

Book of White Rose

Book One of the Book of Ferial
Lars J. Oldenziel

An Auwritas Book

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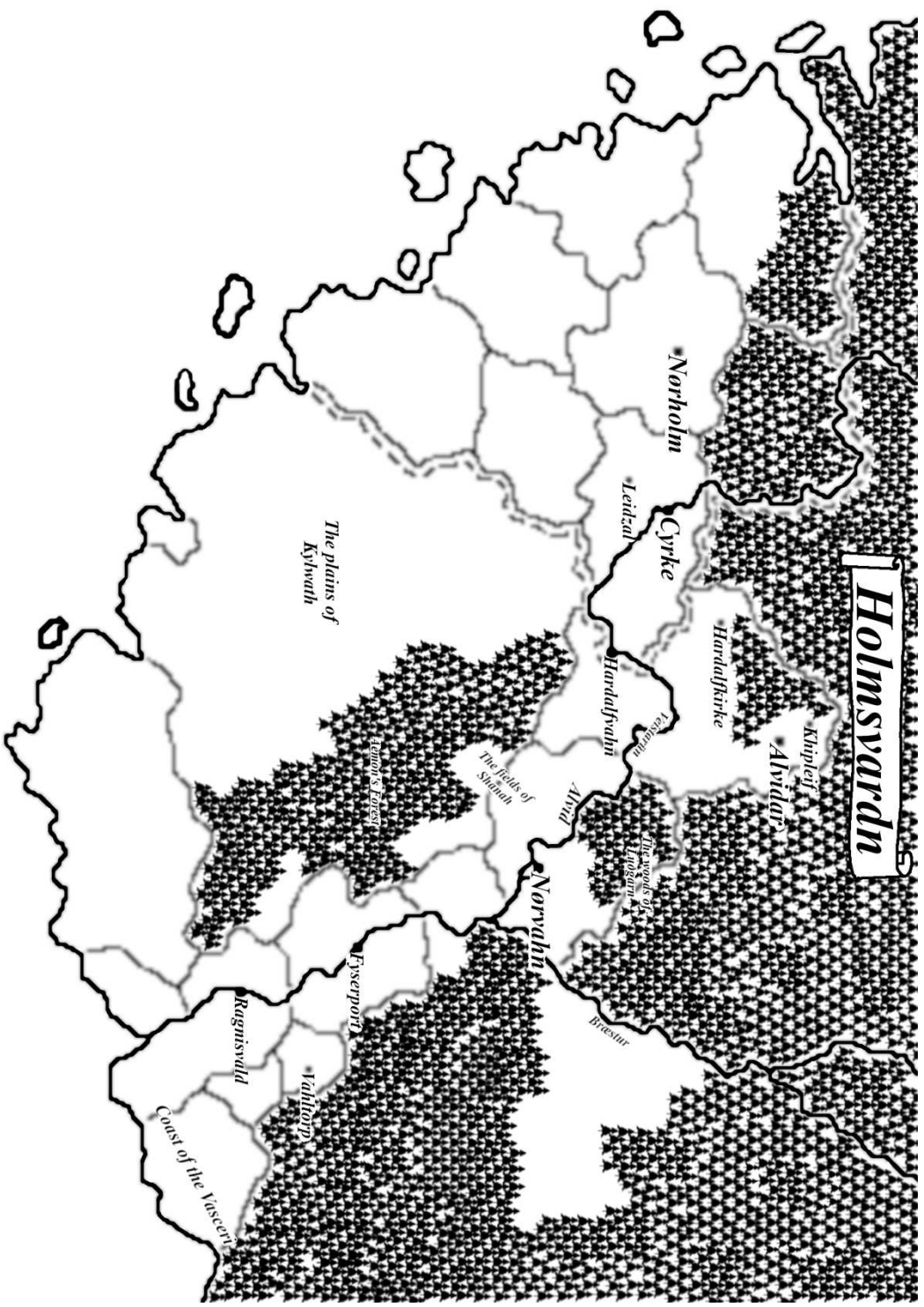
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This novel is dedicated to
Sanna de Vries
for always believing in me.

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Cyrke: The Green Fork

Priest hastened over the cracked paving that made up the thoroughfare of Cyrke. His feet slapped hard upon the stones. His breath was ragged, frozen by the cold streaks of wind on this winter morning. Frost cracks tracked his passing. The soft crunches were muffled by his sodden boots. Priest walked in hurry past the bakers and pastry cooks. He scurried past the taverns and inns.

Everywhere he passed, the patrons stared in his wake. And Priest kept walking on. He'd huddled himself in his cloak, the thick wool covered in odd patches of snow. The cloak's pine green had, in passing years, slowly faded to a green

more resembling basil. Over his cloak, Priest wore a scarf, tightly knotted around his neck to cover for snow.

Priest was hurrying to the castle. His feet flew like birds upon the freezing stone steps. His cloak swept up the snow in his wake. Before Priest now rose a palisade of stone. He stood still, breath condensing the air.

Priest knocked on the door. Once, twice, thrice, and then he waited. The winds toyed with his scarf. And how it played, the scarf danced with such vigour. It flapped and snaked through the air, cutting the chilling, bitter breeze.

* * *

Before the gates of Cyrke Castle stood a figure. He stood slightly bowed, disallowing any wind to tarnish his green tunic. Before the gates stood this figure, wrapped in wool and ice. Even this man's beard held ice. Everything was frozen, cold and snowed.

His rugged form, muscled far beyond his age, seemed frozen solid. His cloak had frozen to the shape of the wind, as had his scarf. His face, beside the beard, also homed tusks of ice, curving from the corners of his mouth to the tip of his chin.

And Fynn further searched this figure. He spied the boots, cracked as ice and the faint outline of a scabbarded sword. He saw the fold where this visitor held his cloak together and the fibula, oxidised copper in the shape of a fork.

Fynn, startled by the discovery, stepped back and fell onto the rear wall of the gatehouse. His breath hastened and his eyes nearly popped from their sockets. His hand trembled as he reached for the rope.

The bell chimed, announcing the arrival of the visitor. Four guards marched to the gatehouse to meet him, to escort him to their lord. Once they got to the gate three of them stood back, hands on their swords and ready to draw. The fourth, Sergeant Rustbone, peered through the latch in the gate.

* * *

Rustbone shut the latch and, with a face as pale as the snow outside, opened the gate. He unlocked the wooden gate with a bronze key and shaking hands. He pulled open the gate and leapt back into a bow.

From beneath his brow, Rustbone spied the Green Fork. He watched in awe as the frozen statue cracked and as from it stepped the Green Fork. The Green Fork stepped through the gateway trailed by a haze of the ice that had been his statue.

* * *

Priest entered the gatehouse and deftly closed the gate. His gaze travelled the room. The murder holes randomly dotted the arched ceiling. To his right he saw the guard's

room. It bore little, just a wooden stool, a mug and a plate. The gatehouse contained five people.

One of them, the one that had first opened the latch, sat or rather laid against the rear wall. His face, deathly pale, bore a smirk despite his obvious lack of consciousness. He must've fainted. Over his chest hung a rope that had supposedly chimed the bell.

The next person, a guard with more years passed than he was facing, stood by the gate. He was bowing.

'Fool', scoffed Priest.

The guard had lowered his guard and thus forsaken his duties. The lord would hear about this. Other than that all signs pointed at him being in command. The silver double slash sewn onto his left sleeve signified him as a sergeant, although Priest suspected the rank to have been earned by mere length of service rather than actual experience. After all, even hiding his face as he was, the pallor was apparent from miles away. Priest suspected that it was all the sergeant could do not to faint.

The remaining three stood facing him, hands nervously clawing the hilts of their swords. Priest could almost taste their fear. Their faces looked pathetic, strained in a blend of determination, cowardice and wavering loyalty. The longer Priest waited, the more their composure betrayed their true feelings.

It took about three minutes. Three minutes before the air stank of leaking urine. Priest pinched close his nose and

marched past the poor souls. He carefully chose his path around the puddles. This was bad form, Priest would report this too to the lord.

Priest took to the door nestled to the left of the rear wall of the gatehouse. He opened it, his knuckles slightly cracking as they thawed. The muscles of his forearm tensed at the weight of the seven-foot-tall door of solid oak. Priest opened the door and stepped back into the snow.

* * *

Rustbone saw the Green Fork leave through the back end door of the gatehouse. He took one step and then another as if uncertain of his footing. After some five shuffles, Rustbone walked again. He hastily pursued the Green Fork, unfortunately forgetting the puddles on the floor. The rank urine permeated the soles of his boots and soaked into his socks.

Rustbone looked down at his feet with utter distaste. The air was thick with the putrid stench and with every breath his lungs drank deep. This was utterly disgusting. His leggings saw tendrils of piss snaking up his legs. He could feel the warm sap oozing slowly through his clothes.

He looked up at his soldiers. He despised these men. At least in the army, or rather, on the battlefield, men had decency. In the army they would have discipline and training.

Here, cowering behind these walls, all they did was eat and drink themselves to their heart's content.

Back in the field, these men would've had to clean their own mess. They would've been smacked across the face with a mailed fist. And after they'd be done cleaning they would've received a good old beating. Maybe that would put some spirit into these men.

But here in this castle, Rustbone was virtually powerless. And so he marched on, leaving his soldiers to their mess, chasing after the Green Fork, contemplating his past.

For Rustbone the past was like a stick, a bone to gnaw on for hours, like a dog. And he'd think of every event and how it'd eventually led him to this quaint city. He marched through the snow, heavy boots as lodestones to his feet. His thoughts whirled around him as did the winter storm.

Rustbone reckoned he'd have been captain by now, had he stayed in the army. Of course marines rarely ever became captains. After all, most captains were the second or third sons of noble lords. That's why he'd left. He hadn't deserted, not by any of the definitions at the time. Rustbone had served his time, collected his gear and left. What more did they expect?

Apparently, these days you'd have to return your gear, you know, for reforging or whatever idiocy they'd come up with now. It seemed an utter waste. After all, what were the soldiers going to do after the wars? The only things they knew were killing and surviving. Some of them might've kept a

family hidden away somewhere but most of them were barely sixteen summers old.

By the time Rustbone had reached the crest of the hill, upon which stood Cyrke Castle, overlooking the city, he'd concluded that leaving the army had been for the best. His knees ached and his hips screeched. His breath was ragged, frayed in tiny gasps. His back throbbed, the light armor was starting to weigh. His hands trembled slightly.

He was getting old and he knew it. And to be fair to those soldiers still standing in the gatehouse, Rustbone hadn't been so dauntless himself. He'd felt the colour leave his face. Time was doing a number on him and he didn't like it.

* * *

He entered the damp hall. The noise seemed to hit him as a wall. The candles sputtered as they struggled to light the room. Wax sprayed out in vivid bursts. These sputtering pipes lined the walls and stood as volcanoes upon the ends of the wooden tables. The flames flickered as the eyes of a wild beast. They cast a dim fade in the smoky haze. The little warmth they held was captured by the hands of the cold, a hearth was held within the rear wall but the heat dispersed to solely the first half of the hall.

The walls, covered in exquisite tapestries, were whitewashed in plaster. They did, however, seem in dire need of reparation. In the corners of the hall several molds blotched

the walls. Trails of seepage tracked rifts in the plaster. The plaster rounding the hearth was cracked and split. The cracks reverberated as borders along the off-white of the walls. All these deformations were lazily covered by the tapestries.

Knights and ladies sat upon the wooden benches that lined the tables. Their vibrant cloths, dulled and faded by the shimmering candlelight, blotched the dark in reds, greens and pastel yellows. The chatter drifted in waves to Priest's ears. It strangled the calm from his head. Priest winced and scurried to the raised dais situated left of the hearth. On his way to the dais, whereupon sat the lord and his family, Priest weaved past several tending servants and jesters.

Priest arrived at the dais unscathed by the messy eating and heavy drinking of the knights gathered in the hall. He flung the left side of his cloak over his shoulder and straightened his tunic. In the gold featuring, dark leather glove of his left hand he held a piece of parchment. It was yellow, discolored as much by the days of travelling as by the lighting of the hall, and sealed by a green wax seal bearing a fork.

Priest introduced himself to the lord, 'Good evening my lord. My name is Jirunath Draeqhon, High Mage in the Order of the Green Fork. You might, however, know me by other names. After all knights and the like are want to call me Jirunath Swordhand or Priest.'

And Priest continued, 'I have come here at the behest of my superior, Lord-Commander Wylas, to deliver a message upon which are detailed the terms of our contract. The lord-

commander has further instructed me to supervise the redrafting and sealing of the aforesaid contract. I will now entrust this parchment to your care and be on my way to recover my lost energy in one of the rooms soon to be kindly appointed by one of your tending servants.'

As Priest turned around and started planning out his path across the hall, the lord's wife bent over and softly whispered in her husband's ear. Priest was about to step off the dais and commence his journey through the thick mess of tables and benches when Herthew's voice rang through the hall.

'How, Priest, do I know you represent your company's interest? How do I know you are not a fraudster?', he asked.

'Well, Lord Herthew Ilgoth, Lord of Cyrke Castle, because in a fortnight your city will be surrounded by an army thrice the size of the Imperial Reserves. This army will stand at your command and will serve you till your stated goal has been achieved. The Order of the Green Fork has never broken a contract, not once in their 173 years of existence.'

'Alright, Priest, but what shows me that you are a Green Fork and not some lowly imposter?'

'Well, my lord, you might want to ask your guards in the gatehouse or the one that followed me up the hill. I assume they would rather I not tell the tale of their humility so I will leave them to tell you themselves. It would however be my sound advice, as military commander of average competence,

that you fire them for their misdeeds. Although I suppose their entire purpose is intimidation rather than actual violence.'

And with that Priest gathered his cloak around himself once more and signed to one of the tending servants. He strode through the hall, lightly brushing the shoulders of the gathered knights, trailed by a measly scrap of meat. He opened another door now, one leading supposedly to the sleeping chambers of the knights and their men at arms.

He stepped into a storage room. It was sparsely populated with small collections of salted meats and grains. The scent of herbs and spices, pungent, filled his nose. It started to itch. The measly scrap of meat that had trailed him through the hall now stuttered.

'Sir, the sleeping chambers would be this way.'

'Very well, kind voice, please do lead on', Priest replied.

Priest followed the scrap of meat through the hall and out into the courtyard. He walked down the hill, his nose still terribly itchy from the spices. At the bottom of the hill, next to the gatehouse, apparently stood a barracks. It didn't look all too comfortable but Priest supposed it was better than the cold. He stepped inside, thanked the measly scrap of meat who was apparently one of the tending servants and went on his way to find a room.

Eventually, Priest found a room. On the second floor, hugged against the curtain wall of Cyrke Castle, was a quaint little room. In it stood a bed and two chairs. A hearth was situated in the curtain wall but due to its rather dubious

appearance Priest opted not to light the fire. He undressed and stepped into bed. He slept within a minute.

* * *

Fynn came to in the infirmary. His head throbbed and the room spun before his eyes. A thick paste churned in the pit of his stomach and his throat burned. He was parched. Fynn tried moving his hand and saw it flop off the bed and onto the ground. Everything, every muscle, was tired. But his hand had pulled him onto his side and Fynn stared down at his hand, palm up and fingers curled.

The boots that Fynn had seen now shuffled. Water sloshed in a wooden cup. Fynn lifted his neck at that familiar sound and let the water slip past his lips. The throbbing slowly faded and the thirst quenched. A deep, rough voice pounded his brains, or so it felt to Fynn.

'Fynn, Fynn. Can you hear me?', it asked.

'Well, if you could just quiet it down a little I'd be quite the happier. There surely is no reason to split my head open is there?'

'My apologies Fynn but I am whispering.'

'Oh ok well get on then with what you need. After all, as you can probably see, I am not in the mood for much at the moment.'

'Yes indeed. So I suppose I should move on and get back to you later?'

'I suppose indeed that would be desirable, if it please', Fynn remarked mockingly.

Fynn rolled back onto his back and fell into a tiresome ponder. He thought about the Green Fork. Had he really been a Green Fork? Had there really been a Green Fork in Cyrke Castle? And why, pray, would there be a Green Fork here in Cyrke?

After all, who needed the Order of Green Fork? Or more importantly who needed the Order and could bring up enough gold? Fynn only knew one person in Cyrke who was capable of bringing up such funds. And as far as Fynn knew Lord Ilgoth was neither embroiled in war nor did he have the ambition to start one.

Fynn's mind started to wander further and further down this pit. His head felt dizzy again and his eyelids felt as lead, impossible to open. His light snores spread through the infirmary.

Ragnisvald: The Departure

The woods of Ragnisvald smelled crisp this time of year. Winter's thaw invited upon the land a fresh air. In the snowmelt little snowdrops grew, spreading their little white heads. Life was waking from its slumber. Some sparrows chirped in the morning.

All in all, the day was perfect. The sun broke through the light clouds and Jurys was happy. Ice shards broke under thick moccasins in muffled cracks. Time itself seemed restored. No more endless hours wasted by the hearth.

It was time to sail again. Jurys and his crew had spent the last few days preparing the Grey Snake for the coming season. They'd honed their weapons, repainted their shields. The sails were stitched back together.

Jurys was to go east, up the river Alvid. To the heartland of Holmsvardn. He would commandeer the Grey Snake, his longship, through the lakes and marshes of Veistarün.

Jurys walked on, to the white ash. The tree stood deep in the forest. It was a big tree, branches spreading wide and roots feeding off the forest. At its base stood a small stone altar. An antlered skull hung upon the trunk, ribbons adorning the antlers. To either side of the tree stood a statue of a naked woman.

Jurys knelt before the altar, his head bowed. He listened to the leaves as they rustled in the wind.

And Jurys spoke, 'San Ras, Ail'eh, hear me. Hear my prayer. Would you give blessing for the Grey Snake? Would you bless me and my crew?'

He paused, uncertain of what to say. He decided against speaking. Words were without meaning when they took so long. Instead he took out his short seax and slit open the bottom of his palm.

Jurys scowled away the pain and brought his hand over the altar. The moss drank deeply from his blood, coloring ever more red. He let several drops of blood fall before ending the ritual.

'Arregh et Salam, thank you and best regards.'

* * *

Hjandr watched the Grey Snake slide into the water. It had laid upon the river bank for nearly four moons now. He was glad the boat kept. The Grey Snake was a beauty. The carvings had been laid in by his father. And he, Hjandr, had kept them in prime condition ever since he'd gotten the ship.

Now it was Jurys' turn. Hjandr was too old for the lakes and seas. His legs ached, simply from standing here for a bell and a half. The winter had done him in good. He now belonged to the elders. He belonged to the old sods and weary bastards that did nothing other than bicker over this and that.

Hjandr watched as his son set out on the Alvid. Oh, how he missed the bends and the creeks already. He wished he could hop back on, back on his old ship, his father's ship. But he'd be nothing but a burden. Old fools don't mix well with the naivety of youth. Hard was the truth in this village of his.

Hjandr felt Gutthilde step to his side. Her warmth was comforting. At least he still had her, his love, his livelihood. She leaned her head on his shoulder and whispered.

'Look at him, isn't he beautiful? Doesn't he look happy?'

Hjandr grunted his reply.

'Oh, how they've grown. It seems but days ago that Jurys would chase after you, wooden sword clutched in his tiny hands. Yshilde, the sweet child, is now married and with child'

Hjandr simply grunted again.

'And of course', Gutthilde said, 'we mustn't forget Øddfrys. He now commandeers Snow Fang, forty oarsmen follow his word.'

'The braggart. You know all Øddfrys did, he did to show the world he was the best. If you ask me, he's the shame of this family.'

'Oh, you silly bugger. You don't mean that. He's your son; you have to be proud of what he did.'

'Darling, I never said I wasn't proud. I am. Øddfrys has done well for himself. But that's not our family. We aren't here to prove we're the best. We, we Yrhusson, are perfectly content where we are.'

'You ask too much of your son,' Gutthilde replied.

And with that she hooked her arm in his and started walking back to the longhouse. He wondered if he should offer resistance. No, he decided, there was no use. She'd convince him anyway. She always did.

* * *

Fygar Kanusson sat on the brow of the longship. The oaken keel of the Grey Snake wedging itself further into the strand as waves swept along the sides of the ship. Fygar's gaze swept over the sand and into the small patch of grass behind it. Aranulf, Fynn and Vigørr were still packing their tents.

The cook fire still smoked, a stark contrast to the snow patched pine trees in the wood covering most of the north shore of this river. Further up the river, Fygar had seen clusters of smoke blow in the wind. Villages were many along the Alvid. Its bays and side streams made it perfect for settlement.

Fygar was on watch. He'd spent last night sleeping aboard, taking over the watch an hour before sunrise. He'd been sitting here for the past half-hour, his feet swinging over the snake's head of the ship.

Fygar's feet yearned ever for the deck. They yearned for waves. They yearned for the river. Fygar himself was just as restless. He needed the spray of water on his face. He needed the rush of the wind in his hair. He needed the wood of the oars to cut into his skin. The beat; splash, submerge, pull, splash, emerge, bring forward, repeat. Fygar needed simplicity. Not for any particular reason, he just needed it.

And so he sat, waiting for Aranulf to pack his tent. The others were done, most of them had been the past fifteen minutes. They now manned five of the six rowing benches of the longship. Their shields rested under the mast, covered up by the sail. Most of them sat ready to row, oars as bars laying over their legs. Vigørr and Ragnus sat upon the ends of their benches, ready to get up and help push the Gray Snake back into open water.

Fygar saw Aranulf picking up his pack and jumped off the prow.