

The last White Witch

A Novel by Nalle Windahl (aka Son of Sound)

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Last White Witch



Before you begin reading this novel.

I am a fan of fantasy novels. Most fantasy novels I read are written in, or translated to, English. So for the fantasy genre, English feels like a natural choice to write in, even if I myself is from Sweden and have Swedish as my native language.

I point this out to you, before you start to read what I have written, in hopes that any spelling- or grammar-mistakes or any other language messup, will be forgiven.

I am not publishing this as an ordinary book, yet anyway. I write this as a free to read and share novel. Anyone that thinks this novel is worth paying for are welcome to donate a small amount, like a dollar or two, to my paypal account to show your appreciation. You find the donation button on my webpage <http://www.sonofsound.se>. This webpage is mainly a platform for my music, so stay a while and enjoy that too.

But no worries, should you not be interested to donate, please enjoy the story anyway!

Should you for any reason want to provide feedback to me, or a word of appreciation or even send a fan mail. Please use the contact link on my above mentioned webpage!

It is always great to get feedback. That is the only way to grow and develop as a person and writer. I promise that I read everything, but unfortunately, I can not promise I can reply to everything.

One last thing I would ask of you, if I may. Should this novell be to your liking, please share this with friends and family or on forums on the internet. Help me spread the word regarding this fabel and let people know you like it.

Now enough of this! Off to the story! Enjoy!

******Footnote to this document******

**This is the writer's draft edition!
Situations, details and characters
(basically everything)
may change from this draft compared
to the final release!**

**You read it at your own discretion,
there may be inconsistencies and spoilers.**

******End of footnote******

Hint: Check out the Legend that you find under the extra material session on the webpage for this novel @ [sonofsound.se](http://www.sonofsound.se).

Chapter one.

Let's challenge your imagination.

What if you were standing on a small path in a forest near the ocean. What if a heavy mist conceals the surrounding environment. The soft light from the dawn can almost not penetrate the mist, giving what could be a milky, white and soft mist a rather cold and grey appearance.

Adding the morning cold from a typical autumn day by the ocean, makes all the tiny hairs on your body standing on edge. The chilly morning breeze runs straight through your clothes.

Your eyes are trying to adapt to the environment, but it is just too hard to do, the mist keeps moving and changing, and it is not enough light to separate the mist from actual things. Trees, the path itself, rocks, branches, bushes, everything is molded together to one unity.

Since your vision is clouded by the mist you are solely dependant on your ears. But every single sound you hear around you are hard to identify.

Is it a huge wolf or bear sneaking in the forest, looking for breakfast, or is it any kind of monster, a vampire that has an extended hunting night due to the heavy mist. An undead or a werewolf? Or could it just be cute and tiny birds jumping around on the ground making all these little noises? Your wild imagination makes your pulse rise high, so high that you can almost hear each heartbeat. Your chest is struggling heavily to fill your lungs with the cool and damp morning air.

All your senses are impaired. Your imagination has triggered every warning signal in your entire body. You want to run, as fast as you can down the path to reach the harbour camp and safety.

Or turn back to the village. Either way as fast as you can to get out of where you are at the moment. Alone. In the forest. On the unmanned path between the village and the harbour camp. No help nearby, no rescue. Just you. And whatever is out there in the mist with you.

Lucky for you that it is not you on that path, this very moment. Unfortunately Dee is not that lucky, because she is the one standing on the path this very moment. On the edge of panicking, which she knows is the worst thing she could do right now. If she keeps her calm, she might be able to sneak her way to the harbour camp undetected. Any being out here this morning will struggle with the mist. In a way the mist is her best friend right now. It will partly cover her smell. Both the smell of her flesh that attracts animals, werewolves and the undead, and the smell of her blood that attracts the vampires.

Dee tried not to think of any of the thousand horrible things she could meet out here. She focused on Rick. If she was lucky, today would be the day when his ship returned from the long voyage. She hoped of all her heart that today would be the day, and that he would be on the ship.

She hadn't seen her brother in over a year, since he was chosen for that horrible mission by the elders.

She kept her focus. Tried to calm her breathing. Slowly started to move again along the path, trying not to make a single sound. Or at least, as little noise as humanly possible when moving along a narrow path in the middle of the forest that is rarely used.

With all senses tense and on edge she took one small step, then another, without making a single noise. All surrounding sounds kept to their pace and did not seem disturbed by her movement. Then suddenly, after ten steps or so, a branch cracked under her foot. After that, total silence. She could not tell if it was the raising panic dulling her senses, or if the forest in fact had gone silent. Completely silent. Did she dare to stand still? Or did she dare not to stand still? From nowhere she heard a faint whisper, so thin she could barely hear it.

“This is my mist. I wish you no harm. Go! I will protect you!”

She could not see who ever was talking to her, she dared not reply. She started to move forward again, slowly, still not able to hear a thing from the surroundings. There was something supernatural about this. Who was it that whispered through the mist? It must be someone with great power. Good or evil? Her thoughts started to spin.

“One day I might call upon your help, but not now. Go my child! Hurry!”

Who ever whispered to her was obviously close, had some kind of power and could protect her from the danger in the forest. From the urgency in the voice the danger could be close. That could explain why she did not hear anything. Anyone close to her would also experience the same. She started to run. Then again. Could she be running into a trap? How could she know that whoever was responsible for the mist had good intentions towards her? The world here outside the cities are cold and hard, full of evil. The villages are fairly safe. Even the various camps, like the harbour camp. But outside of that, especially at night, not a very friendly place. Especially not if you like your life and have planned to stay alive a bit longer.

Being out here was insane, Dee knew that, and by defying her father like this would have painful consequences, she knew that as well. But if there was the slightest chance that Rick was on that ship, she just had to be there when it arrived. She ran as fast as she could.

A million thoughts rushed through her head. Who had whispered in the mist? Who was powerful enough to create it? The wizards were almost extinct. And as far as she knew the few who survived the great war was hiding far south, way past the coldblooded. What service could she possibly provide to someone with powers like this? Maybe it was brilliant hunting maneuver by one of vampires of the old? But could they create the illusion of a whisper with no apparent source?

“Hurry Diane, I can not hold them much longer! You are getting too far away! Soon you will start to hear small sounds again, then I can protect you no longer.”

No she was in great trouble! Whoever it was knew her name! She did not know of anyone capable of doing that! What power was that?

But the voice was right. She started to hear tiny noises again. It started with her pounding heart. Her heavy breathing. Than something beside her. She kept running on the path without knowing where on the path she was. If it had been daylight and no mist, she would have recognised herself, but now. No idea. How far was it to the harbour camp? Had she passed the small bridge yet? No, she did not think so, or had she? Hard to say. If she had passed the bridge she had about a twenty minute walk to reach the outskirts of the harbour camp. How long would that take to run? She could hear more now, she started to hear her steps on the path as she was struggling forward. For how long could she keep running? Her heart was already pounding hard

in her chest, and her breathing was already fast and heavy. Could she make it? What was that? It sounded like a werewolf howl, pretty close. There were more sounds as well. And was she imagining, or was the mist getting thinner? Yes, it was getting thinner, she could see more of the trees around the path now. She kept running, following the path left and right, up and down. Had she taken a wrong turn somewhere? Where is that bridge? It felt like she had been out a lot longer than an hour. Normally she would have arrived at the harbour camp by that time. This mist had slowed her down, no doubt, but had she already passed the bridge? There was the howling again. She stopped. She could see about five feet ahead now. All sounds had turned normal again, she could hear everything around her. Even see small movements in a bush here and there. Probably just the wind. Or maybe a small animal. She hoped anyway. She started to move slow again, ears focused on every single sound, mostly scanning for the howl. It was hard to move slow again, but she dared not keep running and find herself running in to the arms of a hostile creature. Finally, the bridge! She was on the right path! But still, a long way to go. About twenty minute walk from safety. That would be a lot longer in this mist. Maybe an hour longer with this pace. There was that howl again, very close this time. Chills went down her spine. She almost stopped, only to move very, very slow. Then, a sudden shift in the mist, and a silhouette of the huge werewolf, standing with it's back towards her. An equally sudden shift in the mist and the silhouette was gone. She froze. Unfortunately the werewolf would not disappear that easily.

Chapter two.

The ship rolled from side to side, this storm hit them from nowhere. Even if it was not that rough it affected them all. Probably because they were so close to home. It was far from the worst storm they have seen for the past year, compared to what they had been through, this was almost a nice little Sunday Trip with the family, but most other people would either shout their prayers to or curse the creator by now.

The captain had order minimal staff on deck due to the storm, so most of the crew remained under deck in their bunks, listening to all the quirks and quarks of the ship, bending to the oceans everchanging will.

There were fortyeight of them as the Glory left port over a year ago. Only twentyseven of the original crew members remained. Along the way they had gained thirteen new members, of which they already had lost four, so all in all, it was a crew of thirtysix souls that brought the Glory home. The cargo they carried could not be counted in gold or silver, nor in man hours. So a price of twentyfive lives was a small price to pay. For all that had survived that is. For the twentyfive lost souls and their families the cargo was of little comfort.

Many wives, fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters would soon be told that their loved ones would not return.

Yesterday the captain held a short speech, stating that this would be the final day offshore, and that they would return to port either late today or tomorrow at the latest.

That was before the storm hit.

The Hawkman on duty dared only to send out his hawk once during the storm and it seemed the storm had made them drift off course considerably, not to mention that their goal was straight into the eye of the wind. No matter how hard the sailors worked those sails they could never take the Glory straight into the eye of the wind, they would always deviate from course. It was only natural that the steersman would choose to drift offshore rather than risking collide with underwater rocks near the coastline and it would be a terrible thing to lose both ship and cargo when the journey almost had reached its end.

They had already survived many storms, some of them far worse than this, and also a good share of seamonsters and attacks both from pirates and coldbloods.

The Hawkman on duty glazed out in the horrid weather front. No end in sight. He dared not send his hawk on scouting mission under these terrible conditions, yet the ship was in great need of guidance. This journey had already costed him three hawks, and only two remained. Granted, this was a risk all Hawksman took when they signed aboard a ship, but he was not to keen to lose another one, not when they were so close to home.

The steersman called to him over the hard wind, in desperate need of guidance. Well, leave it in the hands of the creator, off with the hawk.

The hawk sprung from the Glory like an arrow straight up to the sky. It took only seconds for the hawkman too loose it out of sight. Like always he felt a certain pride. His hawks was among the fastest and strongest. They came from a long line of hawks bred and trained by his family.

Now all he could do was wait. There was great risk in this, the biggest was for the hawk to lose track of the ship while scouting in all directions to see what lays ahead. Not only was the hawk moving, the ship was also moving and could easily be lost between the clouds and big waves. But he was confident that the hawk would return with status in a short while. He knew that the steersman was depending on him in storms and on cloudy days when they were cut of from the sun, moons and the stars. He eagerly waited the return of his hawk.

About five more minutes passed before he heard the familiare shriek from his hawk. It had made it! He held out his hand to greet it and to give it a place to land.

He saw the steersman looking in his direction, eagerly waiting for word of status.

He began his debrief of the hawk as usual. First of was land sighting. The hawk cried and shook his head once. No land to the north. Repeated the same for south. And east. But for west the hawk nodded. Ok.

“Land due west!” he yelled to the steersman though the hard wind.

Distance? Five cries with wings to it's side.

“Five short distances.” he continued.

Next was hostile movements. The hawk cried and nodded it's head for all directions.

“Hostiles in all directions” he yelled, and the steersman immediately sounded the alarm.

This was a bad situation, so close to land and hostile movements in all directions. Storm was

known to make seamonsters surface, but it was very unusual with seamonsters in these waters. He did not envy the decision the steersman had to take now.

It was clear that they needed to steer off from shore to avoid stranding the ship or risk damaging it on underwater cliffs. But with seamonsters in all directions they risked being detected and attacked.

The hawkman gave the hawk its reward, a shiny silverfish. They just loved them and could not get enough of them.

All crew on shift had now taken their stations on deck. All was armed and ready to fight.

The sailmen were on station awaiting any orders from the steersman. The crew was very disciplined and drilled to perfection. The captain was very demanding but very generous when it came to sharing the prize money.

Suddenly there was an alarm signal coming from the rear left men, and they men arming the arrows turned their towers to meet the threat.

Chapter three.

Even if she just got a glimpse of the werewolf and it was standing with his back towards her, she knew that it could smell her presence. This was it. The end of her life. In any second she would be torn into pieces. If she was lucky she would be killed by the first attack, if not they would probably hear her scream of pain and agony all the way down to the harbour camp.

She braced herself, expecting the attack any moment now. There was no way she could escape this. No one could outrun a werewolf at close range. She had no weapons of any kind, no security detail and no backup. She was alone. A howl cut through the mist, followed by a growl and heavy movement. She could hear the beasts feet scratch the surface of the path, breaking several branches with each step.

Out of nowhere there came a howl to the left of her, and then another from the right and a little behind her. There were three of them!

Even if thoughts appear in microseconds and are processed quickly by the brain instantly, I doubt that anyone has had so many thoughts rushing through the mind as Dee had in that moment.

The strangest thing of it all, she reflected on later, is that among all the million thoughts that rushed through her head at that moment, the most intense was the thought on how to escape. What direction was the best to try and run for it.

When there was only one, the most intense was that she was going to die and imagining the many ways it could happen. But with three monsters so close, the escape was the strongest. Even if her body froze, and the blood in her veins along with it, and every single hair on her body, no matter how tiny or small, was standing straight out and her skin was covered with goosebumps everywhere, even then her brain was struggling to send signals to every muscle in her body to move, to run, to put up a fight. The only thing in her conscious mind was to survive. Even if there are zero stories of any human surviving a meeting with more than one werewolf,

she was determined to survive a meeting with three at close range.

The mist was still thick and concealed all the werewolves. They still howled. And even if each second lasted longer than most days, she could still register them, wondering why they did not attack. The more seconds that passed, the more she realised that the howls were not in aggression, rather of agony.

She could hear movements from all three fronts and did still not dare to move.

As time passed she had to choke a bubble of laughter, she realised that she hadn't been breathing for a very long time, and for some reason it seemed fun at the moment.

Several minutes passed, or lifetimes as Dee felt it, and then the mist started to clear.

She found herself trapped between the three werewolves, all rising twice as high as herself.

They were standing in a triangle with their backs towards each other, and almost in the middle of them was Dee. Seconds later she grasped why they were standing like this. In front of each monster stood five or six Vampires. All of them with silver armour plates covering almost the entire body. Only their feet, hands and face was uncovered by silver. Their armour was so beautifully crafted that they had to be crafted by the dwarf masters in the old mountain. Dee acted instantly and started to run. She could see in the corner of her eye that one of the Vampire hunters changed his focus from the beast to her, but his commander screamed something in Vampirski. Should she know Vampirski she would have understood the commanders order to keep focus on the mark. But the order came just a split second too late and the beast attacked the hunting party in front of it. At the same time the other two attacked as well.

As Dee fled in panic straight into the forest, leaving the fighting parties behind her the mist got thicker again. She could barely see where she was going but kept on moving forward as fast as she could, trying to get as far away from all the horrible creatures behind her.

Had she met either one of them, or at least only one kind of them, she would have been dead by now. Fortunate for her that they were focusing on each other.

When thinking back, she has no idea how long she was running in the mist, or in what direction she ran. Distance, time and direction was consumed by the mist. What she does remember was the fall. All of a sudden the ground disappeared beneath her feet. She fell, without bouncing into anything on the way down, then an equally sudden stop and she got cold and wet. Not just cold, but almost numb. Then everything faded away.

Chapter four.

Close behind them, the crew of the Glory saw one of the largest sea monster they had seen on their entire journey. It was a new kind they hadn't encountered before, but they recognised it's type from descriptions of other seamen.

A large whaleish fish with four long arms around the face, and a wide mouth filled with teeth. It swam fast towards them, getting ready to ram them from behind, but as it came closer, the arrowmen fired their arrows with great precision, forcing the monster to dive. As soon as it had

submerged, the alarm came from the front of the ship. Another monster was about to attack from the front. It was of a kind they had seen before. A great squid with its tentacles ready to grab the ship. The arrowmen hurried to rotate their towers and aimed at the new threat and at the same time the entire ship made a sudden lurch to the left, almost pushing the rail below water. That must have been the first monster that attacked from beneath.

Now the captain joined on deck. Not hesitating once to give order to the towers to divide their attention on both monsters. He'd also woken the men of duty to be part in the battle and ordered one of them to take scout, something that we all knew was risky in the storm, which was why it was unmanned at the moment.

The Glory took another heavy lurch, still to the left, as if the monster knew what it was doing and calculated its attack to get the ship to take in water from one side. But then the attack came from right and at the same time the giant squid had almost reached the ship and had gotten its first wave of arrows. The arrowmen quickly reloaded and was ready for a second round towards it, but now it seemed that the two monsters had seen each other and started to battle over the ship. This was a terrible situation, two big sea monsters to the right of the ship, land somewhere close to the left and a raging storm all over the place.

The captain ordered the arrowmen to stand down and save arrows for further encounters, but keep a high alert since the two monsters was fighting so close. At any sign of the battle coming closer, they should fire all they got to try and force the monsters away from the ship.

The scout shouted from the top of the mast, barely hearable.

“Land due left, two short distances.”

That mean that they had drifted three short distances in a very short while, partly due to the attacks of the sea monster, but even so, very close to the shore with no possibility to steer out to open water again. At least not at the moment.

Captain and the steersman talked about turning the ship around, but it was dangerous to turn either way in this storm not taking the land nor sea monsters into account.

“Hawkman, send the hawk to scout for hostiles, I want numbers and directions”, the captain shouted and continued to the scout in the top of the mast:

“Scout, let me know of any incoming hostiles, and keep continues updates on land due west!”

Both the Hawkman and the Scout confirmed their orders.

The Hawksman released his hawk, and it flew straight as an arrow up in the sky, equally fast as the last time, only never to return to the Glory again.

“Incoming hostile due left!” shouted the Scout and the captain ordered the towers to split focus, two remained on the two fighting monsters and two towers facing the new threat.

“Incoming hostile due aft!” The captain was just about to give a new set of orders when the Scout continued:

“Two incoming hostiles due aft, one incoming due left and another one due left! Land due left, one short distance.”

The crew all gasped. Six sea monsters on one location, even if it was wise to assume that they would engage each other in battle, it was rare to see two at one time, now they were surrounded by six! And they were drifting very close to shore with no possibility to steer out to open water again.

The entire situation was a nightmare.

“Anchors, get down below and secure the cargo!” the captain ordered and both anchors left their position at once, leaving the sailors unanchored.

The arrowmen fired round after round, all concentrating on the threat closest to them. It looked like they kept the monsters at bay, but a sudden hit to the right of the ship made everybody stumble and with a terrifying scream the Scout fell off the ship into the raging water and disappeared.

Then there was another bump, and yet another, now they could all see the coastline, covered in razor sharp graphite cliffs, less than two hundred feet away. They all knew that underwater cliffs were very common outside of graphite mountains.

Then their attention got called again, a great sea snake came directly from right and opened its wide mouth.

Chapter five.

When Dee opened her eyes she was disoriented. Had no idea where she was. She could not feel her body at first. All she could see was the treetops and the blue sky high above. When she slowly turned her head from side to side, she saw the steep mountain sides on each side of her. It took a while before her mind could process all the things she just experienced. As far as she knew no one had survived an encounter with more than one werewolf nor with a more than a couple of vampires. And from what she could recall from all the stories and rumours from travellers and traders, she had never heard of a clash between the two clans.

As her head and brain slowly processed everything she started to feel her body again. First she felt cold, really cold and she shivered all the way into her bones, if that is even possible. Then she felt wet, cold and wet. As she rose her head she could suddenly hear again. She had landed in water, slow running water, not very deep, face up. Face up. Escaped death at least twice she thought to herself as she tried to move her stiff body. It was a struggle to rise, but soon she was sitting in the water and got a good look around her. She had fallen into a ravine, probably created by this tiny waterflow, eroding the mountain through time, eating its way down. Almost no vegetation had made its way down here, could be due to lack of sunlight. It wasn't dark, but there was no direct sunlight coming down, and it would not be able to do so, unless the sun were standing straight above the ravine. And that would not occur more than a short while each day. She looked up. The steep mountainside was at least 50 feet from the edge to the bottom. She was lucky to have survived that fall, so make that at least three times she had cheated death by now. She did not feel any pain in her body, only stiff and cold. She struggled a bit to get on her knees and then stood up, stretching her limbs as best as she could.

She could not hear anything but the pouring of the water. She looked back to where the water came from. A long way back, in an almost straight line, no end in sight. She turned the other way. Equally long and straight. But she figured, if the water is going somewhere, it is probably heading for the ocean, and so was she. So if she couldn't climb up here, she might be able to find another way closer to the ocean. Then she started to walk along the creek.

Every inch of her body was aching, more and more for each step it seemed. She was stiff and sore all over, and if anyone had seen her, they would either pity her or laugh at her.

Infact, there was one watching. And following. Someone who did not pity her, and did not laugh. The eyes that had captured her followed her on a distance, making sure not to be revealed.

As Dee walked on in this endless eroded corridor, she thought about many things. Both the nature of the creek, who long had it taken the water to cut out a ravine like this, and how was it even possible? Where did the water come from and was she right in her assumption that the water was leading to the ocean?

She also thought about fear. It had paralyzed her, made her blood freeze, and yet, her mind had been quite calm. It was as if the fear and the entire situation had sharpened her mind, at least in that moment. She could see details like never before, even if the mist had clouded everything, she could almost recall every hair on the body of the beasts, their movement to detail and all the little sounds they were making. Odd. Or was it just her imagination that filled in the blanks and compensated for the failure of all her senses.

Since the view did not change no matter how many steps she was taking, she kind of drifted away in her own thoughts at first, and as the number of steps grew, she moved on autopilot and the steady stream of thoughts had faded to a still nothingness.

The eyes that followed her did not miss a single step. Even if the daylight had faded and the darkness would embrace the ravine entirely any minute now, the eyes did not get tired of watching. Waiting.

When Dee came back to reality, it was completely dark around her. She did not know how long she had been walking in the dark, only that it was dark. Dark and cold. She looked up towards the sky, but either it was cloudy or the light from the stars was too weak to reach down this ravine. She suddenly felt tired. She had not eaten anything since this morning, and it had been an eventful day, even if she had walked along the creek for the most part of the day, with no end in sight. She sat down, feeling a bit sorry for her self. Wondered if her dad missed her, if he was worried. She wondered if Rick had returned only to find his sister missing. What a disaster. She should have listened to her father. He was very clear when they discussed the matter at the breakfast table, no leaving the village in this mist. But she did not listen. As always. Why, oh why, did she have to be so stubborn?

They eyes kept close watch over the human. Waited patiently. Soon.

Dee leaned toward the mountain wall. Even if it was a bit cold, it was better to lean towards the wall than to sleep on the wet ground with her entire body. It did not take long before she fell asleep.

Now the human was asleep. Now it was time.

Chapter six.

As the sea snake attacked with full speed from the right and closed its enormous jaws around the rails of the Glory, she squeaked in every single piece of the wood that she was crafted from. The stress from the raging ocean, the storm and the sea snake tested her strength to the limit. But even with big chunks of the ship missing from the snake attack, she was still in the game. The captain counted the men on deck. Only one sailor left at its position, all arrowmen still hanging strong, his scout missing from before, the steersman still at his post. Maybe they had a chance, but it was not a big one. His only option was to leave everything in the hand of the creator. May his will be executed on this day.

With little hope he started to give orders to the remaining crew on deck. All but the steersman and the arrowmen was ordered below deck, preparing for the worst. He himself stayed on deck, as a captain should, no matter what his ship was facing.

He wondered if the Anchormen had secured the cargo, and what would happen if the Glory did not make it through this. Should all his own sacrifices and the sacrifices of the men be in vain, or was there a slight chance that the cargo would reach its destination?

He often took pride in being a man of faith, but at this moment his faith was not very strong. Even so, he tried to find it. His faith had always been a source of strength, but where it used to be he only found distrust and despair.

As the sea snake came around for a second attack he turned to the steersman and saluted him in a traditional honor salut. Hand raised with three fingers up, one for himself, one for the one he saluted and the third for the creator. Old habits was not affected by his current lost of faith.

The snake took another big bite of the Glory, leaving her severely crippled in the water. Almost nothing remained of the deck and everybody that was on deck was gone. Either they fell into the water or they were on their way down the snake's stomach.

The Glory started to take in water and the remainder of the crew started to evacuate. They all knew that the cargo was their main priority, those who made it back alive with the cargo would be well rewarded. Should any one of them return without the cargo, or at least its whereabouts, they might as well not return at all.

The Glory had been built to sustain a certain amount of attacks from pirates and sea creatures, there was a special compartment two decks below the main deck. This compartment was built to be sealed off entirely, and even if the ship was going down it could still be ejected in any direction, given that the ship was fairly intact. The only two persons that was in that compartment

was the Anchormen that had gotten the order to secure the cargo. Some men were standing outside of the compartment banging it's walls and, now closed, openings wanting to get in. Some tried threatening their way in, calling the two cowards and many other name I will not recite here. Others begged and prayed. All was aware that the Glory was lost. There was only one last journey for her, and none of them would like to accompany her down to the bottom of the sea. All around the compartment the two men heard the sound of breaking wood, water flooding in, screams from their fellow shipmates, growl from the sea snake and the rage of the storm outside. The two had no clear picture of what part of the ship was less affected, so they did not know which direction they should try to release the compartment, nor when they should attempt to do so. It was always meant for the captain to be here with the cargo in case of emergency. Neither understood the captains choice to go down with the vessel, unless he had no hope of any survivors.

Both looked to the other for encouragement and advice on what to do. Neither said anything and from the compartment there came not a single sound. A ghostlike safe spot in the middle of everything. Like sitting inside a tomb while it was sealed by a disaster outside it's walls. As the sea snake engaged with the other monsters in battle the Glory took it's last breath of fresh air before submerging entirely, never to return to the surface again. More good souls lost in it's cause. More families that would mourn their sacrifice.

Chapter seven.

Dee slept uneasy, it was hard and cold, but then again, something felt warm. And there was something bright. She was uncertain weather it all was a dream or if it was real. She felt like she was on the edge between dream and reality, where the two met and blended, unable to separate from each other. It was hard to tell what was real and what was dream. Maybe it all was a dream. Maybe she was still in her bed at home, just anxious over the possibility to meet her brother the next day, and somehow it all turned into a weird nightmare.

She could hear little noises that she did not recognise. And something that might be a fire. But more like a still fire in the fireplace than a raging fire that consumed a building. She desperately wanted to wake up to see what reality she woke up to, but she just could not force her body to wake up. Her eyes remained shut and she was still balancing on the thin edge between the two worlds. That is, she remained there until something captured her attention. Something in the real world. A noise or a voice. She was uncertain of which.

It was still dark. But she was warm and dry. She could hear the sparking of a fire, there was no doubt in her mind. It took a while to realize we was laying down, not sitting up as when she fell asleep. Above was the darkness of the ravine and the dark, starless night sky.

It felt strange, it was not hard and cold stone beneath her, and all the moist from the tiny creek seemed to be gone. She turned her head to the right, and there was the mountain wall, vaguely visible. She turned her head to the left and to her surprise, there was a tiny fire, almost burned out. The sound she that woke her up, and as she still was hearing, was coming from the dark,

somewhere downstream from where she was. She could not see anything in the dark, only hear. It was some kind of muttering and something else to, she could not make out what it was, but almost like someone was dragging something.

She sat up, turned her head towards the sound, but still could not see anything. Beneath her was a bed of old leaves and dry moss. The fire was located on the other riverbank, well, on the other side of the tiny stream. Even if it was tiny, the fire that is, it was still giving a lot of heat.

But what was that noise? Dee focused on the sound again, gazed out in the dark.

In a split of a second, she thought she saw a pair of shiny dots in the dark in the direction of the sound. Perhaps a pair of eyes? But she could not see them anymore, and the longer she thought about it, the more unsure she was. It could have been anything, than again, nothing at all. But the sound was there, even if it was faint at times.

As she gazed out in the dark, time seemed to stand still, but the source of the sound wasn't. She was sure that it kept coming closer. But time and again, she was uncertain from what direction it came. The echos in the ravine confused her.

She sat there, wondering what made the sound. Or rather, who made the sound. Every now and then she could make out a clear word. Not necessary a word she knew, but clearly a word, which meant that it came from a sentient being. The other evidence that supported that was that she was left on a primitive bed, and that he/she/it/they had made her a fire. Not only a fire, but a fire at a safe distance. The creature(s) probably did not mean her any harm, which was a comforting thought.

She turned her head from side to side. Trying to determine what way the sound originated from.

At this point, it was probably her mind playing tricks with her.

Suddenly Dee could hear a full sentence. Even if it made her feel uneasy, she welcomed it.

-”Oh great! Now it's awake, stupid human!” was the muttering words she could make out. Shortly there after she saw a little creature coming from downstream, dragging something behind. She could not make out what it was, but it looked like something in a sack.

The creature was walking on the other side of the little stream, towards the fire. Well, since the riverbank was so small, there wasn't really room to walk towards something else.

The mutter continued and as it kept growing in straight, Dee felt less and less hopeful.

-”Stupid, stupid human, coming down here and disturbing Groll. Like the old days. Always same filthy humans. Can not do anything right. Leaving their stinky paths, wandering of in the great forest like they owned it. Never something good came from those filthy creatures. Arrogant and stupid. Helpless like animal babies. And stupid. That's what Groll hates the most, the stupidity! Can not see anything for what it is, always need to evaluate everything, giving it a price. Stinking humans! Dividing, categorising, assigning value... Should be extinct the lot of them, they should!”

Chapter eight.

The two anchormen sat in silence. From what they could understand the Glory was already

submerged, the last desperate calls from their shipmates had faded a little while ago. They wondered for how long they could survive in this compartment without air. They wondered what way they should choose to try and exit the compartment from the ship. Would it float?

It is strange how the small compartment so quickly could change from a safe harbour in a raging fight for life outside of it, only to become a prison that seemed to get smaller and smaller for each passing second.

They looked at each other, and then on all the hatches and ropes and little wheels that they could turn. Only one was marked, and it was the aft release path. The other walls on in the small compartment had the same operations panel, but they figured that only one needed to be marked, in case of getting disoriented while in the compartment. The cargo was secure in the middle of the small chamber. They had no food nor water, and felt an urge to make a quick escape from the ship for several reasons. They did not know how long the oxygen would last in there, and they preferred not to follow the Glory all the way to the bottom. Sure, the risk of them getting detected by the sea monsters was still huge, not to mention the raging storm.

Neither of the two had been in this compartment before so they carefully studied all available things on each wall. One of them took an interest in a handle that was located in the middle of each wall, just above the floor. A voice inside his head told him to pull it, and before the other could stop him, he leaned over to the wall that stated aft, and pulled the handle. They could hear something happening beneath the compartment. And then nothing. No movement, no sounds, nothing. The other repeated the same for the left wall. Again, something happened below them, and then nothing. Then the both pulled the two remaining handles, almost at the same time. Still nothing after the sound was over.

What would be the next logical thing to do? And what had the handles done? Both desperately started to pull other smaller handles, turned some wheels, tried to pull in a random rope. It sounded a lot, but nothing really happened.

They still hadn't said anything to each other so when one of them broke their silence it was almost like the fragile moment cracked and some kind of reality entered their small compartment. They both agreed that their mechanical skills was limited, but figured since they still were onboard a ship, ropes would be the most logical thing to use, since the entire sail system was built on dragging ropes in very complex paths.

Each wall had four ropes coming down from the ceiling. As they started to pull those ropes the compartment started to move. Best result they got from pulling all four ropes simultaneously. It felt like ages before something actually happened, and when it finally did, they both could feel the compartment rise to the surface. It was like when the Glory had been lifted high on a wave that suddenly hit them. Same feeling in the stomach.

Soon they felt the familiar movements from the large waves from the storm. They didn't have any windows, so they could not see what was going on around them, they could only pray to the creator that the sea monsters did not detect them. Could they stay undetected they had a chance to survive, but it was still a great risk to drift the sea in this weird vessel, with no way to control its direction.

The only thing the two was grateful for at the moment was that they actually could feel fresh air

again. It took a while to get used to their new vessels water properties. It moved very different compared to the Glory, but it was not very strange, since the Glory was several times bigger and heavier than this little flat and compact wooden barrel.

At least the cargo was safe for now. Better they had a chance to deliver it, than it being stuck on the bottom of the ocean.

They discussed their possibilities. Either they would drift for a very long time, which was most likely, and when someone found the vessel, they'd probably be dead for a long time, since they didn't have any food nor water. The other option was that since they were so close to shore, the storm might drive them towards land. Maybe even strand them. Should that be the case, the most likely scenario would be that the force of the wave would crush their vessel against the sharp graphite cliffs, or if they drifted further north, against a steep mountain wall. Should that happen, they would most likely die. If they did, and the cargo was not damaged by the impact, someone else would find it and claim it. But there was a slim chance, and they prayed to the creator to make it so, that the storm pushed the vessel towards land and stranded them smooth and easy. If that happened, they'd have to figure out a way to get out of the compartment, and then figure out how to bring the cargo back to safety, without getting robbed along the way, or eaten by a werewolf, or by vampire, or getting caught in a horde of undead, and along the way find enough food and water to sustain them all the way back. Since the captain had said that it was a one day journey with the Glory, it would be two or three by foot in flat terrain. But from what they had seen when still aboard the Glory, the terrain was everything but flat and friendly. They estimated rather seven to ten days. And they had to carry the cargo by hand all the way. And to be completely honest, what ever end their journey in this little vessel would provide them, it looked like a pretty good chance that they would not make it out alive.

As all anchormen they always carried knives, so they started to carve their possible last words to family and friends, in the hops that if they did not survive, at least their words would have a chance to reach home and their loved ones. Given that the vessel was not completely destroyed by the impact with the coastline, or that the vessel simply would sink and join the rest of the Glory. Well, they hadn't got much else to do, so they might as well keep carving. And hoping.

Chapter nine.

The little creature arrived muttering to the fire and it did not pay Dee much attention at first. It was a very small creature, rising only about two feet above the ground. Should Dee stand up, she was uncertain whether it would reach her knees or not. As she watched him put more wood on the fire she tried to make out what kind of creature he was. He mustn't had liked her looking, because he turned to her and yelled:

“Why are you awake, you filthy human? And what are you doing here in Groll's ravine? Don't just sit there and look like the fool you are! Speak human!”

Dee didn't know where to start.

“I don't know why I'm here... I was running in the forest and then...”

Before she could continue the little creature exploded again.

“Running in the forest you say? Typical behaviour of a lesser being that only uses a small portion of its big brain. Waste of space and energy I say! Only filling between those funny looking ears of yours. And you don’t even use them. Say you hear, you do, but listen - oh, no, you don’t! Never listen to what Groll says, or anybody else for that matter. Thinking you are better and smarter. But you are only taller and take up more space.”

The creature tossed a piece of something wrapped in cloth to Dee. It was a piece of bread. Or something that very much looked like bread.

Dee whispered a short thank you and took a big bite of the bread since she was very hungry.

The creature on the opposite side of the little stream sat down by the fire, muttering something Dee did not catch. She was chewing too loud.

“Who are you, and what are you?” she asked.

The creature exploded and started to yell again.

“What an insult of a troll! What am I? I would tell you if it wasn’t such a waste of time talking to a human! No shame in that large body of yours. But what to expect from a filthy creature like you? Waste of space on two legs and no good between them ears... Arrogant and foolish is what you are! And wasting my time as well!”

Dee started to getting tired of getting yelled at so she jumped in when the creature took a breath, probably to continue yelling.

“Look, thank you for taking care of me, I didn’t mean to intrude...” she wasn’t able to finish her sentence before the yelling started again.

“Taking care of you?! Ha! Like I would care! Only saving myself a lot of trouble. Should you lay here and die of hunger or thirst I would only have to carry your heavy corps all the way to the ocean. Much easier to have you walk your self. Groll not stupid you see! Oh no! Think of everything, I do! Ha! Care for a human! Almost funny, big one! Almost funny!”

The little one silenced and Dee saw her chance.

“Groll, is that your name? And are you a troll?” she was expecting another blowout from the creature.

“Yes! Groll is my name. And troll I am!” he said in the most of proud ways.

“Nice to meet you Groll. My name is Dee, and I’m a filthy human. A waste of space on two legs...” she said.

The troll laughed. A heartwarming laughter that caught Dee as well.

As their laughter silenced, neither of the two knew how to continue, so they sat there, in the dark, looking into the fire. After a long while, Dee felt sleepy again, and broke the soundless void.

“Is it long till dawn?” she asked.

“Yes! Still long to dawn...” Groll answered. His thoughts was far away.

“Would it be alright if I caught some more sleep? So you won’t have to carry me tomorrow?” she asked...

Groll laughed again.

“Yes, get some sleep... So I won’t have to carry you!” he laughed again. She could almost see a

faint smile in his face, not only on his lips, but in his eyes as well...

Dee lay down on the moss bed again, she felt warm inside. Not hungry anymore. And she felt safe. It was something about this little troll, Groll. Something about him. Or was it a she? Dee wasn't sure she dared to ask, she thought to herself just before fading away into a deep sleep.

Chapter ten.

The hawkman woke up to the sound of a familiar shriek from somewhere very close. He tried to open his eye and could swear that he opened his eyes. But everything was still black. He tried again. Closed his eyes and made sure to close them extra hard and then open them again. Still nothing, pitch black. He was laying down and started to feel with his hands around him. One of his hands touched water and the other some kind of steep mountain wall. Carefully he lifted his upper body and turned his head from left to right. Still nothing. Everything was black around him. He heard the shriek again, a little up to the right and slightly behind him. He turned his head around, there behind him, maybe thirty feet, he saw a piece of night sky. It was surreal in a way, like someone had sliced out a thin line of night sky and put it on a black background. He slowly rose, turned and walked towards the slice of night sky, walking with the water on his right side, instead of to the left when he woke up. He took small steps all the way and found himself standing on the edge of a tiny waterfall, dropping about a hundred feet down. Below he could hear the sounds of waves slowly washing over the shoreline. In front of him was a magnificent night sky. The two moons like shiny pearls, the right blood moon was two or three nights from being full and turning red. The left silver moon was as clear and calm as always.

There was no evidence of the storm that he last could remember. The night seemed still and peaceful. He tried to think. The last thing he remembered was standing on the Glory, he had just sent his hawk for scouting. They got attacked, he fell overboard and... no... had he drowned? Was this the afterlife? Was he facing an image of his life and behind him was the eternal darkness of nothingness? Was this it? What about an eternal life with the creator? What about seeing all that had died before him? His brother's? His grandfather? Should he wait here for someone to come and get him and show him the way? He was chilled to the bones and shivered. Uncertain if it was due to the cold night or the thoughts that rushed through him. The familiar shriek made him come back to the present. Without thinking of what he was doing, he raised his arm for the hawk to land, and it did. As it had done thousand times before. He whispered partly to the hawk and partly to himself:

"Are we dead, my little friend?"

But the hawk didn't answer, it expected its reward, a silverfish. But the hawkman could not provide any this time.

So they stood there, in silence. The hawk waiting for its fish, and the hawkman alone with his thoughts, gazing the moons over his head, and the million stars on the creator's sky.

Chapter eleven.

Dee was sleeping uneasy. Had the strangest dreams. One time she was watching a great grassfield. She witnessed the birth of many various animals on the great field. Then there was a great war, between two human clans. One side wore a red flag, the other a blue.

Then she was deep down in the caves of a very old mountain, watching the dwarves underground fires, melting ore from their mines, and in the river of melted ore, there was something shiney floating away.

Then she stood on the top of the great old mountain, the largest mountain in the world. From it's peak she could see two battling dragons. A red and a blue. Just like the fighting humans.

Then she was in a dark cold forest. Watching an egg in it's nest. A silver egg, as she bent towards it she could see her own reflection in it, only she wasn't herself, she was another creature. Darker and larger. Maybe a werewolf.

Then she watched the blood moon from a small window. She was chained.

What did it all mean?

Suddenly she was standing in water up to her belly, cold water, watching a huge waterfall, she could feel the movement of the water as it pushed against her feet, almost making her lose her grip.

Another jump to a raging fire, she was standing in the middle, unable to move, around her there was a crowd. She was uncertain, hard to see, but it looked like the crowd was dancing or celebrating. Strange to go from cold water to warm and raging fire.

As the dream jumped around, she could experience every change in her body, reacting to the surrounding environment.

When Dee wakes up she feels very strange. As if the dream was not a dream, but something she lived through. Something she remembered. But it was impossible, since she had only been in the village, on the path to the harbor camp and in the harbor camp. Never anywhere else. Even if she often wished she could go on adventures or trading routes to other places, far away. But she knew it was too dangerous. A girl of sixteen winters was not an appropriate nor competent companion on such a journey.

She saw that it was already morning, and only a day had passed since she defied her father and set off by herself towards the harbor camp. But it felt like a lifetime. So much had happened since then. She literally was another person now. Without being able to explain what had change, she felt it.

She looked around her, but could not see Groll anywhere near. The fire was already put out and there was almost no trace of it ever being there. She looked up stream, but saw no trace of him, and as she turned downstream she heard someone yell from far away.

“Hurry up and let's go! Filthy human! Lazy and sleepy! Move along already! No time to waste!”

Yes, there he was, there was no doubt in her mind that it was Groll who yelled at her. She felt warm inside, even if he was yelling, she remembered his laughter from the night before. He was

a warmhearted individual, even if he probably would not admit to it. She was certain of that.

It didn't take long for her to catch up with Groll, and when she did, she had to walk very, very slow, or else she would out run, ehr, rather out walk him in no time. She was right from the night before, his full height was just above her knees, and his legs was about the length of her longest fingers. As so, his steps was tiny, and even if he kept a high pace she still had a hard time to follow his tempo. It felt like she had to decrease her speed for each step. After a while of walking in silence she asked him if he would like to ride on her shoulder.

"Ride on your shoulder you say?! And be carried by a filthy human? Never! Not even if the blood moon itself chased me through this ravine, I would. Stupid suggestion... Don't you think I can walk? Huh? More than twenty ages I am, still young with a lot of energy in my legs."

Dee smiled.

"But it would take us to the ocean a lot faster, and you would get rid of me quicker if you did that..." she said...

Groll stopped to think for a while, he had to admit that she was right. But ride on a human...

"Ha! Yes, lift me up already! Groll getting a human horse! Incredible! Never thought the day would come..."

Dee lifted up Groll on her shoulder and started to walk in normal pace, which was considerably faster than they were going before. She could hear Groll laugh to himself and muttering in a positive way.

"Human horse. Hahaha! Who would have thought? Not Groll? Oh no, not Groll would."

After a while Dee asked Groll how much further the ocean was.

"Don't know, horse! Don't know! Have no reference to this speed, it would be two days in my own pace. But now, I don't know!" he replied, then yelled with the enthusiasm of a five-year-old:

"Silent and move along horse! Faster! Carry on! TO THE OCEAN!"

Chapter twelve.

The dawn had passed, the hawkman hadn't slept anything during the night, and as the moons had faded and left the creators heavenly arena for the sun to make it's daily show, he started to believe that he might not be dead after all.

With the rising light something else rose as well. There was no way for him to get down from the edge of this ravine, and as far as he could see it separated land in a straight line leading from the ocean to an unknown source. Even the ravine itself was divided in two by a tiny waterstream floating in the middle.

The walls of the ravine rose almost straight up on both sides, leaving nothing to climb on. Either he followed the water and took a leap to a certain death, or, which he felt was the better of the two alternatives, he started to walk upstream to see if he could find a way out of there.

As he started to walk with the hawk on his shoulder his lack of sleep surfaced, and on top of that, his stomach reminded him, in a most polite way, that he had not eaten anything in a long time.

What normally would be an easy walk forced him to struggle with each step.

Either it was the lack of food and sleep, or it was the relief he felt, no longer sure he was dead. He had been lucky somehow. Could it be the hand of the creator? It could be the raging waves of the storm that just happened to lift him and leave him in the ravine, but it was unlikely, the waves hadn't been that high, and what would be the odds of his wave, among thousands of waves, rising in the right height (without rolling low over the sharp edges of the shoreline beneath) at the exact place for the ravine. A couple of feet in each direction to the left or right would have meant that the wave had crushed him against the mountain wall, and if it didn't crush him, there was no way that the wave could bring him unharmed back to the ocean, without dragging him through the sharp edges of the cliffs below.

The more he reflected on it, the more sure he was, the creator had to have a say in what had happened, which made another question rise. Why? Why him? Why save him of all the people aboard the Glory? Was he destined to do something that he had not yet been able to complete? And what would that task be?

He could not get his head around it while dragging his feet step after step away from the ravine. An eternity later he was so tired that he sat down in the bottom of the ravine. He had walked a lifetime, or at least that's how it felt, in reality it was closer to fifty three minutes. The entire situation, lack of sleep, lack of food, all his thoughts and probably the little weight of the hawk, still sitting on his shoulder, had drained all his powers. Literally he could not take another step. Not a single one. And he sat there, staring out in the emptiness of the ravine. No end in sight.

Chapter thirteen.

Dee got bored by just walking and tried to make small talk with Groll, more or less successful.

"So, you're twenty Groll?" she asked. "I am sixteen winters myself, soon turning seventeen, so you just a tad older than me..."

"Ha! A tad older you say? Ignorant fool! But, yes, a tad older you could say. Poor little human horse!" He replied without correcting her. What Dee did not know was that there is a great difference between twenty ages and almost twenty winters. An age starts when a person is born and ends with the death of his or her grandchild. So twenty ages was a lot more than almost twenty winters.

Dee was determined to get a conversation going with Groll and continued:

"Have you met humans before? You seem to be familiar with my kind."

Groll muttered something she could barely hear and then yelled so her right ear almost fell off:

"Yes! Sad to say I have! No good you humans! All the same! All ignorant! Thinking of nothing but yourselves and not even that."

"What do you mean, how are we all the same?" she asked.

"So hard to understand?" Groll asked. "All the same! Nothing more, nothing less, nothing hidden in those words, all clear! Mean exactly what they say, all the same!"

"But we're not the same!" Dee protested. "We are very different between us. We are old and

young, male and female, warmblood and coldblood, tall and short, thin and fat. We have different hair colors, eye colors and skin colors. We're not all the same!"

"Yes, all the same! Only yourselves that divide and categorise. But it changes nothing. You're all the same." Groll answered, a little annoyed.

Dee was almost insulted by this and did not feel to continue pursuing any more of this small talk. In Fact she almost threw Groll off her shoulder but hesitated and figured it was best to let him sit there so they could arrive faster at the ocean. The sooner the better, then she would head back for the harbour camp. She had done some thinking, and she was pretty sure she should turn left once they got out of the ravine. Follow the coastline to the north. When she fled in the forest she was most likely running south before falling down in the ravine. She thought about asking Groll for direction advice at first, but now she did not want to ask this little horrible creature anything more.

Suddenly Groll started to yell incomprehensible again.

"A hundred summers and nothing, now two of them in two day! Why can't you just leave me alone? Stupid, filthy humans! What's next I wonder? And look, the other one is already a corpse, birds have started eating already. Might be good, then Groll won't have to drag the heavy corpse to the ocean! Why just you don't leave Groll alone? Is it too much to ask, I wonder!"

Dee wondered what Groll was yelling about, and it took her several more steps to realise that further away in the ravine, there was something lying at the bottom.

"Is it another human Groll?" she asked with a worried tone in her voice.

"Filthy humans! No good you are, raining down like leaves in the autumn! What have I done to deserve this?" Groll mumbled.

Dee walked faster, almost started to run, she wanted to come to the other person, chase away the birds Groll was talking about.

"Are you sure the person is dead?" she asked, with her breath affected by the faster pace.

"A bird is eating in it, of course it's dead! Human corpse, even more disgusting than a live one. Oh, the smell of it! You drag it all the way to the ocean, human horse!" Groll muttered.

Again Dee felt a little insulted, but at the moment she cared less about her own pride and more about the poor human they approached.

When they only had about thirty feet left to the body, Dee saw that the bird was a hawk, but it was not eating on the body, like Groll had said, more like keeping watch over it. She saw that it was a man, and from the looks of it, he have had a rough time before ending up here in the ravine.

As they approached she saw that the man was breathing, he was still alive!

Chapter fourteen

The commander of the Vampires looked at their small battlefield. One of the beast had escaped, one was dead and the third was captured and disarmed. Of his little army of fifteen, only six was still alive. A high price it may seem, but taking into account what is at stake, nine Vampires was

nothing.

The captured werewolf would be brought back for interrogation, but this time they would not use their usual tactics, they would have to be more thorough and aggressive this time. Time was running out. Time they did not have to spend. It was a long journey back and they only had a few shelters, so they all would have to use all their strength to get the beast home safely. They all had a desperate need to feed, but it was a luxury they could not afford at the moment. If they were lucky, they would find prey on the way back.

There was not time, nor energy, to salvage the silver armour from the fallen Vampires. Pitty, the dwarf masters had demanded a high prize for the silver pieces, they knew it was essential to the Vampires to have them in their mission, and greedy as they are they claimed much more than they should have. At least from his point of view.

Fair enough, their armour had to be much purer and of much higher quality than the average silver the dwarves produced. But still. Lucky for the dwarf master that dwarf blood tastes so bad. Oh, well, when this enterprise was over, the dwarves would know their place. As would the rest of the creatures of this world.

Now they had no time to waste, off to nearest shelter, get their covers on, and then head back home.

Blasted mist! It was impossible to know how high the sun stood. On the other hand, the mist helped them. The silver armor might protect them against the werewolves, but it did not protect them against the sun.

Direct sun would dry them instantly, so would long time of heat. But they could survive short periods carrying special lightweight cloth keeping the sunbeams out, and providing darkness for their entire body, even their faces if they had their hood up. The lightweight cloth also had cooling capabilities, especially when it was wet.

They had left those coverage in their last shelter, along with carrier animals of various kinds. All of them was almost dried out, none of them had gotten a good meal in a while. Not that it would kill them in anyway, only make them weaker and more sensitive to the sun.

Then, in an instant, the mist was completely gone. It had appeared out of nowhere in the middle of their hunt, and now it vanished with the same intensity. Strange.

But it could mean one thing. His sister could be close. And if she was, he would need to leave two scouts behind to look for her. Should they capture her as well, then it would be an even greater success than only bringing a beast back.

Should they be able to capture her, then their end goal would be as good as completed. They only had to...

...yes, what did they have to do if they caught her? It was clear she would not reveal anything by free will, and it was most likely that her secrets would follow her to the grave. And it was not possible to use her brother anymore, that opportunity had passed. A shame it was.

But first, focus on the beast and get it to base. That was the current priority one.

Chapter fifteen.

The hawkman did not know where he was at first, or who the girl was or what in the creators world the little thing beside her was. The little creature muttered something that he could not hear, and the girl that stood on her knees beside him (still taller than the little creature), looked at him like she was expecting something from him.

“Where am I?” he asked the girl.

“In a ravine in the forest,” she answered, “I’m Dee. Who are you and how did you get here?”

“Water!” the hawkman said, his world was slightly spinning, probably from exhaustion.

Dee had previously been drinking water from the stream, so had Groll, so she helped the man shape his hands to scoop up water from the stream, but he only got annoyed.

“No, I come from the water.” he continued.

“Impossible!” muttered Groll, “He is not of the seafolk. I doubt he could even swim a rainy day on dry land by the looks of him!”

“The Glory” he said. Trying to explain himself.

Groll snorted.

“No underwater city with that name!”

“The Glory is a ship!” exclaimed Dee, giving Groll a razor sharp eye wishing him to shut up. Groll however did not seem to take any notice of this.

“Do you serve on the Glory?” she asked the man.

“Yes!” he said. “I’m a hawkman on the Glory!” then silenced. “Was...” he said.

His words struck Dee like a knife aimed straight at her heart.

“What do you mean, was...?” she asked.

“It is...” he tried to wrap his head around it, “we was caught in a storm...”

“Did she make it?” asked Dee, thinking of Rick.

The hawkman looked for words, the only thing he knew was that he was no longer aboard the ship, he did not know the fate of the Glory.

“I don’t know” he answered truthfully. “We were in a storm and was attacked by several seamonsters. Six I think.” he silenced a while again. Tears started to burn behind Dee’s eyes.

“It didn’t look good last time I saw her. I was swept of board during an attack, and the next thing I was here. Not sure if I am dead. I walked forever in this ravine and then you woke me up.”

Dee bursted into tears. She would never see Rick again!

“Might as well cry, you’re in the Sorrow now...” muttered Groll, and then turned to the other human again.

“Can you stand up and walk? Or should we drag you in the stream all the way to the ocean? Human scum!”

“I’m sorry, I don’t think I can, the world is spinning, and we are far from the ocean!” he answered.

“Here! Eat, filthy human! So you can walk by yourself!” Groll tossed the man a piece of bread.

The hawk, who circled above it’s master quickly dived to get it’s fair share (more than half, at least) of the bread.

Dee sat in tears on the riverbank, and the hawkman shared his bread with the hawk that now had landed on his shoulder. Groll strolled a bit further back, still muttering.

The hawkman leaned over to Dee and asked with a faint whisper:

“Are you his prisoner?”

Dee awoke from her tears.

“No, not at all, he is helping me and leading the way to the ocean. That is the only way out of here.”

“There are no way out of the by the ocean, I’ve been there, these walls raise high all the way there and at the end there is a small waterfall dropping much longer than it is safe to jump.” the hawkman said. “And besides, the cliffs beneath are razorsharp graphite cliffs.” he added and continued with an even lower whisper: “Should he push us down there it would be the end of us. I mean, he doesn’t seem to like us much...”

Chapter sixteen.

The Werewolf kept running through the forest. Not with it’s usual speed and stamina, it was bleeding from several cuts and bruises from the fight with the Vampires.

Normally it would have stayed and fought to the end, but now they couldn’t. Neither of them could. Now it was the only one in their scouting team. He knew there was others in the region, they could all feel it calling. Like a homing beacon that turned on an autopilot in them.

Their task was to find it, and keep it safe. Hidden. Guard it.

There was a safekeeping not far from here. But they could not use it until their task was fulfilled. They needed to find it. Time was running out. It had been missing for too long now. They had searched for many ages. Now it had resurfaced again, calling them. They could not lose track of it again.

As the werewolf kept running, it felt the signal stronger and stronger.

Unaware if it was the only werewolf in pursuit or if there was others nearby that felt the same calling the werewolf continued on, and on, and on.

The source kept moving, so the signal sometimes weakened.

Strange in a way, but at the same time it wasn’t really surprising. The power it contained could change everything, the outcome of the world as it currently was.

The werewolf was in great need of pray to regain strength, but at the same time there was no time for eating. Should the opportunity arise, the werewolf would carefully need to way the upside of spending time stopping for a meal and the energy it would take to hunt versus the lost ground in the ongoing pursuit.

The thought rushed through it’s mind as trees, bushes and naked rocks passed by in a speed far beyond what a human had been able to produce, even with the use of horses. And yet, far from the top speed of a werewolf.

The werewolfs soul purpose was protecting, haunting, killing. There was no other instinct. No other objective that would divide its attention.

How could the signal move so fast? It was not in its nature.

It must be carried by some kind of vessel, but any man made vessels could not reach speeds

like this, not even the seacrafts.

Was it the vampires? Was there another party involved? Had one of the wizard surfaced again? Damned be the wizards! It was their fault that it was gone in the first place. The werewolves had played a big part in their extinction, but the main factor had been their own pride and disability to honour their own code.

The werewolves took pride in being an active part in reducing the numbers of wizard in this world. Cleanse it, of their impurity. Their way was an insult to the creators wish. The world would be better off without them. And the witches. But the witches had not been as terrible, not yet anyway. And even so, if a witch crossed their path every werewolf enjoyed the kill. Then it was not only killing for food, then it was killing for food and the creation.

But now, only focusing on the signal. It was getting weaker now. The werewolf pushed itself further. Must not lose it now!

Chapter seventeen.

Dee turned to Groll, he was still strolling away from them going upstream, not fast since his legs was so short.

“You said there’s a way out of here by the ocean” she yelled after him.

Groll stopped without turning. She caught his attention.

“What’s your name?” she asked the hawkman before continuing.

“Tadao” he replied short, still whispering.

“Tadao came from the ocean, there is no way out of this ravine that way!” she continued towards Groll.

“Stupid humans!” Groll muttered, “There is always more than meets the eye!” he continued, and started to walk away from the humans again.

Dee looked after him, not sure what to think. Since they lay eyes on Tadao, Groll seemed changed. The bitter little creature seemed more angry now and she was uncertain if her first instinct proved her wrong. She did not know whether to trust Groll or not. Nor if she could trust Tadao. She decided to remain neutral for the time being. If Tadao was right, the two of them could leave Groll when they got to the edge of the ravine and try to find a way out themselves. Should Groll be right he would lead them out of this ravine.

She turned to Tadao again.

“Do you know if there was a Scout called Rick on the Glory? He signed aboard when she started her journey, about a year ago.”

“Is he a loved one?” Tadao asked with pity in his voice, slowly regaining strength from the bread he got from Groll.

Dee nodded, but did not say anything, she only waited to see what news he could give her.

“I also signed on at the start of the journey. But I do not remember any scout by the name of Rick. The first three stops of the journey was very hectic, we were few aboard and had to recruit in every harbour. As you probably know, when a ship reach the last harbour before the northern

orifice of the Red river, she is on her own until she passes the southern orifice. And when passing there we lost several scouts to the Vampire elder.”

Dee looked at him and didn't understand.

“What about the Vampire elder? Can it swim?”

Tadao shook his head, and lowered his voice.

“It can fly...”

Dee burst out in laughter! It was ridiculous! A flying vampire. She had never heard anybody telling anything remotely like that. She welcomed the laugh but it also raised more questions. Could she trust this Tadao? It seemed highly unlikely that he had not heard of Rick, given that they was a small crew from the beginning and losing Scouts to a flying Vampire. No. Did not seem likely at all. She did not even know if he infact had been on the Glory. And if he hadn't then maybe it wasn't lost at sea in a storm as she claimed. That meant that there still was a good chance Rick was alive and well.

She was brought back from her thought by the return of Groll, he had gathered woods to make a fire, it was getting dark.

Neither said anything.

Groll did not even mutter, he just piled up the wood and started the fire.

It was a long evening. Tadao did not start any conversation with Dee, he felt a little insulted that she did not believe him. Groll did not speak to either of the humans because he did not have anything to say. Dee did not know who of the two she should talk to, since she did not know who of them to trust.

Just as Dee lay down to get some sleep Groll open his mouth.

“We're close to the ocean. Tomorrow I will follow you there, show you the way out, then we part, and I wish not to see any of you here ever again. Understood?”

Dee nodded, but Tadao protested.

“We are far from the ocean, I walked for a long time before I ended up here!”

“We'll see tomorrow! Stupid human!” Groll answered annoyed, and nothing more was said that night.

Eventually Dee was on the rim to fall asleep, and just before she did, she had a thought she barely could grasp: Where did Groll find the wood for the fire, they had walked a long way that day, and had not passed a single piece of wood or anything else for that matter? Only the bare walls and the tiny water stream. But she fell asleep before it had any impact on her.

Chapter eighteen.

The vampire commander oversaw the handling of their captive with pride. His men was highly competent and drilled to utter most perfection.

They quickly wrapped the werewolf in the extra strong fabric with woven with a silver thread mixture and then chained it in silver chains, both around hands, feet and neck. This prevented the werewolf from escaping and at the same time did not kill it. But from its body language it was

clear that it was not a joyful treatment.

They pushed it in front of them still covered in their silver arming. They would stop at their last camp where they kept the headpiece for the beast. It was designed to keep its large and deadly mouth shut and with no possibility to open the jaws, not even to growl, and perhaps more importantly, preventing the beast from howling to call the attention of its fellow beasts.

It was a short walk to the camp, and after they had put the headpiece on, they would be able to drop the silver armour and change to their protective clothing. Even if they would travel in the forest, they still needed protection from the sun.

It was unlikely, but maybe they would find prey along the way. They were all in need of feeding.

Once they reached the camp, he would have to decide if he would leave two men behind.

If she was in the forest, it would be great to capture her. If not they would be of little use in this sector. Maybe leave two behind and ask them to search for two days, if they don't find anything, they would head back. Then only one question remained, would the others be able to transport the beast back with only three men and himself?

This was a critical transport, loss of this beast would set them back considerably in their timetable, and the master would be furious.

On the other hand, the master would be furious if he would find out that he did not pursue the opportunity to capture *her*.

They had one witch in their possession. But think of all the possibilities they had if they would capture her. It would mean a whole new different approach to their end game.

He would need to gamble on this one. Yes, leaving two men behind. But then again. What could two men do compared to *her*?

She is most powerful, even if she is known for not using her powers excessively.

So few of them left. It could be that she is the last of her kind, no one knew for sure. The rumour said they were extinct, but the Vampire clan had known for several ages that there was some left, scattered around the known world, in hiding.

She had come from the north.

Her timing was precise, as if she knew their plan, knew their progress, as if she could feel that they were close to achieve their goal and had come to stop them.

Not even the Master was strong enough to foresee her moves or stop her if she attempted to interfere.

The more the commander thought of it, the more convinced he got. Leaving two men behind was a good cause of action.

He played with the thought of being one of the two remaining himself, but then he might jeopardize the whole mission in bringing the beast back.

He trusted his men with his life, but he did not trust them to make all tactical decisions that was needed along the way. They was carved as fighters, damn good one too. But it is a big difference being a fighter and being strategic. No, he would remain with the beast and would let two of the others stay behind to track, and if possible, capture her. Even if it only was a very faint chance of success in doing so.

Once the beast was secure back home he would head out with a new group of men. Come back

and reinforce the two, let them head back and feed and regain strength.

He had been looking forward to be there to break the beast and learn its secrets, but if there was a remote chance to capture her, it was a much sweeter victory. The choice was easy.

He could not help it, but to speculate in her reasons. But every scenario seemed too farfetched and almost all argumentation to fragile.

As history stated, her motives was hidden to the naked eye, and he would probably not be able to get close, no matter how many scenarios he created.

Chapter nineteen.

The two anchormen sat silent in the dark, feeling the fresh and cold sea air, and noticed that the waves had stopped raging, now the sea kept rocking the compartment with it's still but constant movements.

Just as they was about to search for a way to open the compartment something happened. What they assumed to be (correctly I might add) a sea monster, grabbed the compartment in its mouth and started to swim fast along the shore (which they didn't know). And only after a long while of high speed they stopped instantly when (again they assumed correct) a bigger monster grabbed their capturer, and going from high speed to almost full stop made them and the compartment tumble around a couple of times before resuming their slow and steady glide through the waves. One main difference from before their little run-into-the-sea-monster escapade, they had gone from complete dark to having a neat view of the bypassing coastline.

As beautiful as it was, as frustrating it was. They had no means of steering the compartment towards the land, they could only continue to drift to wherever the creator was guiding them.

As reality started to catch up with the two they realised just how lucky they were in this particular moment. The rest of the Glory had been swallowed by the ocean, but they had survived as of now. Even survived another encounter with a sea monster.

Just as they had decided to abandon their little vessel and swim ashore, they noticed that there was sea monsters all around them in the water, not as big as they had seen aboard the Glory, but big enough to easily make the decision to cancel their little swim session.

Through everything they had been through, the cargo lay undamaged in the middle of the compartment, exactly where they had put it when they secured it.

They found it very odd that the waters was boiling with little sea monsters, when neither of them had seen a single one of these smaller creatures for the duration of their voyages with the Glory. And these waters was close to home and no one had ever talked about these smaller versions of the big scary things in the ocean. Not that these were any less scary.

Between them, there was a silent agreement that the rich sea life was somehow connected to the cargo. Since they brought it aboard, the frequency and number of encounters had completely gone nuts. From being rare to being a part of the daily routine. Maybe it was not strange that the Glory ended up at the bottom of the sea. But than again. What was this strange cargo they carried? Why did they have orders to secure it at any cost? What was so important that it was

worth losing an entire ship along with its crew? Did the elders of the village really know what they were up to?

They bounced really hard against an underwater cliff. The impact made the former compartment creak with stress and almost fell to pieces, but remained in more or less one piece. It also changed their course and gave it a new heading towards the shoreline. With a little luck they would strand shortly and complete the journey by foot. It could not be too far from the harbour camp. A day or two at the most. Then they would be richly rewarded by the elders.

There, another bump, driving them even further to land. They could almost reach out from their vessel now, but the waters still swarmed with tiny, but probably deadly, sea life.

It took longer than they expected, but they finally hit solid ground and could leave the last floating pieces of the Glory. The cargo was still secured, but they now had to carry it by hand the rest of the way.

After carefully navigating through the sharp granite cliffs they stood by the treeline but before they could enter the forest they found themselves in front of another obstacle. A werewolf lurked just in the treeline. Since one of them was carrying the cargo, the other one tried to attack with a stick and his knife, but it took only one bite from the werewolf to put an end to the attack. Then there was only one. No where else to go. The werewolf howled and then took a step towards the last of the two anchormen. The growl from the werewolf made him think that the beast was not interested in a chitchat nor any of the stories he'd gain from his time on the Glory.

Chapter twenty.

"Wake up filthy humans!" Groll screamed, "It's time to start, the sooner we get there, the sooner I can show you the way out and the sooner we part ways! Everybody happy!"

Dee looked around. She saw that Tadao was also asleep until Groll had started to yell. What a way to wake up. The fire was out and no breakfast insight. The hawk took place on Tadao's shoulder the moment he sat up.

They both took a while to get back to reality after a night's sleep. Groll shouted again, urging them in a not so polite way, to stand up on their feets and get moving already.

"Human horse," he continued his yelling, "pick me up so we get there as fast as possible!"

Groll was in his best mood since Dee had met him two days ago. Cranky as ever. She lifted him and put him on his shoulder, making the scene a bit amusing. A man with his hawk on the shoulder, walking next to a girl with a troll on her shoulder. Who would have imagined?

Groll muttered but Dee ignored him and started to talk to Tadao. Asking where he was from and so on, just making smalltalk. When Tadao had talked about himself nonstop for almost fifteen minutes and boring Dee with his bragging, he asked her how she ended up in the ravine.

Dee chose the short story and said that she was on her way to the harbour camp and got caught between werewolves and then escaped. Ran blind in the forest only to fall and end up in the ravine.

Groll had been silent the entire time she had been talking but then surprised with a question:

“The werewolf, how does it look?”

Dee looked at him. She was not expecting a question like that from Groll, he seemed to be familiar with everything and very urbane in the known world.

“It’s a beast, twice the height of any man, almost three of me, it has a long nose and a big mouth filled with sharp teeth. It has an appetite for all living things of this world, even the dwarves! So from a dwarf perspective, it is their only natural enemy, since the vampires does not like them.” she answered mixing in what she had experienced herself and stuff from legends and stories she had been told.

Groll did not ask anything more, and Dee would say that he almost looked a little pale, if that was possible for a troll.

The rest of their walk towards the ocean was in silence, and a few minutes before they arrived at the ocean they could hear the breathing of the ocean, as the waves reached the shore.

Now they could see the end of the ravine in a distance, and Tadao started to protest.

“There is no way out of there that way, only down! And that is not a way out. He is fooling us!” he said and gave Groll a sharp eye.

“More than meets the eye, always!” Groll replied, putting an end to the discussion before it even surfaced.

Tadao thought that it was strange that they had walked this distance in about an hour, given that he had struggled for much longer than that on his way in the ravine.

As they came to the edge, Dee was just about to give Tadao right, there was no way out, when Groll pointed to the right and as he had said from the start, there was a way out. They had only to walk across a small rim that barely had room for their feet. It was a small, but dangerous walk, only three or four feet, but they had to round a salient cliff and should they slip, the fall would not be gentle on their bodies. It would be the last thing they did.

To her surprise, Groll was the first one out and yelled at them to hurry up from around the corner.

Chapter twentyone.

As the wizard kept moving forward in the forest, trying to locate it’s berring, it regretted the whole mist coverup. It was good in theory and had, as intended, confused both the werewolves and the Vampires, not to mention saving a little girls life. The flipside was a lost berring, and as always it seemed, there was this unintended consequences of using the powerful magic that nature provided. Not like the witches who only used the flow of the life essence, enhancing it or slowing it, giving it a nudge here and there to steer the flow in a new direction. The magic of a wizard was way more powerful. Taming the forces of the nature, bending the rules and use the forces for new things. But, as it seemed, the more powerful the magic was, and the more astonishing things a wizard was able to achieve, the more unintended the aftermath became. Even if they always tried to predict the aftermath of each and every use of magic, it seemed they could never grasp the whole picture. Time and again, this particular wizard had sworn never to use magic again, but circumstances had forced the wizards hand to act over and over again.

Even if it was hard, the wizard had to admit, getting lost in the mist was not to blame on the magic, it could only be credited the wizards outstanding sense of direction. And from the wizards current perspective, nothing else had gone bad this time due the use of magic. But then again, it is very rare that the aftermath could be seen directly after. It usually took time.

Now, where was that bloody mountain?

The wizard played around in it's mind to look for easy spells that only used a little magic, to identify the right direction.

It could not even use the sun in this heavy part of the forest. It was rare to get a good look of the sky, even more rare to actually see the sun. But even if there was a tiny glimpse of the sun, it was hard to say where in the sky it was located.

Of course, there was always the easy way in stop and ask for direction. But that was very much below the pride of any wizard. And the entire forest knew it, so the best course of action was just to pretend to be on the right path. Which, unfortunately, ruled out using even the smallest of spells to get the right bearing.

Stupid forest, looking the same everywhere, not even the moss could be used as guidance here, it grew all over the place, on all sides of all trees and everything else for that matter.

And the path's from the villagers did not cover this part of the forest, so they could not be used to determine the way.

No points of reference, no nothing.

If only the wizard could find something, maybe like the Sorrow, something that actually lead to the mountain itself.

Or the ocean.

At the ocean it would be easy to determine the right course, only hard to keep it once back in the forest.

Why oh why was there so many trees in the way, making finding one's way much harder.

Maybe swallowing the pride and ask for direction was the best course of action after all. But no, not yet! There was still the small possibility that there could be something ahead, something small that would make finding the way easy. Or maybe an obvious path.

Well, as they say, the hope is the last thing that leaves every living being, only sad that the first thing isn't pride.

Chapter twentytwo.

Dee, Groll and Tadao made the climb from the ravine up to the forest above without any incidents. Looking back, the only hard part was rounding the salient cliff. The rest of the way it was just a normal path, except from it being very steep, which most normal path's are not, at least not that steep, and not very often. Dee had no problems with the slope, but Tadao sounded like a male horse in the middle of the mating process, and of course, Groll was not affected by it at all, since he once again was riding on Dee's shoulder.

As they reached the top Dee expected Groll to return down to the ravine again, but he didn't

show any signs of wanting to do so. Instead she asked Groll:

“We need to cross the ravine and follow the coastline back north to the harbour camp, do you know where we can find a crossing?”

“No crossing” he said, “only way is to go back to the mountain and cross before the Sorrow begins.” he continued somewhat unfocused on his own words.

“To the mountain?” Tadao asked a bit frustrated. “That would be at least a twenty day walk without food, water or protection. That is an impossible task to complete!”

“There is...” Groll started, but got interrupted by Tadao making fun of him:

“*There is always more than meets the eye, stupid human!* Yeah I know! But what is there, oh you little talking and walking piece of the creators mistake? What is here that does not meet the eye?”

“Trees...” Dee answered, almost mumbling to herself... “Trees are what does not meet the eyes at first, because there are so many of them!”

Both Groll and Tadao looked at her and did not understand what she meant. It probably showed in the expression in their faces because Dee continued:

“Either we climb a tree, taking the branches across the ravine, or we try to tumble over a tree to create a bridge over...”

“Not bad for a human...” Groll said, rather impressed.

“I know,” Dee answered with a smile, “you know, there is always more than meets the eye!”

Both Groll and Dee laughed. Tadao however, did not. He felt like he was not a part of their team, and sought any and all means to win over Dee to his side.

“Shouldn’t you crawl back to the ravine already?” he asked Groll in a very short tone.

“Not yet” Groll answered to Dee’s unexpected satisfaction. “I will follow you a while longer!”

They walked along the ravine all day, looking for a tree to climb, or possibly a tree that the three of them was able to overthrow. There was a clear tension in the group and not much was said. Close to nightfall Groll took tone, they hadn’t eaten anything the entire day and might as well set shelter in daylight.

“Take your hawk and go find some wood to make fire!” he commanded Tadao, “and Dee, would you be so kind to gather some roots for us? I’ll show you where to dig.” he said to Dee in a much warmer tone.

“I’ll go a bit further down the ravine to see what else I can find to eat. We’ll set up camp here for the night!” he said, pointing at a big rock where the moss actually hadn’t taken over everything. After showing Dee how to find the roots, he continued a bit further and before Groll came back, Tadao returned with some sticks and pieces of wood. Nothing near the pieces Groll had provided when they still was at the bottom of the ravine.

It was hard to get a fire going, but after a while, they had created a small fire, and Dee had provided a great pile of various roots, not knowing what to do with them, so they lay by the fire waiting for Groll to return.

That night they had roasted roots, Groll turned out to be a real master chef! After their meal Groll constructed warm and soft beds to both Dee and Tadao, even if he planted some quite large

rocks in Tadao's bed, and had a good laugh when Tadao exploded when he found them. Just before Dee fell asleep the for the third night in a row out in the wild, she thought of her dad, how worried he must be for her. She longed to get back to him. She thought of Rick, her dear brother, and that she would never see him again. And of Groll, this strange little creature. He was quite something. Exactly what, she could not say, but she had a good feeling about him, despite his grumpy side.

The night passed without any incidents.

By dawn Groll woke them with fresh pieces of bread. They tasted lovely. The best bread Dee had ever tasted.

They quickly got on their feet when Groll said that he had found a passage over, and only a ten minute walk from their camp a tree had grown in a strange way, creating a passage from one side to the other. Well on the other side they started to walk backwards towards the ocean, keeping a little to the north all the time.

Tadao was walking in front with his hawk on the shoulder, and he made a sudden stop signing to the others to follow his example. They all stood quite, careful not to move. Dee got cold chills down her spines, was it another werewolf?

They could all hear something approach.

Chapter twentythree.

The witch looked out the small window. The only thing visible was the blood moon. The chains was chafing on both wrists, ankles and around the neck. Standing up for an infinite amount of time had it's toll on the body. Knowing the days was counted already from the start, almost no one had left captivity of the vampires with their breath still in their body. Maybe one or two black witches, but never a grey, and definitely not a white.

The benefits of being a grey witch was that you could use the entire spectra of the life essence but breaching the golden rule of never use it for your own benefit. As long as you didn't cross the line and used it against the creation, then you would be a black witch.

For ages there had only been grey witches, with a few black one's along the way, it was only in the beginning there was still white witches. Could be that the white witches needed guidance from the creator and nowadays, the creator lived on only as a belief and something that people cared for mostly by tradition. There was very few actual followers of the creator left.

"Probably what happens when you don't show!" the witch thought, longing to see the silvermoon instead of the blood moon. There was something doomful over the red moon, whilst the silvermoon gave hope.

Trying to keep sane, the witch again repeated the amount of days and nights in captivity, seventy six days, seventyseven night, feeling unsure if the count had been added from yesterday.

Probably.

Thinking back to the night of the capture, remembering it with remorse. So many lives lost for one witch. So unnecessary. So horrible. What a feast for the vampires it had been. So sure that

none would survive, the witch almost crossed the line to become a black witch, but in the end, it wouldn't have mattered, so the line was still uncrossed.

Not that it mattered anymore. Should there be an afterlife, there would most likely be a suiting punishment waiting. The last seventy-oh, what was it again, seventyseven? The last seventy-something nights had made any possibility of a decent afterlife disappear to never return again. But enough is enough. Now there would not be any more suffering, at least not for others, the only suffering left that this witch was the cause of would be it's own. No doubt! And what a suffering.

The stage had passed where the thoughts "I'm lucky if I survive another night" was expressed. Now it was more like "I'm lucky if this is my last night".

The vampire elder was not a gentle host, nor very generous. But the normal basic feelings like hunger, getting sleepy and feeling pain was since long gone.

The body was in survival state, struggling to keep the heart beating and keep the lungs inflating with fresh air. Or rather, as fresh air as there would be in a cold and misty dungeon.

The little energy that could be retrieved from the sun was effectively blocked each morning as the entire castle was sealed with sun blocking drapes, and the dirty drinking water and old pieces of bread contained just enough energy to keep the body alive, nothing more.

The witch knew that as long as the food was poor, there was still time and death did await shortly. But once the vampires started to server food rich with energy to rebuild the body, than their feast was not long away, and death was nearby.

There was the usual noise by the dungeon door, the key clicking in the locking mechanism, the chains and the metal bars removed, the crying from the door when it was awakened from its dormant sleep, only to be closed minutes later.

What kind of meal had they prepared today? Water from the moat or from the sewer? Bread with white, green or blue mold?

There was a plate put on the table to the left, almost out of reach, but it did not sound as empty as it used to.

Since the left eye was brutally beaten and still swollen, the witch had make an extra effort to see what was on the plate.

Oh no! Hot, steaming, roasted lamb with potatoes and sauce. A weird thing, best cooks was vampires, and they could not even enjoy the food. It was soon time. Soon the last meal. Might as well enjoy it while it lasts.

Chapter twentyfour.

Even with restraints, it is hard to move a werewolf. It is like pushing a big rock upstream in a river. It's a good thing that the mouth is secured, otherwise they would all be a head shorter and maybe miss an arm or a leg.

They pushed the beast in front of them, aiming southeast to get closer to home and closer to the ocean at the same time.

Since it was hard to move the beast in the heavy terrain of the forest, they figured that it would be easier closer to the ocean where the trees stood more scattered. But they had to find a good compromise between scattered trees and easier to move and still having forest protection from the sun. But their main focus had to be getting the beast back to the castle, and the commander was fully prepared to push their own safety limits close to the edge to make that happen as fast as possible. He had ordered no rest and movement around the clock.

At daybreak after their first night in transit they reached the shoreline, but their hopes that it would be easier to move the beast turned to disappointment, since it now, without fear for its life, tried to ally with the sun and constantly tried to move in the direction of the water so its captures would be more exposed to the sun. The behaviour suggested intelligence and calculated behaviour, but the truth is that all werewolves, even if they had intelligence and full awareness, were beings driven primarily by instinct. As this was not clear to the commander, he tried to reason with his prisoner, which of course did not change the situation at all.

At a particularly difficult passage when all, including the werewolf, had to focus on where they put their feet down, the beast took a leap of chance and moved straight out towards the sea and after only a few steps, it was out in the open sun. The vampires were close by, but could not stop it from making a full exit of the protective forest into the sunbathing cliffs. As one of the vampires took a leap after it, still covered in the protective clothing, the beast turned and got a lucky hit on the vampire with some strange waving of its front paws, causing it to lose its balance, since its hands were linked to its feet. The end result was a fallen werewolf on the ground, and a vampire with the skin exposed to direct sun. If the vampire had eaten recently, that would not have been a pleasant experience, but not lethal as it was in this case. It was very long since they all had eaten, and the sun dried the vampire in less than a second, and all that was left in the pile of the protective clothing was dust, slowly spreading in the wind.

With the beast on the ground, it was no match for the others to secure their prisoner without risking the same faith as their kinsman. The commander was glad that he in the last second decided not to leave anyone behind to search for her. Should this continue, it would be very difficult to secure the transport of the beast back to the castle.

As they had secured the beast, the commander saw something by the water. It was a creation made of wood, he had never seen anything like it. Obviously man made. It looked as if it was part of some mechanical machinery, but had gotten severed from the rest, floating free for a while before ending up here, crashing into the sharp graphite cliffs. No sign of any humans, no bodies, not a single trace. Only the wreckage.

They continued through the forest, slowly, too slow if you asked the commander. This would take forever.

Chapter twentyfive.

The three of them (four if you count the hawk) stood still, completely quiet. Something was definitely coming towards them, it was still too early to say what it was, but by the sounds, it was

large, or many smaller things. They could not make out the exact sounds yet, but here and there there was something that sounded like a voice, and not a very friendly or pleased voice. Still most of the sound was breaking sticks and bushes protesting as something went through them with force.

Dee dared not to breath. It was almost like she was back at the path in the middle of the werewolves. Only this time her mind wasn't as calm. It was like she had something to lose. Which she've had then as well, but somehow this was different.

The source kept coming closer, and the closer it got, the more clear the words got. Dee tried to identify them. Was it Vampirski? No, it didn't sound like that, or did it? Still hard to say, the words was polluted by all the other sounds.

The three (four) of them still hadn't moved, there was no where to hide, only behind a tree, but it was not a very good protection, so they collectively hoped that whatever, or whoever was the cause of these sounds would pass them and that they would stay undetected.

Obviously that didn't happen. Before they knew it, the saw an old lady coming through a big thicket. She looked equally surprised to see others in the woods, as the three of them was to see an old lady in the forest. Alone as it seemed. Made no sense whatsoever.

The mutual surprise caused an awkward silence that no one wanted to break, so for a long while they just stood there, all of them.

The first who broke the fragile moment was Dee:

"Are you a beggar?" she asked since it was the only logical explanation to an old lady walking alone without any kind of protection. Besides, there was something familiar about her, so she could be a beggar that had passed through the village at some point and she didn't carry any packing of any kind. Typical beggars.

"A beggar?" she asked, a little confused. "No, not a beggar. Only passing through, I don't mean you no harm."

"It is mutual." Tadao answered. "Are you alone?"

"Yes!" she answered short, apparently not wanting to continue the conversation.

Then Groll muttered. "Typically a human, alone in the forest!"

The woman was looked at Groll as if she hadn't seen him at first, there on Dee's shoulder. Her whole expression and body language and face changed in an instant. Dee could not tell if it was because she was trying to process Groll's appearance or if she found his muttering offensive or if it was something completely different. She was hard to read.

"And the three of you?" she asked after a while. "Where are you heading, if I might ask?"

"First towards the ocean, then up north, to my villages harbour camp." Dee answered truthfully.

"Up north?" she said thoughtfully, as if it disturbed her plans. "Me too. You mind if I join you?"

Dee was surprised of her direct question and straightforwardness.

"You might as well" Groll answered with a big sigh and then muttered to himself "great, another one..."

The expression in the womans face changed again, not sure if she should reply on the insult or let it pass by and pretend like it didn't happen.

The four (five) started to walk again, nobody said anything.

Chapter twentysix.

The witch expected the next meal at any moment now. And even if the past days had been filled with delicious meals, and it only pointed to one possible outcome, the meals were actually very enjoyable.

There it was, the familiar scrapes with the locking mechanism. The mere sound activated the taste buds and made them almost vibrate of expectations. The vampire chefs had thought them well.

But when the doors opened, there was not the ordinary guard bringing in the meal. There were two other guards, armed with some kind of strange sword with two blades instead of one, and the edges was black as a contrast to their ordinary weapons that always was shiny and spotless. These blades looked very dirty in a weird way, almost like they had been laying in the fire for too long.

The two guards, did not pay much attention to the prisoner, nor the comfort of the prisoner, they released the chains from the hooks on the wall and attached them to small weights instead. Then pushed the prisoner in front of them as if they were trying to get sheep into a fold or a horse into a stable.

Every inch of the witches body was aching. It had been a lot of days without being able to move more than a little bit, and now, there was a kind of tumbling march through endless corridors and stairs leading both up and down, with chains and not to mention the extra weight. Either the castle was much bigger than the witch expected, or they took an extra long walk just for the fun of it.

Uncertain of how many corridors and stairs they had passed, they all of a sudden stopped in front of two gigantic doors, carved in dark oak with silver details. At first it only looked like a nice well crafted door, but as they stood there waiting, the details cleared and showed various scenes.

The witch could tell that they were crafted by someone that really loved, and took great pride in, every detail of the creation. Pure passion. The levels of detail in each scene made it look almost real, even if it was tiny. Both doors was entirely covered and there were over hundred, if not two hundred scenes on each door.

The witch wished there was more time to study the details of the doors, there was something about them, like they held a key within, hidden. But the doors opened wide to a great hall.

The hall was almost empty, except from a number of chairs along the walls.

At the far end of the hall there was a strange silhouette, the vampire master. The patron saint of the wicked. He was said to be the first of their kind. The oldest. The black witches first experiment. But he was not created as he currently appeared. About an age ago, a black witch gave him wings. The master had captured a dwarf king, and in return for his release he had gotten a small amount of pure life essence. Using that, the black witch had crafted wings on his

body, enhancing his strength, making him untouchable and an unquestioned leader of the vampire clan. He returned the favour by feasting on her, something he later regretted, but at that moment, he was completely thrilled of his newly gained powers.

There he was in his unholy appearance, in front of the witch, facing the back wall of the hall.

As the doors was shut close, the vampire elder slowly turned.

Chapter twentyseven.

It was not common to see, but this particular day a dwarf had surfaced. In the middle of the West Great Mountains, there was a small opening on the northern slope of a high peak.

The dwarves used openings like this to get fresh air down into the mines, and each air vent was carefully crafted to be invisible to the naked eye. So, if anyone had walked by, they would see a dark silhouette of a dwarf, hovering in mid air, in the middle of the steep slope, with no way up nor down. This dwarf in particular was more keen than others to get a glimpse of the world outside of the mines. Every other month, he climbed up an air vent in hopes to catch a glimpse of a sunset, or a sunrise, or maybe even the two moons. Most other dwarves protested loudly if they had to leave the underground more than once per decade. But this dwarf took every given chance to get a glimpse of the open wide. But today it was cloudy, and impossible to see anything but the clouds. Even so, the dwarf enjoyed the view. Mountain as far as the eye could see, which in a dwarves case is not very far, their eyes had adapted to underground chambers and tunnels, so they could see very sharp and wide (not to miss anything valuable) at close distance, but not very good in longer distances. A part from that, their eyes was very sensitive to light, so it was hard for them to be out in daylight, which was the reason that dwarves always wore helmets when being outside of the mines.

The dwarf stood in the air vent, enjoying the view of the creation, and the air, and dreamt away when he heard a voice approaching.

“Onkel Veron, Onkel Veron!” a young dwarf struggled up the small stairway, short of breath.

“Here, come Saculg!” he welcomed his nephew. “Come and join me to see the view!”

While Saculg caught his breath his onkel made a gesture towards the magnificent view.

“Look Saculg! These are the mountains we live in. Our home. The most wonderful roof anyone could ever ask for, and most of us does not even see it...” Veron said with a sad tone in his voice.

“Onkel, you are needed in the great hall, they ask for you, it is urgent!” Saculg said without paying attention to his onkels admiration of the land above.

Together the both of them made the steep descents climb below, back to where they came from, back to where they belonged, following various tunnels, stairways, up and down, to the left and to the right. Like all dwarves, they knew each tunnel, stair and turn by heart. Almost like the layout of their work had been coded in the blood of each individual.

It took a while to come to the great hall, the pride of the dwarf society. Here the dwarf masters had performed their greatest art, sculptures with rare stones and minerals, delicate metalwork,

massive statues of solid rock, beautifully carved thrones for each and everyone of the twelve elders, just to mention a small portion of all the beauty that was gathered here.

There was full activity in the great hall, compared to the usual stillness and respect that the hall inclined.

Veron quickly realised that this was an extraordinary event, probably caused as a reaction to some even bigger thing. But he could not figure out what it could be. But given the state in the hall, he guessed it would not be long before he knew.

“Veron, there you are! What took you so long? Have you heard?” a dwarf with long beard that swelled over his even bigger stomach approached him.

“No, what is going on?” Veron asked.

“You have been selected to carry our flag in the delegation to our province in the north.” the big bellied dwarf said. “It is a great honour for our clan, and it also mean that you will be the first king Thidas.”

“Why are we sending a delegation to the northern province?” Veron asked, a bit troubled. “Have we gotten word from them, or have we found something of importance?”

The big belly wobbled as the dwarf it was attached to snorted and stopped abruptly. “Found something of importance? When was the last time we found something we do not already have found?” The question was more rhetorical than intended to be answered. “Ages ago! I doubt there is something new that we *can* discover. And as for hearing something from the northern province, that would be the day! The most likely scenario would be if the dug a tunnel from the north that interconnected with one of our own. But they are too lazy to do that. Shame of our kinsmen they are!”

“Then why are we sending a delegation there?” Veron asked again, really not expecting a straight answer.

“Yes, why are we?” the belly-wobbling dwarf asked, again more rhetorically. “Waste of time and resources it is, mark my words, but you, my lad” he patted Veron hard on the back, “you get to great king Thidas. And *that* my friend. That is a true honour, even if he is not worthy of it.”

Veron sighed, how hard was it to get a straight answer on this place?

Chapter twentyeight.

The vampire master stood silent a long while, studying the prisoner. Then he cleared his throat addressing the witch directly.

“So.... you’ve been with us for a while now...” silent again. “How do you like... “ the vampire master was looking for words on the human language, “our....” another long silence, “hospitality?” The last word was followed by a grim laughter.

“I’ve had better!” the witch replied short and dry.

“I see...” the vampire master started to walk around with his hands behind his back, just beneath the wings. He was a truly hideous creature.

“We’ve tried to get your cooperation in a number of ways. And as you probably have concluded

yourself, my patience is wearing thin.”

The witch stood silent.

“I’ve decided to make one last try to gain your cooperation. You know what’s at stake, I do not have to explain the details to you.” the vampire’s eye studied the prisoners face carefully for each word, as if to measure the impact the words had, calculating the next move.

“I will bring in ten innocent little girls, that we have captured for you.” the vampires eye was almost glowing with pride, this plan was the best ever to set in motion.

“I know you will need four or five to do what I ask of you, maybe six. The rest will be yours to do as you please. Maybe satisfy your human lust. Or set free. So they can return home to their families.” the vampire watched as the words reached the prisoner and was absorbed by the entire being of the witch.

“All you have to do is to comply. Then they can go home.” A small silence again. “You can be a hero, saving yourself and a few of these girls. You’ll get to leave this castle unharmed by vampire hand.”

The witch still stood silent, with a boiling rage inside.

“Should you choose not to comply, I will feast tonight, and then the night after that, and the next, and the next, until there are no more of the delicious little girls left to feast on... then I will unleash my guards on you. They haven’t eaten anything in a while. So there will be many that will enjoy the things you can offer.” The vampire smiled a big wide grin. “I almost hope that you will not comply, but then again, if you do...” There was a hidden longing in the vampire master’s voice, hard to say if it was for the little girls or if it could smell the completion of their end game. To give the witch the choice to sacrifice a few to save a few, and not to have to die by the hands of the vampires, but of course, the survival mean crossing the great plains and pass the hords of the undead undetected, which was not very likely. But the vampire master had no intention of playing with open cards. Besides, he hated to lose.

He snapped his fingers and from a side door, ten girls, roughly between the ages of nine to fifteen, was brought in. All unharmed, but scare and pale, obviously not given enough to eat or drink, nor enough sunlight or sleep.

The witch hesitated.

“I expect to hear your answer within the hour!” the vampire master said, snapping his fingers again, and the prisoner was brought back to the cell where another delicious meal was waiting. But it didn’t taste good. It was spiced with defeat and abomination.

Time moved slowly and it might as well have been a full night that had passed from when the witch was locked in again until they came back to open the door.

It was a long hour to be alone with the agony.

Chapter twentynine.

The four (five) had walked all day, mostly under silence, and as the sun set, they set up another temporary camp to spend the night.

The fire was warming and Groll had, still unknown how, produced one of his wonderful breads again. They all sat around the fire, strangely calm, neither worried about the dangers that the forest hosted.

Dee could not stand the unknown any longer, she had to ask.

“So, what’s your name? And what are you doing here alone in the forest?” she asked, directed the question to the old lady.

“My name is Leola, and as for being here in the forest... “ she paused... “the short version would be that I am looking for my brother.”

“Did you travel together and he got lost?” Tadao asked.

“No, haven’t seen him in a long while. But he needs me now, and... I kind of need him as well...” Leola answered truthfully, even if it was very cryptic to the rest of them.

“What about you then?” Leola directed the question to all the others, surrounding their little campfire.

Dee was the first to answer.

“I was on my way to our harbour camp to greet my brother....” she silenced and tears filled her eyes.

Tadao continued.

“I was on the Glory, she wrecked after she was attacked by sea monsters. I am lucky to be alive, I was swept aboard and ended up meeting these two. Her brother used to be a member of the Glory crew. I didn’t know him.”

Leola then looked at Groll, he looked back at her for a long while, neither of them spoke. The only thing that anybody could hear was sobs from Dee and the sparkling from the fire.

Then Groll broke the silence.

“I’m with her.” he nodded towards Dee. “For now.”

Nothing else was said that night.

Dee had heard everything that was being said, and felt strangely revealed to hear Groll say he was with her. And in a strange way, she felt that the four of them was more connected to each other, now when they had started to talk a little.

As she was about to turn in, she thought that it was strange that they hadn’t reached the harbour camp nor the village yet, and had not seen any trace of any of the paths she knew surrounded the village. How far and how long had she been running?

Probably not that long, besides, it was a tricky terrain to maneuver, and they would probably reach the harbour camp tomorrow.

Chapter thirty.

Roy Hicks stood at the edge of the great plains. He knew that whatever he did, he should never pass through the great plains. Not unless he wanted to continue living. And he had no urge to die. Not yet anyway. The only way to pass the great plains was to go around them. Following the edge. Even so, it was a dangerous escapade, there could be undead in the outskirts of the great

plains as well. The safest thing he could do was to head back to the main trading routes and head either north or south. But he knew he was not welcome there anymore. Not ever.

He thought of what he should do next. Maybe look for a way to the Mountain Village. But the thought of living there for the rest of his life was unbearable. A horrible way of living, those Mountain Villagers. No, maybe he should try to do something that he never had heard anyone do, seek out the dwarves. Maybe they could teach him to mine and work with metal. Or maybe be their spokesperson in contact with the humans. But then again, they also had contact with the vampires. Or at least that was what the rumours said. And how would the warm blood react if the dwarves had a cold blood as their spokesperson? It would probably not be a very good scenario. Maybe go see the ocean? He had always heard about the ocean, never seen it. Yeah, the more he thought about it, the more he wanted to go see the ocean.

He turned around by old habit, to grab his few belonging in the bag, only to remember, he didn't have any belongings anymore. None. Not even clothes on his back. So he started to walk towards the ocean.

Even if he wanted to, he chose not to cross the great plains, instead he chose to take the northern way around it, in cover by the forest. A decision he later both would regret, and then be very grateful for. Had he, at that time, known that the northern way around the great plains was actually the longer, he would have selected the southern route instead, because as many already knew, Roy Hicks was rather lazy by nature.

Now Roy Hicks had no idea that the southern route was the shortest, so he turned his nose to the north and started walking.

He had never thought of it before, but walking naked was actually a very satisfying thing to do. He could feel every single change in the air, from the smallest breeze to the hot spot when passing a rock that had spent the largest part of the day sunbathing.

Of course, this new sensation of naked well being did not last very long. The first thing he noticed was that clothing stopped many of the small insects that was always around. Now they could freely land on his skin, taking a bite or just walk around to create an itch.

The second thing Roy Hicks learned about walking naked was just before it starts to rain, the air gets much cooler. Infact, it gets so much cooler that you actually start to freeze before you get wet and start to freeze even more.

The now cold Roy Hicks started to run a little, trying to find shelter faster, and hopefully to get a little warmer at the same time.

Now, for those who knew Roy Hicks, seeing him run would be such a rare occasion that most of them would lose a high stake bet on Roy Hicks not running for a month, or for the summer, or for an entire year for that matter.

The only time Roy Hicks would run, and this was common knowledge, was when the traders came back from their trade routes to the south, to see if they had brought back any barrels of Gizzy. It was rare, and they were expensive, but somehow Roy Hicks always had money to pay for a barrel of Gizzy, when just moments before, he wouldn't have a single coin to his name when people asked him to pay his debts.

Even so, he was actually running, Roy Hicks, believe it or not. But as you probably already have

figured out, a person who runs is not very likely to spot what he might be looking for, so it took Roy Hick almost an hour of running in the rain, before he found shelter beneath a large tree that had fallen down on another tree. There was even soft moss on the ground. Still dry. A good shelter.

Chapter thirtyone.

Those who claim vampires does not have feelings should have been with the vampire commander after the long struggle of bringing the beast back to their castle. What a relief, no more men down, and on top of that, the pride of accomplishing the mission.

First thing to take care of was making sure the beast was secured in the dungeon. Next item on the list was making sure that all the men got something to eat, and some rest to regain their full strength, and before he would enjoy those things himself, he would report to the master.

He expected high praise for his accomplishment, and at the same time, it felt like they still had a long way to go, especially since they had no more witch. Either they had to recruit one, or capture. But nowadays it was hard to recruit, they needed a gray witch. The black was simply not powerful enough, and a white witch would never do it. And besides, nobody had heard about a white witch in ages.

The commander made all the right turns, passing each doorway, going up and down in the stairs. The vampires remade the entire castle as they took over it, reforming it to be as sheltering as possible. Sure, there was still windows here and there, all covered with protective cloth, but despite what people believed, the vampires still needed some light. Their eyesight was good in the dark, but not *that* good. Not that any vampire ever admitted it.

He passed the magnificent door to the main hall and went straight into the commander on duties office. Stated his reasons and demanded help with the beast and a meal and rest for his men.

The commander on duty was quick and more than willing to help out. The orders was given at once and he promised to personally oversee the transferring of the werewolf to the dungeons.

Now when all that was settled, the commander turned around and walked back to the main hall doors. He stated his intention and wished an audience with the master. It didn't take long before he got his audition granted and the doors opened.

Inside there was empty as always, except the presence of the great master himself.

The commander bowed and waited to speak until spoken to.

Then he summarised his mission in a full mission report. At the end he added a personal thought.

"It's a shame we don't have the witch with us still..."

"But we do!" the master replied.

"But wasn't..."

"There is a time and place for everything, the death of the witch will come, either by our hands or in another way. I saved the witch for one purpose alone, now we have two."

The commander was well acquainted with the ways of the master and understood better than to

question him.

Just as he had left for his mission, he heard one of the other captains get the order to kill the witch and since that obviously did not happen, he had a feeling that there was one captain less by the officers banquet. A shame in a way, but also one less mouth to feed.

Speaking of which, the commander waited to be sent away so he himself could enjoy a fine meal. He wondered what options there would be on the menu this time. In particular, the commander enjoyed young people, preferably not over ten years of age. Their blood still had a fresh sourish taste, the older the humans got, the more mellow they tasted.

Chapter thirtytwo.

When Dee woke up, Leola was gone. Tadao was still sleeping (snoring) and Groll sat by the fire, poking in it and giving it more fuel. As the flames grew, it almost sounded like Groll was humming.

“Where is Leola?” Dee asked.

“You mean the filthy wizard?” Groll replied, with his usual grumpy tone.

“Huh?” Dee replied. “No I mean Leola, the old woman we met yesterday.”

“Claims she is a wizard.” Groll stated, ending the discussion before it even begun.

Dee let his word sink in. A wizard. Sounded like an awfully strange thing to claim. For several reasons. Wizards are old men. And extinct, as in no longer alive, at least not that many left, and they were in hiding. So it would be illogical to walk around in the open claiming to be a wizard. Then it hit Dee, she didn't get an answer as to her whereabouts, only that she had claimed to be a wizard.

“You didn't say where she is.” Dee pointed out to Groll.

“Oh.” he thought for a while. “She is around. Should be back in a while. Breakfast is ready soon.”

Dee looked towards Tadao, still no signs of waking up.

“What did you mean yesterday, when you said you're with me? And what made you change your mind to join instead of going back?” Dee asked Groll.

“I have my reasons. Let's just say that I need to accompany you, and make sure you have a safe return to your village, then I have business of my own to attend to.” Groll replied.

His words went straight to Dee's heart. He did care for her, this little grumpy creature.

It didn't take long before Tadao woke up, and shortly there after Leola returned.

At breakfast Dee asked Leola how it was that a Wizard was walking alone in the forest.

Tadao reacted quickly before she had time to answer, her only reaction before Tadao started to talk was a hard stare on Groll.

“A Wizard? You can't be a Wizard. Everybody knows that Wizards are great and powerful men. Not many left, and the one's that are left are living in exile or hiding.” Tadao said with his rapid tongue.

“Bah! Don't give me that prejudice crap that you've been fed along with your mother's milk.”

Leola replied.

Tadao laughed, "and I suppose you are about to tell us that there are male witches as well, right?" he looked at Leola trying to read her reaction.

"Of course there are male witches. My brother is one!" she said. "Wizards or Witches has nothing with the sex of the person practising the magic, it is the description of how they use their magic and what kind of forces they use."

Before Tadao sent his tongue loose on another sharp dance, Groll took Leola in defence.

"Right you are, my child!" he said.

Tadao was surprised by Grolls comment and silenced at once, and again, Grolls words seemed to put an end to a dialogue before it even started.

After breakfast, the four of them continued to make their way back to the harbour camp of Dee's village and just as the day before, they did not meet anything dangerous and their journey was rather uneventful.

After a few hours through rough terrain, they could see the pier of the harbour camp and it could not be more than an hour away. But something looked different, Dee thought. Could be that she was approaching from the south, rather than from the north as she was used to.

Chapter thirtythree.

Veron took his place among the rest of the clan, still unaware what had caused all this.

Everybody around him was very engaged in the delegation and opinions lay thick in the otherwise sound polluted air. Veron had hard to focus on what was going in the center.

The heads of all clans was gathered, discussing something very loudly and giving each word extra weight by supporting it with big gestures.

Come to think about it, it looked rather much like some sort of advanced, choreographed dance show without music. Veron tried to make out what they said to see if he could get some idea of what was going on.

Indeed, carrying the flag was a great honor, it meant that the delegation was his responsibility, and he was also the first that was expected to greet king Thidas when they arrived, and thus, bring forth what ever news or message they carried.

So far all he could understand was something about the order of the clans, if there was one clan that was of a greater value than the other, or something like that.

All the heads tried to explain why their clan was of the most value to the entire dwarf society, and what they could provide that no one else could. Some of them bragged about all the treasures their clan possessed, making them far more valuable than all the others. Some of them tried to bring forth the diplomatic skills or trading skills or their influence in the vampire castle.

It all seemed to be some sort of power demonstration, as if...

The Grand Master! Where was the Grand Master? Veron could not see him anywhere, not on his throne, nor among the heads of clans. Had something happened to the Grand Master? Shure, he was older than most, almost three ages, but every healthy dwarf was expected to live for

about five ages.

Was there anything else that held him? Something so important that he could not be here now, something that held his attention elsewhere?

But then again, why all this talk about who of the heads of the clans that was the most important? And again, even if the Grand Master was needed elsewhere, why send a delegation to the northern province?

He turned to the dwarf closest to him.

“What is all the buzz about?”

“Don’t know for sure, but I think it is something about the election of a new Grand Master...”

“Where is our Grand Master now?” Veron asked, trying to get a clearer picture.

“Some said he died, some say he just walked out of here to the great plains, saying he should not return...”

That was an unexpected answer. But the election of a new Grand Master was reason enough to send a delegation to king Thidas. For several reasons, both because he was the head of the northern province, and he also was the brother of Grand Master Phidas, so from a respect perspective, king Thidas had the right to know.

Dead? Not very likely, but plausible. Walked out of here to the great plains, not very likely, but then again, crazy enough to be true. Grand Master Phidas was known for being spiritual ever since he found the life essence. And Veron had over the years gotten the feeling that he regretted his alliance with the vampire master.

But the internal politics of the clans and the outside world alliances had never interested Veron. Maybe he should have paid more attention to it.

Veron tried to focus his attention on the heads of the clans again. Still only discussing who was the most suited for the position as the new Grand Master, no focus on when to send the delegation or what message to send to king Thidas.

Chapter thirtyfour.

The doors opened to the prisoners cell and the vampire master entered majestically. He watched the witch who was caught in the middle of a bite of a big chunk of lamb, roasted to perfection with different kinds of herbs and vegetables.

“So... Grime, old friend! Have you made your decision yet? Will you save your own life and the life of four or five little innocent girls?”

Grime looked up at the vampire master, still chewing on the lamb. He figured that even if he pretended he would obey, he would not get this kind of food anymore. If he declined the offer, he would most likely be a special on today’s menu.

“What kind of guarantees do I have?” he asked the vampire master.

“Non other than my word.” the vampire answered.

“And you want me to transfer the life essence of a few of these girls to you?” Grime asked.

“That’s right...” the vampire answered.

“What are you going to do with that life essence?” Grime demanded to know.

“I will store it inside of me, letting someone more powerful than you mold me to perfection.”

“And who would do such a thing?”

“Your sister....” the vampire answered.

His words felt like a hard punch in the stomach. No, that could not be true. She would never do that!

“You are lying” he yelled to the vampire, but the vampire only laughed.

“Maybe I am, but then again, maybe I’m not. My word is all you got, I will let you go, and the girls that are not needed for this procedure. You may take it and trust me, but then again, you never know if I will keep it.”

With those words, the vampire master exited the cell and commanded one of the guards to go back in the cell and chain the prisoner.

If agony had tormented Grime before, it had grown tenfold now. Would his own sister be in alliance with the vampires? It could not be! If she was, then why go through all trouble? Why not come directly and speak with him?

It was a trick, it had to be! The vampires are not to be trusted, Grime already knew that. And he would not proceed with the extraction of the life essence. He could not trust that the others or himself was going to be set free.

He had to work out some kind of plan. A liberation plan. He probably needed help from the outside and the only person he could think of was his sister. But what if that part was actually true? What if his sister was indeed in collaboration with the vampire overlord?

Then his attempt would fail never the less.

If not...

A thought was born i Grime’s mind, a thought he kept well hidden, just in case there was someone powerful enough to know mindreading or mind control. He had to be very careful with each step. It just might work. Maybe. Yes, it was plausible he could pull it off.

First step of course was to stay alive. And healthy. He needed time. How could he negotiate for more time?

First piece of the puzzle. This would be a complex thing to pull off. And the more he thought about it, the more likely it was that he would succeed. If he was not deceived by his own hope. That was also a factor to calculate.

But maybe, just maybe. He would have to sacrifice one or two of the girls.

May the creator greet them well in the afterlife.

Chapter Thirtyfive.

Roy Hicks stayed under the trees the rest of the day, looking out at the rain and felt kind of sorry for himself.

In a way, he fully understood why they had taken everything from him and left him out here, but on the other hand, he was still a young man, and like everybody else he made mistakes and

tried to learn from them. Sure, he had cheated his way through life on many occasions, but he still thought his punishment was undeserved.

But she was worth it. Every single second, and every questionable action that lead up to that point. Now he could live on those few precious moments for the rest of his life.

Chills went down his spine as he thought about it, and his body reacted with arousal as he thought about it.

Even if he easily could say, and mean it, stealing from others is always wrong. Never the less, the thrill he felt when he took the mayor's key, and the power he felt when using it, unlocking all the places other people could only dream about visiting, seeing things no one would believe if he told people about it.

When he took the key he was not aware of her, not at all. He passed many secret passages, doors and rooms. Opened some of them, took a peek at the hidden wealth and treasures of the city.

In one room he saw the jaws of a dragon, still filled with teeth. To Roy this meant that the legends of the dragons became history, not legends.

In another room there was a most beautiful crystal forest in miniature. Complete trees, rocks, moss, leaves, sticks, all made of delicate and colorful, perfectly mimicked, crystals. Below the creation there seemed to flow a glowing river of something he did not know what it was, that gave the entire forest illumination. In the crystal forest he could see tiny creatures, both animals and what seemed to be people, all alive. The room was large and the forest would easily cover twice the space of the central city square.

Another room was filled with so much gold, silver and gemstones that the mighty dwarf masters would be filled with envy for the rest of their long lives, and no matter how much they plundered the mountains of it's treasures, they would ever be able to gather even half the riches of this chamber.

Roy Hicks spent almost two full days and nights in the gigantic underground city exploring before he found the room with her.

A more beautiful creature had never existed in the creators good world.

Her skin was light green, almost shimmering, and her eyes was large and deep blue. Her red hair stood wild from her head and swirled down her shoulders in a lively dance.

She had not a single piece of clothes on her body and oh, the goodness of the creator, she needed none.

Roy Hicks did not know what to do, maybe for the first time in his life (but not the last), so he just stood there, quietly staring for a very long time and it was not until she laughed (this perfect, pearling, giggling laugh) and waved at him to come into the room that he actually could do anything else than just stand there.

As he thought about it, the time he spent in that room was the happiest twenty hours of his life. They didn't talk much, infact, he remembered every single word they exchanged.

First he said:

“Uh... hmm... ehr... I... eeh..”

Then she laughed at him again, and the next time he opened his mouth it was to say:

“I... eh.... who.... I mean.... like.... uhm...”

Then she just looked at him with her big blue eyes and he felt like he drowned in an eternity.

There was nothing sexual about her, even if she was completely naked, there was only this feeling of complete happiness, perfect harmony, inner peace, stillness and joy.

She enjoyed his company, somehow he knew that, and come to think of it, the actually never talked... strange... it felt like they talked, they exchanged so much... but what was it? Not words, more like.... feelings... yes, that's it, they exchanged feelings...

And the last thing he said to her, just before being dragged out of the room by the guards was:

“I... think.... I.... love..... “ then he was hit in the head by one of the guards and did not remember anything else until he found himself in front of the mayor.

Chapter thirtysix.

Veron put on his finest clothes, then slowly, with the respect it demanded, applied the thin but strong silver plated armour. Last, but certainly not least, he took his helmet on. The other dwarves in the delegation would be protected by the shield bearers, but as the flag bearer he would go in front of them all, unprotected. Solely dependant on his own skills as a fighter, which Veron knew was limited, no, rephrase that to *very* limited. Should they get attacked by either humans, vampires or werewolves he would most likely be the first to fall victim of the other parties aggressivity. He was also the one who had the responsibility to negotiate if the need for it arose. Veron was not overly enthusiastic about his duties, but more than overly thrilled to be able to go to the surface, to walk up there, see all the beauty it offered. Even if he was a dwarf and belonged beneath the surface he had a constant longing for the world above. The fresh air. The sunlight. The colours. The softness. The beauty. So even if he himself thought he was insane for accepting this mission, he thought it worth the risks to get the chance to be up there, at least for the duration of the delegation. Should all go well he would return here. Maybe advance a degree or two for completing this mission, but he would still be stuck down here. Below the mountain. As he exited his chamber Saculg joined him as he walked towards the great hall. Saculg was very excited, he wanted to join the delegation, but he knew he was too young, too inexperienced. He bombarded Veron with a thousand questions, questions Veron would not know how to answer until he had returned and completed the task.

So mostly he opened his mouth to capture some air to try and give a reply or ask Saculg to ask him again when he returned, but he never got a chance to say anything before a new question had been raised. As they reached the great hall Saculg was lost in the throng of the lively preparations.

Veron reported ready and got his orders, his negotiation tables (which is the amounts he should offer in the given situations and how much he could offer to raise the payment if he was asked to do it) and the rules of engagement. As always the negotiation table was: get as much as possible for as little as possible and the rules of engagement was: none. Do not engage with any other species until absolutely necessary. Take the long way around if possible. No ransom would

be paid for their release, it was cheaper to send a new delegation.

Veron sighed. Even if dwarves are known to be greedy and cheap, it was hard to hear that the value for his life was almost nothing to the others. They would probably grieve more over the loss of the silver flagstand and the beautiful flag, than over the lost life of the dwarf that was carrying it. Veron wondered if the greed was a trait of their kind, or a product of their way of life. Living isolated under ground must have its toll when it comes to interacting with others and not only among themselves.

Well, Veron hoped that he should not need to use the rules of engagement nor his limited negotiation table. He played with the thoughts of putting in his personal treasures, if it could possibly save their lives, but he knew that it would mean political suicide and most likely he would be excluded from the clan and be forced to move to the abandoned parts of the mines, along with the other non-worthy dwarves. A dwarf that cared so little for richness and wealth was a danger to the whole dwarf society, he knew that, but at the same time... wasn't it worth more to be alive?

The horn sounded. Time to get going. Helmet on. Gear secured. Flagstand ready. Flag attached. Now the climb towards the outside and the sunlight.

Chapter thirtyseven.

It was truly a sight for sore eyes, this little man, with long beard and wild hair sticking out beneath the helmet. The man was not taller than a human child at the age of five or so, but the whole appearance gave a different impression. The determined look on his face, his strong arms and legs that looked like they had done their fair share of hard physical work. One underarm alone was almost as wide as a grown mans fist, and the hands seemed too big compared to the rest of the body, but they looked strong and could probably easily break a bone or two in your own hand, if you were to shake his hand while saying something that would deeply offend him. He was dressed in the finest fabrics and in some lights it seemed that the fabric itself was shimmering.

It was easy to see that this little man was not used to move in the forest at all. Studying his movements with only that as a reference, you could see that he was working hard to get his body moving, and the effort could easily translate to a great speed in what ever terrain. But looking at the environment around him, it seemed that the effort for three steps only took him one forward. More will and power than agility it seemed.

This was typical for dwarves in general, and it was no difference for Grand Master Phidas. Or former Grand Master Phidas. Now he was only Master Phidas, or no, scratch that, only Phidas, and from the dwarf community hardly worth his dwarf name.

But as strange as it may seem, this dwarf was more at peace with himself than he had been for many, many years now, almost and age, but who was counting?

In fact, for each step he put behind him, Phidas felt his burden easen.

He was not sure what he could do, one dwarf (not that any dwarf ever should be

underestimated, they are a resourceful race) do against the entire vampire clan? As if the odds was not uneven from the start, the life essence he traded years ago had most likely been used to enhance them in some way. Or giving one a greater power. Either way, he had the element of surprise on his side. He only had to make it to the great fields, cross them without getting consumed by the undead, find his way through the eastern forest and locate their stronghold and then attack some how. With something. One dwarf. Against several vampires. In their homebase. "Madness!" he muttered to himself as he walked on, breathing heavily.

"Utterly, pure madness!"

He did not have any clue as to what he was supposed to do once he got there. He just knew that he had to go. Not for the dwarves. No, at this stage he had stopped caring what was best for the dwarves. Now he thought of what was best for the entire world. All beings. And at himself. This was his chance to repay for the benefits he had given the vampires. Repay for all the help he had given them. Even if it would cost him his precious life in the process. It most likely would. Hopefully not too soon though. He hoped he would reach his destination, no, rephrase that, his destiny, and make some serious damage before his last breath.

Damned be the softness of the ground! He longed to feel the hard rock beneath his feet again. But he had to pass this, overcome it. Rise above it somehow.

Chapter thirtyeight.

With Groll still sitting on her shoulder, Dee approached what had once been the harbour camp of her village. Tadao and Leola waited a bit behind for an unclear reason.

What ever had happened here must have happened quick and swift. The fence that used to run around the camp lay useless and scattered on the ground. All buildings and huts had signs of heavy violence. Everywhere there were arrows, both silver headed, iron headed and stone headed. Looked like they had used all they got to defend themselves. Did not look like they made it though.

There were no bodies in the entire camp, or rather, what was left of the camp. What ever that meant Dee could only imagine. She knew that there was both werewolves and vampires nearby. Neither Dee or Groll said anything. Groll did not even mutter. They both understood that whatever had taken place here had been quick and without mercy. Even so, the lack of bodies, both human and from the attackers, puzzled Dee.

They did not spend more than ten or fifteen minutes in what was once the harbour camp. There was simply no point.

The four continued in silence. Dee was worried. If the harbour camp looked like this, how did her village look? Had they made it?

It was easy to follow the path now, and after a short while they came to the point where Dee left the path to rescue herself just a few days ago. Yet it felt like a lifetime ago.

It's odd how a person can change in a short timeframe when exposed to different circumstances and environments. She was still sixteen, but she felt like she had aged and matured a lot. The

foolish decision to run away without permission felt wrong, yet it was the single most important decision to the huge changes she had gone through the last days.

Meeting Groll, Tadao and his bird, learning that Rick was gone, meeting Leola. Learning that things might not always be as she has been thought.

Being on her own for the first time in her life, without her father or Rick. Spending time outside in the horrible world, that just did not seem so horrible, and yet even more horrible than she ever had imagined before.

She had been close to the evil forces of this world, but not yet seen exactly how evil they were, she could only imagine from what she had seen now.

About half way between the harbour camp there started to be traces of battle again. First alone, stray arrows. The closer they got, the more signs there were. Damages on trees, large areas where the ground was a total mess, moss ripped off by the roots, revealing bare dirt and roots from the surrounding trees and rocks that had not seen daylight in ages. Large chunks of bushes was ripped apart and the familiar surroundings of the path had turned to a horrid wasteland.

Completely unrecognisable. Yet the path itself seemed fairly untouched.

Dee knew that just in just a little while they would reach the buffer tower, the same she had been sneaking around just a few days ago, to stay undetected.

The buffer tower was a manned tower and acted as an early alarm system if there should ever come an attack from the ocean.

The tower reported with horns back to the village. Should the horn sound the guards in the village had about ten minutes to prepare for a rapid attack, maybe fifteen if the front did not advance quicker than walking pace.

In the evening the horns was replaced by a fire, and one guard had the task to constantly observe it. In case of an attack the tower would put the fire out by throwing it down on the hay bales that were spread around like a low wall. This way the tower would see the attackers better and the village would know when something was wrong.

But the hay bales was still intact, or rather, no one had tried to light them up, but they looked like a mess. It was almost like a horde had ran over it, leaving hay all over the place, and the once so tidy hay bales beaten beyond recognition.

It was hard for Dee to see, she knew that this meant that there had been an attack on the village itself as well. That also meant that anything could have happened to her father. She dared not think of all the things that might have happened, she just hurried down the path towards the village. She could not stand the thought of having lost her father as well. That pain would be unbearable. The others had a hard time of keeping up with Dee. Only Groll made her company in the front, and for once, he was completely quiet, as if he understood the agony inside her, and let her be alone with her thoughts, without intervening.

Chapter thirtynine.

Veron enjoyed this, the outdoors. At first, or rather, still, it was hard for the eyes to adapt to the sunlight. Too bright, and Veron was grateful for the tiny openings in his helmet. He figured that this applied to all of the members of the delegation.

Being used to work with various heavy tools to conquer the mountain and reveal its secrets, carrying the silver flagstand was a physical relief. Like an ant that normally carried sticks back to the hive that suddenly got hold of a tiny leaf. Or a straw. Come to think of it, more like a straw. And all this fresh air... If the creator ever created an afterlife for the dwarves, the air in the mines of the afterlife was like this. Fresh. With a nice breeze. And all kinds of strange and exotic fragrances. It was almost like being reborn.

From what Veron could hear from the rest of the tightly shielded delegation members, they did not share his enthusiasm of being on the ground instead of under it.

He sighed, he was definitely born in the wrong body, or in the wrong era. Maybe in the future it would be accepted for dwarves to walk the world as an equal to man. But if he would do it now, he would be an outcast to both mankind and the entire dwarf society. Even among the outcasts of the dwarves. There was simply no place for a dwarf somewhere else, except in the mines. Someone from the back yelled at him to slow down, but Veron just continued. As long as he held the flag, they had to follow him, he led the way, he set the pace, he decided when to rest, when to walk, talk, eat and sleep. And the responsibility was his alone.

The first night Veron had them camp in the middle of the forest, close to a rill. And as they sat by the campfire that night, one of the delegation members started to hum. Now, the dwarves was widely known for their creativity and their skill with rocks and metal. They were not especially famous for their singing capabilities. Never the less, they had a traditional tune, The Hymn of the Dwarves, and it was something every dwarf knew by heart and once every now and then, one of them started to sing it. In fact, this was their only tune. That is why everybody knew it. Veron hardly slept that night. He was too thrilled to be on the surface.

The next morning they took off again. It must be a pretty impressive sight to see the delegation pass. One silver flag in the front, then a squad of five silver shields long and three silver shields wide. On top they were only shielded by their helmets. For now. Should they need, the dwarves in the middle could add additional shielding on top, but they now carried them on their backs to save their strength to when they needed it. IF they would need it.

Most other flagbearers would lead the delegation by night, and rest in hiding by day, so the sun would not blind their eyes. But Veron liked the daylight and would enjoy it as much as he could, no matter what the others thought. Even though he knew that it put them in greater risk in running into others, except maybe vampires, but that was not the greatest of his concerns.

This journey was expected to take at least twenty days. And the visit in the northern province at least two, and then the return trip. This meant that Veron had a total of 42 days in freedom from the mines. And he was going to make each of those 42 days worth while.

He had studied the maps of the known world so he knew about what to expect and where to expect it. He had memorised all possible camps, good places to rest where they could find water and prepare their meals. Where they could stop for reprovisioning. He had planned a route for them that would take them through as varied environment as possible.

In all honesty, this was probably not the safest route, but it was the route that would enrich Veron as much as possible. He wished to see the different types of forests, see all kinds of landscapes, follow free, running water, watch it float still and steady, see cliff formations and pass by other mountains. Yes, he was still a dwarf, and he loved the mountains, no doubt about that.

Even if the biggest part of him wished for an eventless journey, a small part of him wished for an adventure. Something that he would remember for the rest of his life. Something that would redefine him as a person, maybe even earn him some respect among the other species. Or change the way the others looked at dwarves entirely.

In a way, both parts of him would be right. The journey to the northern province was rather uneventful.

Chapter forty.

The vampire master entered the room, swinging the door so hard that it almost broke against the wall. Grime almost crapped his pants as he was far from reality in his daydreams that he invoked to get time going in this terrible chamber.

From the grin on the vampire masters face, Grime could tell that his rapid entrance had the desired effect on the prisoner.

“Well, Grime...” the vampire master looked at the prisoner with an expression that was hard to read, either it was concealed hope or masked abomination, or something completely different that Grime could not interpret.

“Have you made your decision yet? Do you want to stay alive, save some of the girls and get out of here in one piece, or have you chosen the high road, trying to serve some divine idea in a misguided attempt to try and save this world as it is?” Grime felt the impatience in the masters voice. Maybe he could use it somehow.

“Well, first I want to know exactly what it is that you ask of me, even if I have my suspicions. And then I will need time to plan how I should proceed to reach optimal result, maybe even gather some things that can not be found here. Only then I can present what solution I am capable of providing. Should you accept it, even if it does not meet your requirements completely, we can reach an agreement, but I need to have some insurance and will not act in good faith alone.”

Grime hoped that this answer would provoke the master and in doing so, maybe reveal more than he intended in the first place.

“Let’s be clear on one point, Grime, I will not ever give you any insurance, this is not negotiable whatsoever, either you do what I ask you to do, or you will die, simple as that.”

“What is it, exactly, that you ask of me?” Grime asked, pretending to be a bit scared, this just might work.

“I want to be able to reproduce. Our numbers decrease in a concerning rate. Should this continue, we as a species will not survive.” the vampire master answered, swallowing the bait, as Grime had hoped. That was just the piece of information he needed.

“Reproduce? You mean mating and having children? That is something beyond me! I am not nearly that powerful, I don’t think anyone are!” Grime answered, pretending to be terrified.

“But I have something different in mind.” the vampire master replied, falling for Grimes theatrical performance.

“When humans mate, they share a small piece of the life essence from the mother and the father, merging it into one inside the mothers wound. There it matures, collecting energy from everywhere. Balance is kept.” Now the vampire master smiled confident, “should we mate the same way, our lack of blood would keep the baby from growing and gathering energy, so there would be no new life.” Triumphant he continued. “Now, what I have in mind would not only shorten the time to create new life, but it would also mean that we would be able to reproduce exponentially. But before I say more, I need you to prove yourself to me. You can do so in one of two ways, or both if you prefer. Either you rape one of the girls that I have chosen from you, or you kill her. Either way you will cause her pain.”

Now Grime did not act, he was terrified for real. The colour left his face and in no time he was almost as pale as the vampire master himself.

“I... eh... is it really necessary? What if I need all ten girls to perform what you ask of me?” he heard himself say.

“In that case I will capture some more. Bring her in! Let the prisoner loose!” he ordered and a guard immediately freed Grime and another brought in one of the girls. She looked young, maybe twelve or so...

Grimes stomach reacted and emptied itself right there and then. He felt awful.

The vampires left and locked the door. Grime was left alone with this scared little girl, still hearing the harsh laughter of the vampire master as he walked down the hallway outside the door.

Chapter fortyone.

As they approached the outer fence of the village Dee could tell that there was something out of the ordinary.

There were a lot few guards patrolling the fence, but even so, the village looked unharmed from here. Could be that the elders had sent out everybody that could fight outside of the fences, after all, they had walked through a battlefield on their way here.

She tried to get one of the guards attention, but he just walked away in the other direction, so their only option was to circle around to the main entrance to the village.

On their way around Dee got more and more anxious, the village did not look anything near the one she left a few days ago. She barely recognize it.

At the gates she asked for her father. She had a bad feeling, did not recognize any of the guards.

As one of the guards went inside to check with the active commander she asked the remaining guard what had happened.

He looked at her as if he didn't understand the question.

"What happened here? We passed what seems to be the remainder of a battlefield on our way here. And the Harbour camp is wiped out." Dee tried again.

The guard looked strangely at her again.

"Yes, we took the harbour camp when we got here, then we took this vil..." he muted abruptly as his commanding officer came out of the booth. The commander had a distinct look on his face, and Dee did not like it.

"This man you ask for... your father..." the commander said.

"He died in the attacks... There is nothing for you here... I suggest you leave right away... We have no use for a little girl, an old woman, a.... what ever that thing is... How ever..." the commander turned to Tadao:

"We could make use of you, if you are willing to work hard, we can provide you food and shelter... It's a harsh world here... I doubt the lot of you will survive more than a few days..."

Tadao hesitated... Dee hated him for even consider this offer...

"I think it is time for us to continue our journey..." Tadao said, talking to Dee, Groll and Leola.

"There is nothing for us here, and I would prefer to get as far away from this village as possible, before the nightfall..."

With those words the four of them continued to walk inland.

Dee's thoughts ran all over the place. Who were those men, what had happened to her father? A part of her knew that her father was still alive, but she was afraid that it was wishful thinking, rather than intuition. And on the other hand, what had happened with all the people in the village? Sure, it was a fairly large village, but she recognized just about everyone by their looks, even if she did not know their name or had ever talked to them. All of those men were new to her, they had a strange accent when they talked, and the guard had said when they came, they took the harbour camp. Could it be an invasion of the coldbloods to get a stronghold or a province here in the northern parts? No matter how hard she tried to bring order to her thoughts, something just didn't add up. There was a piece of the puzzle missing. And her father, he was certainly missing.

Where was he? A string of bad conscious hit her hard inside. If she only had obeyed him. Or at least said goodbye somehow. Now she did not know if she ever could say that she loved him again. Or hug him. Tears filled her eyes as they walked away from her home village, heading inland.

Chapter fortytwo.

The horns echoed in the chambers of the northern dwarf province as Veron approached King Thidas throneroom.

This was a rare occasion indeed. Only once before, as far as Veron could recall, had there been a delegation of this magnitude, and that was six or seven ages ago, when the old king Midas had died, leaving his split kingdom to his two sons. He had lived a long life, even for a dwarf, and during his rule the dwarf kingdom had expanded further than any king before him had been able to do. To start a province in the northern mountains had proven very fortunate, and the taxes that the province paid every year compensated well for the ever decreasing findings in the main mountain. True, the expansion to the west was necessary and also very sound in terms of profit, but everybody knew (even if no one ever mentioned it) that the dwarf society was very depending of all the rich findings in the northern province.

Come to think of it, the only delegations lately had been quarrels over how much tax that should be paid, and Thidas had done a very good job of lowering the tax burden for the northern province. This was one of the reasons for his great support back home, and probably the main reason why he was most likely to take over as king of the entire dwarf domains now when Grand Master Phidas was no longer in service, wherever he was...

"Who may I welcome to my domain?" King Thidas voice broke the silence after the horns had stopped echoing.

"Veron of the Ingm clan, from the great dwarf mines in the west. I come bearing news!"

"What news would that be, messenger from Ingm clan?" King Thidas demanded to know.

"First, I want to apologize for not bringing any official gift. The heads of our clans could not come to terms and find a fitting gift, for reasons I will come to later..." Veron paused and put his hand inside his armour and reached deep under it and pulled out something wrapped in a piece of cloth.

"...I hope you can accept this humble gift from my personal collection instead." he unwrapped the cloth and handed over a large crystal, clear but with a tiny stream of white smoke in the center.

"The Heaven Stone!" King Thidas whispered with great anticipation in his voice.

"Rumor states that you are currently in possession of three of the legendary stones and wish to collect them all. The Heaven Stone has been in my family since the Great King decided to divide the Legendary stones." Venom continued, but King Thidas did not pay much attention to what he was saying, since he had his eyes fixed on The Heaven Stone.

Veron waited for the traditional request from King Thidas where he was supposed to ask for the message, but since the King seemed to have forgotten all about Dwarf traditions at the moment, Veron choose to continue:

"I bear news from the West. Your brother, Grand Master Phidas, is no longer with us. We request that you oversee the election of a new leader, or appoint one at your discretion."

King Thidas did not respond.

Veron got tired of keeping to protocol, so he walked over to King Thidas and handed him The Heaven Stone.

"Here is the fourth of the Legendary Stones, my king, only three to go!"

King Thidas looked with great eyes on the latest addition to his great treasures, but still did not

say anything. Veron thought it best to return to his position in front of the throne, and wait until spoken to.

Chapter fortythree.

Roy had spent the night shivering in a bush under a large tree. At least it wasn't raining, but the nights in the valley was really cold. As he stretched his long and skinny body, slowly rising from the cover of the bush, he felt a cold morning breeze running all over his naked skin. It was dawn, and a bit misty, and even if he still shivered, he could truly see the beauty of the landscape. In front of him was a large open grassfield. Fortunate enough it was not part of the Great Plains, so the chance of running into undead was minimal, even if the risk is always there outside the protection of the villages or cities.

As he stood there and watched the first beams of the rising sun touching the ground a rather large house appeared out of thin air in front of him. Seconds passed, and suddenly the only door he could see on the house was opened with great force, and a large man walked out. The man looked worn and had an almost hysteric exit from the building. As he walked out his entire appearance changed to a mix of relief and happiness. He stopped suddenly, just steps away from the door, lay down on the ground and kissed it and hugged it as best as he could.

Roy could not really tell if this was really happening, or if this was a weird part of dream, and as he watched the scene he expected to wake up any time. But the scene kept playing in front of him, and equally sudden the house disappeared into thin air, leaving the man still laying on the ground. Then like nothing was out of the ordinary, he rose, brushed of the remains of the grass and dirt that covered his strange clothing, and like that, he vanished as well.

This was indeed the strangest thing Roy Hicks had ever seen, and little did he expect that this was only the beginning of his adventures to come.

As he stood there expecting to wake up from this weird dream he saw another thing that convinced him that this truly was a dream.

Out of the forest came a dwarf, long beard, helmet and all. Any other day, this would have been an extraordinary sight, but now it felt completely natural, and Roy expected the dwarf to vanish as well. But to his surprise, the little dwarf did not vanish but he was not surprised when the dwarf stopped just in front of him and spoke.

"It's none of my business, but I am curious, I have never seen a man standing naked outside in the middle of nowhere, looking cold like you."

Roy laughed.

"Well, even if I am naked in this dream of mine, I am sad to say that I will be naked when I wake up."

The dwarf muttered.

"You will be disappointed then. This is no dream, and I suggest you get going as soon as you can, both to keep you warm and to avoid what is coming."

"What do you mean 'what is coming'?" Roy asked, not sure he believed the little strange dwarf.

“Been walking all night, thought I heard some werewolves close by. For me, that does not really matter, they don’t like the taste of me, but you... that is a different matter altogether.”

When the dwarf mentioned werewolves Roy did not hesitate much. Whether this was a dream or not, werewolves was not a pleasant meeting, so he hurried out from the bushes, as much as he could, without scratching himself on the branches or anything else. The last thing he wanted was an open wound when werewolves was nearby.

“So, Master Dwarf, where might you be heading, and would you be in need of the services of this poor soul, in exchange for food and clothing?”

“Clothing I can arrange, just because I pity you, but I know better than trust a naked human in the middle of nowhere, seems to me your word is no good and your honour even worse.” Phidas said, not looking at the naked man, nor slowing down or changing his heading.

“Well, I can’t blame you for that, Master Dwarf, but I would be truly grateful if you could help me with clothing and what ever else you can spare.” Roy answered with renewed hope in his voice. This just might be a good day after all.

Chapter fortyfour.

Grime tried to grasp the full situation. He needed to come up with something solid. He had no time to do it, and the girls sobbing did not help.

He had to do something. If he knew the Vampire Master, there was eyes and ears watching, to see if he could be trusted.

“Undress” he whispered to the girl. “Take off all your clothes.”

The girl did not move a muscle, but her sobbing escalated heavily.

“Don’t force my hand... I need you to take off all your clothes...”

The girl looked at him and her red eyes begged him for mercy.

“Are you going to kill me?” she asked with a faint voice.

“Not unless I have to...” he heard himself answer.

She started to undress as she understood that there was no mercy from this man. Even if there was a possibility there was good in him, she heard what the Vampire Master said. Rape her or kill her, or it would be the end of it.

As she undressed and stood completely naked in front of him, she felt his eyes wandering over her young and untouched body. This was not how she had imagined her first experience with a man.

“If you kill me, can you please get word out to my mother and father, and my brothers and sisters, and my cousins...”

Grime looked at her. Had he not been a prisoner between cold stone walls, the view of this naked young girl would have been tempting, too tempting he had to admit to himself. She was not yet of age to be married or to be with a man, but these stone walls and the entire situation made the thought of being with her impossible. One side of him was grateful for that, another side thought it was a pity.

“How many sisters do you have?” he said, with his thoughts in a distance.

“Two, and four brothers” she answered, feeling inconvenient and tried to cover herself using her arms and hands.

Something came over Grime and he snapped back to presence in the cell.

“Your mother, does she have any sisters?” he looked at her with renewed eyes, and she could not tell if it was lust or something else that drove him.

“I have two aunts... My mother is the youngest of the three...” she said, not knowing where this was going.

“...and your sisters, are they older than you?”

“Yes, and my brothers as well... I am the youngest...”

Grime took a few steps forward. Touched her gently on her stomach.

“Have you ever been with a man before?”

She embraced herself mentally, this was really happening, this was it...

“No...”

To her surprise, the prisoner rushed to the door and started to pound it with both fists.

“Get me your Master, right away! It’s important...” he yelled.

She stood there waiting, the man did not look at her anymore, he avoided her. He did not yell or pound. He just stood there, with his head leaning on the cold stone wall.

She could not tell for how long, but she did not dare to move. Still trying to cover herself as best as she could, still waiting and preparing for the worst. Why did he not look at her, why didn’t he kill her or touch her?

It felt like forever, and then the door opened, and the Vampire Master reentered.

Grime had learned from experience not to start to talk before he was spoken to. The Vampire Master walked into the room, looked at Grime, looked at the naked girl.

“She is still standing, untouched, alive... Why?” he said with his low, almost growling voice.

“She is pure, the third daughter of a third daughter. I’ll gladly kill her right here, but she is pure, and it would be a terrible waste. I could make good use of her, but I need her untouched and pure...”

The Vampire Master did not answer...

“If you want me to prove myself, that I am loyal to my word, give me one of the other girls, preferably one of the oldest you have. It is a better chance that she bleeds, and if so, she will not be as pure as this one. And I doubt that you are so lucky that you will have two girls that are the third daughter of the third daughter...”

The Vampire Master walked around the cell for a while. Looked at Grime, looked at the naked girl.

“Very well...” he said as he left...

A few minutes later, a guard came and ordered the girl to get dressed, brought her out of the room and put the chains back on Grime.

Chapter fortyfive.

The visit in the Northern province was over for the time being. Veron had a bad feeling about it. King Midas had not spoken to either one of them and there had been no dialog whatsoever. After the first audience in King Midas chamber the whole of the delegation had been shown to a remote room near the entrance to the mines. They had been instructed to wait there and wait for further instructions. After two days Achim had come to introduce himself. Achim was the second in command after King Midas, and he had asked Veron to lead him back to the mines, the safest and quickest route as possible, the rest of the delegation was ordered to stay behind for the time being.

Veron felt that it was very awkward, since they all longed back to familiare caves and rocks.

But they could not defy their new orders.

Two legion squads protected Achim and in front of them all Veron walked alone with the flag proudly waving in the wind. This time Veron figured that he could as well take the large routs and skip all caution and try to stay hidden. Two legion squads could not easily hide anywhere, except below ground, but here in the open, pointless to try. Achim did not seem to be pleased with the route, and constantly sent runners asking if they could take a more suited route for passage in discretion. Veron gave the same answer every time.

“Where can more than thousand dwarfs hide on the surface?”

Even so, Achim kept sending runners with the same request, and what could have been an eventless and calm return trip turned out to be an annoying and far from eventless journey, even if nothing dangerous occurred. Veron thought to himself that the only danger on this journey was of him losing his mind from the nagging question of a childish and scared second in command.

It was a true relief when they arrived back home again, but when Veron saw all the soldiers that kept flowing through the entrance he realised that this was nothing but an invasion, peaceful, but still an invasion. Nothing good could come out of this.

Achim summoned the head of the clans as soon as he had taken his first breath of real air, not the humid and frisky air of the surface, but the still and rocky air of the mines.

He did not have much to say, but his word troubled them all, realizing that this was a new and darker era in the dwarf history.

“All you who are guardians of one of the legendary stones, come forth and bring your stone. King hereby overrules the old decision to keep them apart. Should I not have all stones by nightfall I will give my legion orders to search the mines and authorize any means to find them. We have been tracking the whereabouts of the stones a long time and have a good idea where to start looking. So you are all wise to show your loyalty to King Thidas by bringing them forth without the use of force. These terms are not negotiable.”

Veron had never heard a sentence this deep in the great hall. This was indeed an invasion and life as they knew it had ended. This new era would be led by greed and violence. Veron made a very easy decision. It was time to leave. Most likely Achim would like to go back, or at least send someone or something back to King Thidas shortly. That journey would give Veron the possibility he needed to leave.

He looked at all the faces around him. Some of them looked at him to seek answers on where their loved ones were, some of them looked at him wondering why he brought this madness back to them, all realising that he could not control the events only follow as the rest of them. But yes, it was time to leave the dwarf society for good. He figured he had a few days to make all the necessary arrangements. Saculg would get to take his place and his living quarters, after all, he was too old to live by his parents anyway.

Before Veron was about to make a silent exit from the great hall he heard Achim request the hundred best diggers and miners to report to him for a special mission.