonde thing, barely a waif, barely a girl – rushed from the Capitol bearing a message from an outpost far away from any place near a beach. Or near warmth. Or near any of the other places that the up-and-coming priests or paladins or scribes or healers would have enjoyed being sent to. The least of those was the agent of love-condoned madness in their ranks soon to be tasked to deal with this... disturbance.

They knew the message before Daniella could even get close to the tower (they even knew her name, so detailed was the whisper that flitted into their ears) and they knew who was to be sent to deal with a single, simple problem (oh were they ever wrong about *that*). They scried for as much as they could and they determined that the threat was real, but minor (even clairvoyants could have bad days). A small darkness had taken the gaze of the Lady, and She wished it brought into the light of day.

They had an edict crafted before word could reach them, leaving all to wonder more and more about what powers they truly had. When did they know of disaster? Did they really speak to the Goddess, did they possess some kind of future sight? Those were stories they would never tell.

Their part in the story had now been played. Content with that, they returned to their diversions as they looked out to the beach and down to Her followers milling below. They stood with smiles, and stood in the sheerest of silk robes, while sipping the finest of wines from little gold and silver goblets.

Not all of the stories about them were wrong.

I. A CHILL IN THE AIR

The town of Toniki had a serious problem; a problem old, a problem odd, and a problem, well, quite cold. It seemed that despite the best efforts of nature to let rain fall on this sad little place in the mountains when and as it should, the only thing that landed upon the hundred-and-a-half heads of the merry men and women of this lovely local town were snowflakes. This was hardly appropriate.

Now, to be honest, the heat of the sun didn't often fall upon the lovely people of this lovely village; no, they had the luxury of enjoying about four months worth of lukewarm temperatures and rain before the icy grip of winter reached down from the skies and strangled their village with snowdrifts and blizzards and icicles for good measure. It was neither an easy life nor a fun one. But it was a life, and it was theirs.

But now, it seemed, even those few months of rain had been stolen from the village – and they were getting quite upset about it. While most of them considered the Goddess of Ice to be a frigid bitch, She wasn't normally known to be excessively cruel. Winter happens, and in the mountains, it never tends to be pleasant.

Still, you see, without the rains the herbal remedies that they made from the plants that grew in the surrounding passes and valleys couldn't be brewed. With the roof of the local mine collapsed from the weight of the snow and ice above it? And the larger of the highways ruined from an avalanche, leading travel to and from Toniki to take days longer than it should? Without those, the town had little to trade. In the eyes of the Kingdom, it made the entire area just about worthless to everyone on the outside.

Just as unfortunate, it also placed undue (and unwelcome) need to rely on healers and priests from the Orders of Light or the charlatans that posed as them. Up to this point the need for such aid was at a minimum. What needed to be done could be managed by the dwindling stores of the village alchemist while critical care could be granted by an outpost of the Queen's Army at the bottom of the mountain. It was an inelegant solution for an inelegant time.

The weather was not their immediate worry, depressing as it was (and really, it should've been – as signs went, unceasing winter was a big one). Their immediate worry began when they started to hear the howling. True, there were wolves in the woods. The path to the upper mountains and outside of the borders of Dawnfire were fraught with wildlife that was not always so welcoming to people. Or as a bevy of bears, wolves, and the occasional mountain troll called them: dinner.

So the howling, when it started, was also at first ignored.

Before long, the howls were joined by the discovery of wildlife mangled into unrecognizable chunks. Worse still, those chunks did not appear to have been mangled by anything native. Not totally oblivious to this threat, they made a choice that they'd soon regret.

Hunting parties were sent to find the beasts and kill them before they threatened the peaceful people of the village. Sending them out wasn't a bad idea. It was perfectly reasonable and by no means a foolish choice based on the information they had available.

At first, the parties found nothing. Then they found tracks that looked like very large wolves. Later, they came back with tales of larger creatures ripped to bits which gave them cause for slightly more concern.

After a while, they simply quit coming back home.

They lost four people before they stopped volunteering to try and resolve it on their own. As questionable luck would have it, there was one person who might have been able to help if they just asked. Their main concern was not if he could help – they had a markedly high level of respect for the man – but if they could puzzle through the chaos on their own without having to rely on him. Magic always has a cost and his was no different; most of the village was happy to pay any price they could for his aid. But the elders weren't, so they waited.

There was a wizard that long ago had taken roost in a cottage a day away in a march that would take them deeper into the woods and further up the mountain. He wasn't well-liked but he had his uses. Respected, yes, but not well-liked. Unfortunately, he wasn't really the

wizard that they thought he was and he had his own issues with the village.

That wasn't to say that the elders and the wizard weren't on slightly amicable terms. They traded on a regular basis: his skills with mageswork and magicraft in exchange for food and clothes and tools. All in all, no different than anywhere else. Still, his abilities were strictly and passionately involved in his "work," and even if he could have done much about a pair of supposed "wolves," it was anyone's guess as to if he would. Eventually though, they had to cave and find out.

Continuing their impressive run of foul luck, nobody could get close enough to his house to find out what or if he could do to help. A feeling of absolute dread filled them every time they got too close. Eventually, two brave adventurers dared to risk the trek and press forward against that feeling of doom and gloom.

One of them never came back. The other one ran and made it back home with fresh piss freezing in his leggings. He never spoke a word of it after; he never spoke again as far as anyone in the village knew. They found him missing from his home the next day, with all of his belongings packed up and his horse long gone.

About this time they finally started to show some inkling of sense and realized that the wizard hadn't come to see them in nearly a year. People began to wonder if he had turned against them, or if the source of the howling had made him vanish the same way their trappers and woodsmen had. Sure, he came to help by divining small springs or to make the odd bit of medicine with the town alchemist – a middle-aged, round-bellied woman who was more than happy to share the duties of managing the town with her brother, a butcher named Ronlin.

Aside from simple spells and a slight knowledge of medicinal works? That was all that most people really knew about him. There was a *lot* more to his story than that but most of the people were either not privy to it or didn't remember some of the older rumors that, back in the day, had entertained the village spinsters with gossip that went on for years.

With their numbers dwindling – people moving away from the village to find safety in the foothills, or leaving the province entirely to go someplace markedly warmer – Ronlin, in a fit of pure desperation, sent a missive to the army outpost a few days away at the base of the mountain. In response, seven soldiers were dispatched to tame the wilderness and wilds. You simply couldn't have terrified citizens going missing under the Queen's all-encompassing benevolence.

That would just be... unheard of.

And missing villagers? That kind of thing sets a bad precedent. It would just look *awful*. It couldn't be done. The garrison commander knew this and embodied it in all of his actions and his cherished duties. He hand-picked those seven men and bravely sent them into the ever so increasingly cold wilds to the north while he relaxed in the arms of his wife as far away from the cold as he could.

They were armed to the teeth.

They were not adequately prepared to defend against teeth, but they were armed to them.

Even in hindsight, the decision to call for them was the best one. Under normal circumstances they would have come and vanquished the beast(s). After, they would help banish the threat the stores of mead posed in the village tavern. They might have even mounted a daring endeavor to battle through the hazards posed by the village daughters and their hopefully wanton ways. That was the way the world was supposed to work. Even if there were questions as to if the mounting would be willing or not, it was the way the world was supposed to work.

The world disagreed.

The world was not supposed to spit three of the soldiers back. Nor was it supposed to leave two of them covered in festering scratches and drool that was paradoxically both frozen solid and so hot that it was steaming. It wasn't supposed to have one fall over dead within an hour of their return. It wasn't supposed to send the third into a catatonic state not much longer than that.

It really wasn't supposed to leave the healthiest of them so terrified that he begged them to call for aid from (almost) any of the priesthoods that comprised the Orders of Light. That was *not* something that the army on this side of the kingdom wished to do. Ever. True, the Orders had their uses – but this close to the border? No. Just, simply, no.

In the town of Toniki, what started as a few snowflakes and a disconcerting howl was now something that made them debate doing the unfathomable. Most felt that while the Gods were still to be trusted the people that worked for them scarcely were. Did they have a choice? If the army was of no use, if the bravest of the townsmen were unable to head north to find aid? Did they have to reach to the capitol of the Kingdom and call for aid?

Was there a choice?

After a lengthy – and (ironically) heated – debate, Ronlin sent his fastest rider down the mountain to rush back to the local army outpost and plead for help from the Orders of Light. *That* particular conversation

didn't go over much better with the military than it had with the rest of the village. There were still protocols to be observed, regardless if they liked the thought of it or not.

They didn't like the loss of their brothers-in-arms, either. The military was not as obstinate as the men of the village and if the garrison's patrol couldn't handle it, there was no real shame in reaching out to those that could. Luckily for them, there was already a whisper in the wind that raced across the land faster than any of their missives could have hoped for.

Still. There was hope that someone from one of the Orders would be dispatched to solve the problem quickly and aggressively. A Knight of Purity, mayhaps, with a crystalline blade and righteous fury to banish the evils of the land? Or from the Kingdom's divine matron, the Goddess of Destruction? The army *unquestionably* cheered for their priests when they arrived. It could have even been a Steward of Blizzards from the Order of Ice (they were a strangely haughty bunch) for all they cared.

That would have fit perfectly for the situation at hand. Someone else thought so too.

Not that it did any good, but someone else thought so too.

The Order of Love was not the Order they expected to get. This was the kind of situation that they took seriously. *Very, very* seriously. Their reaction time to respond to an *issue* like this one was, as the Sisters were demonstrating on the other side of the Kingdom, borderline instantaneous.

On the upside, they did have their own way of sending someone somewhere urgently and their agent arrived faster than anyone else's would have. The method wasn't necessarily fun or even comfortable. Or cheap. Though it worked. That was about all you could say about it.

This time was no different. When their representative hit the ground running, he actually did hit the ground. Upon receiving a face full slushy mud upon his deposit a few miles between Toniki and the outpost, their exorcist had to sit up and wonder something aloud. He started with profanity (it was well within his nature, even if it wasn't approved off by his superiors); words best not said in polite company nor ever to be recorded by any scribe. The point was made without hearing most of it though there was one poignant line within his expression of aggravation.

"Goddess, who in the fisting Heavens did I piss off to make You send me *here*?" The undignified arrival, and that statement, set the tone for his task.