

The Black Lion:

Chapter 1 - How I met your Father - Part 1.

By John McCabe

The heavily laden wagon passed the wooden stockade into the small village of Nordenham. The woman held the reins and steered the single horse around an overturned cart. The wheel of the cart had come loose, and it had tipped, spilling the sacks of coal all over the ground. Two dwarves cursed each other while they gathered up the fallen pieces to put them back into the sacks.

Beside the woman, her male companion lay back in the seat his feet stretched out before him a piece of straw in his mouth. He grunted "What an absolute dump".

The woman did not look at him. She was used to his critical remarks. She just rolled her eyes and headed towards the stables. As they drew near, her companion sat up. He was a large broad man, his hair cut very short. He had a long moustache that hung below his chin. "Stop Anya, I need a drink. The dust from that road is everywhere".

"Later Hader, we need to unload the wagon".

But it was no use, he had climbed down and had started towards the Inn. He was walking backwards and spoke again. "Just one drink Anya" he grinned.

There was a man hanging a wooden sign in front of the Inn. He was on a ladder and was driving some nails in to hold the cross beam which would hold the sign in place. Hader bumped the ladder almost knocking the man from his perch. The big man stumbled and snarled "Get out of the damned way". The man did not respond. He just held on to the wooden frame in front of the Inn until the obnoxious brute carried on.

Anya sighed, "Just one drink Anya" When had it ever been just one drink? She pulled the cart up alongside the Inn and climbed down, ensuring that the cargo was securely covered with the oiled tarp. "I'm sorry about my brother".

The man on the ladder, who had long limbs and a shock of red hair just nodded his head. The woman was very attractive, and his tongue suddenly felt paralysed.

She pulled her shawl up over her shoulders and walked up the steps to the Inn, onto the covered veranda that ran along the front of the businesses. She was surprised to see it so full of people this early in the day. It was just past noon and already it was more than half full. As she entered, she took in the room, the bar ran along the entire left-hand wall. At the back of the room were two doors and a staircase leading to the floor above. Scattered around on the right were tables and chairs. An assortment of patrons were eating, drinking and playing cards.

She spotted Hader sitting about half-way down at the bar. As she approached the empty chair beside him, she noticed beyond Hader, sitting at the very end of the bar at the back wall was a huge man. He had long black hair, the top was tied back from his bearded face.

He wore a sleeveless tunic which displayed massive arms and hairy forearms. He gripped a large mug of beer and stared straight ahead, ignoring the hustle and bustle around him.

Anya sat beside Hader as the bar man brought him a large clay pot of wine and a cup. The bar man's hairline was receding and unusually for these parts he was clean shaven. Hader slapped a coin happily on the counter and immediately began pouring himself a drink. Anya shook her head. "The only time he ever seemed happy", she thought.

She waited while he emptied the contents of the cup down his throat and then spoke. "Alright Hader, you've had your drink. Let's go, we have a lot of unpacking to do".

"What's the rush? The cart isn't going anywhere. It won't take long to unpack".

She was not surprised at his response. Her brother was a strong man. Strong in body but weak in mind. Drink was his joy and his companion. Waiting while he poured his second cup, she looked around the room at the people. Judging by their clothing, there were woodsmen, some farmers and a couple of merchants. She turned back to the bar and looked at the mirror behind the bar. She glanced to her right and saw the huge, bearded man staring at her expressionless. He had flat features; high cheekbones and his eyes were slightly slanted. "Some Ethengarian ancestry?" she wondered. Quite handsome really. She blushed as his blue eyes held hers. She looked down and then turned to Hader impatiently. "Ok Hader let's go".

He reached again for the clay pot without looking at her and said, "When I'm ready". The third cup was quickly emptied, followed by a fourth.

She stood up and walked to the exit. Behind her she heard her brother shout "Olson, more wine". She shook her head in disgust and stood out on the covered walkway. Descending the steps, she was careful to avoid the red-haired man who was applying the finishing touches to the sign - Olson's Alehouse & Inn. The lettering was painted with some care. She turned and looked around. The village of Nordenham was small but quaint. It still had a lot of the rough edges, but she liked that. A few miles North past the village was the forest of Altenwald. To the west rose hills and mountains. The sky was a clear blue, no clouds. It was a beautiful place. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply.

A crash and a roar made her eyes open reluctantly. "Now what?" she sighed. She walked back towards the Inn. She had only been gone five minutes. She stood in the doorway. Hader was on his feet, one of the merchants sat on the floor, his hand trying to stem the flow of blood from his nose.

"Ok that's enough," cried Olson.

Hader turned and snarled "I'll say when it's enough". He reached out quickly and grabbed Olson by the front of his apron and yanked him almost over the bar. Hader, lips flecked with spittle pulled a startled Olson forward till his face was inches from him.

Anya was about to intervene when the huge man at the end of the bar spoke. "That's enough, leave Olson be".

The room went quiet. The merchant who had been moaning in pain from a possibly broken nose went silent. He glanced at the huge man and then at Hader who still had a firm grip on Olson.

“Let him go and I won’t have to hurt you”

Hader snorted and pulled Olson almost entirely over the bar. His legs were off the floor, and he tried to break free but Hader was much too strong. “Or what?” shouted Hader.

Hader was a skilled swordsman, but he did not draw his sword as the huge man pushed himself away from the bar and stood. He strode calmly to Hader who released Olson and left him sprawled atop the bar. Hader was a big man but the stranger was bigger still. Anya stood watching it all unfold as caught up in the event as everyone else in the room.

She saw Hader tense, ready to throw a punch as the human bear closed the distance. Hader threw a left but the giant moved his head. Hader threw a right and his fist was suddenly trapped in a massive hand. His arm was straightened and twisted which caused Hader to cry out in pain and fall to one knee. A huge fist came down like a hammer and smashed him in the face. He would have crumpled unconscious to the floor, but his opponent grabbed him by the front of the tunic and dragged his limp body towards the door. Hader’s heels scrapped along the floor, and he appeared to weigh no more than a child.

Anya’s mouth went dry as the towering man came towards her. She took in his wide shoulders and then looked at his face. The blue eyes seemed to twinkle “Excuse me, my love”. She stepped aside as her brother was unceremoniously dumped out onto the street.

Olson had by then recovered and joined her at the door “Thank you Matheus”.

Matheus looked at Anya and nodded before turning and walking back into the Inn. Several people had stopped to stare. She tightened her shawl around her shoulders and lowered her face in embarrassment as she walked to where her unconscious sibling lay.

She knelt down and tried to wake him. It was some few moments before he stirred. He flinched awake and immediately put his hand on the pommel of his sword. Anya tried to put a hand on his chest to calm him down, but Hader was enraged. He stumbled to his feet, fell and surged upright, heading straight for the Inn.

Vengeance, bloody reprisal no doubt in his mind for the man who had dismissed him so easily. He stumbled left and right his equilibrium still rattled. The red-haired man was moving the ladder away from the sign as Hader reached the steps. Once more he shouted “Out of my way” before he stumbled and fell, his sword half drawn from its scabbard.

The man fell back in terror, but Hader had tripped and was falling to his left. He hit the wooden post hard knocking the crossbeam loose with a splintering crack. Hader was on one knee attempting to right himself when one side of the sign – Olson’s Alehouse & Inn, came loose and swung down like an axe.

Anya covered her mouth to stifle the scream. Hader had no time to utter a single word. He barely registered what was about to happen. The sign hit Hader full in the side of the head with a sickening crunch. Anya was rushing forward, as Matheus appeared in the doorway, the other patrons attempting to look around his huge bulk.

Just as she reached Hader, his lifeless body fell sideways into her arms. His face and head were smashed beyond recognition. "Hader, Hader" she pleaded. She looked at the damage in stunned silence. There was nothing she could do. It was beyond her skills to help him.

She felt a hand on her shoulder. A soothing touch, she felt the warmth from Matheus as he knelt beside her. "Here, my love. Let me take a look". She did not reply but moved aside and reluctantly released her brother. Matheus examined the body once more and looked at Olson who stood in the doorway of the Inn. He shook his head and Olson immediately set about organising the removal of Hader's body from the street. He was handled gently in deference to his sister who stood by, speechless.

Her brother was a tough, strong man. A warrior. He had faced many dangers and survived, but he had a drinking problem. It was always said it would be the end of him. But to die like this? Hit by a falling piece of wood? It was just unbelievable. She was at a loss for what to do, until Matheus came to her once more. He put his arm around her and walked her towards the Inn. Olson met them at the door and ushered them into one of the rooms at the back. It was a small office. Olson offered her a chair and she sat down, grateful to be away from the gaping faces of the patrons in the bar. It was all a blur; people spoke around her and to her but she did not respond. Arrangements were made to bury Hader in the village graveyard. She had thought about sending his body back to her parents in Freiburg but decided against it. This is our home now. He can be buried here. All throughout this was the reassuring presence of Matheus.

Early the next morning Matheus awoke. He washed his bearded face, dressed quickly and walked downstairs to the main floor. Olson was preparing some breakfast which smelt delicious. "Hungry?" he asked.

"Always" smiled Matheus in reply. "Where's Anya?"

"She said she was going to the stables to unload the cart. They bought Asmud's General Store. Did you know that? When Matheus shook his head, Olson continued. "Surprised Asmud sold the place. I thought it was a profitable venture. Still, he was always complaining about something or other. Too much rain, too cold, damn trolls, damn gnolls" Olson laughed. He was still laughing when Matheus left the Inn. "Heading to the stables no doubt" he thought with an amused smile. He turned back to the bacon which was now ready to eat. He called to his wife "Dura, breakfast is ready".

Matheus strode down the street. It was still early and not many people were out and about. He walked up to the stable doors, which were open. Inside Anya was about to lead her horse from its stall and harness him up to the cart. "You're up early" he said.

She started in surprise but smiled when she saw who had spoken.

His heart thumped in his chest. Such a beautiful creature and those dimples. He was always a sucker for dimples.

“Good morning, Matheus. I just wanted to get a start on unloading this cart. It should have been done yesterday but well Hader” she paused; a look of sadness crossed her face. “Damned fool. It was the drink you know. He wasn’t always like that”.

He nodded. “I heard you bought Asmud’s General Store. We all wondered why he sold it and to who, but he never said. Just packed up two weeks ago and left”.

She nodded “Yes, Hader and I were supposed to run it”, she paused again “but now it’s just me”.

They stood in silence for a few moments before Matheus spoke again. “Put the horse back in the stall. The general store isn’t far”.

“But the cart?” she said, unsure what he meant. He walked towards her and gently took the reins from her. He led the horse back to its stall. She was bemused as he walked back to her. “Pardon me, my love” he said as he picked her up effortlessly by the waist and placed her on the cart seat.

She yelped in surprise and gripped his massive shoulders. She sat down as he walked between the poles. His back to her he lifted them, one in each hand. Turning his head, he asked “Are you ready?”

She laughed and nodded “You’re crazy”.

He moved forward dragging the cart and its precious cargo with him. “Those dimples will be the death of me”.

She blushed furiously but said nothing, glad that he had his back to her.

It was another beautiful morning. The sky once again clear, the air crisp and fresh. She thought of Hader but pushed that memory down. It could not be helped now. What is done is done. She watched as Matheus pulled the cart, his wide shoulders powering forward. A few of the early risers paused and shouted greetings. She was a new arrival in town and known to nobody, but in Matheus’ presence they seemed to accept her more readily. The cautious looks from yesterday had changed to empathy when Hader died. He would be buried this evening.

“You know I was going to hire some men to help me unload”.

“Well now you don’t have to” he replied, as they pulled up in front of the general store. He lowered the poles to the ground and walked to the side of the cart. “Now my love” he said as he reached up for her.

“I can get down myself” she said but almost before she had finished the sentence she was already being whisked through the air and placed slowly on the ground.

“Are you always this familiar with women you just met?” she asked.

He just smiled and began removing the oiled tarp covering the wagon. It contained barrels and crates of supplies, axe heads, rope, some boots and clothing. Everything Asmud had suggested they would need to re-supply the store. A few passers-by seeing Matheus and Anya unloading the cart stopped to help. She thanked them and smiled gratefully.

For the rest of the day, she re-stocked the shelves and cleaned up where she needed. Matheus had left when all the heavy lifting was completed and returned the cart to the stables. Several children had clambered aboard in delight. She leaned against the door frame as he walked away bearing the laughing, squealing children. “Thank you, Matheus,” she called after him.

“Anytime my love”, he shouted in reply not turning. This caused the children to laugh uproariously. They turned to look at her. Once more she blushed and turning away walked back into the store. Once inside, she closed the door, leaned against it and smiled.

That evening a few of the village folk attended the funeral, including Matheus. She said a few final words after his body was buried, surprised she was not more upset. The truth was she had been expecting this for a long time. In some ways it was a relief that the waiting was now over. “I hope you finally find peace brother”, she whispered, kissing the holy symbol which had belonged to her brother.

Over the next few days, she explored Nordenham. It was a relatively small village protected by earthen works and a wooden palisade twelve feet high that ran around the border of the village. Most of the Freeholders lived on their own farms which were scattered around Nordenham. The village provided a location for the few businesses in this part of the world such as her general store, Olson’s Alehouse and Inn, Brunick’s Smithy and stables and so on. The number of people that actually lived within the relative safety of the walls numbered about four hundred.

It had been a few days since Matheus had been in Nordenham. She had been surprised to hear that he did not actually stay in Olson’s Inn. He had his own farm North West about a day's travel. Dura, Olson’s dwarven wife had mentioned it during one of their frequent chats. Anya had resisted the urge to ask how a human man and a dwarven woman could end up married. It was something she had never seen before. Whenever she skirted around the issue, she could see the amused look in Dura’s pale grey eyes. Dura never took the bait and the topic moved on.

Anya checked in with her horse and as she began to walk back to the general store she could see Dura outside the Inn, sitting on the porch which ran all along the business fronts. She was smoking merrily on her pipe, her plaited hair hanging across one shoulder.

“Good morning, Dura”, she called.

Dura waved and took the pipe from her mouth, tapping it against the heel of her thick boot. "Good morning, Anya. What are you up to today?"

"Oh nothing, business is quiet this morning. I was just getting some air".

"Well, there's plenty of it out here" joked Dura.

"I'm expecting a delivery from Altendorf sometime today. The sugar cane you asked for should be coming with it" said Anya coming to the foot of the steps.

"Oh, that's great Anya, I really appreciate that. Just remember not to mention it in front of Olson".

Anya laughed "My lips are sealed". With that she bid farewell and headed back to her business. She walked into the backroom to her living quarters and tidied herself up in the mirror. Her cheeks were flushed from the fresh air. There was a definite change in the weather. Snow was on the way. Some customers came in to buy supplies, farmers, woodcutters and some children whose families had come into the village to meet friends and stock up. She liked these people. They were hardy and independent; it took a while to get behind the hard exterior but once you did, they were very warm and generous.

Things quieted down after a couple of hours and she walked towards the open door, leaning against the door frame. Just coming into the village was a procession of carts and some men mounted on horseback. The first two carts were her supplies, but her brow creased when she recognised the black lion tunic worn by the lead riders. There were about twenty, heavily armed Heldannic Knights on war horses. "What the hell do they want?" she muttered.

A creak of the chair beside the doorway told her she was not alone. The blood drained from her face as she looked sharply to her right. Her eyes met Matheus who was getting up from the chair. He noted the startled look. "It's ok my love. I don't like them much either" he chuckled.

She regained her composure and waited for her supply carts to arrive. All the while she divided her attention on watching the knights and checking the list of things in the cart she had ordered. She addressed the driver, "Durik, tell Ashemon, I know he is skimping on the tobacco. If he keeps it up, I'll go to someone else".

Durik laughed "I will Anya. He'll have to get up early in the morning to put one over on you".

She smiled back, her eyes following the knights as they broke into two groups. One was headed to Olson's, the other to Brunick's stables. It looked like they might be staying in the village tonight. She doubted Olson had room for twenty men.

As the carts were unloaded into the store her concentration was broken by Matheus. He whispered, "You ok Anya?"

She turned, smiled that beaming smile, all dimples, which she knew would reassure him. "Yes, of course. Now, how can I help you?"

He paused uncertain. "Well, I uh need a new axe head".

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Another axe head Matheus? Really? That'll be your third in two weeks".

He coughed and cleared his throat. "Well, you know steel doesn't do well up here. It rusts and stuff".

"It rusts and stuff?" she repeated. "Matheus" she said smiling and linking his arm in hers "if you are coming to see me, just say so, ok?"

He grinned and allowed her to lead him into the store. She thanked the cart drivers and gave them some extra silver as a tip. "You men better get a move on. There's snow on the way".

They thanked her and climbing back onto the carts they headed over to the lumber yard just inside the village walls. They would load up and bring the much-needed lumber supplies back to Altendorf.

As Anya was restocking some of the shelves, she noticed that Matheus seemed a bit ill at ease. He was trying to cover it by browsing the shelves. Every so often he would pause and pick something up as if he was considering whether he would buy it or not. Now it was her turn to ask, "Are you ok, Matheus?"

"Well Anya, I was just thinking".

The bell tinkled as the door to the store opened. Anya visibly stiffened as three Heldannic knights and a Lupin walked in. She composed herself and putting on a smile asked, "Can I help you Knight Bachelor ...?"

"Blutfelden, Knight Bachelor Blutfelden. I'm not sure", he continued. "Maybe. We'll just take a look around. See if there's anything of interest" he smiled.

He was a tall, well-built man, clean shaven but for the moustache which was trimmed neatly to chin length. The two other knights walked around the shelves, while the lupin stood close by. He was a black-haired creature with patches of brown and hazel eyes. He stood, relaxed, his hand resting on the pommel of his sword. His tongue lolled from his canine mouth as he yawned. Unlike the Knights he was dressed in leather armour.

"How is business?" Knight Bachelor Blutfelden asked.

"Business is good Herr Blutfelden, thank you".

"You're accent. You're not a native?" He asked already knowing the answer.

She smiled; a tinge of nervousness swept over her which she hoped did not show on her face. "No, I'm only here about a month or so"

"Oh? That's interesting. Where are you from? If you don't mind me asking?" His eyes held hers and she felt it was important not to look away. "I was in Altendorf before this".

"...and before that?" he asked.

A clay pot smashed on the floor, spilling lamp oil all over the place. "I'm sorry Anya. I'll pay for that," said an apologetic Matheus.

She turned relieved for the distraction.

"Tut Tut" muttered the Knight. "You really shouldn't allow these barbarians in here Anya. May I call you Anya?" She nodded. "Yes, his type isn't house trained. He'll put you out of business, bumbling around like a brainless ox knocking everything over". He shook his head in genuine displeasure. "You" he said to Matheus, "pay the lady what she is owed and get out".

Anya knew what Matheus was capable of and was impressed by his restraint. He fumbled through his tunic and brought forth a coin.

The Knight Bachelor studied him. "You, before you leave. What is your occupation?"

"Farmer", came the simple reply.

"You don't look like a farmer. More of a woodsman. Maybe even a ranger", he paused "...of Altenwald?" His eyes bored into Matheus's inscrutable face. A moment passed.

"No, just a farmer. I do herd some deer on occasion and some trapping. The meat and furs fetch a good price in Altendorf".

The other knights were moving closer to Matheus, Anya noticed. They were awaiting the outcome of their Knight Bachelor's appraisal.

Herr Blutfelden said nothing. He moved his neck as if trying to work out a stiffness. He pursed his lips. "You can go".

Matheus started to walk to the door.

"This farm of yours? Where is it?"

"About a day's ride from here, headed west.

"I'll make a note of that", he nodded his head, indicating to Matheus that he could leave.

Once he had left, Herr Blutfelden turned back to Anya with a smile. "Well my lady, it was a pleasure to meet a fellow Hattian so far from civilisation. I'm sure I will see you again". He gave a slight bow and turned for the exit, his cloak swirling behind him. The other two knights behind him. The lupin regarded her for a moment and then followed his comrades out of the store.

Anya let out a big sigh, not realising she had been holding her breath. "What the hell was that?" she muttered to herself. She walked to the window to make sure they had gone. She could see Blutfelden talking to more of his men. He was gesturing to them, it seemed, to put the remaining horses in the stables. As if sensing he was being watched, he turned back and smiled at her once more. The smile did not stay long on his face. He became serious again and turned away heading it seemed back to Olson's Inn.

She walked back to where Matheus had dropped the oil and began cleaning up the mess, her mind going over what had just happened and what it would all mean.

A few more customers came in to buy some things and it was through them she learned that the knights were indeed staying in Olson's. The Bull, which she had only recently learned was his nickname, was not impressed. It seemed that he had an uncle that was one of the many people hanged for opposing the knight's invasion about fifteen ago. There was a lot of that kind of thing and worse that the Heldannic Knights had inflicted on the native population. To say they were hated by many was an understatement.

She gathered up the sugar cane sweets and razor blades for Dura and Olson. She closed the door behind her and walked down the covered walkway to Olson's Alehouse & Inn. The sign that had killed her brother had not been put back up. It still lay to one side of the steps. Up ahead she saw several of the newcomers loitering around outside the door. She paused and briefly thought that this was a bad idea. She steeled herself and walked on, quickly passing them to enter the Inn, ignoring their lingering looks.

Apart from the two owners of the establishment, the only customers were the knights. The regulars who frequented the alehouse were absent. Only a fraction of the seats were occupied by the knights who were eating, drinking and laughing. She was surprised by the level of disdain she felt. She knew the knights from her time in Altendorf and elsewhere, but something had changed. Nordenham had become her home and she bristled at the obnoxious presence of these 'outsiders'.

Olson was talking with Knight Bachelor Blutfelden who had removed his armour and wore a simple tunic. His sword was still strapped to his side. He looked far less impressive and smaller. She paused until she spotted Dura at the bar and walked quickly over to her. Dura gave her a brief smile but seemed preoccupied. Even the arrival of her sugar cane sweets did little to lift her mood. She explained that the knights had taken all the rooms and that "all the regulars just disappeared like a fart in the wind". They paid well for the inconvenience, but their presence would leave a bad taste in everyone's mouth. Anya did a quick head count, and all seemed present, except the lupin.

"Matheus?" she whispered.

Dura shook her head and while thanking her for delivering the goods, suggested that she not hang around. She left then, once more running the gauntlet of hands and eyes of the men gathered around the door.

She walked in the gathering darkness to the stables. There was no sign of Brunick but the stable boys were around. She told them she was here to check on her horse and gave them a silver piece each. As she walked into the stables, she passed many stalls filled with the Heldannic Knight's horses. Matheus's horse was still in its stall. This puzzled her and she walked over to the horse which nuzzled her fingers. "Where is he eh?"

She turned away and walked past the other stalls also filled with the knight's horses. One stall was empty of horses but contained a couple of wheelbarrows, shovels and other such equipment of use around a stable. She continued until she came to her horse, which trotted over when it saw her, burying its nose under her arm.

"Did you miss me? I'll have to take you out for a ride tomorrow if I get the chance. Would you like that?" The stall was clean, and the horse looked content and healthy. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a piece of sugar cane. She knew Dura would not mind her keeping one piece back for the horse. She offered it on the flat of her palm and the horse eagerly gobbled it up, soon looking for more.

Then she heard a noise from back the way she had come. She stood still and listened, then she heard the latch of the stall containing the wheelbarrows and other equipment and saw the stall door open. Brunick appeared. Where had he come from? He was definitely not in the stall when she had looked in. He noticed her; his eyes hard until he recognised her. "Anya, is everything ok?"

"Hi Brunick, just checking on my little sweet tooth here and keeping out of the way till our visitors go to sleep. Have you seen Matheus? He was in the store with me and we had a little run in with our friends".

"Don't worry about Matheus, he's fine. I'm sure he's probably wrapped up somewhere warm and getting some sleep. Which is what I'm going to do as soon as I sort out a few more things".

She took the hint and gave her horse one more rub before she headed out the door past Brunick. She did not cast so much as a sideways glance at the stall he had emerged from. He watched her go and she heard the stable doors being barred behind her.

She walked across the open ground back towards her home. To the right there was still light and laughter coming from the Inn. The rest of the area was quiet, total darkness had fallen. The first few flakes of snow began to fall as she reached her door.

Once inside, she locked the door and moved to the private lodgings at the back. She lit a candle and boiled some water to make herself an herbal tea. She had heard Blutfellden say the name 'Rangers of Altenwald'. A lot of the men she had seen frequent the Inn and surrounding village had vanished, including Matheus. His horse had apparently been left

behind, but then Brunick had appeared from a stall some minutes after she had examined it and knew it was empty. A secret passage must be the answer. These 'Rangers or Haldis Partisans' as she had also heard them called must be using it to hide and plan. Matheus must be involved with them and Brunick was part of the organisation too. She sipped her tea, enjoying the warmth course through her body. "What now?" she thought. Sleep. Definitely sleep. The 'what now?' can wait till tomorrow.

She awoke the next morning and climbed reluctantly from the warm bed. The room was freezing. She quickly threw on a heavy robe and prepared the fire and had it lit in short order. She prepared a quick breakfast and dressed this time in warm fur leggings, eschewing her usual dress. She entered the general store and opened the front door. The snow was about six inches deep all over the village. Luckily the covered walkway was snow free. A few people were passing by their feet making a pleasant crunching noise as they walked through the snow.

She crouched down to light the fire in the general store and glanced at the pile of wood put by for fuel. Was there enough? Probably not, she judged. She had been warned that the winters got cold up here. Altendorf was a cosmopolitan city compared to Nordenham, which was really just a few businesses and homes with a wooden wall thrown around it. She did not know how the people on the homesteads could live the way they did, so exposed. Trolls, giants and humanoids were quite numerous up in this region, but from talking with the people here they seemed more concerned about the Knights.

Just then the bell rang, and the front door opened. In walked Knight Bachelor Blutfelden. He had his full plate armour on and a heavy fur cloak on his shoulders.

She turned from the fire and smiled in greeting. "Good morning, Herr Blutfelden. I trust you slept well?"

"I did my lady, thank you. All this fresh air has that effect".

"Do you need any supplies before you leave?"

"You sound like you are trying to get rid of me" he laughed.

Anya just smiled.

"No, I don't require supplies but thank you. We are leaving now but I wanted a quick word if I may?"

"Of course," she replied standing up to face him.

"This land is a hard land but it is beautiful. We Knights, with Vanya's guidance are trying to make it less hard, but well it seems some of the natives don't want that. Unfortunately for them the greater good must be served. As a fellow Hattian I am sure you are sympathetic to our problem?"

When she nodded, he smiled “Good. I knew I could count on you. I need you to keep your eyes and ears open and if there is anything, anything at all which would assist us in making this land a more pleasant land to live in for all, then I hope you will let me know. There have been ambushes against our people. Sabotage against our buildings and structures. These Rangers are the instigators behind this. We don’t know exactly where they are based. The Altenwald forest is quite large and this land has many nooks and crannies. With winter coming they will need somewhere dry and warm. Maybe in some place like Nordenham. Maybe even on one of those farms further out”. He slapped the fur lined gloves he was holding into the palm of his hand and looked at her more closely. “That man who was here yesterday. The big man”.

She nodded to show she was listening.

“He’s an interesting one. He said he was a farmer”. She nodded again. “What was his name?” Her throat felt dry. Where was this going?

“Matheus. He comes in sometimes for supplies. Axe heads, candles, that sort of thing”.

“Yes, Matheus. I suppose you get a lot of interesting people coming in here all the time, but this Matheus, I would like to talk with him again”.

“Perhaps next time he comes in I can let him know?” she offered.

He was silent for a long moment. “You know you are a very brave, remarkable woman to be up here all alone. What made you do it? If I’m not prying too much?”

“No, not at all Herr Blutfelden”.

“Raimond, please. We’re almost friends now, aren’t we?”

“Ok, Raimond”, she smiled. “When I came here, I was with my brother but he had an accident and well I am alone now. He’s buried in the village graveyard”.

“I am terribly sorry to hear that. An accident you say?” He paused and she was dreading the next question. She did not want to explain how he had died. It was a freak accident and an embarrassing way to die but Knight Bachelor Blutfelden was discreet and did not ask. “What was your brother’s name, Anya? I do hope you don’t mind me using your first name?”

She smiled and shook her head “Of course not. Hader, his name was Hader Arendt”.

He nodded; his face solemn. “I am leaving now Anya, but I will be back. Perhaps next time you can bring me on a tour. Show me around a little. You have a horse? If not, I can supply one”.

“Yes, I have a horse. I haven’t been here long and I haven’t really had time to explore the area myself. I’ve been busy settling in and getting the business going, but yes next time you are here”, she smiled. “When will that be do you think?”

“Who knows Anya? It’s best not to signpost your comings and goings. I wouldn’t want to be ambushed”, he laughed.

She grinned in response.

“I am joking of course but I’m not sure Anya. Tomorrow, next week, next month, who knows but Vanya herself. Are your parent’s followers of Vanya? I assume so because of your name?”

“Yes, they are”.

“...and you?” he continued.

“Well yes but I wouldn’t be as consistent as my parents or indeed you Raimond, but I do try”.

“Of course, Anya, of course. We all have our battles. Well, I’ve kept you long enough. I’ll be on my way now”. He bowed and then without another word, turned and left. His men following close behind.

“Well, this is getting awkward” she thought.

The knights had already saddled up all their horses and were ready to go. An efficient and well-oiled machine. Knight Bachelor Blutfelden walked up to his war horse taking the reins from the knight who held them. He climbed into the saddle and led the men to the south gate and out of Nordenham. The village seemed to exhale in relief.

Over the next few minutes people began to appear from everywhere. One or two came into the store to buy some things. When they had been looked after she stood out on the veranda. The snow was already turning to mud where people and carts travelled. She leaned against the rail; her woollen shawl pulled tight around her shoulders. Over across what passed for the village square he came from the direction of the stables. An unmissable figure, large and powerful he walked like a lumbering bear. As he came close, she gave him a smile in greeting “We need to talk”.

“Of course, my love, lead the way”.

How I met your Father - Part 2.

She led him into the back room and he sat down waiting. She cut some slabs of bacon, bread and prepared a large mug of hot tea which she placed before him on the table. She then sat down opposite him. Her hand smoothed the hair back from her face and put it behind her left ear.

“How did you know I’d be hungry?” he asked.

“Brunick doesn’t seem the type to make breakfast” she replied. They sat in silence while Matheus ate. He took his time savouring each mouthful, but also, she suspected because he was trying to delay the conversation. Truth be told she was not sure exactly what she was going to say to him. Instead of diving straight in she waited.

“I want to take my horse out. He’s been in the stables for over a week now. I think we could both do with stretching our legs and having a look around”.

He considered this, his fork halfway to his mouth. Then stuffing the bacon into his mouth, he grunted in agreement. He then started applying some butter to the slice of bread before him.

“You could show me around a bit. I haven’t had the chance to look around”.

“Spring would have been better”, he replied, taking a bite from the bread. “There’s not much to see now everything is covered in snow and most creatures are settling in for the winter or gone south”.

“You could show me where you live?”

He regarded her for a moment and then pushed the plate away. “Ok let’s go”.

As he was rising, he asked “What about the store? You may have some upset customers if they find the door locked and no Anya”.

“I’ll leave the key with Dura and a note on the door for them to call into her. I’m sure she won’t mind”.

He shrugged and made his way to the door, while Anya found a sheet of paper to write the note. He walked back and stood looking over her shoulder as the script filled the sheet. Long elegantly curved strokes of the quill. “Beautiful” he whispered.

“What?” she asked but he moved off not answering. He turned as he got to the door “Wrap up warm and bring a change of clothes. I have everything else we may need. I’ll meet you at the stables”.

She nodded “I won’t be long” and once she had locked the door, she went to find Dura who agreed to keep an eye on the store. “Stay warm, dear. I’d rather you than me. Traipsing around in the icy wind and cold”, she shivered theatrically.

“I’ll be fine. I’ll be with Matheus”.

Dura smiled "Oh, well that's different. Big lump of a man. I'm sure he'll keep you warm", she laughed out loud slapping her thigh.

"It's not like that Dura; he's just showing me around".

"Whatever you say. Will I expect you back this evening or are you staying out late?" she grinned.

"I'm not sure but he said to bring a change of clothes, so maybe tomorrow?"

Dura said no more except to add "Oh to be young and free again".

Anya laughed "See you tomorrow so...MOTHER!"

Dura followed her to the door and watched as Anya walked to the stables. "A fine woman", she thought. "Matheus could do worse". Then she turned and walked back into the Inn meeting Olson coming out from the kitchen with some breakfast on a tray. "Good morning husband of mine. How about a kiss?"

He stopped surprised at this unusual request. "Here, take this for Sigfrid. He's leaving on business soon"

"...and the kiss?"

"I'll give you one later, once the customers are sorted".

"It better be a good one", she muttered, taking the tray from him and carrying it to Sigfrid.

By the time Anya got to the stables, Matheus's light brown stallion was saddled up. A few burlap sacks were secured to the saddle and he was just leading her horse from the stall. She stood there watching as he put the bridle and saddle on. Her horse standing perfectly still while this was done. He turned to her "Ready?"

She nodded and taking the reins led her horse out of the stables. Brunick was standing near the door leaning on a pitch fork. He nodded to the pair and then went back about his work.

They climbed into the saddles; their horses were eager to be gone. When they reached the open gate, they eased off on the reins. Anya's horse took off. Matheus urged his horse on and caught up to her. "Where are we going?"

"I don't know, ask her", Anya replied indicating her horse. After about a mile, as the horse worked out its excitement and the snow grew deeper, it slowed down and moved along, side by side with Matheus's horse at a much slower pace.

He regarded her from time to time. Her cheeks red from the cold. "What a beautiful, beautiful creature", he thought.

She caught him at one point and just smiled back her dimples on full show.

"You'll be the death of me" he thought again and not for the last time, he was sure.

They rode on until they came to a small river coming down from the mountains. It would eventually join up with the much bigger Naga River further south. They followed this river North West for a few miles when Matheus called out quietly to Anya. He pulled on his reins stopping the horse. Anya drew up alongside him. "See over there by the rushes on the far bank?" he pointed. She looked but could not see where he meant. He drew closer and practically put his cheek to hers. He pointed with his left hand inviting her to follow the direction.

"Rushes, grass. I don't see anything. What am I looking for?"

"See where the water swirls around that rock and comes into the pool, there? See those reeds that are much thicker than the others?"

It was a moment before she answered "Yes".

"Well stay away from there if you see anything like that. It's a Skrimsl".

"A what?"

"A river wrym. It's a type of water dragon, long like a snake. Short stubby little legs, no wings. Hunts in ambush. The side of the river she's on has signs of deer and elk. Probably a spot they are coming to drink. I think she'll be waiting a while as most of the herds have moved to their winter migration spots. She might get something else though, a gnoll, an orc, maybe even with a bit of luck, a knight".

They continued on, passing the reeds where the creature was in hiding. She never would have spotted it. As they rode, he pointed out landmarks, tracks of animals and some footprints in the soft ground most likely of humanoids. Although they were a few days old and only close by the river bank where the snow remained relatively light. The snow they rode through had fallen fresh last night but not heavily. It seemed that no one had been through this way recently. The river bank turned and headed more west. They crossed at a shallow part, the water rising up to their knees. On the other side of the bank was the body of an orc, its body frozen. It was clear some animals had been feeding on it, most likely foxes or badgers. A broken arrow shaft in his side indicated a likely cause of death. They continued on without a word. However, or whoever had killed the orc it was not Matheus. She knew he did not use bows. He was more of a spear and axe kind of fighter. He had two finely crafted axes secured to his saddle and two spears and a heavy broadsword within reach at this side. She only had a longsword and a small knife tucked into her belt. With talk of Skrimsls, footprints of gnolls and a dead orc less than half a day from Nordenham she felt under armed and more than a little vulnerable. But this feeling evaporated when she glanced at Matheus. He was completely at ease in this wilderness. He was confident in his skills and the knowledge that he carried. This was his home and it held no dangers or surprises for him. This feeling spread to envelop her and she relaxed, taking in the beautiful scenery, albeit most of it covered in snow.

They stopped late in the afternoon near a rock outcropping that sheltered them from the wind. He quickly got a fire going and prepared a hot drink and some beans. The horses did their best locating some grass amongst the snow. They had been well fed that morning and

would be fed again when they reached Matheus's home. Her lower back and thighs began to ache as the day wore on but she remained silent. As the sun began to fade, Matheus told her they would be there in less than two hours.

Finally, it was so dark she had no idea where she was or how they were not tripping over stones and shrubs. It was a clear night and the stars began to come out. Matheus dismounted and she did likewise at his bidding. They walked the horses another while until they came to a wooden fence. They followed this along until they came to a gate. Passing through the gate he asked her if she was tired and reassured her that they were almost there. She nodded, but in the darkness, he probably could not see her. Eventually out of the gloom she could make out the outline of a long-sloped roof. They walked the horses to another building she had not seen and paused while Matheus found a lantern to light. The night was extremely quiet, no sound of animals or wind. Once the lantern was lit, she could see large barn doors which he opened and they led the horses in. After removing the saddles, bridles and rubbing the horses down, they then fed and watered the animals. Only then did they leave and head to the long roof building she had seen earlier. She followed close beside him, eager to get her boots off and get warm again. He pushed the door open and beckoned her in. Once again he got a fire started and the room heated up quickly. There was a massive stone fireplace and chimney. He had a bed on one side, on top of the stones that formed part of the chimney. Once the fire got going, the stones heated up and radiated the warmth into the rest of the room.

"I'll make you up a bed. There'll be hot water in about thirty minutes, if you'd like a bath?"

She nodded and he set about his preparations. She sat on one of the chairs and removed her boots massaging her feet and warming her toes. She looked about taking in her surroundings. It was a surprisingly big room with the large stone fireplace taking up the centre of the room. To one side Matheus was manoeuvring a metal bath tub closer to the fireplace and connecting metal tubes to it. Around the walls hung weapons and furs. Two large chests, some shelves, a door to another room. She heard Matheus splashing some water with his hand. The water was coming from the pipes after he had turned a spigot, steam rising from it.

She raised her eyebrows in surprise. "I wasn't sure you were serious; you really have hot water?" she asked.

"Of course, nothing is too much for my love", he smiled, obviously pleased he had surprised her.

When the tub was filled, he called her over. There were fresh towels on a rack beside the tub, soap and a warm robe. Her change of clothes was on a chair close by. The room was not made with privacy in mind. There was no dividing wall or screen, so Matheus moved to the far side of the stone chimney while she stripped off and eased herself into the hot water. A deep sigh of relief came from her as her body was bathed in the heat. She slid under the water completely submerged and then came back to the surface. She began to soap herself down and could hear the sounds of Matheus unpacking some supplies on the other side of the room. "Are you hungry?"

“Yes, a bit”

“Good, I’ll cook some steaks”.

After a couple of minutes, he called out “Anya” and eased slowly around the side of the stone chimney. She sunk further under the water; her body hidden by the soapy suds. “Everything ok?” he asked, not looking in her direction.

“Wonderful. I never imagined you’d have hot water all the way out here. It’s amazing”.

“Well, someday when we know each other better I’ll take you to The Grove. You’ll really like it there”.

“When we know each other better?”

He ignored the question and said “Food will be ready when you are”. Then he moved away once more behind the chimney.

Finally, she stood from the bath and towelled herself dry. The room was now warm so she slipped on the robe he had left her and dried her hair as best she could. He had anticipated her arrival at the table and had put the steaks and some vegetables on a plate for her. Her stomach growled and he watched with amusement as she devoured the meal in no time. “I take it you like my cooking?” She nodded in reply her mouth full. He opened a bottle of wine and poured her a glass of Darokin Red. She sipped the wine, made noises of approval and then drank some more.

When he could see she had settled he reminded her “You said we had to talk?”

She had almost forgotten and did not really want to have this conversation. Reluctantly, she nodded. “Knight Bachelor Blutfelden came to see me again this morning before he left. He was making it quite clear that he was looking for Haldis Partisans, Rangers, whatever. He wants me to keep my eyes and ears open for information”.

“So? You keep your eyes and ears open and hear and see nothing. Stay out of it”.

Anya noticed a drop of wine that had fallen on the table. She stuck a finger in the blob and spread it around, head down not making eye contact.

“Anya, what aren’t you telling me?”

“Blutfelden asked me to spy for him. What he doesn’t know is that I am already here...spying”. She paused glancing up at Matheus, his broad, flat features impassive. The lantern light fighting with the shadows across his face. When he remained silent, she continued. “My brother Hader was sent here to set up the business. He took the oath with the Order, he was a Heldannic Knight and I was only supposed to show him how to actually run a business. Then I was supposed to leave, but he died and I couldn’t just leave. So, I stayed and decided I would carry out the duty he was given. Hader was sent by his superiors and no one else was informed. They weren’t sure who could be trusted. It was safer to assume that as they had spies in your ranks, that you possibly had spies in our ranks”.

“What do you mean my ranks? I’m a farmer Anya. I have nothing to do with this. I sympathise with the Partisans but it’s a lost cause. Halvard needs to let it go but he’s proud and stubborn, very, very stubborn”. He was silent for a moment and then laughed, a slightly bitter laugh. “Funny thing is we had your brother pegged as a Heldannic Knight but when he started knocking back those drinks, we had our doubts. The Knights don’t drink, at least there not supposed to and he was enjoying it way too much”.

She didn’t respond to this low blow against her brother but waited.

“I know about the safe house in the barn. You and probably others were hiding there the night that Blutfelden and his men arrived. I see the way the people respect you Matheus. Blutfelden was right. You’re no farmer”. She looked around the room. Hanging on the walls were a variety of weapons, swords, axes, shields of various styles with various emblems. Pride of place was a finely crafted Ethengarian composite bow, a leather quiver filled with arrows hung beside it.

He saw where her eyes lingered. “My mother’s”

She turned back to him unsure what to say next.

He spoke first “So what now Anya?”

“I don’t know. I thought I did, but now? I was nervous at first, scared stiff when my brother died. I thought it was a sign. Abandon the plan or seize my chance to prove my worth to Vanya, my family. I decided I would see how the day went. Then the next day and then the next. I felt part of the village in no time. Welcomed as one of your own”. She gave a short humourless laugh. “Ironically it was the death of my brother, a Heldannic Knight who would have gladly strung up Olson and any others that did it. Hader always told me about these wild freeholders, uneducated, less than human. It didn’t take long for me to question this. My friendship with Dura...” she paused “...with you”. She looked pleadingly at him. “I don’t know what to do. I must follow Vanya my Immortal Patron but I don’t want to see any of you tortured or killed. Dura told me some of the stories Olson had told her about the things they had done. The songs, the ballads sung by some of the patrons in the alehouse. I’ve learned the words of some of those songs but ...” She let out a deep sigh.

There was a long silence with only the sound of logs crackling on the fire. Finally, Matheus spoke “If Blutfelden wants to get his hands on the Partisans then we can help him do that. I’m sure they’d love to avenge themselves on him too”.

She looked at him confused “What do you mean?”

“When Blutfelden comes back, you’ll tell him you have some information, that he was right about me not being a farmer. Tell him you heard that we meet at my farm. That we have weapons and seem to be planning something. An ambush, something bigger you’re not sure. You’ll give him directions to my farm”.

“You want me to tell him about this place!”

“No, my farm in the west”. He smiled; his face had a gleam. It was wild, almost feral looking. In the flickering light of the room, she felt a tinge of fear. “When we leave here tomorrow, we can talk more about it but it’s probably better to be vague. I’ll give you the directions to my farm and then ...”

“And then?”

“We wait. You meet Blutfelden, give him the directions and stay out of the way. We BOTH try and stay out of the way. If all goes well, I’ll take you to The Grove”. He smiled then, a warm friendly smile. The tense atmosphere evaporating.

She awoke the next day to Matheus bringing the fire back to life by placing some pieces of wood and coal in the hearth. He noticed her stirring. He was on his hunkers with an armful of wood and turned to her “Good morning, my love. I’ll have breakfast ready soon”.

“You’ll make someone a great husband” she grinned.

“And any man would be honoured to have you as his wife”, he replied.

Embarrassed, she made a pretence of looking for her clothes and while he prepared some food she got dressed.

Once they had eaten, Matheus offered to take her on a tour of the homestead. It was while they were mounted and crossing one of the fields behind the barn that he paused, leaning to one side to look more closely at the snow-covered ground. He looked up and followed the track marks into the tree line.

“What is it?” she whispered.

He breathed out; the mist of his breath clear in the cool morning. “I’m not sure. Stay behind me”. He turned the horse to the left and followed the tracks.

Anya looked at the tracks in the relatively deep snow. It looked like someone or something had walked through the snow leaving a very obvious track to follow. There were some bird calls, the sound of their horses snorting every so often but otherwise all was quiet.

He paused again at the trees and dismounted, moving on foot, the horse following along as did Anya still mounted. After about thirty minutes, he paused again and scanned around. “Had a fire and camped here last night. Did good trying to cover it but not quite. Mounted up and headed back west. In the village, when they left, did you see the lupin with them?”

She thought for a moment. “No, but he may have met them outside?”

“No, I think this was him. I think he’s headed back to the river, but he wanted to swing in a big arc so he wouldn’t stumble across us or we him”. Matheus mounted up. “Tour is over”, he swung the horse around and kicked it into a trot. “Might be better if we catch up with him”.

Anya spun her horse around and followed alongside. “Plan doesn’t change but I’ll feel better if he doesn’t get back to the village. Depending on how fast he’s moving, which probably isn’t too fast, I think we can cut him off”.

They passed the barn and when possible, sped the horses up, but generally kept to a fast trot. Matheus guiding his horse up and around obstacles. Her heart began to beat faster in anticipation of the confrontation. She felt safe with Matheus but the lupin was an unknown quantity. He was most likely a skilled tracker, though with the snow fall so deep in places and no new snow since then, the tracks were easy to follow. He rode with the knights and was most likely told to track any Freeholders leaving the village, so Blutfelden trusted his skills enough to allow him to act alone.

They made it back to the river crossing and made it to the other side. "When you tell Blutfelden about my home you'll be continuing up the river not crossing here. Another five miles or so there are some standing stones, most have fallen but it still looks quite impressive. There's a small hillock to the left of this. If he rides towards that, my home is at the base on the other side. OK?"

Anya nodded. "The lupin?"

"He's not here yet. You go on. Follow the river back a ways, just stay near farm houses the way we did on the way out and you'll be fine. You should reach Nordenham by nightfall". He saw her questioning look. "I'll wait here for our dog headed friend. He shouldn't be too long".

She nodded and kicked her horse back into a trot. The last glimpse she saw of Matheus before she was carried out of sight was of him removing his two spears from their place on the saddle.

"Keep going, stay, wait, watch, he might need my help, I might get in the way, distract him", her mind was a torrent of voices all trying to push their way to the forefront and say pick me! I'm the best choice.

She took a breath and carried on another ten minutes then pulled on the reins. "I'll just wait here. I'm far enough away I won't distract him. Then when it's done, we can go home together". This seemed like a sound plan so she dismounted near some rocks and hobbled the horse. She then found somewhere to sit and wait. "Come on Matheus" she whispered.

She strained her ears for any sound of combat, cries of pain, victory, clashing of weapons. She could not hear anything and it was about an hour since she had left him. After what felt like an eternity, she saw movement, which became a shape, which slowly grew larger. She strained her eyes to see. With relief she recognised the massive bulk. He was on his horse and as he got closer, she could see he was leading another horse. Across the saddle was the body of the lupin. His hands and feet were tied and he was unconscious. She could not see his face but he must be alive if Matheus had bothered to tie him up.

Matheus's face was splattered with blood, there was some on his tunic and forearms. He seemed somewhat grim when he saw her. She left the horse where it was and ran to meet him halfway. "Are you ok?"

He grunted in reply "Fast bastard, almost got me", he spat blood flecked spittle to the ground "but not today. No, not today".

“What are you going to do with him?”

“I’m not sure yet. I was going to stick his head on a pole and dump his body in the river but maybe he knows stuff. Might have valuable information...” he coughed again, grimacing and touched his side with his forearm.

“You’re hurt,” cried Anya.

“I told you he almost got me”.

“Get down, let me take a look”.

He shook his head “No, not here. There’s a cave a little way from here. Should be empty, might not be”. He indicated by jutting his chin north. “Mount up and we’ll go”.

She sprinted back and quickly got on her horse. Once more they began a fast trot. She looked at him with concern etched on her face. He was pale. He noticed her concern and forced a laugh “Don’t worry my love. You won’t get rid of me that easy”.

It was another forty minutes before they reached the cave Matheus had mentioned. He took a big breath and with a grunt dismounted. He grabbed the lupin by the scruff and roughly dragged him off the horse and to the ground. The unconscious body showed no sign of discomfort or pain at the rough treatment and just lay there, feet and hands still bound.

“You watch him. I’ll check for dragons”.

“What!!” Dragons, are you serious?”

He grinned “No, bears maybe but not dragons. At least there shouldn’t be”.

She was freaked out. They were in the middle of nowhere. Matheus seemed to be badly hurt but yet he was still cracking jokes. “Don’t do that”, she said forcefully. “This isn’t funny”.

He did not answer except to draw his sword and head up to the cave mouth. A few tense moments while he disappeared inside, then he reappeared and began walking back to her.

“Take our two horses up to the cave. I’ll be right there”. He looped some rope through the restraints on the lupin’s wrists and tied the other end to the pommel of the saddle. Then he led the lupin’s horse to the cave, dragging the lupin along the ground. A hiss of pain came from the lupin just as they reached the cave. “Good, you’re awake”. He made the lupin stand and pushed him forward. Once inside he once more secured his prisoner. The lupin’s face was a mess. His snout was badly cut and he seemed to have broken fingers on his left hand.

Matheus slumped down, while Anya pulled the blood-soaked tunic away. “Oh Matheus. This is bad, this is so bad”.

He peered down at it. “Ah now, don’t be worrying. I’ve had worse. Just let me rest a bit and all will be well. Grab some bandages from the saddle bag there and see if you can stop the bleeding”.

When she returned with the bandages, she could see his eye lids looked heavy, his face so pale. She did her best to apply pressure and finally the flow of blood seemed to stop. His tunic, leggings and right boot were soaked in blood. She turned in anger to the lupin. She was going to curse him. He sat still and regarded her with no concern. She pursed her lips and said nothing, turning back to her patient.

The hours passed. She did her best to get a fire going, using whatever pieces of wood she could find. She never let the lupin out of her sight. She would never forgive herself if he got free and finished the job on Matheus. As night fell, the temperature began to drop. Matheus was unconscious but at least he was still breathing. She pulled blankets out of the saddle bags and placed them on Matheus. She paused and looked at the lupin. He was looking straight ahead and ignoring the two humans. He turned his head as she approached. "You better not die either", she said placing a blanket over his shoulders. He continued to regard her in silence as she returned to the wounded human.

Try as she might to stay awake, sleep claimed her. In all her twenty years she had never been in such a situation. Administration, business, she took that her in stride, but this? A man had his life in her hands. She did not know where she was. Did not know what she would do if he died. She had come to care for this man. Possibly more than care. She would not allow herself to say the word. If it came to it, she would kill the lupin and do her best to get Matheus back on the horse and back to ... She laughed. A bitter laugh. Get him back on the horse, how? He is far too heavy. She was beginning to feel overwhelmed, "Oh Vanya, help me. Help me to help him". She felt rather than heard a presence. In her dream she turned.

The lupin was beginning to doze off. The human woman was mumbling something in her sleep. Her hands were outstretched. Then her arm and the palms of her hands came together as if she were praying. Then she seemed to settle down and sleep. He began working at the leather binding his wrists. The human male had tied them tight. They cut into his wrists but he must be free or they would most likely kill him. Though the woman had been kind. No weak. She had been weak. He must get free and then decide what he must do.

She awoke feeling calm and rested. It took her a moment to get her bearings. One eye blinked open, the morning sun hitting the back of the cave where they lay causing her to keep the other eye closed. She looked around without moving and could see that the lupin was still there, as were the three horses. The cave was warm but also had a strong smell of bodies. She became aware of the body beside her. Her head lifted slightly as he breathed in. It all came back to her and she gently lifted her head and then her body until she was sitting up on her side. The calmness remained, she eased the blankets aside and looked at the bandage, which was stained red. Silently she removed it, making soothing noises when Matheus moved to escape the discomfort. When he was still, she again went to work removing the bandage. The wound was ugly and deep in his side. The dream came back to her. She recalled asking Vanya, her Immortal patron for help, and help had arrived. She mirrored in reality all that Vanya had shown her to do. The thoughts to muster, until she felt the heat collect in her hands, which were again palm to palm. With her eyes closed she

collected the energy that was pouring into her until she had gathered what she hoped would be enough. Then she placed her hands gently and directly on to the open wound. The heat from her palms radiated out into the bruised and torn flesh. The wound which had partially reopened when she removed the bandage seemed to fade slightly and close. The bleeding now properly stopped. She left her hands in place until all the energy had passed from her to Matheus. It was still a bad wound but now he seemed stable. She would try again tomorrow when she would be able to summon more healing energy.

The lupin was once more looking at her. A look of curiosity on his face. A moment later, Matheus woke and looked at the wound and then at Anya kneeling beside him. "How?" he seemed confused. "You did this?"

"Vanya came to me in my dreams. I asked her for help and she helped me. She helped me and I helped you. I can try it again tomorrow. I should be able to do it again when I've had the chance to rest".

Matheus grunted with the effort to sit up and push himself against the cave wall.

"Go easy, you'll undo all my work you big oaf".

"Help me up".

"Just rest, you need to rest".

"Help me up, Anya. I'm fine, we can get going now. I'll have you in your bed tonight".

Their eyes met, she blushed. He cleared his throat "You know what I mean. One night in this cave is enough. Let's go".

"What about him?" she asked indicating the lupin.

"He's coming too".

She stood and began preparing the horses. When they were ready to go, the lupin was put in the saddle but he was facing backwards. He had to put his hands on the rump of the horse to steady himself, his wrists still tied, the horse's tail flicking him in the face occasionally.

Anya led the way holding the reins of the horse carrying the lupin while Matheus followed behind eyeballing his foe. Neither said a word as they started the journey back to Nordenham.

They were still fifteen miles out when riders approached from one of the homesteads. He knew they risked running across a patrol of knights but he did not think they had much choice unless they killed the lupin and hid the body. Matheus was therefore relieved when he recognised Bjorn and his two adult children, Gunnar and Hallveig. They waved as they drew closer, the large mastiff hounds accompanying them loping alongside.

"You ok, Matheus?" asked Bjorn with a laugh. "You look like death warmed up".

"I'll be fine Bjorn".

“What do we have here?” said Hallveig as she drew closer eyeing the lupin with disdain. “Is this one of the Knight’s hounds?” she asked.

Matheus nodded “Yes”.

“What are you going to do with him?” she asked.

“Not sure yet. Question him. After that? We’ll see. Depends on how helpful he is”.

“Want us to baby sit him?” asked Bjorn. “It might be best to keep him out of sight”.

Matheus nodded, so Gunnar rode forward and took the reins from Anya. “Let’s go for a walk doggy”, his horse trotted off quickly causing the lupin to almost fall off the horse.

Alone again, Matheus and Anya continued on their journey to the village.

It took a couple of days rest and the newly obtained healing power of Anya before Matheus was fully recovered. She was still somewhat in awe. She had asked Vanya for help and received it. This would have to mean she was a priestess of Vanya now. An inexperienced novice but still. She was not sure what it all meant. Her life had taken another unexpected turn.

Hader had been given to the Order of the Heldannic Knights. One per family was customary and he had been so proud to take the Oath of Service. He had been off training for a couple of years when he returned to their home in Freiburg. Their father ran a small business and Anya had helped out. Hader told them he was headed for Nordenham in a couple of months. He was not willing to talk too much about it but it involved running a general store in this very rural, very rough and ready frontier post. Her father had suspected what it was about but as with anything involving the Heldannic Order he remained quiet and discreet. He did however mention an obvious fact. “What do you know about running a business?” Hader had laughed and pulled Anya to his side. “What I don’t know, Anya can teach me”.

“You can’t drag your sister off to the middle of nowhere. It’s not safe”.

“Don’t worry. I’ll look after her and it’ll only be for a couple of months till I get a handle on things. I’ll even throw in some sword lessons. She’ll be fine”, he grinned hugging her tightly to his side.

Anya was excited about the prospect. The sword lessons were sporadic, Hader had unfortunately begun drinking again. He managed to conceal it from everyone apart from those that knew him well. They had hoped that being given a post may give him some extra motivation to stay off the drink but as she recalled he had barely set foot in Nordenham when he was at it again and was killed soon after. She had stayed on in his place, not knowing what else to do. She did not want to return to Freiburg to be married off as her mother was always pressuring her for. She was twenty now and had quite a few suitors. Only Vanya knew how she had managed to convince her father that this man or that man was not quite right much to her mother’s frustration. Now she was here, running a business and trying to carry out her brother’s failed mission. Settle in, make friends, keep your eyes and ears open. Report anything suspicious and so on. Hader had talked more freely when he

was drinking. Especially on the days just before they departed. He had mentioned ambushes and the destruction carried out by the Haldis Partisans, also now known as the Rangers of Altenwald so she at least knew what he was supposed to be listening out for. But he had never got around to explaining how or to whom the information was to be passed on to. She did not know who had sent her brother but she doubted Blutfelden was aware. According to her brother only a few at the top were aware in order to protect the mission from discovery. No doubt he was just one of many sent out across the land.

Time had passed and she had almost forgotten about the mission when Knight Bachelor Blutfelden and his men had turned up. He made no indication he knew and seemed to be attempting to recruit her himself. Again, she had thought to let it go but then when Matheus had been hurt, she had called for and received help from Vanya. This appeared to her at least, to show that Vanya was watching her. Was she supposed to help the Knights, who worshipped Vanya as their Immortal Patron? It seemed likely. She sighed; this was not easy. Maybe I should have stayed in Freiburg. Maybe but then I would not have met all these great people, Dura, Olson and yes, Matheus.

Just as she thought of him, then in he came. The bell on the door announcing his arrival. "Good afternoon, my love. How are you today?" He was fully healed and recovered. She had asked about the lupin and was told that he had been moved again and it was better if she did not know too much about that. He reminded her again of the directions to his home in the west. The place where she could tell the Knights, when they eventually returned, was a likely place the Partisans were hiding out. It was quite close to the mountains and well within gnoll country so she needed to stay out of the way. "Just give him the information and let Blutfelden do the rest"

"And there are Haldis Partisans there?"

"Yes, they're there alright".

"I don't understand. Why are you helping Blutfelden find them? You know what he's likely to do don't you?"

Matheus nodded "I do but there are some scores to be settled, Vengeance to be had. Just give him the directions and don't worry about it" he reassured her.

She wanted to ask more questions but decided to be discreet like her father and let it go.

How I met your Father - Part 3.

Anya was outside Olson's Alehouse and Inn, on the veranda, talking as usual with Dura. She had not seen Matheus in several days. Days had turned into weeks before the Heldannic Knights arrived back in Nordenham. As usual a lot of the people in the village melted away. Knight Bachelor Blutfelden dismounted and one of the riders accompanying him took the reins. He smiled as he approached the steps leading up to them.

"Greetings my ladies", he nodded. His armour was splashed with mud, his face appeared more gaunt as though he had been working hard since she had last seen him. Even though he was not a physically imposing man, there was a look in his eyes, the way he carried himself that advised caution.

"Do you and your men need rooms Herr Blutfelden?" asked Dura.

"Yes, that would be most useful and a hot bath I should think", he replied as he regarded the mud-spattered armour he wore.

"I'll get them set up" said Dura, turning away and walking back into the Inn calling for her husband.

As Anya made to leave, Blutfelden climbed the steps. "If I may?" he asked causing her to pause. "I would like to invite you to dinner, once I've cleaned up of course. The food here is quite...rustic but it is good".

"Thank you Herr Blutfelden but..."

"Raimond, please and no I insist. A beautiful lady like yourself, you would be doing me an honour if you would agree and indeed there might be things we can talk about?"

She hesitated but finally agreed to dinner. About an hour later after returning home to find something more appropriate she entered the Inn. Blutfelden was already there. The Inn which could seat a hundred people comfortably now only had herself, the Heldannic Knight himself and six of his men spread out in a relaxed but obvious protective circle. Once more regulars would have to find somewhere else to drink and play cards. Olson looked unhappy as he dried a glass. Dura as always was the consummate host. She smiled and welcomed Anya, telling her how beautiful she looked. Despite this Anya could see a questioning look in her eyes. Anya shrugged imperceptibly and continued over to the table. Blutfelden stood as she approached, pulling out a chair and seating her. "If I may say you look very nice".

"Thank you Raimond".

He smiled at her use of his first name.

The food began arriving, Anya drank some wine while Blutfelden stayed with a clear glass of water. They spoke of Hattias and Anya told how her family had been involved in wine and cheese export from their hometown Vinton. After spending her early years there, they had moved for a time to Thyatis City but her father wanted a fresh start and decided to go all the way to the Heldann Freeholds. "My mother was not happy with the move", she chuckled "and after a short time returned to Hattias to a sister who has several vineyards". Then she

had come with Hader to Nordenham before he met with his unfortunate accident. She had remained here since and run the business.

He was very impressed with her independence, which pleased her because Hattian men generally preferred their women to stay home raising the next generation of warriors. With a female Patron in Vanya the Heldannic Knights were obviously more open minded. She had found herself at first being reluctant to answer questions, fearful of speaking an untruth. He had an air about him that gave one the impression he was asking a question he already knew the answer to. As the evening went on though she enjoyed the chance to speak of Hattias with someone who was familiar with it. The wine of course helped a lot too.

Towards the end of the night, the conversation turned to questions about the future. He was a Heldannic Knight and had sworn his oath of service upon becoming a Knight. He had a younger brother Konrad who had followed in his footsteps making their family most proud. The oath meant a vow of celibacy and therefore no wife. In a way he explained he was wed to Vanya. He wanted to know her long term plans. As a Hattian woman she surely wished to marry someday? He questioned her choice of Nordenham. How could she expect to find a suitable Hattian husband? As friendly as the people were, they were savages.

She got the distinct impression and knew it to be a typical trait amongst her people that he found any non-Hattian people beneath him. A Hattian woman could only marry a Hattian man and vice versa.

“There aren’t that many of us Anya. We need to stick together. If I were not committed to the Order, I would ask for your hand in marriage. You are a remarkable woman”.

She thanked him and once more began to feel uncomfortable. She made her excuses and stood to leave. He stood with her and moved behind her chair, pulling it away. Then he handed her shawl to her.

“I plan on going for a ride in the area tomorrow. I will call in before I leave for some supplies”.

She replied with a smile and pulling her shawl around her shoulders she left the Inn bidding good night to Dura and Olson.

The next day as promised Knight Bachelor Blutfelden arrived dressed in full armour accompanied as before with two guards. As he looked around the shelves, he asked her if there was any new information that would be useful to him. She made a show of being nervous, not too difficult under the circumstances, and nodded her head, beckoning him closer. He strode over eager to hear the news.

“You were right about Matheus. He was the big man that was here the last time you were”. Blutfelden nodded. “He isn’t a farmer. I don’t know too many details but his farm out west is used as a safe house for the Rangers. I’ve seen him talking with men that I’ve only seen once or twice. They don’t usually come into the village you see. Rough looking men but then again this far north they all look like that. Anyway, Halvard Gudmundson is their leader. They say he is the last surviving heir of the Haldis family, the original rulers of this land”.

Blutfelden's face lit up at the mention of Halvard. They had never been able to pin him down. Savages they might be but they knew this land and were careful about engaging the Knights directly. He urged her to continue.

"Anyway, Matheus's farm is about a day's ride west. I can draw you a map".

He did not answer for a moment, lost in thought. "A map? Yes, that would be useful. Better still, you will come with us".

Her face fell but she quickly regained control. "But I'm a civilian, not a fighter. That's inhospitable land, there are gnoll tribes out that way. It's not safe and I'll only get in the way".

"Perhaps, but I would prefer if you came along", he smiled.

It was a smile she knew would brook no argument.

"When do you want to go?"

"Well now of course. Strike while the iron is hot".

She found herself quickly changing into her leather armour. She was nervous but also excited. She grabbed her weapons and as an afterthought Hader's holy symbol. Her horse already saddled she joined the twenty knights and headed west. Upon reaching the small river she led the party north, passing by the river crossing and continuing along the bank. As Matheus had said they came to a group of standing stones off to one side. They were weather beaten and most were lying on their sides having fallen over. She paused looking around, as some of the men broke formation and rode in amongst the stones. These were the more lightly armoured troops armed with crossbows and swords. She found the hillock to the left. "At the base on the other side is the farm. At least that was my understanding from what I heard".

Blutfelden nodded and after a quick word, two of the scouts proceeded ahead. The others followed more slowly.

As they reached the base of the hillock one of the scouts returned and reported that there was indeed a farm on the other side. When they reached the top, they could see for themselves, a small barn was to one side of a solid looking farm house. There was no sign of movement. The light was beginning to fall quickly, the temperature dropping.

"Slow and steady men", cautioned Herr Blutfelden. "We'll be upon them before they know it".

The farm was about a half mile distant. The men spread out but not too much. Anya rode at the centre but behind Knight Bachelor Blutfelden. He had told her to stay at the barn after they had checked it and they would proceed to the main building. Some of the men dismounted but as they approached the barn, the door opened and Matheus came out. He stopped as if startled and rushed back in pulling the door closed. Knights rushed forward yanking the doors open before he had a chance to bar them shut. They roared battle cries and charged after him. Anya felt herself being drawn forward, eager to see Matheus and

hoping he would escape. Blutfelden put out a hand out to stop her, but she could see Matheus leap over some bales of hay and disappear from sight. It soon became apparent that he had jumped down a trap door. Blutfelden stopped the men from pursuing and ordered them to secure the area. They then searched the farm house and found it empty. There were signs of cooking and a number of plates and mugs on the kitchen table, but no Partisans.

Preparations were then made to open the trap door on the barn floor. The heavily armoured knights with shields to the front moved forward anticipating an ambush. The doors were pulled open revealing stone steps leading down to a cellar like area. The barn doors were left open, Blutfelden left two men to keep watch fearing they were being lured in here to be trapped.

Anya was now in the barn as it seemed a safer place to be. The armoured knights took stone pebbles from pouches on their belts. They glowed brightly from a light spell cast on them. These were then thrown down into the dark cellar. Then cautiously the front rank descended the steps. A call from below gave the all clear and Blutfelden proceeded down. Anya remained where she was but moved closer to the top of the steps peering down. "There is a tunnel leading off sir. It's quite cramped but he must have gone that way". Anya felt it was not wise to continue but unsurprisingly Blutfelden gave the order to proceed. She knew he would not want to leave empty handed.

Anya walked down the steps halfway, Blutfelden was issuing orders to his second in command Lucinius, an experienced Heldannic Knight, for the more heavily armed to proceed. More pebbles, with light spells, were thrown ahead and one of the knights, a priest muttered an incantation of some type. Blutfelden saw her, he had a thoughtful look on his face and then beckoned her forward. She walked down to the floor of the cellar and looked around. Several sacks of potatoes and grain were stored against one of the walls.

"Safest place for you is beside me" he grinned.

She was not sure if this was true and got the distinct feeling that Blutfelden was keeping her close as protection for them.

The tunnel was roughly hewn but began to smooth out as it proceeded downwards. The sides looked like they had been worn smooth by the passage of water. It eventually opened up into a large roughly rectangular chamber. There were some pools of water on the ground, more dark areas, which were quickly filled with light from the pebbles. Again, there was another tunnel leading off and again it was leading downwards.

"Fortune favours the brave", Blutfelden whispered as if to himself.

Anya was at the centre of the group and they descended about fifty feet down the tunnel when there was a heavy noise of grinding stone on stone. The light from behind them was suddenly cut off. Yells of surprise came from the men bringing up the rear. It became apparent that they were trapped. A solid stone barrier had blocked the tunnel behind them. There was no choice now but to continue.

There was the sound of water dripping from rocks but no sign of any Partisans. The tunnel they were in opened out into a large chamber but they held at the tunnel until more light stones had been thrown around this chamber. They were braced for some kind of attack but after a few tense moments when nothing happened, they once again moved cautiously forward, taking up positions around some boulders which were strewn around the floor. The men were silent except for the noise of their breathing, the scrap of metal from their armour whenever they walked too close to each other. A bead of sweat rolled down her nose and she wiped it away.

Several tunnels led off from this chamber. Blutfelden reluctant to divide his men up to follow each tunnel chose two and divided the men into two groups. He called Lucinius to his side and put him in charge of a group of eight. The remainder, including Anya proceeded with Blutfelden. The two groups went down the most promising of the tunnels. The tunnel they were in wound back and forth, still continuing downwards. There were some rough-hewn steps which made the descent easier. More, smaller tunnels branched off but they remained with the larger one.

Anya glanced at Blutfelden. If he had any fear or regrets, he was keeping it well hidden. They paused once more, ankle deep in water, the priests in the group casting more spells as if searching for something. "Were there spells that detected ambushes?" she wondered.

Faintly a noise carried to Anya's ears. It sounded like shouting but she could not be sure. Then one of the men at the front called out as he spotted something. Crossbowmen prepared to shoot; armoured knights presented shields. It was a lone figure, humanoid, he, it? , appeared to be lost wandering around in the gloom. The figure stepped towards the men, stumbling into the light. It was a man. He appeared dishevelled and starving. He reached out a bony hand, moaning in hunger or pain, she was not sure. The men grew tense, something was not right. The man came closer still, walking faster now as if eager to be rescued, ignoring the crossbows pointed at him. There were others behind him and they followed his lead. She did not know how many, but there was a lot. Her mouth went dry and she felt herself backing up, but was prevented by the knight standing behind her, bumping into him. He excused himself and looked behind in case others were coming that way.

The dishevelled man came within twenty feet of the group and in full light now, his mottled rotting flesh became apparent, his bony, clawed hands, the ragged clothing of a Heldann Freeholder, his dead sightless eyes.

One of the Knights fired his crossbow hitting the zombie. It ignored the bolt protruding from its chest moving forward still. Then all hell broke loose, zombies started appearing from everywhere. Men were shouting war cries as they attempted to cut down the undead or call out warnings to their comrades to "watch out" or "hold the line".

Anya drew her sword and got involved where she could, cutting and stabbing at the living corpses. When Blutfelden realised there were less zombies in front than behind he gave the order to head that way. There really was not much choice as their retreat was blocked, so that was the way they ended up going. The more heavily armoured knights literally putting their bodies in the way, shields lined up. Unfortunately for them the tunnel widened, which

allowed the zombies to outflank them and swarm in from the sides. The zombies dragged and pulled on the defending knights who were beginning to tire.

A couple of the priests raised their holy symbols to turn the undead, a handful of them reeled back in fear but there was so many it made little difference. Staying where they were was not an option either. Perhaps in the wider part of the tunnel there would be an escape route or a new more defensible position.

She did her best to stay within the protection of the knights without getting in the way but it was difficult. People would stumble in the gloom and fall over the uneven floor. She tried where she could to help them up, their bulky armour cumbersome, or plug a gap in the defence until they recovered. An undead female lunged at her catching her across the face, drawing blood. She chopped the arm from the corpse who did not seem to mind losing the limb. She kicked out, knocking the zombie to one side but immediately two more took its place. She hacked at another but her blade got stuck in the skull and as the body fell the sword was wrenched from her hand.

A knight came to her aid but before he got there, she instinctively raised her holy symbol and shouted "Away with you". The energy she felt was similar but different to the energy she gathered for the healing spell. Nevertheless, the zombie recoiled in apparent fear and tried to scramble away. She used the respite to regain her sword, the knight covering her while she rearmed herself. She remembered what Matheus had said about leading the group to the Haldis Partisans. Where were they? Had Matheus lied? Were they yet to show up? It was at that moment she realised they were already here. The men and women who had been tortured, murdered and hung by the Heldannic Knights; these were them. Somehow, they had returned to have their revenge just as Matheus had said.

She began looking around to see where they were headed. More tunnels dotted the walls of the large chamber they were now entering, thankfully with some torches burning along the walls. She thought she saw movement higher up in the shadows. Then there were more sounds of shouting and fighting. Lucinius and four surviving knights burst from one of the tunnels, panting and looking around. They were drenched in gore. They saw Blutfelden and the others and ran to link up. Blutfelden gave a cheer attempting to rally the men.

A hand grabbed Anya firmly and pulled her from the group. "Anya let's go". She screamed before she realised it was Matheus and not a zombie. One of the knights turned to assist her. Matheus delivered a sword blow to his helm, denting it and stunning the man.

She allowed herself to be pulled along behind Matheus who led her into an adjoining tunnel. He grabbed and shoved his way past any zombies in his way, seeming reluctant to use his sword. "We have to go back into the main chamber and make a run for the wall, ok? I'll climb first and pull you up. We've blocked the stair case so it's the only way". She nodded and they began moving again.

They kept along the side of the chamber; she saw that the knights had formed into a defensive circle, now reinforced with their other comrades. They seemed to be holding their own, when suddenly a large rock the size of a man's head crashed into the shoulder of one

of them. Another rock followed. She could see shadowy forms high up on the wall, hurling rocks and breaking up the formation. It quickly broke and men found themselves separated from their comrades and surrounded. Sheer numbers began taking knights down, screaming as armour was pulled from their bodies. The soft flesh beneath was an easy target for claw like hands and teeth. Some zombies noticed Matheus and Anya and stumbled towards them. It made no difference that Matheus was on their side in this battle. Their undead bloodlust saw all the living as a target.

Anya ran, up ahead she saw a pile of rocks, a fallen pillar. Matheus was beside her and he raced past the pillar and leapt at the twelve-foot wall. She was shocked to see the ease in which he scrambled up it. It was like he was moving along the floor. Once at the top he turned "Anya, come on".

She kept running when something hit her in the side and she was sent sprawling to the ground. She looked up and standing above her was Knight Bachelor Blutfelden.

"You traitorous bitch!" he screamed.

She struggled to her feet and barely blocked a sword blow. She started moving again but this time to the fallen pillar, trying to put it between them. He was so intent on her that he did not notice two zombies approaching him from behind until they attacked. One grabbed his shield arm, the other his shoulder and head, trying to bite into the soft flesh. He shouted in rage as he stumbled, barely keeping his balance.

While he was distracted, she clambered over some fallen rubble up the broken pillar. Just as she was almost at the top, something grabbed her ankle. She looked down to see Blutfelden climbing up after her. Only a few of his men still fought on and more zombies were closing in on them. He had a hold of her leg, as zombies were clawing at his. They would all be pulled down.

Needing both hands to hold on for dear life, she began kicking and stamping on his face, shouting at him "Let me go, let me go". She swung her leg and caught him across the side of the head, and with the zombies pulling on his legs he lost his balance and slipped off the pillar with a strangled cry, lost immediately amongst the dead Partisans as they fell on him, desperate to feed.

Free now, Anya turned and began climbing to the top of the broken pillar. It was not high, perhaps seven feet from the ground, worryingly within the grasp of the taller zombies.

"Jump, Anya!"

She looked up to see Matheus leaning out from the ledge, his arm outstretched, the other holding the wall. She looked down and saw some of the zombies clambering over the rubble to reach her, another was scratching at the ankle of her boot. Lucinius and two others were still fighting but it seemed hopeless. There was no way for them to escape.

"Jump Anya, I'll catch you". She turned back and could see the almost desperate look on Matheus's face. "Jump, my love".

There was no room for a run up. She took one step and was in the air reaching desperately for his hand. She wasn't going to make it.

Matheus released his hold on the wall, which allowed him to use both hands and it also gave him more reach. He was leaning out at an impossible angle. He grabbed her and she was swept up and around.

Despite the terrible danger she yelped in partial fear of being dropped and delight in being spun around. It reminded her of when she was a child. Her father would hold her hands and spin her around. Her feet would leave the ground when he turned around and around. The momentum carried her up and over onto the ledge. Matheus stepping in beside her.

"How?" she asked.

He just breathed in a sigh of relief "Are you ok?"

Another man, axe drawn walked towards them. Matheus moved Anya gently behind him. "She's with me". The man nodded in understanding.

Two more men arrived, one spoke "Are you ok Matheus? That was a foolhardy thing to do" he said looking from Matheus to Anya. She did not recognise these men. "What now?" he asked.

"Now, Sigfrid, we do what you wanted to do. Light them up".

Sigfrid grim faced, nodded and began issuing orders.

She could not bear to watch. Blutfelden was still gone from sight, a hill of zombies clambered and crawled around the area he had fallen. Lucinius and one other still fought for their lives.

Clay pots were thrown from the ledges, dozens and dozens. Sigfrid held a torch aloft; several others did the same. As one they were thrown onto the oil covered bodies below.

"Come my love, you don't need to see this". He put his arm around her and led her away from the ledge.

She heard the explosion of flames, the moans of the zombies as they caught fire and the screams of the living. Her heart sank a little. That was no way to die, but perhaps better than being ripped limb from limb and eaten alive.

Matheus led her to the surface. It was still dark outside and it looked like it would be a few hours before the sun rose. "You look tired, my love". She nodded in agreement. "I'll bring you to my place in the Grove. I have a small cabin there. I'll get you out of that armour and cleaned up, you look a mess. We should be there by this afternoon. It might be better if we lay low for a while. The disappearance of so many knights will create some consternation. They'll be all over this area looking for them".

He found her a place out of the wind beside a camp fire with several Rangers of Altenwald around it, while he spoke with another man. They were warm and friendly with Matheus but unsure how to treat her, not rude but not overly friendly.

She was handed a bowl of hot stew by a young female ranger. "Thank you", she smiled.

The ranger nodded and sat down opposite her and poked the fire. Anya ate the stew, which had lumps of meat and vegetables with a wooden spoon. "Are you one of them or are you with us?"

Anya did not know what to say and was relieved when Matheus returned. "How are you feeling now?"

"I'm good thank you. It got crazy there for a while. I didn't think we'd ... I'd get out of there alive".

"I would never let anything happen to you. Isn't that right, Agatha?" The young ranger simply smiled. They ate in comfortable silence, until they had finished, then Matheus rose and held out his hand to Anya who took hold and stood up. "I'd like to get started for the Grove, if you're not too tired?"

"No, I'm fine. I don't think I could sleep anyway".

He bid farewell to Agatha who remained sitting at the fire. "She's a fine archer that one, as good as any elf" he said to all around. Agatha looked like she enjoyed the compliment.

They left the warmth of the fire and Matheus led her to the horses which were already saddled. She recognised her horse immediately. Matheus told her that the guards left behind at the barn had been quickly overcome and now the Rangers had new horses and equipment. They mounted up and began heading north. Matheus explained they would be heading through very hilly terrain to a wooded valley which was part of the Altenwald forest. "You liked that hot bath at my farm?"

She nodded "Very much so" and smiled.

"Well, you're in for a treat. You'll love the Grove. You don't mind pixies or sprites I hope?" he asked with some mirth.

"Sprites?"

"Yes, the forest is full of them".

They continued on in silence, every so often she looked at him. He was riding calmly on his mount but she could see that he was fully alert, his eyes scanning the surrounding hills. Every so often he would pause and listen for a moment, then satisfied he would smile reassuringly to her and they would continue. To their right the sun began to rise. Once more they paused this time to enjoy the spectacle. "Beautiful" he said.

"Yes, it is" she agreed.

"Sunrise isn't bad either", he joked thumping her gently on the shoulder.

They continued on then, stopping at a stream to rest and allow the horses to drink. It was biting cold but he kept them mostly down low between the hills to stay out of the worst of the wind. Snow still lay on the ground. After a few hours of travel, they began to descend

and up ahead she could see the number of trees increasing. As they got further down into the valley, she noticed the temperature rise a few degrees. The snow was less prevalent, the trees thickened substantially. They were in the Altenwald forest now.

They slowed their pace and Matheus turned to her. "Another hour, a little less".

As promised after almost one hour she could see ahead that the trees thinned out a little and she could make out some buildings. Several people were walking around, men, women, even some children. She also spotted some elves as Matheus led her to his cabin.

"Food first or bath?" he asked turning in the saddle.

"Bath would be nice".

"Bath it is, follow me".

Up ahead the clearing opened up, the ground rising. There were more rocks and pools of water. As they rode amongst the rocks, she noticed steam rising from some of the pools. Eventually they stopped at one. They dismounted and Matheus secured the horses. He took down one of the saddle bags and brought it closer to the pool. He then shocked her when he began to strip off.

"Underground hot springs, they come up all around here, but this is my favourite spot". He was naked from the waist up.

She looked away uncomfortably but not before noticing he was heavily muscled, with huge broad shoulders, his chest covered in black hair.

He began kicking his boots off, "The water has healing properties. You'll feel like a new woman". Once his boots were off, his leggings were next. "Anya?" he asked.

She was not looking at him but knew he was completely naked. "Yes?"

"Are you not getting in?" He turned and stepped into the pool, laughing. "Aahh, this is the life" he cried, before sinking down under the water. He resurfaced a short time later, smoothing the hair from his face and wiping the water from his beard. "Come on Anya, you'll love it. I promise you". He sat down in the pool on a stone slab, the water just about at his shoulders, the water steaming gently. He looked at her with some amusement. "Do you like babies?" he asked.

"What?"

"Babies, do you like babies?"

"What in Vanya's name are you talking about?"

"Never mind, hurry up and get in. I'm getting hungry".

She draped her furs over a rock and began removing her armour slowly.

"Do you need help with that?"

"No, I've got it".

He spread his arms wide, resting them on the sides of the pool.

“Can you stop looking at me” she scolded.

“By Frey and Freya, will you get those clothes off and get in here”. He complained, covering his eyes with a hairy hand.

She quickly stripped off and walked quickly to the pool and climbed in. “Oh my”, she sighed in delight. The warmth of the water had an immediate effect and she felt invigorated. She looked at Matheus who was peering at her from between his fingers. “Well?” he asked.

“It’s wonderful” she sighed.

He reached out and she took his hand. He pulled her to his side and she sat down beside him, the water up to her neck.

“I’ve always loved this place. Away from it all. Peace and quiet. It’s even better now that you’re here. You know they would charge a fortune for something like this in Thyatis or Darokin”.

She did not answer, luxuriating in the warmth and peace. The only sound was the gentle bubbling of the water and the occasional snort from the nearby horses.

“Back in the caves, how did you stand on the wall like that?” she asked looking at him.

His left arm which was draped behind her came in front of her. On one finger was a black ring, with white lines in the pattern of a spider web. She took his hand and examined the ring. “Magic”, he said simply and put his hand back on the ledge. She sighed and leaned back closing her eyes for a while.

When they were done, Matheus climbed from the pool and took some towels from the saddlebag he had placed beside the pool. He tied one around his waist and held the other open for Anya. She had overcome her shyness and standing up she walked in to the towel embrace of Matheus. He gently dried her hair as she stood there. The feeling of being safe, warm and contented caused her to lean into him. She looked up at him when he was done to see that he was grinning happily. “Right, let’s get dressed. Food now, I’m starving”.

They headed back to the cabin. One of the women in the Grove, welcomed them back. “It’s good to see you Matheus. Always good to see you. Food is ready”.

“Ah, Hilda, that man of yours is lucky to have you. I hope he appreciates you”.

“Hmpf”, she replied rolling her eyes.

“Thank you”, said Anya.

Hilda nodded in acknowledgement and left them to it. The meal was wonderful, fresh venison and an assortment of vegetables. She sighed and closed her eyes, savouring the first mouthful. “Good, eh?” asked Matheus. She nodded in reply tucking into her meal with relish.

“We have enough supplies up here to keep us fed for months. The hidden people lead the trolls on a merry chase away from our settlement if they get too close. We’re quite safe here. It’s our safe haven when we need to disappear for a while”.

“Hidden people?”

“The fairy races, pixies, sprites, dryads. That's what we call them. Hidden because you’ll never find them if they don’t want you to”. He put a slice of venison in his mouth and shook his head slowly. “Hilda sure is a fine cook”.

“How long will we stay here?” she asked.

He shrugged and continued eating. “As long as we need to. Word hasn’t got back to the Knights yet but it will and they’ll eventually come looking. Things will be wild for a time, but they’ll calm down. Halvard will have a few new targets for us and we’ll start again”.

“Will I get to meet him?”

He paused for a moment and she could see he was considering his reply. “You might. He’s a great man. Passionate, yes, about this land and its people. Took over the Partisans about three years ago and him only seventeen at the time. I’m a year or two older than him but I wouldn’t dream of taking on that responsibility”.

“Why did he?”

“He had no choice, Anya. You’ve been around here long enough. Those knights invaded this land and wiped out his family. He’s the last and rightful heir”.

“You admire him”.

“Of course. We couldn’t do this without his leadership, his head for tactics”.

“From what I can see there is a lot of respect for you amongst the people too”.

He scoffed at this. “I just keep the wheels on the cart turning but Halvard built it”.

There was silence for a long while and they finished off their meal. He pushed the plate away and leaned back. “Are you tired or will I show you around?”

“A walk would be nice”, she smiled.

“Good”. He stood up, grabbed some furs, and handing some to Anya, they left the cabin. It was now well after midday and this time of year it would be dark soon. They passed several cabins and were greeted by many people. The cabins themselves were within the tree line and well camouflaged she noticed. Anything or anyone flying overhead would see only hot springs and geysers.

One or two children followed along close by and waved shyly when Anya became aware of their presence. She knelt down on one knee and they walked slowly over. One young girl had her fingers in her mouth, unsure.

“Come away children, it’s bath time”, a woman called. They ran back their mother, Anya and Matheus continued on. “How many live here?”

“It changes, about seventy but it depends on what’s happening on the outside”. He led her around the buildings, pointing out different features, and told her that Halvard had been born here in the Grove. “There’s a special energy here. Many women come here to give birth, sometimes to conceive”.

She glanced up at him but he was not looking at her. As darkness fell, the temperature dropped noticeably. He did not seem bothered by it but she shivered. Barely audible in the distance, amongst the trees was the sound of voices and what sounded like music. He looked at her and putting his arm around her led her towards the building. As they drew close, she could tell that it was definitely music and people singing and laughing. A celebration?

He held the door open for her and she walked quickly in to the warm room which was packed with people. Some stopped to consider her. She was not known to them but when Matheus stepped in behind her, their looks of uncertainty were replaced with beaming smiles. “Matheus, Matheus”, several voices from around the room called his name in welcome.

He stepped up behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders. “Let’s get a drink”.

It took some time to reach the small bar as they had to stop on several occasions while he greeted and embraced people. After some small talk, they moved on, only to be stopped again. She put on a smile, feeling very much out of place.

“Leave the big ox there and let’s get you a drink”. A young attractive woman with braided red hair and dressed in simple clothing linked her arm with Anya’s and brought her to the bar. “You must be Anya”.

Anya smiled and nodded.

“I’m Elsa. What would you like?”

“I don’t mind”.

“Good, beer it is. Aron, drinks for the ladies”.

Aron looked at her good naturedly “Sure, Elsa”. He placed two glasses on the counter and poured a clear liquid. He stood and waited, the bottle held in his hand, leaning against the counter.

Elsa picked up both glasses and handed one to Anya. “This will warm you up” she said, before knocking the drink back in one go. She looked at Anya expectantly. She smiled uncertainly but followed suit. She coughed and spluttered but smiled at Elsa who took the glass from her and had Aron refill it. “One more, then some beers”.

The music became more lively, Anya was halfway through her beer when Matheus finally joined her. "Elsa! So good to see you". They embraced warmly. Matheus had to pick her up as he was more than a foot taller than her.

"Don't worry big man, I'm taking good care of her".

After that the ice was broken. The evening passed in a blur. Drinks, music, singing, conversations with people she had never met before promising eternal friendship. Elsa stayed close by her side, laughing and joking. She was a great person to be around. So full of life.

At some stage four more men entered the building. Good tempered shouts of complaint to "shut the door, were you born in a barn?" quickly changed to delighted shouts of "Halvard!"

"So, this was the famous Halvard" she thought.

As she had experienced earlier in the night, Halvard was finding it difficult to make any headway to the bar. He was a handsome man, about six feet tall. His hair was tied back, the sides cut close to the scalp. He removed his furs and one of his companions took them from him. Anya turned back to Elsa who she noticed was remarkably quiet for the first time since she had met her. Her eyes kept flicking up to watch Halvard and then down to her drink. She looked at her drink and nervously smoothed a stray lock of her hair behind her ear.

Anya smiled, "I know a secret", she said in a sing song voice.

Elsa looked at her in confusion "What?"

"I know a secret", Anya repeated smiling broadly and clearly drunk.

"What are you talking about?" whispered Elsa nervously, leaning in closer.

"You know", said Anya cryptically indicating with her head to Halvard, who was coming closer.

"Ssshh, Anya". Elsa seemed terrified with embarrassment.

Anya reached out reassuringly and held her friend's hands. She nodded, letting Elsa know she understood.

Elsa seemed relieved and finished her drink. Composing herself she stood up and called to Halvard who grinned and moved towards her. "Aron, drinks for Halvard", she shouted.

Anya stood too as he drew near. It seemed the polite thing to do. Matheus was on his way back to their table after finishing the last set with the musicians. He knew quite a few ballads, the rousing sort, not the type that leave you feeling broody and vengeful. Matheus was a full head taller than Halvard and they embraced like brothers. "Good to see you, old man".

"Old? Old, he says", replied Halvard looking at Elsa and Anya. "You're two years older than me", he roared with laughter. His eyes lingered on Elsa who seemed trapped in his gaze. She

was getting drunk now and sat down grinning. He turned to Anya and addressed Matheus. "Is this the one?"

Anya was unsure what he meant.

"This is Anya, Matheus's woman", explained Elsa standing back up to make the introductions.

"Yes, I can see", smiled Halvard. He stepped forward and took her by the shoulders. "It's good to meet you, Anya.

"I've heard a lot about you", she replied.

"As I have of you. Come, a toast. To all the friends and lovers together, safe and well". The music paused and the entire room joined in the toast. After a round of hugs and back slapping, the music started up again.

Anya could see that Elsa was enjoying the evening. The awkward moment regarding Halvard had passed and she was once more just one of the men, drinking and joking. Halvard did not have the physical presence of Matheus, few men did but she was struck by his charisma, he exuded it. He seemed larger than life, people were drawn to him. She could understand how he had become their leader, how he was the man who inspired them. It was clear too that Elsa was madly in love with him. Anya began to feel the effects of the alcohol and was surprised to see Elsa still drinking. She was only about five foot three and appeared drunk an hour ago. Somehow, however she was still knocking them back, banging the hilt of her axe on the table as she sang along with the musicians.

Matheus took a seat beside her. "Enjoying the night?" She smiled and nodded.

"Ready for sleep?" She nodded again.

He stood and helped her stand. They bid farewell and goodnight to Halvard, Elsa and the others gathered. Donning their furs, they left the building and headed back to Matheus's cabin.

The ground crunched beneath their feet. Their breath a white mist as they exhaled. The sky was clear, the stars twinkling high above. She had never felt so happy. Matheus drew her close and they walked in silence past some of the other homes. Some still had lights on inside but most did not.

"Does Halvard know how Elsa feels about him?" she asked quietly.

"How does she feel about him?" asked Matheus.

"Really? You can't see it?"

"See what?"

"She's crazy about him".

Matheus seemed nonplussed. "Everyone's crazy about him. It's Halvard".

“No, No, not like that. I mean she loves him; she wants to be with him”.

Matheus looked at her. “You think so?” he asked appearing uncertain.

Anya shook her head. “Forget about it. Forget I said anything at all, and don’t you go blabbing to Halvard. If he can’t see it and you can’t see it...ugggh, men!” she finished shaking her head.

They reached the cabin and she was glad to get inside. Matheus stoked the ashes and put more fuel on the fire. Soon it was blazing. She removed her furs and basked in the heat. There was only one bed and Matheus insisted that Anya take it. He rolled some furs on the floor and lay down close by. The room was quiet and dark but for the comforting flicker of the fire. Then Matheus spoke, “You say Elsa loves Halvard?”

“Yes”, she replied, tiredly, close to drifting off to sleep.

“Can you always tell when someone is in love?”

“Huh?” she murmured.

“Nothing Anya, go to sleep my love”.

The next day she awoke with a splitting headache. She sat up on her elbows, her vision was blurred. “Never again”, she groaned. She heard Matheus laugh. “We always say that”.

He walked towards her with some water. She drank it down greedily and handed the empty container back to him. He sat on the bed beside her, “Sleep, ok?”

“Perfect, all perfect, until I woke up”, she groaned and eased herself back under the covers.

“I’ll get some breakfast ready”.

She grunted in reply, the blanket pulled over her head.

“Good morning, everyone”, shouted Elsa entering the cabin.

Anya pulled the blanket down and looked at her in disgust. “What the...how are you so fresh? You had more than me”, she complained.

Elsa embraced Matheus, then jumped on to the bed beside Anya. “Come on sleepy head, get up”.

“Aaaarrghh, go away”, whined Anya.

Elsa looked about and noticed the furs Matheus had spread out on the floor. “Did you two have a fight?” she asked indicating the furs with a nod of her head.

Anya drew herself up into a sitting position, leaning back against the head board. “No, we did not have a fight”.

“Then what’s with that?” she asked, again nodding at the furs.

“Sssh, Elsa”, said Anya echoing Elsa from last night.

Elsa said no more and stood to leave. "We'll be heading off soon and I'm not sure when we'll be back. I'll drop by later before we go, Ok?"

Anya nodded and gave her friend a weak smile. "If I live that long", she grumbled.

Elsa walked to the door and put a hand on Matheus's bicep. "Look after her, yes?"

"Of course, Elsa". After a pause, he continued "...and Elsa". She turned at the door waiting. "Stay close to Halvard, keep him out of trouble". She nodded and without another word left the cabin.

A short time later, Matheus had Anya out of bed and dressed. "Come on. I know what will help". She groaned and leaned against him. They left the cabin and made the twenty-minute walk to the same hot spring they had used the day before.

She stripped off, uncaring, the hangover overriding any sensibilities. He stood watching her as she eased herself on to the flat stone, sinking up to her neck in the warm water. Her eyes closed; she sighed in contentment. She opened them some seconds later and looked at Matheus who still stood, fully clothed. She seemed confused, "Are you not getting in?"

"Well, I hadn't intended to but when a beautiful woman asks you to get naked and join her in a hot spring, it would be rude to refuse". He was stripped naked, his boots flung to one side and he was in beside her in no time, the water splashing into her face.

"Someone's eager", she laughed.

"I love that laugh", he said, "that smile, those eyes, those dimples. They'll be the death of me".

Her face already red from the hot spring never the less seemed to redden even more.

They sat in silence for a while before Anya spoke, "Last night, you asked me a question".

"Did I?"

"Yes, you did. You asked me about love. Do I always know when someone is in love?"

He remained silent.

"I do", she continued, leaning towards him, her face upturned.

"Do, what?" he asked bending down to her.

"Know when someone is in love".

Their lips met and they kissed.

All was peace and bliss, the sound of children laughing and playing could be heard from the cabins further down in the valley.

Afterwards, they headed back down to the cabin and ate breakfast. Just after noon, Elsa, along with Halvard and some others she recognised from last night's festivities, came to bid them farewell.

“I’m sorry you’re leaving so soon. We hardly had a chance to get to know each other”, said Anya embracing her.

“We should be back in a couple of months once our business in Wendar is completed”, replied Elsa.

Halvard seemed eager to be off so the talk was kept brief. They headed up out of the valley, Anya watched them for a while. “Oh well, looks like it’s just the two of us again”, she smiled as Matheus stood behind her holding her in his embrace.

“Elsa is a good fighter. You handled yourself well enough in the caves but you can always improve”.

“Okaaaay?” she said turning, “not how I expected this moment to develop but I’m listening”.

“Weapons practice in half an hour, let’s get ready”.

How I met your Father - Part 4.

They spent the next two hours running through drills, using mainly the sword but towards the end they had some fun with axe throwing. Matheus was right, her skills needed to improve. He assured her that after three to four weeks he would have her half way decent. She knew that he preferred spears and axes as range weapons but discovered with much amusement that he was not comfortable with a bow. Amusing because his mother, Asturi, was from Ethengar. The people of Ethengar were renowned and feared for their skill with a bow, even from horseback. He made some excuses about his hands being too big and every time he tried to draw an arrow from the quiver, "three or four would come out". She laughed at this and he just stood there smiling at her. "It's true".

"When do I get to meet Asturi?"

This caused the smile to leave his face. "Be careful what you wish for, Anya".

The sudden change of mood surprised her so she thought it best to change the subject.

There were times throughout the day when he would speak quietly with one man or another like he was giving orders or receiving news, most likely from the outside world. Apart from those few occasions he never left her side.

He walked her through the forest, pointing out landmarks in case she should need to find her way back to the cabin or back to Nordenham. There was a definite edge to being in the forest, like they were being watched. Hilda had mentioned a dryad that was as she put it, 'very fond of Matheus'. She advised Matheus not to bring Anya too far into the forest. This particular dryad was known to be the jealous kind she said. Matheus had shaken his head at that and Hilda had laughed. Neither one said they were joking which made Anya wary of encountering this 'jealous dryad'. It was strange how in this valley, lost amongst the forest of Altenwald and yes apparently protected by the Hidden People, she felt they were in a different world, her old life merely a distant dream.

Hilda had prepared a meal for them again, which made Anya feel embarrassed. She felt like she was not pulling her weight and was being treated as the guest of Matheus and the Grove and still not quite one of them.

The day came to a close and she was tired but happy. That night Matheus did not sleep on the floor. In the morning, it was a quick breakfast, weapons practice followed by some time in the hot springs and then various small jobs around the Grove. When time permitted, she helped the children with their reading and writing.

One time she was required to use her healing abilities granted to her by Vanya. A young man had received a wound from where he did not say and although she was sorely tempted, she did not ask. She healed the wound as best she could, and then fell back on her knowledge of traditional remedies to finish the job. The man was grateful for her help and she felt a buzz in being able to do something useful, to justify her presence there. Much to her delight she found she could also use the gathered energy to create light, although it did

not last very long and she found plenty of use for a spell she had mastered, that could purify food which had spoiled.

News finally reached them that the loss of Knight Bachelor Blutfelden and his men had reached the Heldannic Order and in particular his brother Konrad Blutfelden who was scouring the land. Despite this, their life in the Grove carried on much as before. The weeks went by and she felt more accepted within the group. Things between her and Matheus had never been better.

That night she went to sleep as usual but this time she had another dream. Afterwards, she awoke and lay there for a minute, letting her eyes adjust to the dark, the cabin was quiet, a full moon high in the sky, its pale light illuminating the window and Matheus sleeping peacefully beside her. The dream had been vivid, the message clear. She rose quietly from the bed and padded bare foot to the window looking out.

“Anya?”

She turned, her body in silhouette against the pale gleam of the moon. Matheus was propped up on one arm.

“I must leave”, she said.

“When?”

“In the morning”.

He regarded her for a moment. “Then we still have a few hours”. He lifted the blanket, a clear invitation to return to bed. She walked back to him the cold clinging to her body and was embraced once more in the warmth.

That morning, Matheus sat up in bed watching as Anya dressed. As she buckled on her leather armour he spoke “Is everything ok?”

“Yes”.

“Then why are you leaving?”

“I had a dream last night. Vanya came to me or at least the dream was about her. I have work to do”.

“We need you here”.

She stooped down and picked up her fur cloak from a chair. “When you were hurt that time capturing the lupin, I asked Vanya to help me to help you and she did. In return I must return when she calls me. I have no regrets. I want to stay here with you and the others but I can’t. I am so grateful to Vanya that you are alive and well. I wish it could be different but I gave my word and I have a duty now to Vanya”.

He rose from the bed and walked towards her. She finished securing the clasp on the fur cloak and checked her sword one last time and then looked at the floor. As he stood before her, she looked up at him and gave him a sad smile. He reached for her but she turned

away. She paused at the door, turning once more. "You should leave this place. It will not be safe". She left then walking towards the stable to collect her horse.

It was three weeks before her warning came true. He had made preparations but had hoped they would be unnecessary. They were only alerted when cries of surprise and panic began to ripple across the Grove. Matheus grabbed his weapons and ran outside, scanning the tree line for the source of the threat. A large eagle shaped craft arrived into the Grove, barely clearing the tree tops. It swung around low, facing the tree line where the most buildings were. Matheus gave a moment to give thanks to Frey and Freya that he had taken heed of the warning and sent the children away. Others had refused to leave the Grove and he could feel their anger, some of it directed at him. None would give voice to this anger directly to him, but he knew and understood. Anya had betrayed them, betrayed him and had earned herself the nickname "The Harpy".

Several men opened fire with a volley of arrows at the Heldannic warbird as they later learned it was called. A return volley of ballista caused them to seek cover, two men would fight no more. The warbird remained fifty feet from the ground, so they were unable to attack it directly and had no heavy weapons to threaten the ship.

A rumbling noise which had started quietly and then increased in volume caused the men to instinctively grab whatever cover they could. A booming, reverberating noise came from the warbird. A black smoking ball, shot forward hitting the largest building. It along with the men inside simply disappeared, flakes of ash exploded everywhere and fell like snow. Several of the warriors were stunned, frozen in shock at the massive display of fire power. The warbird dropped closer to the ground, a hatch opened and Heldannic marines poured out of the hull, perhaps two dozen, along with six Heldannic Knights. With their dull grey armour and white tabards emblazoned with the Black Lion, they fanned out and moved towards them.

The fighting was fierce. The Rangers threw themselves at their heavily armed foes. Some of the elves let loose with arrows and cast magic missile spells. The warbird fired another volley of ballista and heavy shot from mounted catapults, targeting the archers, magic-users and any concentrated groups of defenders.

Matheus threw a spear which pierced the shield of a marine it was thrown with such force. Charging forward he easily parried the sword, a reverse swing hit the marine hard across the face of his open helm. The man dropped screaming in pain. One of the knights in full plate armour, his face obscured by the closed visor of his helm attacked with a war cry "In Vanya's name".

Matheus dodged the war hammer and grabbed the top of the shield dragging him off balance. The knight stumbled to his knees. Matheus kicked the fallen knight in the head. He fell to his side with a muffled cry, the helm knocked from his head. Two marines rushed to his defence. Matheus decapitated the first while holding his sword two handed. He allowed the blade to follow through and turned his body allowing the momentum to carry him fully around to face the second marine. As he spun, he dropped low, his sword cutting into the knees of the man who cried out and fell back, away from Matheus, stumbling badly.

He turned back to the fallen knight who had regained his footing. The man glared at him with hatred. He stepped forward swinging his war hammer, using his shield with great skill to block strikes from Matheus and return blows of his own. The war hammer caught Matheus on the thigh causing him to grunt, the leg numbing almost immediately.

Another marine came to help the knight. Matheus moved, trying to keep both of them in front of him. An arrow ricocheted off the marine's helmet causing him to divert his attention to his attacker. Matheus pulled an axe from his belt and threw it at the marine, burying it between the shoulder blades of the distracted man.

The knight attacked then, Matheus blocked and shoulder charged, using his massive bulk as a battering ram. The knight stumbled backwards, half falling, half catching himself. Matheus pressed the attack bringing his sword down hard. The shield came up and took the heavy blow. Matheus chopped again and again and again. It was all the knight could do to keep the blade from piercing his flesh.

Another marine tackled Matheus around the waist, trying to wrestle the huge man away. A few seconds of struggle, caused Matheus to drop his sword. Both hands free now he grabbed one of the marine's arms and wrenched it behind his back. A sickening crunch followed, the man screamed in agony, his left arm hanging useless by this side. A second axe flashed into Matheus's hand, cutting into the man's neck silencing him.

He turned once more to the knight who was uttering words of magic. Matheus drew back the axe, ready to throw. He grunted with the effort and nothing. He could not move. His body would not obey him. His arm drawn back could not move forward and release the axe. He was held in place by magic. He roared in anger and frustration. The knight grinning in satisfaction, stooped to pick up his fallen helm and putting it under his arm, walked closer.

"You and I, are going to have a chat. My brother is missing, presumed dead and I believe you know something about that".

Matheus glared at him.

"Nothing to say? Don't worry you will when I'm finished with you".

Several marines gathered around Matheus. The remaining Rangers had melted back into the forest. "Bind him tightly and put him aboard".

Anya peered down from the deck of the warbird. "Oh Matheus. Why did you stay?" she whispered softly to herself.

Before the warbird finally left the Grove all the buildings had been set ablaze. Matheus was locked in the ship's brig, after he was searched carefully for hidden weapons. The dead and wounded Heldannic marines were brought aboard. The warbird rose smoothly into the air, rotating as it did. Once it had gained enough altitude it flew straight to the capital city, Freiburg.

With Matheus locked up and out of sight Anya had been tending to the wounded men when she received word that the captain wanted to see her. She walked down to see Captain Von

Gissur and stood outside the door to his office. Just before she knocked, she could hear he was talking to someone. She recognised the voice of Herr Blutfelden, the younger brother of Raimond who had died in the Haldis Partisan ambush. "I told you Otto. I told you it was worth the risk. What a prize. There was no way we would have found that clearing without using the warbird",

"Yes, yes Konrad but we were under strict orders to keep the existence of the warbirds a secret",

"I know my friend, but Land Meister Lowenstern agreed this was too good an opportunity to turn down. I'm going places Otto. I'll remember this day. I'll remember you stood by me. When I rise, I'll bring you along with me".

She heard a clinking of glasses. Waiting a moment, she knocked on the door. "Enter", called the captain. She opened the door halfway and waited to be invited in. "Ah, Lady Arendt, come in. I am sure you are as delighted as we with the success of this mission", said the captain, a stout man with a prominent duelling scar on his face. She smiled weakly and nodded, stepping two paces into the room.

She noticed Herr Blutfelden appraising her, his blue eyes unsettling. He was about the same height as his deceased brother but more sturdily built. "Lady Arendt", he said giving her a short bow and raising his glass to her.

"Most successful", continued the captain. "We located a base of operations and smashed it. We inflicted heavy losses and captured one of their leaders and all thanks to the information you were able to supply. The lady Vanya smiles upon you". He poured her a glass of wine and handed it to her. She took it and then raised it for a toast when prompted.

Then Herr Blutfelden spoke, "I heard about your brother Hader. A most unfortunate accident. I must say we were most impressed with your decision to undertake his mission. I am sure he would have been most proud".

"Thank you, Herr Blutfelden".

"Have you given any thought to taking your oath of service? A woman of your bravery and decisiveness would do well".

Captain Von Gissur joined in with a delighted cry. "The lady Vanya has smiled on her. She has been using her healing abilities on her wounded comrades. It's a foregone conclusion she will take the oath".

Anya smiled but did not reply. Her emotions over everything that had happened were buffeting her. She fought to keep control. "What will happen to Matheus?"

"Herr Blutfelden drank some wine, before answering. "The prisoner we captured?" When she nodded, he continued. "He'll be questioned about what he knows. The fate of my brother and his men...the location of their bodies if as I suspect they are dead".

"...and then?"

“Then”, he grinned, looking at Captain Von Gissur. “Well, if he has no more use, no more benefit to our Order, well?” he shrugged.

Anya said no more fearful of betraying her feelings for Matheus. She finished her wine over some small talk and then feigning tiredness asked to be excused. “Of course, Lady Arendt. We should be in Freiburg soon enough”, said the captain.

She left the captain’s quarters and went to her room, her head spinning. She could not let them hurt Matheus. She could not let them kill him as Herr Blutfelden seemed to indicate was his fate. Yet what could she do? She lay on her bed and closed her eyes. There must be a way she thought.

She had been back in Freiburg now perhaps two weeks. The native population were making preparations for the festivities which would take place tomorrow, Kaldmont 28, - Hiding from the Year’s End. It was a strange custom that involved making lots of noise to stop the old year carrying them away as it passed. Bonfires were lit and people drank a lot. At least the native Heldanners did, the Knights shunned these barbaric customs preferring to celebrate the New Year on Nuwmont 1st with parades and festivals. It was a low-key affair compared to what happened in Thyatis City. Now that was a great day.

She wandered around the plaza, wrapped up warm in a thick fur lined cloak. She paused for a few minutes watching the work men as they raised the Notre Dame of Vanya’s Cathedral. They had started seven years ago and were well on the way to having it completed in about two more years. It was a massive structure taking up most of the space in the plaza. She sighed remembering the much smaller wooden structure she had shared with Matheus in the Grove. She thought of him now. She had not seen him since he had been captured. He was locked up somewhere in the fortress.

She had not taken her Oath to join the Order but had spent a lot of time being linked to it through her brother and truly she had not really wanted to. Her brother was dead now so she had no one to make discreet enquiries regarding Matheus. She shook her head at this, even if he was alive, Hader would not have helped her in this matter. She was sure he would have hated Matheus. The few men she had healed and bandaged were back on duty and truth be told she would not recognise any of them now. Herr Blutfelden would be of no help obviously. He seemed to be relishing the chance to torture Matheus. Otto, the captain of the warbird would not help either. She thought of the battle in the Grove and that incredible creation thinking again of the warbird. She had been shocked to learn of its existence. It was a closely guarded secret and one she had been sworn to keep.

She turned from the plaza and walked to her father’s home in the Vayburg district. He lived in one of the nicer parts above his business which sold wine, cheese and bread. She had no idea how he made ends meet, especially this far north and in a place run by the Heldannic Knights who frowned upon such things as alcohol, at least when they were not celebrating the capture of enemy leaders, she thought cynically. Her father’s line of business would have been more successful anywhere else, though he did well enough and had been delighted to see her return to him safe and sound. He had wanted her to come home sooner, especially when news of Hader had reached him but respected her decision to stay.

Her mother had not lasted long in Freiburg and had returned to Hattias. Her father seemed, dare she say, happier. Her mother was a wonderful person but could be very overbearing. It was one of the reasons Anya had followed her brother to Altendorf.

More weeks passed and with still no clue about Matheus's fate she turned to her father.
"Papa?"

"Yes, Anya. What's wrong?" he asked, noticing the look on her face.

"What will happen to the Partisan captured last year?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I know this man. I helped capture him. I want to know that he's alright".

Her father seemed confused. "Hader's job was to root out the Partisans and hand them over. He died but you stepped in and carried on his mission. I am so very proud of you. Why are you worried about this man?"

When she shrugged her shoulders and did not answer his eyes lit up. "Ah you feel sorry for him. Don't, these people are wild, Anya. They're not to be trusted, why only the other day one of the little brats stole a loaf of bread from the front of the shop. I can't even leave bread outside to cool anymore".

"That's not true Papa. He's a good man. He always kept me safe, treated me with respect".

"Ha!" her father shouted, "Respect? Of course, he treated you with respect. You're a Hattian woman, he's, he's...well you know?"

"Beneath me?"

After a pause he continued "Yes of course he's beneath you. You are a young attractive woman Anya but still naive, especially in the ways of men and women. You'll be married some day and then you'll understand what I'm talking about. If your mother was here, she could explain".

"Oh, don't start that again, trying to marry me off" she replied, exasperated.

"Well why not? You haven't taken the Oath of Service and you won't to let us find you a fine man to marry".

"A fine Hattian man, you mean!"

"What?" Her father felt like he and his daughter were having two different conversations.

"What are you talking about? Of course, a Hattian man, who else?" he demanded.

She remained silent and looked at the floor.

"Anya? What's going on here? You're not making any sense. You head off with your brother, you've not been back for months, now Hader is dead and your mother is gone back home. You finally return to me and help the Order capture a very dangerous criminal. I thought you would be happy and that you would have taken the Oath. Instead, you've been moping

around these past few weeks and now you're asking me about some Freeholder farmer! I'll ask you one more time Anya. What's going on? On Vanya's name, I promise if you don't give me a good answer, I'll send you back to your mother and she can deal with you".

"I'm pregnant".

Silence.

When her father said nothing, she looked up. His mouth was moving but no words came out. Finally, after a few false starts he spoke "Pregnant?"

She nodded.

"What? "How? Who Anya? I don't understand". His eyes swirled in his head, darting around. At last, he gathered himself. Understanding began to dawn on him. Her father did not usually get angry but she could see he was angry now. "Him! The one they have locked up?"

She blinked at him, terrified to answer.

"Answer me, damn you".

"Yes".

"How could you? Did he force himself on you? Yes, he must have".

"Papa".

"Yes, he must have. I'll kill him".

"Papa".

He looked around, probably for a weapon. As if he was going to march straight in to the fortress and kill Matheus himself, right there and then.

"Papa".

He did not answer. He had shut her out and was deciding how to handle this.

"Papa!" she said louder. Again, he ignored her. "It wasn't like that. I love him and he loves me".

This caught his attention and he paused in his search, turning to her. "What do you know about love? What is love? How important is love? You silly little girl".

She snapped. She respected her father so much but she snapped. "What? Like you and mother? Maybe if you had loved one another, she wouldn't be in Hattias and you here".

"Don't you dare"

"Enough Papa, please. I know he loves me. He saved my life and yes now I'm pregnant. He's the father and you're going to be a grandfather. I'm not raising this child by myself and I need you to help me get him out of there".

Her father was taken aback. Many replies came to his mind but he ignored them all. "Grandfather?" he thought, his anger dissipating. "How...how do you expect me to get him out?" he finally asked.

She closed the distance between them touching his forearm gently. "You know people, Papa. I know you know people who could help".

Her father looked at her considering his reply. In the end he simply nodded. She smiled broadly and embraced him tightly. "Oh, thank you Papa".

"Don't thank me yet. This may take some time to organise. There's no guarantee it can be done". He eased her away from him so he could look at her face, still holding her shoulders. "Anya, please don't get your hopes up. It may not be possible and even if it is..." he paused, "there is a chance he may already be dead".

"You don't know him, Papa. He'll be alive I know it".

Over the next couple of days her father disappeared at times and she was left to mind the shop. Every so often she would ask how things were going.

"It's taking time, Anya. These things can't be rushed".

She was impatient for some progress but knew her father was meticulous and would only proceed when he was satisfied. It was on one of these occasions while her father was away that a customer came into the shop. A tall strong looking woman a couple of inches taller than Anya herself. She looked briefly around the shop and approached Anya. She wore the unmistakable symbol of the Order, the Black Lion.

"Good afternoon, can I help you with anything?"

"Good afternoon, my child. Yes, I think perhaps that you can. Anya? Anya Arendt?"

Anya nodded.

"Good I am Grand Knight Erstenlicht".

Anya paled in fright. "Am I in trouble?"

The woman laughed, a generous, warm laugh. "Not at all. I came here to see you personally. I have heard you were the one responsible for locating the Partisan camp, which led to the capture of one of their leaders. You showed exceptional bravery gathering this information. I must say I am impressed but also a little surprised".

"Surprised?"

"Yes, I had expected you to take the Oath but no, I have been left waiting".

"Oh, I am sorry but I'm not sure what I am going to do. I was going to, I wanted to, but my Papa needs my help here and well, there are other reasons".

"Your father is a very capable man and you have shown yourself to be a very capable woman". She looked about the shop at the shelves filled with produce. "You are capable of

so much more Anya. You need opportunities to show what you can do. Take the Oath and I will make sure you get those opportunities”.

Anya’s mind focused. “My training. It would be in the fortress? Here in Freiburg?”

“To start with, yes, of course”.

“Perhaps you are right. Perhaps I need to take on new challenges”.

“Good, I am very happy to hear you say that”.

“But I must speak with my papa. He should be back soon”.

“Of course. Come see me when you are ready. I will leave word at the gates that you are to be admitted”.

“Thank you, Grand Knight, Erstenlicht”.

The tall woman smiled in response. “We’ll talk some more then Anya. Good day to you”. She turned and left the shop. Anya followed her to the door and watched her leave. A retinue of heavily armed Knights accompanied the Grand Knight back towards the plaza.

“Well, well” she thought, “that was unexpected”.

Her father returned later in the day and noticed something different about his daughter. She had prepared a meal for them both and he sat down. Deciding to pre-empt her question he told her the plans were coming along but it would take another few weeks as gaining access to the prison cells in the bowels of the fortress was proving a headache.

“I may have a way to gain access”, she said.

“You? How?” asked her father surprised.

“While you were out, Grand Knight Erstenlicht paid me visit”.

He knew by her calm exterior that there was no obvious threat. “...and?” he prompted.

“She asked why I hadn’t made arrangements to take the Oath. She thinks I have the talent to be a Knight and she wants me to talk to her about this, after I had a chance to speak to you”.

“And you think that by joining the Heldannic Order you would have access to the cells” he finished.

She nodded smiling.

“Taking the Oath is not something you should take lightly Anya. It’s a big commitment. You can’t just leave if it doesn’t work out. Not with your honour intact anyway”.

Anya told her father of the events leading up to Matheus being badly injured and how she had called upon Vanya’s help and how Vanya had answered. “So, you see Papa. I have already become a Cleric of Vanya. Taking the Oath is a logical next step if it means saving Matheus”.

“You do know that along with taking the Oath, you have a code to follow?”

She nodded.

“Chastity and celibacy, Anya. That’s part of the code. You take that Oath; then you and Matheus can’t be together. You can’t be married”.

Her face saddened. “I know Papa, but it would be worse for me if he dies”.

“...and the baby?” her father asked.

“I’m not sure. I’ll speak with Grand Knight Erstenlicht about that once I know I can help you get Matheus out of there”.

Her father sighed deeply. He thought for a moment before admitting “There doesn’t seem to be any other way. Given more time I’m sure we’d find a way but I’m not sure we have much time. I’m not even sure if we’re already too late”.

“Then I won’t waste any more time. I’ll go see Grand Knight Erstenlicht this evening.

Her father walked her to the plaza, right up to the gates of the fortress. After explaining to the guards on duty, she was allowed to enter, leaving her father outside. “I’ll wait for you here, Anya” he shouted. She nodded and waved as the gate was closed once more.

Anya was led across the parade grounds. She looked about her, it was quite dark now but she could make out some of the buildings within the compound illuminated by torches. They entered one of those buildings the guard handing her over to another knight who brought her up some stone stairs and along a well-lit corridor. He knocked on the door at the end of the corridor.

“Come in”, called Grand Knight Erstenlicht.

Anya was ushered in.

“Ah Anya. You surprise me again. I wasn’t expecting you so soon but I am very glad you are here. Please, sit down”.

“Thank you Grand Knight Erstenlicht”.

“I think we can dispense with the formalities for now. You can call me Maude, at least until you take the Oath”, she smiled. “That is why you are here, I hope?”

Anya nodded “Yes, Grand Knight...Maude”.

“Excellent. Would you like some tea? It’s quite cold outside”.

“Yes, please”. Anya gazed about the room as Maude boiled some water. The room was quite austere, some simple furniture, a small altar to Vanya and some rugs on the floor to help keep the room somewhat warm. Maude herself was dressed in a simple tunic with the lion rampant. Her light brown hair hung loose in curling locks. She had a slightly round, friendly face. When the water was ready, she carried the tray with the pot of tea and two

cups to the table where Anya sat. She noticed the amused look on her face. "What is it my dear?"

"Nothing, I'm sorry, but well I've met some knights while I was in Nordenham and since then".

"Oh?"

"Yes, and well not a lot of them drink tea".

Maude shook her head. "Yes, well they should know better than to be drinking alcohol". She was clearly displeased and Anya regretted immediately having shared the information. "I'm sorry Maude. I didn't mean to offend the Order by making a joke".

Maude sighed and sat down opposite her. "You have nothing to apologise for. You didn't break any of your vows. It's a problem we have sometimes unfortunately. People can be weak and when they think no one is looking, they...indulge. I hope they didn't indulge too much?" she asked, raising an enquiring eye brow.

"No, no, just one drink".

"It's probably best I don't ask who it is we are talking about?"

Anya merely pursed her lips and remained silent.

"Yes", continued Maude, "discretion may be called for here. I hope when you take the Oath of Service, you'll take into account that there are a number of codes and I expect you to follow them, Anya. Even when no one is around, because remember, our Lady Vanya is also watching".

"Of course, Maude. I understand".

"Good", replied the older lady. Seemingly content she poured tea into the cups.

They spoke for quite a while. Anya told her about her time in Nordenham. She spoke of her brother, Hader but left out that he too had been drinking, and heavily. She spoke of the people there, Dura, Olson and of course Matheus. She left out the details of their relationship and Maude passed no comment. She seemed interested in the people and it was obvious to Anya that Maude did not have the same animosity displayed by the other members of the Order who felt that anyone not a Heldannic Knight or Hattian was a lesser being. Maude made it clear that she would be in favour of recruiting outside the Hattian people.

"If we can get them to join us, then we won't have to fight them. They would come to know the glory of Vanya and it would be a better conclusion for all concerned".

As subtly as she could, Anya brought the conversation around to Matheus. "The prisoner we captured in the Grove. Is he still alive?"

Maude looked at her. "I believe so, yes".

Anya fought to keep the relief from showing. She was unsure how to proceed. In the end caution was abandoned. "Can I see him?"

Maude's green eyes held her for a moment, a flicker of surprise. "Whatever for? Knight Banneret Blutfelden is overseeing the questioning. He takes these matters quite seriously". Maude paused, a barely audibly whispered "perhaps too much so" and then drank some more tea.

"I wouldn't interfere. I just wanted to see him. See if he's alright".

"He most certainly is not alright, Anya. He may be alive but I am sure he is in very poor condition. The eh...questioning has been quite severe. It's not something I necessarily approve of but we are at war with the Partisans".

Anya was feeling desperate, her chance was slipping away. "Please Maude. Grand Knight Erstenlicht, I need to see him. I must".

Maude once more regarded her and then asked "When is the baby due?"

Reflexively, Anya covered her belly.

"Come now my dear, be truthful with me".

Anya looked down at her hands and then at Maude. "The baby is due this summer. Felmont sometime".

"And the father is this prisoner, Matheus Ironclad?"

Anya nodded.

Maude drew in a deep breath. "By Vanya, we have a complicated situation here. You told me Matheus was injured and our Lady Vanya responded to your request for help and you were able to heal him".

Anya nodded again.

"...and now, he is once more in trouble and you wish to go to him?"

"Yes".

"My poor child, it heartens me that your cry for help was answered but you must realise that this time there can be no help. Matheus is a prisoner. He will never be released, and when his usefulness is past, he will be executed".

Anya's jaw tightened, struggling to hold back the tears.

Maude remained silent, thinking and then said "Very well, if you want to see him then you can see him. I can't spare him but I can grant you that". She called two guards and gave them orders to accompany her and Anya to the dungeons.

Anya did her best to take note of which corridors and stairs they went down, the number of guards, anything she thought would be useful for her father to know. Along the corridor, near where Matheus was being held, she saw sturdy metal bars, low on the wall, dark water

beyond. Up ahead she saw one guard posted outside the cell containing Matheus. A brief word from one of the guards accompanying them and he opened the wooden cell door and stepped aside.

Anya was giddy with excitement mixed with dread at what she might see. Maude accompanied her into the cell which was lit by a solitary torch. Wearing heavy chains on his wrists, Matheus sat on the floor, leaning against the wall. His head sagged on his chest, his hair long and matted covered his face. Anya stifled a scream of despair and turned to Maude who nodded to her, sympathy clear on her face. She knew without having to be asked what Anya wanted. "I'll wait outside".

Anya ran to Matheus's side, calling his name gently. He stirred and looked at her, his eyes glazed and unfocused. She smoothed the hair from his face and began weeping. "Oh, Matheus, what have they done to you?"

He looked shocking, his body was battered and bruised and he had lost a lot of weight.

He appeared confused upon hearing her voice. "Anya. Is that you?"

"Yes, my love".

Despite the circumstances, he grinned. "I knew you'd come. I was going to get out of here but I thought I'd better stay here until you did".

She hugged him tightly. The chains dragged along the floor as he raised his arms to return the hug.

"You smell wonderful", he whispered.

"You need a bath", she laughed tearfully.

"Once I get out of here that's exactly what I plan to do. Let me look at you".

She moved back while he looked at her. "Beautiful my love and those dimples..."

"...will be the death of you", she finished.

He reached out and touched her stomach gently and then looked at her expectantly. She nodded with a smile.

"The Grove?"

She nodded again.

"I told you that place was special" he grinned happily. "When is the baby due?"

"Sometime this summer".

His brow creased, "This summer? What month is it now?"

"Vatermont 8th".

"Vatermont?" he whispered. "Have I been here that long?"

She nodded once more and ensuring that her body shielded her hands from the doorway, she withdrew a glass bottle from a concealed pocket. She gave it to Matheus. "Hide it and when you can, use it on your chains".

"When?"

"Some night soon, you'll know". She embraced him once more and then stood to leave. He merely watched as the door was opened and she walked through into the corridor outside.

Maude walked Anya back to the parade ground. It was not until they arrived there that she spoke. "You've been through a lot my child and you will have more to deal with when the baby is born. I need to know you are fully committed to this decision. This isn't a choice that is easy and the way things are there is no room for a family outside of the Order. If you decide to come back, you will be coming back alone, fully committed to this life without any outside distractions or conflicts of loyalty. Do you understand what I am saying?"

"I do and thank you for your patience".

Her father was waiting for her as she left the fortress. He put his arm around her shoulder and they walked quickly across the plaza. "Well?" he asked.

"He's alive".

Once they were home, she relayed all the information she could remember. He listened intently and drew a rough map, asking her some questions to clarify certain things. "This will be a great help, Anya. We have plans of the fortress from before the Knights seized control but without knowing where he was, we'd be running blind. You did well".

"How soon?" she asked.

"A week?" he answered.

"A week! That's too long papa. They may find the bottle; he may be dead by then".

"I know, Anya. We'll do our best". With that he pushed himself away from the table and grabbing his cloak he walked to the door.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"No more questions Anya. I can give you no more answers. It's best if you don't know too much. I know it's going to be difficult but I need you to be patient. Go about your business as normally as you can, ok?"

She nodded in response and he left, locking the door behind him.

She had trouble sleeping that night but finally managed to get a couple of hours before being awoken by the sounds of the city. Her father had not returned. She walked to the front of the shop gently caressing the growing bump. Horses, carts, the streets thronged with people, she sighed. "This is no place to raise a child" she thought. Thinking back to her time in Nordenham, time spent with Matheus in his home and in the Grove. She walked to the table and took down some sheets of paper, a quill, some ink and began to write a letter.

She had no idea what she was going to say or how the letter would be received but it seemed the right thing to do.

Once she had finished it, she sealed it with some wax and put it in a small leather bag. She left the shop, locking the door behind her and once more she crossed the plaza. The builders were hard at work on the Cathedral of Vanya. This time however she headed straight to the Commercial District. She walked with a brisk pace straight to a place she knew well. The market quite close to the Warehouse District was of course bustling. She made her way to the front of a building, a well-dressed man in his mid-thirties, his hair already greying at the temples was sitting on a wicker chair. As was his usual routine at this time of day he was drinking some coffee.

She stood in front of him. "Hello, Ashemon".

He looked up at her with a smile recognising her quickly. "Anya! What a sight. Like the rising sun after a cold night in the desert". He stood up and bowed courteously. "Please, sit, have some coffee with an old man".

She smiled and sat down. "You're not old Ashemon".

"Ah, thank you, Anya. Al-Kalim has gifted you with a honeyed tongue but I accept your compliment".

A merchant from the desert land of Ylaruam, Ashemon had been in the Heldann Freeholds for about twelve years. He was a good friend of her father and supplied many of the shops in the land. Much of what Anya had secured for her business in Nordenham had come from Ashemon's warehouses. They spoke for about twenty minutes and then Anya asked if he would see to it that the letter was delivered to Dura in Nordenham.

"I'll make sure it's on the next wagon out". He looked at her a moment. "Is everything alright Anya?"

She laughed "I seem to be getting asked that question a lot lately but yes Ashemon as well as can be expected".

He nodded, not really believing but accepting the answer.

"Business seems to be going well" she said.

"Yes, it's going well". He seemed distracted.

"But?"

"No buts Anya" he smiled, "things are good. My life is good, business is good. No sand in my beard, my food, my wine", he laughed. "Come see me again, Anya. When the little one is born. Yes?"

She pulled her cloak around her hiding the bump. "Is it that obvious?"

"Obvious and beautiful. You shouldn't be ashamed, Anya. It's a wonderful thing, a beautiful thing, praise be to Al-Kalim".

“Thank you Ashemon”.

He rose to his feet as she did. “Of course,”

They bid farewell and she promised to return when the child was born. “When the child was born”, she thought again, trying to get used to the idea.

She was walking back across the plaza and noticed a commotion. Several people were gathered so she walked closer to see what was going on. It seemed an abbey had been attacked near Hockstein. It had been set alight, several people had been killed and the place had been looted. The Haldis Partisans were of course blamed. There was no doubt about it. The knights were right at this moment hunting them down. They would soon be captured.

“No, they won’t”, she thought to herself. “No, they know the land far too well”.

She left then with nothing else to learn and arrived back home a short time later. Her father was there and he appeared busy. She looked at him expectantly.

“No questions, Anya”.

Not long after he was out the door again and once more, she was alone.

The next day she heard more news about the abbey. She soon realised that it was a different abbey, further south not too far from the village of Thurgau. It was the same again, the abbey set ablaze, Heldannic Knights and clerics slain, the place looted. The presence of heavily armed soldiers in Freiburg was more noticeable than usual. The city was buzzing with people speculating where was next? What would the Order do? Was Freiburg itself a target?

“Those rebels are so brazen I wouldn’t be surprised”, said one man who was immediately ridiculed by his companions.

“Attack Freiburg? You must be joking. The city is nigh on impregnable. No, they’ll stick to the soft targets, but we’ll catch up with them eventually and by Vanya, they’ll pay”, one man grumbled.

Her father was gone all day and did not come home that night. She had walked into his room the next morning and could see the bed had not been slept in. It was late in the afternoon when he finally arrived back and he looked tired. He closed the door behind him and smiled. “It’s done”, he said simply.

She raised a hand to her mouth afraid to ask. “He’s...?”

“Yes, he’s in safe hands”.

She could see he was bursting with pleasure. “Ah, Anya I miss this life. A job to do, an impossible job, a plan devised and carried out with such precision. Working with men who know their craft”.

“... and he’s ok?” she asked.

“Yes, Anya, he’s safe. It helped that the Knights have all their attention on the attacks on the Abbeys”. He shook his head as if disbelieving their fortune. “I’ll say no more. He’s out of the city and will lay low for a while. Now, please, as best you can forget all that. Go about your business like nothing has changed. You’ll be a suspect. I’m sure I will be too. If we leave it will make them sure of our guilt but if we stay, we are still in danger. Like I said, nothing has changed, everything is normal, ok?”

She nodded and repeated “Everything is normal”.

How I met your Father - Part 5.

The next day she was in the plaza, watching the construction workers. About 200 feet away was an artist. He had set up with an easel and some paints and was busily transferring the scene of the building work to the canvas. She moved her gaze back to the workers. Huge stone blocks were being moved into place, stonemasons, craftsmen of all disciplines and labourers, it was organised chaos at least to her eyes. She was aware of a presence and looked up. "Grand Knight Erstenlicht" she said, surprised.

"Good morning, my dear".

She was accompanied by ten knights and Anya was not sure what to expect. Was she to be arrested and questioned? Tortured?

The older woman sat down beside Anya on the bench. "You come here a lot", said Maude.

Anya nodded in agreement "I enjoy watching the men work. It's really quite amazing. I can't wait till it's completed".

"Yes, they are making great progress".

There were a few seconds of silence, slightly uncomfortable.

"Have you heard the news?" asked Maude.

"Oh, yes, the attack on the Abbeys, such terrible news. It's shocking. I wish there was some less violent way to end this conflict".

"Yes, the abbeys but also the prisoner".

Anya looked at Maude, her face as innocent as she could make it "The prisoner?"

Maude looked at her, a faint line of amusement barely perceptible. "The prisoner Anya, yes. The one you were visiting a couple of nights ago. He escaped".

"Matheus? Matheus escaped? But how?" Asked Anya appearing shocked.

"It's not clear at the moment. His chains were dissolved by some substance, probably an acid of some type. The guard was overpowered and they escaped out through the sewers".

"They?"

"Well, he didn't do it alone, so yes, they. It was a highly skilled job".

"You're impressed by it?" asked Anya.

"Well, I'm not happy about it and Knight Banneret Blutfelden will be most upset, to put it mildly, when he hears the news as Grand Master Stamhoffer most certainly was, but I can appreciate the level of expertise it took to pull this off. I am also impressed and relieved that no one was killed or badly injured. The knight on duty received a knock to the head but I think his pride has been hurt more", she finished.

This was not at all the way Anya expected Maude to respond. "I don't understand, you don't seem too upset"

"Oh no my dear, I am upset. This is a very serious breach of our defences, and with the attacks on the abbeys going on, it must be addressed. At the same time however I accept what has happened. You told me that our Lady Vanya answered your call for help and it seems she has once more".

Anya remained quiet, she just held her pregnant tummy and turned her eyes back to the workmen.

"Perhaps it was the Partisans freeing their comrade but I think not. As I said the Knight was spared which is not something they are known for. Perhaps it was the Lady Vanya acting through some intermediary, perhaps not. In any case he is free once more".

Anya turned back to face her. "I probably shouldn't say this Grand Knight Erstenlicht but I'm glad he's free. He's a good man. He's not of the Heldannic Order but he's a good man".

"I'm glad to hear it" Maude replied. "The world needs good men and your child should have a father".

Anya remained silent and Maude spoke again. "Have you made arrangements yet for the arrival of the child?"

"Yes, well I hope so. I've written to a friend and I'm waiting for a response".

"Good, well if you need any assistance let me know. When the child is born and when you are ready, come and see me again".

"I will Grand Knight Erstenlicht and thank you again for your patience and understanding".

Maude rose to her feet and gave Anya a final smile before she walked back to the fortress accompanied by her knights.

Anya remained a little longer until finally with a grunt she stood up and walked slowly home.

Winter soon turned into spring, which meant more frequent rain. She had forgotten how dreary it was to be stuck indoors when this happened every other day. She was content to run things in her father's shop, the smell of freshly baked bread was something she would never tire of. Weeks after she had sent the letter to Dura, a reply arrived. Ashemon sent one of his errand boys to deliver it to her. She gave him a silver piece from her apron and he grinned happily at this unexpected gift.

She sat down at the table and opened the envelope. She admired Dura's elegant script while she read down through the letter. Things were going well; she had convinced Olson to take over the general store while Anya was away. They had hired some help and business was good. Things had been in turmoil for a while after the party of Heldannic Knights went missing and there had been some arrests. Olson was suffering from a bad cold but he sends

his best wishes. An abbey had been attacked and Dura was unhappy with this as she expected it to as she said “shake the hornet’s nest again”. She was looking forward to seeing Anya in the summer and would make preparations for her arrival. She tried to be diplomatic by saying that people were very upset about Matheus being arrested and everything else that happened around that and that maybe when she arrived, she should be as discreet as possible.

She held the letter in her lap and considered these words of warning. Was going back to Nordenham such a good idea? Of course, word would have reached them about what had happened in the Grove. It would be very foolish to believe she would not be blamed for what happened but she was determined to have the child if not in the Grove, then in Matheus’s home. It felt right to her that this was the place to bring the child into the world.

Every so often usually at meal times with her father she would ask “Any news?” Her father knew what she meant and would look at her reproachfully. “No. No news”.

She nodded and drank some more soup and then smoothing a stray lock behind her ear she spoke again. “So, if someone wanted to go somewhere, you know like take a break from Freiburg, get some air and stretch the legs, where would be a good place to go?” She nonchalantly spooned some more soup into her mouth and looked innocently at her father before looking back at her bowl of soup.

“That depends. Some people would like to go somewhere far away. Maybe somewhere warmer and dryer until the weather improved at least, but some people”. She looked up as he emphasised that last two words and her father met her gaze, repeating “some people don’t want to go too far away as they have responsibilities, you know like a business or a maybe they’re waiting for some important package to be delivered. People like that don’t go too far at all and will stay quite close. Even when their friends say, you really should get away for a while and enjoy yourself while you can but there’s no telling some people. People like that are very, very stubborn!”

She smiled happily at this and finished her bread and soup. “I’m thinking of going to see Dura in the summer when the weather improves”.

“Dura? In Nordenham, but why? The baby will be due then and you need to rest Anya. You shouldn’t be undertaking any unnecessary journeys”.

“I know Papa but I like it up there, it’s so beautiful. A fine place to bring my child, your grandchild, into the world and don’t worry Dura is an experienced mid-wife. I’ll be in safe hands”.

He dabbed his bread into his soup, mopping up the remains before popping it into this mouth. “Well, if that’s the only reason, because it’s not a place to go if you’re expecting to find anything else. When people want a break and get away for a while, they don’t go to Nordenham”.

She nodded her head in response to show she understood but he could tell she was a little disappointed to hear this.

She kept busy and when summer finally rolled around, she made arrangements to join a caravan of supplies to Altendorf and then onwards to Nordenham. The road to Altendorf was quite decent but from there to Nordenham it was not much more than a trail worn into the landscape by wagon wheels and horses. Even so it was her favourite part of the journey. She was accompanied by three wagons, a number of travellers like herself including about ten caravan guards. The Partisans were still causing trouble and trolls had been spotted closer to the human settlements. No doubt the harsh winter had left them with little to eat.

Late in the day they arrived at Nordenham without incident. She felt a mix of excitement to see everyone again, it had been so long since she had been here, but there was also a feeling of nervousness as to what kind of reception she would receive. She took Dura's advice and kept her head down as best she could. The wagon passed several people she knew but she resisted the urge to call out in greeting. She began to get the feeling it really was a bad idea coming back here now. The wagon she was on stopped near Olson's Alehouse and Inn. She thanked the driver, who handed her the few belongings she had packed. She walked up the steps and saw that Dura was waiting for her.

She looked very happy to see her, smiling broadly. "Come here my dear and let me have a look at you".

Anya who was very visibly pregnant now, climbed the steps awkwardly holding the handrail as she did and embraced her friend. Dura who due to the height difference was almost face to face with the bump rested her forehead against Anya's tummy and said "Well, I suppose I better say hello to you too. We'll be seeing you very, very soon".

The baby kicked at Dura's voice, causing Anya to gasp in surprise and delight. "Did you feel that Dura, the baby moved".

"I did my dear, it's wonderful. They'll be a handful when they're born, no doubt about it. Come inside now, it's not quite warm enough yet to be standing around outside".

She led Anya into the Inn which was bustling with patrons. Most she recognised and they called out greetings to her. Some whispered to their companions no doubt about her pregnancy and more likely about the events in the Grove. She had food with Dura and Olson but soon she grew tired as she often did these days. Dura had set up a room for her in the back, not wanting her to have to face the stairs every day.

They planned to leave in a couple of weeks for Matheus's home. A place she felt would be most suitable for bringing the child into the world. As she lay in bed, she could overhear their conversation despite the whispered tones. Olson was hoping that there would be no trouble, that one or two people had made some probing comments about Anya's return to the village. Dura told him not to worry and reminded him that there were spies aplenty from both sides and besides Anya was a friend and pregnant and that was the end of the conversation.

Over the next few days Anya did what she could to help around. Dura and Olson fussed over her, exhorting her not to be working too hard and for goodness' sake not to lift anything heavy.

The original plan of keeping a low profile had gone by the wayside. She decided it would be better to face whatever accusations were levelled at her and get it over with. In all honesty they were not without just cause.

Some days she would wander down to the general store and talk with the customers when they came in. Dura had hired a young Heldann man to run the store. He seemed to have a good grasp of it but was more than happy to accept whatever advice and tips she had to offer.

It was during one of these conversations with Jürgen that she discovered her new nickname. He had inadvertently told her while telling her about some of the goings on like the increased Heldannic Knight patrols, the attacks on the abbeys and so on. He was retelling the story as he had heard it about the ambush in the caves, not realising she was intimately familiar with the event. Her pregnant state seemed to make her appear vulnerable and caused him to lower his guard so that whatever caution or tact he may have had was abandoned when he spoke of the ambush and the attack on the Grove.

He told her how some thought there had been a spy in their midst who had revealed the location of the Grove. These people thought it was Matheus's lover who had bewitched him and tricked him into showing her the Grove. They called her The Harpy. Others defended this woman's honour saying she had been there at the ambush and had led the Heldannic Knights to their doom. He shrugged his shoulders "Maybe we'll never know the truth but it makes for an interesting story".

Just then another customer walked in. He excused himself and went to see what they wanted.

As had been arranged, Gunnar and Hallveig, the son and daughter of Bjorn came to Nordenham to escort her and Dura to Matheus's homestead and they had brought spare horses with them. Before she left, she visited Hader's grave to say a prayer and lay some flowers.

A few miles out from the village while following the river, she noticed a rider waiting for them. As they drew near, she recognised the lupin that she and Matheus had encountered last year. The lupin that had wounded Matheus.

Hallveig noticed her reaction. "It's alright, he's with us now. Mokcheera" she called.

The lupin raised a hand to the approaching party and even appeared to be smiling, though with its canine features it was difficult to tell. Now it was Gunnar's turn to notice Anya's unease. "Don't worry Anya, his previous master didn't treat him well but he's loyal to us".

"Now Gunnar, don't talk like that, he's not an animal", admonished his sister Hallveig.

"So sensitive", laughed Gunnar to Anya. "Mokcheera has a sense of humour Hallveig. You should hear what he says about humans", he teased.

Mokcheera regarded Gunnar with a look that did not appear angry but really Anya had no idea, as she had no experience with lupins. The first time she had ever even seen one was

when he had appeared in Nordenham that time with the older Blutfelden. The lupin bowed his head in greeting to her and she returned it.

“He doesn’t say much, does he,” said Dura readjusting herself on the saddle of her horse.

“No, he’s a quiet one alright” agreed Gunnar.

They rode on talking of everything that had happened over the past few months. There had been plenty going on and not just with the Knights more frequent patrols. There had been some livestock lost to gnolls and they had to drive a lone troll off with the help of some neighbours. They were exuberant with the successes against the Heldannic Abbeys but equally there was dismay about the attack on the Grove and that was all anybody wanted to talk about.

Dura stole a quick glance at Anya who acknowledged this with a grim look on her face.

“The buildings were burned, a lot of good fighters were killed and Matheus was captured. You were lucky you weren’t there when they attacked”.

Anya nodded to Gunnar her face flushing red. She quickly moved the conversation on saying that she had heard that Matheus had escaped. She did not know where he was now but she heard he had escaped and was safe.

“I knew it”, said Hallveig delighted with the news. “There’s no one and nothing that could keep Matheus down for long”.

“Does Hallveig have a soft spot for Matheus?” goaded Gunnar.

“Be careful brother”, she replied “or you’ll be going for a swim. Besides who wouldn’t love Matheus, he’s a great warrior and a fine man. Isn’t that right Anya?” she laughed indicating the large bump of the growing baby.

Anya smiled at this.

They rode on for a few more hours, rested for a short time and then continued on crossing the river at the same spot Matheus had led Anya all those months before. This time however the crossing was more difficult. The river was much higher at this time of year with snow and ice melting. She was not as comfortable on the horse as she usually was but except for getting a good soaking everyone crossed safely. Also, unlike the last time she was here, the days were longer and so they reached Matheus’s home while it was still bright. She was happy to dismount and laughed gently at Dura who seemed even worse off than she was.

Mokcheera and Gunnar did a circuit of the surrounding area and found no signs of danger. Hallveig walked Anya to the front door. Unlatching it she stood for a moment in the doorway and then walked in. She paused again inside looking around at the weapons on the wall on the other side of the fireplace. She had hoped that he would be here waiting for her despite what she had told her father but no, it appeared that there had been no one here in all this time.

Dura quickly got the fire going and Gunnar brought in some more wood. Mokcheera set about gathering some more and started cutting stacks of firewood to add to the pile Matheus had prepared already. Hallveig and Dura prepared some hot food for everybody and when it got dark, the women climbed onto the heated stone bed and the others slept on the floor beside the fire, Gunnar taking first watch.

Over the next couple of weeks, Gunnar, Hallveig or Mokcheera returned to Bjorn's farm. They would be gone several days but would then return with more supplies. It was early on Felmont 19 when Anya's water broke. "Dura!" she called a slight note of panic in her voice.

Dura came running. "It's ok Anya, this is all perfectly normal. It looks like we're starting. The baby is on the way", she said taking Anya's hand and calmly leading her to the store room, they had converted to a bedroom to deliver the baby.

It was late that night, about an hour before midnight when the wailing of a new born baby could be heard. Hallveig went into the room to check that everything was ok. She returned to her brother and Mokcheera smiling happily "It's a boy".

Dura and Hallveig kept an eye on Anya that night. It had been a long day and she awoke the next morning feeling somewhat refreshed. For a moment she thought it had all been a dream, until the baby stirred beside her, still sleeping contentedly.

The others came in that morning to congratulate her and to see the baby. Mokcheera in particular seemed fascinated and came quite close, peering at the small bundle.

"Human pup sleeping" he said. It was the first time she had ever heard him speak.

"Yes ", she agreed, "he is, but not for long".

"What name have you chosen?" he asked.

"His name is Druss and Ironclad after his father".

"Druss", repeated the lupin nodding "a good name".

Soon after that the peace was shattered when baby Druss woke up. After a moment to gather himself, he began squirming around and crying. He was still clean so he must be hungry. She lifted him to her breast and he immediately began feeding.

In a couple of days Anya was up and wandering about the cabin singing a gentle song as she cradled the dozing baby. Her life had changed so much since that fateful day when she had agreed to accompany her brother to Nordenham and now she was a mother. She walked to the weapons wall and looked again at the variety of weapons and shields displayed there. As before her gaze was drawn to the Ethengar Bow of Asturi. It was a beautifully crafted weapon, made with what looked like several pieces of bone or wood. She wondered again about Matheus's reluctance to talk about his mother not to mention his father. Who was he and where was he? She realised that there were a lot of things she did not know about the father of her child. He seemed to have a troubled family history. Was that the fate of their child, Druss? A mother who had given her word to join the Heldannic Knights and devote her life to Vanya and a father who was an outlaw in his own land to be killed on sight.

She kissed the sleeping child on the forehead unsure what the future held for him. As she was turning away, she noticed a leather bag hung to one side that she had not noticed before. Amongst the weapons it appeared an ordinary simple bag like something you would hang from a horse saddle. She lifted the flap while holding Druss in the crook of her left arm. Inside were three wooden spikes about a foot long and reinforced with silver bands, one of them was also tipped with silver. Another mystery, another thing she did not know about Matheus's past.

She walked outside into the clear fresh air. The sun was shining high in the sky. On this side of the house was a small garden, which was protected from the worst of the wind. There were a few herb and vegetable plants growing but without constant care the weeds were beginning to crowd them out. It was a calming place to be. She sat down on a wooden chair basking in the sunshine, holding a sleeping Druss in her lap.

Dura found her there her eyes closed and enjoying the sun on her face. "Let me take him for a while".

"Thank you, Dura".

The baby stirred as he was lifted but snuggled into the dwarven woman and was soon asleep again.

"It's really beautiful here, so peaceful" said Anya, stretching her legs out.

Dura was rocking the baby gently. "It is Anya, very nice but you know what it's like up here. Give it a few weeks and it'll be biting cold and dark, the wind howling down from the mountains. Not a place for a young woman and her child to be. If Matheus was here with you, I'd have no concerns but Gunnar says there are gnolls around here, he's seen the tracks. We're not sure why they haven't broken into the cabin and taken what they could. Maybe it's Matheus, I don't know and neither does Gunnar. The point being Anya, you can't stay here. I have to get back to Olson and the others to their homestead".

"I know Dura and I want to thank you so much for everything you've done and the others too. I'll leave when you leave. I just wanted my baby to be born here and I wanted Matheus to be here. I really wanted for Druss to meet his father. I had hoped he might come but it doesn't seem likely. I'll leave a note when we go, just in case he comes by".

"Well, you're welcome to stay with us for as long as you like. I know Olson would enjoy having a baby around to spoil", she chuckled.

"That would be nice, Dura, thank you. I'll send word to my father and let him know he's a grandfather now. I'm sure he's probably worried".

They went back inside then as Druss was awake now and needed changing and feeding. The others were there lounging around in chairs. When he was clean and fed, Hallveig picked him up. "Oh, my he's heavy, he's going to be a bruiser like his father I can tell. Aren't you little man?"

Mokcheera was still fascinated with the small human and Hallveig noticed him hovering over her and so passed Druss to him. He sniffed the child and grinned happily as the child grabbed a lock of his hair and wouldn't let go until Hallveig helped free him.

Two days later, they made ready to leave. Hallveig and Gunnar made sure the place was locked up securely. Anya had left her letter for Matheus in the hope he would return. With one last glance around the room, she left, slipping the lock back into place.

The journey back was uneventful and they parted with their three companions who rode back to Bjorn's homestead. They arrived back into Nordenham but Anya was unable to settle. She fretted over Matheus. Where was he? There were many new faces in the village and more activity. The Heldannic Knights were more numerous and their patrols more frequent. It would only be a matter of time before something kicked off. She could feel the tension in the air.

The knights were deep inside enemy territory and they were suspicious of everything and everyone. No doubt some of the men here now were members of the Rangers of Altenwald, the name most in use now. The Haldis Partisans was the previous incarnation, but not used as much apart from some of the older members out of habit. There was a slowdown in the attacks on the abbeys as the knights were out in force now but they were simply too few in number to be everywhere and to no one's surprise another abbey was hit its treasures looted.

Somewhat reluctantly she made arrangements to return to Freiburg with Druss. She had heard someone mutter "The Harpy" under their breath when she was within earshot but nothing came of it and most seemed to think she was not responsible for the attack on the Grove. She had sent the letter to her father two weeks ago and had not yet received a response. Truth be told she had not expected one and had only hoped to alleviate any concerns her father would have.

"If Matheus turns up..."

"I'll send word to you", smiled Dura. "Don't worry my dear he will eventually". She embraced Anya and kissed Druss on the forehead. "Stay safe Anya and come visit whenever you want. We'll probably always be here".

Olson walked them out of the Inn carrying her belongings and loading them onto the wagon. She climbed up and took Druss from Dura's outstretched arms. The wagon rumbled out across the village square and Anya turned around and waved a final time to her friends who waved back. Then they passed through the village gates accompanied by several other people and the ever-present caravan guards.

They stayed overnight in Altendorf but she did not stray from the Inn and left again the next morning continuing the journey to Freiburg. She had mixed feelings as the city's walls came into view. On the one hand she was eager to be home and to see her father again but on the other it felt so far from Matheus. She knew her destiny lay there; Vanya had called her. She had a young child now to care for but soon it would be time to fulfil her part of the agreement and take the Oath.

Arriving in Zehlendorf she booked passage on one of the ferries crossing the Elber River, the last leg of her journey to Freiburg. The closer she got the more she looked forward to seeing her father and sleeping in her own bed. The river was quite busy with merchant vessels and fishing boats. The seagulls called loudly as they wheeled around above the ships, some even landed on the decks and rigging hoping to snag some morsel of food. Druss looked around sternly his little brow creased as he tried to work out where the noise was coming from.

When they arrived at the other side of the river, she decided to call in briefly to see Ashemon. She was tired and there would be plenty of time to catch up some other time but it would be rude to go straight home without calling in. He greeted her warmly and fussed over Druss. He could see she was tired so he gathered up her belongings and walked her back to her father's home on the other side of the plaza. "Come see me when you have settled back in, yes?"

"I will Ashemon, thanks for helping me with the bags".

He bowed with a wave of his hand and walked back towards the plaza.

Turning to face the door to her home she smiled and took a deep breath as the smell of baked bread wafted through the air. Her father looked up as she entered the shop not expecting to see his daughter and grandson.

"Oh, Anya, what a surprise and who is this little one?" he asked taking Druss gently into his arms and holding him close. Druss grabbed a tuft of his hair, yanking hard. "This one's going to be trouble, grabbing his grandfather like that, no respect", he laughed.

"He does that a lot", smiled Anya happy to finally be home.

"I received your letter and I bought a small cot for the child. I put it in your room beside the bed in case you need it", said her father walking towards the room. "Are you hungry?"

She shook her head, "No, Just tired".

"Then sleep, we can catch up tomorrow when you have rested".

With Druss washed and fed Anya lay back in the bed, the child beside her. She did not want to put him in the cot. "Too much like a prison with those bars", she thought remembering the last time she saw Matheus. Druss fell asleep quickly making soft murmuring noises and Anya was not far behind, slipping into a deep and dreamless sleep.

It did not take long for her to settle back into city life. She spent most of the time helping with her father's business, ordering stock and managing the accounts. Druss spent these early days and weeks in the back room within earshot but once he was walking there was no keeping him locked up. Customers coming in for bread, wine or cheese would have to make sure to close the door behind them as on more than one occasion he made his way out on to the busy street.

"You really should take more care of that child. He's likely to be knocked down by a cart or a horse", one lady admonished Anya.

She pursed her lips biting back an angry retort and instead she nodded in agreement. “I know but he’s so full of energy. He’s a real handful”, she replied lifting the now ten month old Druss into her arms and carrying him back inside the shop.

Her father walked over to her with a warm shawl. “Bring Druss out for a walk, I can take care of things here”.

She nodded in agreement “Come on little man, let’s see if we can get into trouble somewhere else”. She took hold of his hand and they walked along the wide street leading to the plaza. When he began to slow down, she picked him up and balancing him on her hip continued on.

She smiled upon entering the plaza. The sun shone high in the sky, illuminating the Notre Dame of Vanya’s Cathedral. It was not quite finished, another twelve months or so she had been told but already it was very impressive. The two massive doors were closed and would only be open to the public when it was completed. Heavy sheets of fabric covered the windows to protect them but she had seen the incredible mosaic designs, the Rose Window in particular was an early favourite. She had even managed to convince her father to replicate the design on some of the bread they sold for when it was completed and he agreed that it was a good idea.

She was explaining some of the incredible architecture to Druss but he was more interested in the birds that came too close, stumbling after them and then falling to his knees, his balance not quite there yet. The workmen had got to know Anya and now Druss as she came there most days whenever she took a break to eat and drink. She enjoyed listening to them explaining the correct amount of water to add to mixtures they required, the way the windows were designed and why they faced in such a direction and so on. On several occasions she had been allowed inside and given a tour. There was scaffolding and buttresses all over the interior but she got a real sense of the vastness and power. It would be an impressive symbol to glorify Vanya and showcase the power and industry of her followers.

She could see Druss growing bored so she brought him to the warehouse district passing the artist Fabian who was completing another painting of the Cathedral. He also did sketches and paintings of people and Anya had posed for several while she sat on her bench in the plaza. A young man, she had promised to help find him somewhere reasonably priced to house and display his art.

As she entered the Warehouse district with Druss, she had to keep a tight hold of him. He was getting too heavy to carry for long, and it was an extremely busy side of the city. The shouting, joking and bustling energy of the men and women who worked there had him staring around in rapt fascination and of course Ashemon was there. “Uncle Ashemon”, as he called himself would always have a small treat for the young child

Two months later and it was Druss’s first birthday AC 973 Felmont 19. Anya’s father bought him a silver clasp for his hair, which had grown long and was pulled back from this face and hung in a short ponytail.

“Papa, that’s too much. He’s only a child, he’ll lose it”.

“Now, Anya, it’s a nice piece, see”, he held it up showing her the clasp which was in the shape of the lion rampant, symbol of Vanya’s Heldannic Knights.

She rolled her eyes “Papa, you had a son in the Order and soon I will take my place but that life is not for my son, not for Druss”.

Her father seemed surprised by this. “No?”

“No”, she affirmed.

He made a face which showed he accepted her answer when the bell over the door tinkled, indicating someone had come into the shop. “Hello Anya, Jakob”

She sighed “What is it, Aaron?”

“A letter for you”, he replied handing her the small envelope.

She thanked him and quickly opened it, reading it while her father waited. Her face was flushed and she appeared to be caught between laughing and crying.

“What is it, Anya?” her father asked.

She handed him the letter and waited while he read it.

He looked up from the page. “I don’t understand, is Dura in Pflenzen?”

Anya bent down and picked Druss up with a grunt “By Vanya, we’ll have to stop feeding you. Not Dura, Papa, Matheus”.

He looked again at the letter; his face creased with uncertainty. “Are you sure? It doesn’t say that here”.

“You have to read between the lines Papa. He’s there alright”, she said smiling. “Do you want to meet your Papa?” she asked Druss, pressing her nose against his.

Druss squealed in delight as she kissed his neck tickling him.

“You’re going to Pflenzen? But there’s nothing there. Unless you like fish and goats”.

“He’s there Papa”.

“Anya, I know you miss him but...” he gave up. “I can’t talk you out of this can I?”

She smiled, “No, Papa, but don’t worry If I’m wrong, if he’s not there I’ll come straight back”.

He sighed “Ok, so when are we leaving?”

“We?”

“Yes, if you and my grandson are going, then I’m going too. Besides it’s probably time I properly met this man of yours. See for myself if he was worth all this trouble”.