

Across the Dales

By Wytemi

Dedication

In Memory of Mona Woodman, a beloved seminary teacher.

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Chapter i - Descent

Dalefell,

an endless, pitch-black, abyss so abounded by darkness that nothing but the sparse sounds of course, cold gales eerily string the frigid air. The vacancy filled with nothing seen by natural sight.

The void is sullied by a radiant glow that bursts through a sky filled with black-charred clouds, flashing the hollow expanse with a pallid glow that reveals an endless, black sea. This ghostly radiance rolls into an expanse that far exceeds the reach of any distant-seeing eye; so far that not one discernable landmark of civilization could be sighted.

The clouds mound into a pressured blister, swelling larger and wider as something immense presses from above. The dark veil stretches thin; fissures of bright, red light seep through the strained skin. The red hues bleed through the clouds, bruising them with an unbearable glare.

A pale laser tears through the void, torn shards of cumulus evaporate into a vapor, tunneling a narrow, lit, spotlight through the clouds. In that crater, an unconscious child with black wings and feathers across their body descends.

As the child freefalls the pitch-black void, the clouds explosively collide with flashes of thunder and lightning, revealing for barely a moment an endless sea surrounding a forested isle covered in snow. The sky fills and darkness returns. Only the faltering radiance of the felling child remain flickering through the sky.

Down, down does the child fall from the surface to the abyss. Powerful winds vortex in perpendicular circlets forcing the child's speed far beyond their terminal velocity. 1,000 feet. 900...800...600...400. The fading child's glow reveals an isle decorated with a barren forest of decayed root encapsulated by snow & ice.

The child meteors into the snow-filled ground, blasting snow and dirt in all directions. But the ground is so firm by eternal ice, not even a crater cradles this fallen youth. The lingering luminance fades as the depthless darkness absorbs its energy. As emptiness eradicates the sudden disturbance, this once lumen being sinks deep into the loose blanket of snow. It's trapped...forgotten.

In the fallen dale there is no light to survive the relentless stale waste. It consumes any energy unfortunate enough to be felled forever petrified by void. There is nothing...abyssal silence, sightless. Little felt, barely heard...absent of life.

Not even a loose gale in the wind shakes the keen and taut corpses of nature's shadow. Silence without peace. Quiet violence by a living, opaque overcast. In all of Dalefell, there is no light...

e x c e p t . . .

That light again stubbornly shines warmly underneath a thin blanket of snow. A frail, shaky hand illuminated by flickering flame unearths from beneath Dalefell's grip. The thick darkness is once again pushed back to reveal a short sphere lighting frosted branch tips. A black feathered hand slams the frozen bark of a tree trunk and claws sharply into the ice, its undercoat lit faintly by a crimson glow. It fades, darkness falls.

The quaint air is continually shoved aside by youthful gasps and grunts. Shivering sighs are heard and fade as quickly as the breath. The hand; as small

as a child's, crawls along the covered ground. Undercoated feathers flicker again, bathing down the forearm under the snow. The feather tips quiver in sync with the faint cries of the child's chattering teeth. The snow trapping this unique child melts from their radiant body heat.

A stunning fiery talon climbs onto the snow from a newly burned crater, ankles shaking. The flaming undercoats catch wildfire up this child's body. A naked angel; a boy with feathers down his back and magnificent wings donned upon his shoulders. His years are just under a decade but eyes long aged by tragedy. He falls face first into the snow weak and frail.

The darkness overwhelms the child's natural blazing hearth. The forest disappears by the NetherRealm's hand; its dread triumphs against the child's fervent glow. Nothing but darkness, not a sound nor a whimper in the still air. A brisk wind gushes through the dark pocket of trees. Soundly brushing the branches to creak and shake.

The Victory doesn't hold. Dalefell finds no lasting relief. Echoes of footprints compacting the snow ripple like waves through the realm's relentless silence.

A swaying lantern illuminates the forest, grasped by a tall hunchback wanderer. His shoulders are superbly disproportioned, and his body fully concealed behind a black shawl. A shovel is wrapped along his back. He trudges through the snow towards the crater, his face as pale as the snow.

The wanderer stops in his tracks and leans his lantern downwards. There he finds the angel child shaking and chattering. The boy reaches to meet the wanderer's gaze but fails. Daeth makes a stern, bellowing command:

“Get up or be trapped under ice for eternity.”

The child attempts to rise again. As he crawls forward, something yanks at his back. The boy stresses his neck behind to witness his feathers stripping from his body - he CRIES.

“What's happening to me?!”

His wings flap violently as they rip off his back. Thick, dark, slushy, ice splatters from under his skin and soils the snow. His skin pulls and tugs until...it... S N A P S. The child SCREAMS.

“You're cursed, boy. Your fate is Dalefell.

From the fresh wound of his severed wings, a new being amalgamates from his scalped spine and personifies into a human-like bird child with a long beak, feathers coating all his body, and his signature crimson undercoat. The now stripped boy lies utterly naked, coiled fetal in the burrowed snow. His muscles throb, black blood-like slush freezing to his skin. He groans weak and looks up to see his feathers and wings have been removed entirely.

The wanderer removes his shawl, revealing a tattered black attire, not an inch of skin shown. He tosses it to the boy. “Put it on before you freeze.” The boy shivers and quickly wraps the shawl, covering his naked skin. He warms up, his shaking slows. The wanderer turns into the newly manifested creature.

“What be your name, Wings?”

Lying on the snow, the strange, winged creature points his sharp feathery finger under his chin and looks up at the invisible sky to think about his name.

“um...Azure?”

He answers almost like a satisfied epiphany, a recall of such critical detail about his new form. Azure sits up and looks at the boy from whom he so violently was created. The boy inspects Azure up and down confused. The wanderer turns to the boy.

“And you?”

The naked child draped only by the wanderer's black shawl shivers from the frost biting at his cheeks. His eyes already heavy from the frigid cold. This boy need not think of his identity. With scorn in his voice, he replies:

“I'm Phoenix.”

“Never forget your name, *Phoenix-Azure*.”

The wanderer’s emphasis on the concatenation of his name left no flinch nor stutter in Phoenix’s miserable stature. He looks up sharply to the wanderer.

“You’re no angel, who are you?”

“There is power behind my name, one I shan’t give freely. Though like you, an angel I am.”

Phoenix glares at him for an uncomfortable pause.

“If you must have a name, then you may call me Daeth”

“What is this place? Why’s it so dark?”

“In all of Dalefell, there is no light, except what a lantern can emit. Stay together, and stay lit.”

He sets the Lantern down at Phoenix’s knees. He turns away.

“W-wait! How do I get home?”

“Dalefell is home. It matters not how you decide to dwell, but...”
Daeth contorts his head behind uncannily with eyes rolled backward at Phoenix. “...beware the vain, eyeless god.”

With that final caution, Daeth trudges out of range of Phoenix’s lantern, disappearing into the void. Azure twirls and sways his new body. He flicks at his beak and runs his sharp talons down his wings. Phoenix squints his eyes through the limited light of the lantern at this strange manifestation standing before him.

“What are you?” He asks with a hint of disdain.

Azure giggles. “What are we?” He giggles some more. Phoenix is dissatisfied by the non-answer. Azure tilts his head and frowns confused.

Inside Phoenix’s chest brews a concoction of wild emotions. He growls:

“Those wings...and feathers... they’re mine!”

“They are?” Azure attempts to tug at his wings, but they don’t budge. “I’d give it back, but they don’t seem to come off.”

Growling breaths and heavy heaves from Phoenix as he stands. His chest pounds and his muscles flare.

“...Phoenix?” Azure asks confused. Phoenix lunges at Azure, pulling his wings like a rabid dog. Azure freaks, “Phoenix! Stop! What’re you doing?!”

“They’re mine! Mine! They’re my feathers! My wings! You stole them!!”

Azure kicks him off his back and jumps skyward. He flaps his wings and hovers above Phoenix in the air. “Phoenix! I’m sorry I can’t help it!”

Phoenix tensely stares him down. He scoops his palms in the snow and cups snowballs. He aims it at Azure and throws it, but he narrowly dodges them.

“Phoenix, please! Stop!”

Phoenix throws his hands up and tosses his back to a dead tree. Azure slowly descends and lands beside him.

Phoenix looks up at the pitch-black skies, there truly is nothing, their sight restricted within the confines of the lantern’s reach. He slides down, drops the lantern, and starts crying.

“I don’t remember who I am...or how I got here...or why I’m here! Or why a part of MY body is...you.”

Azure plops his feathery rear in the snow, his weight launching snow dust around his radius.

“Do you remember anything?”

“I’m an angel...or at least I was.”

“I dunno why we split up. I don’t really know anything, but maybe we can find a way for me to give you back your wings?”

He picks up the lantern and offers it to Phoenix. Phoenix looks into Azure’s eyes and sees his own reflection. He trembles a tear for a brief second before snatching the lantern passive-aggressively from Azure’s claws.

“Fine...where do we start?”