

Written by Grant Anderson



The Wintry Stronghold

The wind cut through the layers of clothing. No matter how many he put on, it didn't seem to be enough. Owen looked at the stronghold. It was hard to see through the never-ending blizzard. Luckily it was day, because Owen was certain the stronghold would be invisible during the night.

It was all a white blur. The sky was a shade of white, the snow that covered the ground for miles was white, the clumped pine trees were covered in white. The snow swirling around him and the castle was white. The only thing that stood out was the stronghold. The deep gray color of bricks, and the slight warm color of burning torches.

Owen looked at the building with his spyglass. There were about fifty guards, manning cannons and ballista, hiding behind the battlements, and glancing out windows. This was the fabled stronghold. The place where the king kept his most precious possessions.

Owen was a thief. A pretty good one too, maybe even the best. But unlike other "good" thieves, he kept stealing from simple people. Why? Because how can a thief make money if they're rotting in a cold stone dungeon?

Owen looked at the guards. They were wearing simple metal armor that they bundled up with animal fur to keep warm. Some held halberds, swords, and spears, all equally dangerous. But Owen knew what he was doing.

Why was Owen trying to steal from the most heavily guarded place in the country? Because of one reason: revenge. He was mad at both sides of a war for taking one of his best friends. So, why not steal from the king's private treasures to defeat an evil necromancer trying to take over the country?

Sadly, the heavily guarded place was high in the mountains of the northern tundra, making it the coldest place in the world. Even the stronghold was crawling with ice and snow. It was a blight of pure light. But then why did the light feel so cold?

The wind made Owen's nose a bright cherry red. He examined the impenetrable keep, beginning to think it was an impossible feat. Then he notices something near the side of the building. He saw a small Yakwhite root growing near the castle. A mistake!

Owen celebrated quietly. A fault in not clearing the vegetation. His hands covered with fingerless gloves shook in the air triumphantly. The wind tried to bite off his fingers, but Owen's hope kindled them. There was a chance.

A Yakwhite root grows only in cold places, which makes winter cabins even more treacherous. Their roots grow long and into anything, cracking stone. That means that because it was right next to the wall, damaging it, hopefully enough to break in.

Owen crouched and snuck around the wasteland, trying not to be seen. He turned back to see his footprints disappearing. Not a trace. A perfect weather to run away if his escape was that bad. Even the nose of a fleshhound wouldn't be able to track him in this weather.

Owen made his way around the back successfully. Not one guard had seen him. He walked to the Yakwhite root. Its white stem was invisible in the storm, only given away by the single gold petal on the top.

He examined the wall next to it, and sure enough. There was a huge crack which, in the cold, can only get worse. Owen wedged his fingers into the small snow filled crack, singeing his fingers for a moment. He pulled and the large brick slid right out, falling onto the snow without a sound. The howling winds shrouded any of the grunts Owen made while dislodging the bricks. Owen had to be quick; in a blizzard like this, his escape route would be covered with snow in a blink of an eye.

Owen entered the castle. The floor was wood, hopefully not the creaking kind. The hallway was empty, just as he had expected. Even the guards here weren't allowed to look at the artifacts the king was hiding.

He brushed himself off, the snow from his clothing falling onto the dark brown flooring. Owen carefully tested each board before him to make sure none of them were loud, trapped, or faulty as he walked down the hall.

The torches on the stone walls blazed brightly, restoring Owen's internal temperature. He walked up to one and put his hand out to warm them. After a few seconds, he continued on, still being cautious. Owen walked until he came to a big metal door, A Skeleton Lock. A lock that was impossible to open unless you had the key specifically designed for it. But even those who had acquired a Skeleton Key couldn't enter.

This normally would have posed a huge challenge for Owen, but he had come prepared. Earlier that week, he had snuck into the king's palace, and stolen his Royal

Keychain. Containing all the keys to the kingdom, literally. But he had to be careful. Anything done wrong could trigger an alarm system.

He pulled out the ring of keys, and grabbed the one matching the door, and the symbol on it. Unlike usual locks, the door was the lock. You had to move the key, in the keyhole in the direction previously set within the vault door. Luckily, again, on the key was the exact orientation he needed to move the key. A forgetful king...

The key had an arrow pointing left, so the lock wasn't going to be too difficult. Owen put the key in the lock, and heard the sound of several gears moving. Owen then turned it all the way around. Several more clanks, and creaks could be heard within the door. But nothing too loud. Owen then slid the key, and the keyhole, to the left side of the door. More clanks and clicks. When Owen reached the end, he heard a final click. And like a handle, Owen pulled on the key to open the vault door.

It swung open slowly. Creaking and groaning. When he had opened the door all of the way, he peered into the room. It was relatively large, matching the theme of the hallway, with statues of knights, lords, and gods lining the walls.

What a normal person would expect in this vault was piles and piles of gold coins. But those are not worthy of the Wintry Stronghold. Only the most powerful talismans, weapons, and tools in the entire world were permitted the protection of the bastion.

Inside were several podiums, about twenty of them. On each was a suspended item. All the most powerful artifacts ever held by a mortal hand, worthy of a god. Any one of these items in the room could make him rich beyond imagination, or more powerful than any warlord. But that was not Owen's intention. He only wanted revenge. If it was this easy to break into the castle, he could do it again with a much bigger box to carry everything. But he had come here for one thing only.

Owen scanned the various items and found the one he was looking for. He ran in to grab it. But as he did, he heard the barks of a fleshhound. There had been a hound inside the vault as an alarm, with no leash holding the beast back. Owen ran, grabbing an item to his right, and turned around just in time to see the hound lunge at him. The hound's mouth wrapped around the item he had used to defend himself. A large, rounded potion vial filled with a golden glowing liquid.

The fleshhound's sharp teeth bit through the glass like jelly, and the gold liquid inside lined the mouth of the beast as the bottle shattered into a million pieces. The dog fell over, woozy from whatever was in the vial. Its body started to glow that same golden gleam of the potion.

Owen would have stayed and watched, but time was short. No doubt, guards were running down the long hallway to see what was the matter. Then Owen saw it. There, on one podium was a single flower suspended by a metal rod. Its stem was a light green, with multiple leaves coming off of it. And at the end of each leaf was a hanging bulbous flower with a rich blue hue to it. The Eldritch Flower.

The flower itself was healthy as ever, and its power would continue to sustain it long after this world collapsed. It had the power to end all sickness, kill all infestations, and destroy all blights. As Owen grabbed the flower and put it in a protective cloth to carry back, he noticed a weapon to his right. It sort of looked familiar. It was a halberd made from a blood red crystal, with a hellish aura. Since Owen had only brought a few throwing knives as weapons, he grabbed the halberd, just in case.

No sooner than he did, a loud growl shook the room. Owen turned around to see the fleshhound that had been lying on the floor. Now standing up, but with a few differences. It was now twenty times its size with razor sharp teeth; glowing gold eyes; and thorn covered legs. Owen froze with fear. The dog was about the size of a carriage, and probably could pull ten of them.

Owen stood ready, holding the halberd in his hand. He noticed some words on the handle of the weapon. They were in a different language, but those symbols were enough to spark his memory. The Unholy Reaver. The weapon of the demon Voksh. With two words you could unleash its mighty fury that could destroy cities.

Owen saw five guards walk through the gate of the vault. One, with a powerful voice, yelled, "Stop!". The strength he had slowly dissipated as he beheld the giant beast in the middle of the room. The drool of the thing dripped onto the floor, and even on some artifacts.

It then barked, sending a loud shockwave around the room, enough to deafen a man for a few seconds. There was some ringing in Owen's ear, but he wasn't discouraged. He held

a weapon that could easily allow him to escape the stronghold. So he uttered the words people feared, the enchanted phrase

“Kley-ouvf Yool!” As he spoke the words, the halberd began to hum. The guards knew what was happening, and ran away, while the oblivious dog walked forward.

Red energy surrounded the weapon, and a silent bolt of red lightning jumped from the halberd’s tip. There was no crackling noise. Only the sound of sizzling flesh.

It had burned a hole through the dog’s head, and out the castle wall. The giant beast fell on its side, crushing half of the talismans in the room, rendering the magic that enchanted them useless.

The wind, that seemed to be tired of blowing in the same places, happily entered the newfound crater in the castle. Owen then ran out the vault door.

No longer afraid of noise, he sprinted down the hallway, spotting the crevice in the wall. Owen slid across the floor, and slipped through the hole, now covered in snow. Luckily it was just snow. So he shoveled it out of the way, and escaped. The running was hard in the freshly laid snow, but not impossible. He heard the shouts of guards behind him as they loaded the ballista, and aimed to fire.

But it was too late. He was far out in the storm. His footprints were gone, and the snow shielded him from the sight of the guards. He ran far, until he collapsed. Owen opened the cloth holding the flower. Safe and sound. Now he had everything required to defeat the evil of the south and bring justice to the tyranny in the north. All he needed now was a ride...