

# Chapter 1

## After the Fall

*Failure.*

*Pain.*

*Fire.*

*Anguish.*

*Failure. Failure. Failure.*

The sound of hooves thundered in his ears. So fast. The world alongside was a blur of greens and browns. Erroh, atop his mount, terrified and determined, went with the charge. No longer could he hear the flames as they destroyed the eternal structure, but they were there. Still burning. He was a failure, and the world had ended.

*Fuken failure.* He'd met Uden and faced him atop the walls of Spark City. Met him with confidence—nay, arrogance—and almost died for his missteps. Beaten, battered, before he'd even believed he could do it.

*I can never beat him.*

His mind was awash with horror and terror. He was a man without a plan. An Outcast without land or banner. Everything was lost, and it was all his fault.

“Keep going, girl,” he challenged, and his magnificent beast answered. She didn’t fail. She didn’t let him down. She found him when he needed her most. He, though, was broken and lost among the fires and smoke, too beaten to rise. Too damaged to be defiant.

He shuddered in the saddle as Highwind bounded over unforgiving terrain, and his body ached further with every jolting step.

*Save me, girl.* He didn’t dare calm her charge, and she dared not slow. Only when they were clear of the city, of the scattered forces hiding among the eternal green, would she curb her pace. For there were many. Those not ordered to charge. Those who waited with beady eyes, seeking a fleeing failure of a warrior with the silhouette of humanity’s desolation billowing up behind him in plumes of black and spark-filled smoke.

*I am alone and lost; this is the end of it all.*

Erroh’s hammering heart was like lead in his chest. A terrible heaviness took hold and seeped through his body. He drew upon dwindling reserves of energy, and wasn’t sure he could take any more than the gods asked of him. He’d endured too much. Too much pain. Too much loss and regret.

*Betrayer. Cruel murderer.*

*Failure, failure, fuken failure.*

*You failed the world, Erroh. Again.*

He gripped the reins, dug his feet in against the impressive beast’s ribs and felt the agony in his ankle. Always the fuken left, he thought miserably, and shook unhelpful thoughts away. Those thoughts led to despair. The last thing he needed in a terrified flight from a fallen city was despair. It led to a lessening of the charge. A surrendering of the soul.

He gripped the reins again with shaking hands, stealing what determination he could. He dared not look behind for fear of what pursued him. He imagined a smouldering army screeching outrage at his defiance. He imagined Uden upon a divine chariot of gold and blood. Too quick. Too fierce for a little cub upon a terrified mount.

*You lost, and the world will burn.*

*As Uden said it would.*

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The air kept him alive. Brought reason to his spinning mind. Its rushing force took his smoky breath and infused him. He deserved little of this relief, but as he had often done during his short life, he took it, gorged himself upon it, regardless of his deserving.

Below, the hammering thunder softened as Highwind's hooves touched the softer ground, and he leaned lower and kicked her forward. He knew his miraculous escape would not go unpunished. Could not be ignored. The farther he travelled, the more he imagined a garrison of Riders in pursuit. An entire army of them, at least. All chanting their victorious god's name, all bent on finishing this ruined cub and being done with the matter.

*The world saw you fall. The world watched you fail.*

*Again.*

As the canopy of green closed in around him, he held in a scream of agony. Of relief. Of fukén desolation. Oh, that scream wanted to release itself from his lips. A lone rider upon a charging mount might remain concealed in the green well enough, but a screaming idiot too foolish to hold in his panic would offer an easy beacon for a hunting pack. So he kept

that scream in, gripped the reins tighter, and hated himself in silence. He hated his vanquisher a little too. It was all he could do. It wasn't enough.

*Get home to them.* He kept that thought in his mind. It was all he could hold. All he could hope for. "You are so brave, Highwind. Just go a little farther, girl," he hissed again, and she did.

When the miles between the fallen city of Spark and the Outcast grew, he finally listened to his mount's laboured breathing and eased his assault upon her. As he hushed her, she gratefully answered his calming demands and lessened her charge. Stroking her mane, he told her he loved her, and she did not appear to care. And that was fine, for he was exhausted, and weariness came upon him as though held in an absent god's invisible glove. Tightening, crushing, everlasting.

*Deserving.*

"Fuk you all," he hissed in a croaky, broken voice, and it was a weak threat to those behind, or those ahead, or those surrounding him, or any of those who had him in a concealed arrow's sights—as though words thrown angrily could halt their charge. "To the fires with you," he added, and realised the stench of smoke no longer tormented him. He should have felt relief, but he felt only exhausted and broken. More so than usual, too.

He stayed upon the beast, reassuring himself that they might rest awhile once they came upon a suitable site. Really, though, he knew he would try to continue moving until he could ride no more. Until he reached Raven Rock. Until he found his nerve once again.

Further miles drew on and went by until, eventually, exhaustion and thirst pulled him from his horse. Painfully so. Hearing the call of water's delicate rush, he brought Highwind

through thick undergrowth until he came upon a small river. Slipping off the mount and forgetting his shattered foot, Erroh dropped painfully to the ground.

“Fuk it,” he cried, rolling awkwardly into a patch of bushes with nothing but stinging agony to break his landing. He spat dryly and lay for a moment. “Fuk it all.”

*Failure, failure, fuked failure.*

“Maybe we rest a little while here?” It was a good suggestion, but Highwind thought little on the matter. She blinked at him, and shook her head free of a few buzzing insects before drinking from the water’s edge.

“Save some for me,” he whispered, scrambling beside her to drink from the cool flow. “I did most of the work escaping, anyway,” he jested weakly. He hoped the water might revitalise him and strengthen his weary bones, but he felt no better. He drank deeply until the pain left his throat, until the dizziness left his vision. Until his belly filled and ached. Then he dipped his head to wash the city, the blood and ash, from his face.

This, strangely, gave him a little energy. Enough to climb to his feet again and discover, to his horror, the broken bolt plunged deep into his beast’s rump.

“You poor thing,” he cried, momentarily forgetting his own miseries and failures. The bolt had struck deep and snapped off sometime during their desperate escape. “It never slowed you down, did it?” he said softly. He lay his forehead against hers and loved her more so.

As he examine the wound, Highwind reared a few times but mercifully did not bolt away. He took no further chances, though, and, securing her to a tree, pulled a dagger free and went to task operating on the offending projectile. The bleeding from the wound had

slowed, but the beast's agony was terrible. He felt her every cry of suffering; he lamented every act of clumsiness as he dug in, removing the piece.

"You don't deserve this," he said after a time. The dagger shook in his quivering fingers, for he was no drunken healer. "I'm trying," he whispered, hoping she would understand. He persevered and finally removed the bloody piece, dropping it on the ground before sealing the wound with a salve of mud and leaves. He tried to remember Garrick's further treatments for such things, but his fractured mind couldn't gather the memories needed. Gently, he faced the beast, placed his forehead against hers, and rubbed her gently again. "I will never speak ill of you ever again, my beauty," he pledged, and for a moment, he wondered if the beast understood him. If she did, she gave no sign. She was still upset. Slowly, she dipped her head and bit him on the shoulder. It was a fine bite, for she had all her teeth. She bit deep and drew blood.

"Bitch!"

Pulling away, she snorted her dissatisfaction a few more times before deciding the bite was enough. Perhaps she no longer felt the piece as before. Regardless, she snorted a second time and then went back to grazing. He left her to it, for he had more urgent, horrible matters to attend to.

Carefully removing his boot, he was dismayed to discover how badly his shattered foot had swelled in the saddle. "Fuk it," he cursed softly. Sitting by the river's edge, he allowed the cool water to cover his limb and felt relief for the first time in hours. Prodding around the injury and wincing at his own touch, Erroh began making a splint. A difficult task with few materials to call upon. He ripped his shirt, broke a few thick branches, and laid them side by side.

He hated the next part. Hated it because it involved a lot of pain without guaranteeing success. Gripping his injured foot tightly, he twisted it back and forth. He felt jagged pain shoot up his leg as he manoeuvred his ankle into different positions, hoping to ease the agony. He took the pain and did not cry out. That was their way. Above him, the sun moved across the sky as he massaged the ruined limb, hoping for success, but found nothing more but further pain. There were loud clicks, a few crunches, and he might have felt bones slide ever so beneath his touch. Eventually, when he neared crying out, he dropped his leg back into the cool water and wedged the mangled foot tightly between a couple of rocks.

“Take it,” he whispered. A warning, a plea, a mantra. “Take the pain.”

He tried to take it. He really did. Turning his body so that the immobilised ankle bent at an unnatural angle, he leaned into it and felt creaking, shattering torture. It took him now, overcame his mind. He’d never endured this kind of agony before. His mouth opened and gasped, and his eyes betrayed him as they let loose their deluge of sorrow.

“Take it because you failed the world, and everyone will die,” he groaned between clenched teeth.

The world went dark, and he fell unconscious.

He did not scream.

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Darkness.

He woke with a start and found himself among the shadows of a thousand ungodly things, and they reached for him. They loomed all around him, but he could not see. He was blind but for the shattered moon above.

*Where am I?*

He tried to rise, but a demon held his foot tight in its monstrous mouth, and he shrieked in horror.

*I'm in hell, where it's hot as hell.*

He hated the dark. The gods knew he hated the dark. That's why they'd brought him to this place. He gasped, pulled himself along the mossy ground, and wrenched himself from the demon's grip. Something in the monster's easy relinquishing of edible things grounded his frantic thoughts, and visions of a burning city roused him from the stupor. A one-eyed god took his angelic wings, spoken of in the ancient tales and beliefs, sending him into fire. Only then did he recover his senses. Hell might have been warmer. Hell might have been quieter too.

*Fuk.*

There was movement, loud and crashing. Pulling closer in the dark and marching, seeking, hunting. It was like thunder around him, closing in. "Oh, please, no," he moaned, dragging himself away from the stream's edge. His foot was frozen and numb. Whatever damage he'd inflicted upon himself had allowed some swelling to go down, but it was a ruin, and he had failed the world, and he was as lame as a heroic mount with an arrow in its rear, and he wanted to cry, and it was all fuken shit.

"Fuk."

Shivering again, he felt around for his boot and, holding back another scream, dug his foot back into it. He wrapped the torn pieces of fabric tightly around the leather before rising carefully, slowly, supporting his weight with the few sturdy twigs, and felt a little relief. He caught his breath in the moonlight and felt the cold mostly in his numb fingers. He felt alone and, for a moment, almost stopped. Almost gave up like the frozen South.

*I have failed.*

More thunder.

*Move, Erroh.*

The thundering roar of the marching Hunt filled his ears and caused him to panic anew. He thought it typical to escape with his life against impossible odds, only to fall asleep and get caught unawares. *One of these days, luck will desert me completely*, he thought miserably, testing his foot's strength and finding further success. He could not sprint, but he could fight.

*Show me the Woodin Man so that I might have a second go at him.*

Settling his nerves, he shuffled towards the distressed figure of Highwind. Patting her gently and offering words about shielding each other, he climbed atop her and brought her from the river. He saw them again through the forest, a line of fire marking their progress as they trundled through the undergrowth, marching down upon him—or just marching.

Kicking his beast forward, he fled the line of pursuers, hoping their tracking skills in the night were worse than they were in the day. Highwind still suffered from her injury, so the pace was slower than he'd have liked. Without speed to call upon, he chose unforgiving terrain instead and slowly distanced himself from the chasing pack. But it never felt enough.

He peered down the moonlit path ahead, and his heart hammered with every thump of Highwind's hooves upon the mud.

*Don't hear us, don't see us. Don't pursue us.*

His prayers remained unanswered, for they continued their pursuit, deeper into the Wastes than he thought possible. Always thunder in his ears as they came ever closer to striking him down.

For hours more, he raced his weakening mount. She never faltered, and somehow, he never fell from the saddle or relinquished his grip. Yet still, the Hunt's Riders followed.

Eventually, the path opened up, the grass and twigs having been crushed by some other wandering convoy. Opting for speed over concealment now, he broke forth, away from the pursuing pack. Though exhausted and injured, Highwind relished the faster pace. The thundering sound of her hooves increased as she charged into the darkness, but tragically, within a few breaths, he heard the Riders following.

He imagined them. Upon fresher mounts, waving torches manically, seeking easy prey. He imagined his back a fine target. Even in the low light. Imagined the click of a crossbow and the *thunk* of a bolt through flesh.

"Faster, Highwind," he cried, and she could not answer. Instead, she weakened at his request, and his heart fell. He feared she might die upon this charge, yet he could not relinquish his urging. No, he demanded more, because he was a cruel failure of a legend, savouring his breath above that of all others.

*Perhaps you'll save us if they shoot you in the rear again.*

"Errrrrrrrr..... oooooooh!"

He spun around as the Riders called out in unison, but could barely see them as they closed the distance behind him. They, however, could see him. A moment later, they called him again, and he caught the gasp in his throat lest it turn to a whimper.

“Errrrrrrrr..... ooooooh!” they cried again, and more joined along, their cries building into a terrible chant as they hunted him down. He had failed the world, and none of this was fair.

*Fuk, fuk, fuk.*

He kicked his horse one last time and willed her to outrun this savage pack, but he knew his fate. He considered dropping from his beast, dipping into the treeline, and searching for a bush. Any bush. Even a big rock to hide behind. Instead, he gripped the reins, continued to charge, and listened to their chanting as they hunted him down.

He knew their bloodlust was at its zenith when they chanted his name even more loudly, more powerfully. It was a wall of noise. As one, they took few breaths and filled the night anew with their horror, and he was terrified. It was the war horns tenfold, for they played for him alone.

And then... ahead lay salvation.

But he saw it as damnation, for it was a Southern camp.

He saw the banners first, as he had a thousand times before. This particular Finger did not march; instead, they lazed and waited for night to pass. Light filled the darkness. The sight of the campfires and torches, and the crisp smell of their smoke, brought forth the memory of his desperate flight. Highwind found a last gasp of energy. She charged towards the campsite, seeking a respite, unaware she carried her master into certain doom. Unable to

stop her outright, Erroh coerced her away from the camp and back into the unforgiving forest before the Southerners could rouse themselves and fill them full of bolts.

Beneath the cover of the leaves, he finally allowed her to slow. The race was done. There was no saving himself from this. The last thing he desired was her death on his conscience.

Concealed somewhere between the hunting Southerners and the settled Southerners, Erroh waited. Carefully, he dropped to the ground and released Highwind to enjoy these last few moments free. Perhaps as they gutted him, he thought unhappily, she might bite one or two of them and take flight.

“Errrrrrrrr..... oooooooh!” the Riders called again as they neared him.

Drawing his swords, he looked down to the camp, which was now rousing itself. “Fuk it,” he said, deciding these were fine-fitting last words.

The hammering hooves of the Riders’ Northern mounts pounded in his ears as they thundered towards him. He almost stepped out from the treeline. Almost leapt upon the leading Rider, hoping to take him from the saddle.

Instead, he dropped his shoulders and waited.

And they came upon him at terrible speed.

Screaming, hating, hunting, killing.

And then they charged past him, roaring their violent and hate-filled fury, towards the Southern camp.

*What the fuk?*

*They charge towards their own kind?*

The ground shook, and the air filled with war cries from both sides as the settled Southerners realised they were facing invasion. He lost count as the Riders stampeded past him, hundreds of them, only a dozen feet from where he stood concealed within the green. Each hoofbeat reverberated in his chest, and he was a failure. They screamed his name. They eyed the path ahead. They raised their swords and broke apart into formation and drove down upon the unprepared Southerners.

They went to war. They did it in his name.

*Seriously, what the fuk?*

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